

NALA-AONTAS: National Skills Conversation: Challenges and Opportunities for Adult Education and Literacy

25 September 2025

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Rather than present statistics and trends, I will provide a reflection on educational disadvantage and the evidence we have on the role and impact of schools in shaping and countering inequality.

Schools are at the frontline of Ireland's efforts to integrate new Irish families, build an inclusive society for disabled people and tackle generational socio-economic inequality. Schools are also increasingly facing pressures from wider societal challenges, while trying to keep up with the potential and pitfalls of rapid technological change. The core business of schools, education, is also at a point of inflection as the dust settles on the implementation of the JC Framework and the senior cycle redevelopment is embedding, and implementation of the new primary school curriculum has just begun.

We now have a much better understanding of which children and young people face difficulties at school, what shapes their experiences and what are the implications of earlier educational experiences for later life outcomes?

So what does that evidence tell us?

2. Understanding who is disadvantaged

Research has been consistent in documenting persistent social inequality in educational access and outcomes – students from less well-resourced families and those experiencing additional needs typically fare less well than their peers across a range of benchmarks and indicators. But the groups tended to be treated in a fragmented way, when inequality really needs to be understood as intersectional and systemic.

COVID-19 revealed a lot: when the one relative constant for all students, the classroom, was removed, it was clear that families possess different resources (economic, social and cultural) to respond and support their

children. The barriers to engagement intersected to make it more cumbersome and less rewarding to engage for vulnerable students. The impact of the pandemic made clear the level of inequality that students bring to the classroom, by showing what happens to them without it.

More recently, we have been looking at the implications for student learning and wellbeing today – many students report that the pandemic is still impacting on their learning and wellbeing. But this varies hugely between schools and different groups of students, particularly in terms of the enduring impact on student wellbeing. So there is wide variation in the extent to which wellbeing supports at school are offsetting the profound impacts of the pandemic. I will return to wellbeing a little later.

How do early educational experiences shape later outcomes?

What's interesting is we now have the evidence to show how students' experience primary and early second level schooling – in terms of their attendance, engagement, relationships and expectations – plays a crucial role in where they are a decade later. Our research has been exploring how dimensions like gender, children's self-concept (how they perceive themselves as learners), the nature of their interaction with teachers (things like being praised, being given out to), academic achievement, experiencing additional learning needs, aspects of school context and ethos and experience of economic vulnerability impact later.

It probably won't be a surprise to hear that earlier academic performance predicts later academic performance, but many other factors play a role in shaping this relationship and in shaping outcomes more generally.

Educational aspirations play a particularly important role. Much higher levels of college participation are found among those whose parents expected them to achieve this level of education at 9 years of age, all else being equal. So expectations matter – a key challenge for policy is how to bolster expectations for all, particularly at critical transition points between primary and post-primary and on leaving school.

How children experience school plays an important role, in particular, levels of engagement, attendance patterns and interactions with teachers matter. Progression to further study is much lower among children who

missed more than 10 days of school in the previous year at the mid-primary stage and this relationship holds even when you take account of early academic performance and other characteristics. So attendance has a net impact, all else being equal. Given the latest figures showing high levels of non-attendance today, this issue needs urgent attention. Experiencing conflict in interactions with teachers also has a negative impact, while being engaged at school has a positive impact.

Family, neighbourhood and school context characteristics also matter – reflecting variation in access to learning and other resources in the home and school settings. Students with fewer household economic resources are more than twice as likely to become early school leavers and only half as likely to plan to pursue higher education as their peers from households with greater resources.

Students with additional needs are more likely to experience conflict in their interactions with their parents, have negative interactions with their teachers, have repeated absences, come from economically vulnerable households and attend schools with more socio-economically disadvantaged populations.

So it is clear that educational outcomes are a systemic phenomenon, and certain risk factors tend to be more prevalent in the lives of some groups of young people. Our research tries to disentangle some of the intersectional disadvantage experienced by children and young people and the results reveal individual and school level factors and processes which are associated with the divergent outcomes.

3. What Matters for Students

What matters: Engaging contexts and positive school climates

Working to make school a place where students want to be is a key part of the DEIS programme and my research reaffirms the importance of building engaging contexts to nurture engaged students.

There has been a resurgence of interest in a framework called ‘productive pedagogies’. This centres on four main dimensions, these are challenge, relevance, supportive classroom environment, and recognition of

difference. To extent these dimensions challenge current conceptions of what is valued and what should be emphasised in school. And they are important, particularly for those who have been traditionally failed by the education system. Where these pedagogies are not present, the culture of schools will disadvantage some groups of students over others and inequalities will continue to be exacerbated. So what does this mean in practical terms challenging, supportive environments, which recognise difference.

Firstly, all students should be provided with intellectually challenging content and teaching. Education that lacks such intellectual challenge is socially unjust and really brings us back to a deficit perspective, where individual students and their families are essentially blamed for their lack of success. We have good evidence to show that where disadvantaged students have high levels of learning or other need in a school, school may become an environment of 'care' rather than 'challenge', which can negatively impact students' academic progress. Experts describe this as a trade-off between intellectual demand and 'an almost therapeutic culture of care'. So **challenge** is number one.

Secondly, supportive environments and a **positive school climate** are essential. We have lots of evidence across several decades to show the importance of positive relationships at school for a host of outcomes. The research has consistently highlighted the important role of trusting, non-judgemental relationships in establishing and maintaining connections with students at risk of disengagement from school. Creating a safe, welcoming and caring environment for students is key.

Expectations also matter. We have just published a paper on the role of parental expectations and positive teacher-student relationships in post-school progression in education. Socio-economically disadvantaged students finish primary school with lower academic self-concepts (beliefs about their ability) — and these drop more steeply in secondary school compared with their peers. Parental educational expectations typically rise during this transition, but not for parents experiencing inequalities. Both of these patterns shape attainment 7 years later. In fact, parents' expectations during this period are especially influential for low-SES

children. Even when low-SES parents do hold high expectations, these students also need positive teacher relationships to reach the same attainment levels (a third-level degree) as their high-SES peers.

In sum, the evidence shows the importance of caring and respectful relationships in engaging and reengaging disengaged children and young people in learning. While placing care and wellbeing at the heart of formal learning, it is important to avoid an overemphasis on care as opposed to challenge and high expectations.

Finally, how do we recognise difference, but not do so by separation? We are really at a critical point in terms of **inclusive education** in Ireland. We have a system which separates many children and young people, in various ways. We need to ask the question - are we going to continue to reinforce a model of separation or actually move towards an inclusive system? As the numbers of children and young people needing additional and specialised supports continues to rise, we need to examine how do we support in an inclusive way. Do we want to have increasing numbers in separate schools and special classes or is there a better way? The current path does not meet our commitments under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which was ratified in Ireland in 2018, and reinforced that children with disabilities must not be discriminated against in their access to the general education system. Evidence at the ESRI shows that special classes typically operate as separation – they don't operate as the fluid, flexible form of support that was envisaged – many students enrolled in special class settings remain in that setting across years, across the school day and don't get the opportunities to interact with peers that they should get. This is a fundamental question for us – how do we move towards a more inclusive system?

Wellbeing An Essential Aspect

I want to briefly talk about wellbeing as it has been an important aspect of policy in the last decade or so, with the formal introduction of wellbeing in the school system, partly in response to rising rates of students experiencing mental health and wellbeing difficulties. Recent evidence from second- and fifth-year second-level students shows that while 85% of

students rate their general health as being good or above, only 60% of students rate their mental health with the same level of positivity.

Importantly, student wellbeing is intricately linked to how students experience school: students who are more engaged at school are more positive about their mental health. However, we cannot ignore the resource constraints faced by both schools and wider youth mental health services – which of course creates a challenge for schools aiming to provide adequate wellbeing supports for students.

Research undertaken by the ESRI provides evidence on challenges facing teachers and school leaders in meeting the wellbeing needs of students. While some schools fare better than others, we found that many schools struggle to provide adequate wellbeing supports. Only 46% of students felt that their school provides adequate wellbeing supports. So what should the priorities be?

Firstly, it is critical to identify the types of students within individual schools who are most at risk of socio-emotional difficulties – girls, students with additional needs and those with economic difficulties are most vulnerable to poorer mental health. A one-size-fits-all approach does not work for wellbeing – instead, the issue is what supports are best placed to serve the needs of specific groups? Teachers in our research spoke about how changes in the student population, such as increasing numbers of students with additional needs and students from migrant families, impact the school's wellbeing needs. Understanding the needs of the student body and being flexible to adapt to how these needs may change over time, could go a long way in providing meaningful wellbeing support in schools.

Another crucial way of ensuring wellbeing supports meet the needs of students is to listen to what students want. Giving students the opportunity to be heard and involved in the school's approach to wellbeing makes students feel listened to, respected, an agent of their own learning and gives them a sense of belonging to their school. One of the strengths identified within DEIS schools that supports student engagement and sense of belonging.

Above all else, the single largest barrier to impactful delivery of wellbeing supports is teacher capacity and professional development. Teachers need system level support that facilitates access to professional development; this might include greater cooperation and teacher sharing across schools and more regionally clustered and accessible professional development resources. Wellbeing efforts will not be impactful unless teachers are supported to gain the skills needed to deliver them.

Finally, the best approaches are those that work against the natural hierarchy within schools, to actively incorporate and value the perspectives and contributions of all school staff members. Often, it's a sports coach or a special needs assistant who is the first port of call for students struggling. These staff, with an ear to the ground, can be of huge benefit to the early intervention and prevention of wellbeing and other difficulties if they have received training and the channels exist for information to be shared with a wider wellbeing team.

Our evidence shows that identifying those most vulnerable to poorer wellbeing, listening to what students need, supporting teacher professional development in wellbeing and embedding a whole school approach are the best ways to foster wellbeing in schools.

6. Policy priorities now

The Irish school system has made positive strides in promoting student wellbeing and engagement and creating environments where students, regardless of background or need, want to be. There is a strong emphasis on supporting the most vulnerable children and young people, a focus on successful transitions, inclusive curriculum models and evidence of student voice becoming increasingly embedded in policy and practice. This is underpinned by a responsive and supportive inspectorate focused on building the capacity of school and setting leaders and teachers and engaging with other agencies and sections of the Department to support a cohesive approach to improvement. There is also an increasing move towards cross-departmental and cross-sectoral collaborations more generally, which further strengthens policy coherence and impact.

But we do have to ask serious questions about the level of funding we are willing to commit to tackling educational disadvantage and ask **is this is the level of inequality we are willing to tolerate as a society?**

Why some students disengage from school remains a key policy challenge in education systems around the world. Policy responses tend to focus on either school prevention strategies or compensation approaches but rarely both. I think there are three key priority areas right now:

1. We need a much more **responsive approach** to supporting schools in meeting student need. Schools serving populations experiencing socio-economic inequality but not targeted under the DEIS programme, often reflecting changing enrolment over time, can face difficulties meeting high levels of student and family need. Secondly, some schools within the DEIS programme report particularly high and growing levels of student need, and a lack of responsiveness to meet such needs within the current programme design.

Two recent developments are likely to be important in addressing these gaps in provision. A new 'DEIS+' group of schools are currently being identified, who will receive additional funding to reflect high need levels. It seems this will include enhanced funding, staffing supports and priority access to wellbeing supports as part of the scheme. The Department of Education has also introduced one-to-one counselling support as a pilot programme in primary and post-primary schools in select locations around the country, to support children and young people experiencing the highest levels of socio-economic inequality. These two developments address critical pinch-points in the system and could prove instrumental in supporting greater equality and inclusion in schools.

2. I have talked about the systemic nature of inequality – which requires a **systemic and whole education response**. Educational disadvantage is a complex social phenomenon influenced by individual, contextual and societal factors. We really need to see a further shift from isolated school-based responses towards more holistic and integrated frameworks – based on multisectoral collaboration, within and beyond the school setting. This would

include a wide diversity of stakeholders, including voluntary, community groups, NGOs, state agencies and government departments.

3. We still need that conversation on how to support more **inclusive provision** in schools and a shift away from separation. The Education Convention next year might provide that opportunity. Ultimately, listening to all voices in the system, particularly the newly arrived, those experiencing diverse learning needs and/or socio-economic inequalities, is paramount in developing an effective, responsive educational system that supports everyone to flourish.

All ESRI education research publications are available here:

<https://www.esri.ie/research-areas/education>