Working Group Schools Policy: Early school leaving

Country focused workshop: Ireland, 24-27 March 2015

*Whole School Approach to Early School Leaving*
Contents

1 Overview of the workshop 3
2 Key messages from the workshop 4
3 A whole school approach towards early school leaving 5
   3.1 A whole school approach in Ireland from a historical, legal and structural perspective 5
   3.2 Policy measures to support a ‘whole school approach’ ........................................... 7
   3.3 Whole School Approach in action: examples of good practice in and around the school 10
   3.4 Challenges associated with a whole school approach ........................................... 14
4 Concluding remarks 15
5 Bibliography 17
Annex 1 Self-evaluation and school improvement plans ........................................... 18
Annex 2 Policies to address educational disadvantage and ESL .............................. 18
1 Overview of the workshop

The third country focus workshop of the Working Group on Schools Policy (priority theme: ESL) took place in Dublin between the 24th – 27th of March 2015. The workshop was hosted by the Irish members of the Working Group from the Department of Education and Skills (DES) in Dublin, Ireland. In addition to representatives from Ireland, it gathered participants from Belgium-Flanders, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Sweden, as well as representatives from ETUCE and Business Europe.

The objective of the workshop was to provide an overview of the ‘whole school approach’ to early school leaving (ESL) in terms of the policy approach, legislative framework as well as how implementation of a ‘whole school approach’ can be supported across the education system. A further objective was to reflect on the importance of school leadership as well as specific supports to target ESL.

The workshop opened with presentations on the Irish education system within the context of its constitutional and legislative framework and main ESL related initiatives – namely the Delivering Equality of Opportunity (DEIS), the national programme to combat educational disadvantage. The workshop included presentations from the Inspectorate on aspects relating to the development of a ‘whole school approach’ encompassing policy development, system evaluation and system supports. During the workshop a presentation on the DEIS evaluation was provided by the Educational Research Centre at St Patrick's College, Dublin. Presentations from a number of school Principals together with visits to schools in and around Dublin and a meeting with parents from a local primary school were organised.

Visits to primary / post-primary, DEIS / non-DEIS, co-education / single-sex schools provided excellent examples of a ‘whole school approach’ to ESL in action through the implementation of a range of different measures implemented jointly by schools and other local stakeholders including those that are part of the DEIS. Presentations during the visits and during the main plenary session provided real life examples of the Home School Community Liaison Scheme and School Completion Programmes (as integral components of DEIS).

Brief presentations of all working group participants on their country's situation with regard to school improvement were provided, with a contrasting example from Portugal. A summary is provided in annex one. The Department of Education and Skills provided an example of peer support and local networking with a presentation on the OSCAILT network - a network of principals coming together from Limerick City DEIS primary and post primary schools. A contrasting example was provided from Belgium-Flanders on the Flemish local framework. In addition, a presentation on local governance structures was provided by a representative from Germany on the Lernen vo Ort programme.

This summary report is structured as follows:

- Section 2 summarises the key messages put forward by the participants;
- Section 3 presents a whole school approach from an historical, legal and structural perspective. It then presents the current state of play in relation to a whole school approach to policy, planning and leadership. Examples of good practice in and around the school are then presented. This section finishes with an overview of the key challenges associated with the implementation of a whole school approach in Ireland;
- Section 4 completes the report with final remarks.
2 Key messages from the workshop

What is a whole school approach?

- A ‘whole school approach’ to early school leaving can be characterised as a cohesive, collective and collaborative action in and by a school community that has been strategically constructed to prevent and react to drop out.
- A range and combination of policy approaches and initiatives to create a unique and effective ‘whole school approach’ to tackling educational disadvantage and ESL, tailored to the needs and ethos of the school community are required. It should include a multi-disciplinary approach to support learner needs, a corporate culture based on a shared understanding of a ‘whole school approach’. Positioning and supporting the notion of education as a continuum, starting in the home, through to pre-school, primary, post-primary and beyond is essential.

What does a whole school approach look like in practice?

- The key characteristics of a ‘whole school approach’ are illustrated in Figure 2.1 below. In practice, these characteristics typically underpin the general ethos of a school implementing a ‘whole school approach’ and its approach to ESL. Central to the ‘whole school approach’ is the learner at the centre of the model supported by underlying policies that support the highest level of academic expectations appropriate to all learners.

What are the pre-requisites in terms of policy to support a whole school approach?

- The notion of a ‘whole school approach’ encompasses a range of different themes and policy approaches, often in partnership with other government departments and in collaboration with key stakeholders, including parents and learners.
- The concept of ‘whole school approach’ allows for the entire system of actors and relations in and around schools to be considered, acknowledging that each stakeholder has a role to play to support the pupils’ educational journey and nurture his/her learning.
Ensuring partnerships are formed on the basis of clear and shared goals, roles and responsibility together with a common understanding of the challenges at hand is highly important.

- Strong leadership and governance is needed to promote teamwork and collaborative practices within the school community and bring the school actors and other stakeholders together to ensure educational success.

- The implementation of a whole school approach aims to raise quality and standards across the entire school and across all aspects of the school, not only in relation to ESL. Schools that actively use school planning and school evaluation for improvement should be in a stronger position to eradicate ESL. School development and improvement processes should include targets to address ESL and involve all schools actors and other stakeholders.

- School leaders play a key role in facilitating and promoting collaborative approaches in and around schools, by adopting a more distributed leadership style and creating space and time for cooperation. At system level, there should be continued investment in improving school leadership, with professional development opportunities for experienced, new and aspiring school leaders.

- The professional development of teachers, their well-being and recognition of their commitment is essential. Support mechanisms should be in place for teachers – rotation of staff and expertise between schools with high levels of ESL/educational disadvantage and non ESL schools can be potentially advantageous in the longer term. This also serves to support the emotional well-being of the teacher and their professional development.

- Policies and methods to support integration and inclusion require a strong focus on the emotional and physical health of young people. The well-being of the child is important and should not be restricted only to teaching and learning. Learning and learner achievements are celebrated and rewarded. Schools and teachers actively promote participation in national programmes and competitions that provide opportunities for the school, its teachers and young people to shine.

- The ethos of the school reflects the mission statement of the school. Ensuring schools are safe, welcoming and caring learning environments where pupils can grow and develop as individuals and members of the community is implicit within the schools development plans and improvement processes.

### 3 A whole school approach towards early school leaving

#### 3.1 A whole school approach in Ireland from a historical, legal and structural perspective

A general overview of the education system in Ireland is provided in the Background Report. Ireland’s contemporary education system and more specifically the development of a ‘whole school approach’ must be considered within a historical/legislative context.

As well documented in the literature, the Church has played an historic role both in defining Irish identity and establishing the cultural values of Irish society. Since the setting up of the national school system in 1831, each individual school was run by a manager who was nominated by the school’s patron. By the mid twentieth century, virtually all schools were under denominational patronage and as such a religious ethos permeated the curriculum.

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Most schools were single-sex institutions except in a few rural areas where low enrolments made it unviable. To date, approximately one-third of schools remain single-sex, a situation that is almost unique in Europe. In the past, provision of and attendance at secondary schools in Ireland was low.

Article 42 of Ireland’s 1937 Constitution established the basic principles of education policy. The article acknowledges the role of a parent / guardian as the primary educator of the child and has enshrined in law that a parent / guardian may educate a child in a place other than a recognised school. The role of the state is determined in the constitution and this is to ensure children receive a certain minimum education. The article remains un-amended as the basic law in Irish education.

As summarised by O’Sullivan (2005), the period from 1960 onwards represents a major transitional one for Irish society and for education. A series of national policy decisions were taken between 1963 and 1980 which were guided by the Programmes for Economic Expansion. Whilst the significance of the religious interest in the matter of educational change were clear, the economic role of education and the importance of education as investment for economic progress became significant in Irish education policy discourse.

In 1966 the introduction of the ‘free education scheme’ made a huge impact on Irish education by making secondary education free for all Irish students. The abolition of fees for entry to secondary and vocational schools, and the provision of a school transport service at both primary and secondary level made education accessible in rural areas which in the past were inaccessible due to cost and distance.

In 1991 the government identified education as a major component of national policy and a central plank in the economic, social and cultural development of Irish society. In 1995, Ireland committed to providing free college and university level education to its citizenry. In terms of legislation, the Irish Universities Act (1997) and the Education Act (1998) were passed. The Education Act of 1998 gave more powers to teachers and provided for the establishment of an Educational Disadvantage Committee to advise the Minister on policies and strategies to combat educational disadvantage and for greater participation by students and parents in their own/their child’s education.

As Walsh (2009) notes, significant structural changes of the 1960’s and 1970’s took place in the second level school provision, with the introduction of new types of secondary comprehensive schools. In the 1970’s, a variation on the comprehensive schools called ‘community schools’, with modified governance arrangements was developed by the Department of Education. Parents, teachers and the now, local Education Training Boards now share in the governance of community schools at board of management levels.

Today, the post-primary level comprises of voluntary secondary schools (whose trustees are typically religious communities or boards of governors), vocational schools and community colleges (administered by ETBs) and community and comprehensive schools (managed by Boards of Management of differing compositions).

In recent decades, there has been greater demand for the option of schools within the national school system which would be multi-denominational, co-educational and under a democratic management structure. In 1983 a coordinating committee, ‘Educate Together’ was established to coordinate the efforts of various groups attempting to set up multi-denominational schools in Ireland. Today Educate Together is the patron body for a network of 74 multi-denominational primary schools in Ireland.

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In line with the economic and social changes in Ireland, over the few last decades, a range of policy documents have been published setting out Government commitments to tackling educational disadvantage and ESL. These include a seamless interface between levels, facilitating access by all and progression, flexibility and support services such as guidance and childcare. Significant to early school leaving is the raising of the compulsory school leaving age to 16 years and the establishment of a National Educational Welfare Service under the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000.

3.2 Policy measures to support a ‘whole school approach’

The notion of a ‘whole school approach’ encompasses a range of different themes and policy approaches implemented by the DES, often in partnership with other government departments and in collaboration with key stakeholders, including parents and learners. The Education Act (1998) sets the legislative basis for a whole school and partnership approach with a statutory definition of educational disadvantage and a requirement for policy development and school improvement/planning. This underpins the policy approach to combatting educational disadvantage and ESL.

With a continued focus on tackling educational disadvantage and improving quality and accountability, a range of policy measures have been introduced in recent years and are summarised below:

Regarding educational disadvantage, significantly, the Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools (DEIS)\(^4\) initiative was launched in 2005 with the aim to ensure that the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities are prioritised and effectively addressed. The DEIS initiative provides a range of different support measures such as the Home School Community Liaison Scheme, the School Completion Programme as well as reduced class sizes in the most disadvantaged schools, additional funding and priority access to literacy and numeracy programmes (see annex 2 for more information). The HSCL and SCP are managed as part the Integrated Educational Welfare Service in the Child and Family Agency (TUSLA).

Improving literacy and numeracy levels for life is a policy priority in Ireland following the 2009 PISA results for Ireland that reported falls in the literacy and mathematical achievements of Irish 15 year olds between 2000 and 2009. The introduction of a National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy that followed in 2011 is embedded in all education policy and planning including whole school evaluation and school self-evaluation. The Literacy and Numeracy Strategy commits the DES to a programme of helping schools to benchmark themselves against their equivalents and set targets for improvement, and in doing so provides a clear emphasis on the need for improvements in teacher training. Reforms of teaching and learning approaches to literacy and numeracy are currently underway in order to meet the aims of the strategy. As experienced during the workshop, there is a very clear ‘whole school approach’ to improving literacy and numeracy where all teachers are teachers of literacy and numeracy. Parents and communities also have a key role to play in improving literacy and numeracy through participating in/contributing to initiatives such as the ‘Dublin: One City, One Book initiative’\(^5\). Good practice examples at school level include the implementation of accelerated reading programmes where all learners are encouraged to have a book in their school bags at all times, other examples include shared reading programmes between pupils of different ages/levels of education.

In addition to the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (2011), recent policy developments in Ireland also include major curriculum reforms to both the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate. A Framework for Junior Cycle published in October 2012, has amongst its aims, to reduce levels of disengagement within schools that lead to

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\(^4\) The DEIS initiative is summarised in more detail in Annex 1.

\(^5\) http://www.dublinonecityonebook.ie/
ESL. The Framework highlights the need for fundamental changes in curriculum and assessment. It highlights the need for assessment to be a key part of teaching and learning across the three years of the junior cycle and need for high quality feedback to students and parents. There is a degree of apprehension and resistance from teachers and representative unions in relation to proposals to introduce more school based assessment as part of the certificate. The reform is currently underway and is considered radical and therefore controversial.

As noted in the Background Report, early childhood education and care is a developing area of policy and provision. This reflects the establishment of a National Early Years Education Advisory Group, the development of a Practice Guide that distils the key principles of the early childhood curriculum framework, and Síolta, the national quality framework for early years. In addition, the DES Inspectorate is planning for the introduction of focused inspections on the quality of educational provision in early childhood education settings participating in the Early Childhood care and Education (ECCE) Scheme which provides a free pre-school year for all children.

Reforms of teacher education policy are also underway and there is greater investment in teacher professional development and assessment. This includes an interdepartmental approach to upskilling early education practitioners; recently revised teacher education programmes – which include an increase in the entry requirements for initial teacher education in co-operation with the Teaching Council; an increase in the duration and school-based element of ITE courses from three years to four years since 2012 for all teaching degrees; an increase in the duration and school-based element of all postgraduate teaching diplomas to two years from 2014 - now at Master level (referred to as Professional Master of Education) programmes comprising of 120 ECTS credits. The Teaching Council, through the Droichead Pilot, has also introduced a new model of induction and probationary processes for newly-qualified teachers. The Teaching Council is currently consulting on the continuous professional development requirements/provision for teachers. Consultation is underway and it is anticipated that a new framework for CPD is expected in March 2016.

Linked to the implementation of the National Strategy on Literacy and Numeracy and Junior Cycle reforms summarised above, the need to improve teachers’ assessment, literacy and skills is underway through a structured approach to the professional development of teachers. A key aim is to develop the schools’ capacity to assess and to use assessment data to inform teacher and learning approaches and to improve learner outcomes. Plans are also underway to develop and expand standardised testing in literacy and numeracy to inform the need for specific interventions.

Further developments are also underway to improve school leadership as part of a review of national leadership policy and practice. This builds on a range of professional development opportunities provided by the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST)\(^7\), including the Misneach induction programme\(^8\) for newly appointed principals, together with a range of courses geared towards experienced school leaders, which include Forbairt (13 month programme), The Tóraiocht programme, leading to a Post-Graduate Diploma in Educational Leadership for teachers interested in developing their leadership skills, Tánaiste (1 week summer course) for newly appointed deputy principals / acting deputy principals and Spreagadh joint professional development initiative as post-primary level.

Current investment in improving leadership professional development also includes the development of a framework of guiding principles and standards for school leaders. An induction, mentoring and coaching service for new principals and serving principals who may

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\(^6\) In Ireland, the term teaches incorporates principals as teachers.

\(^7\) [http://www.pdst.ie/](http://www.pdst.ie/) also including the Ciall Ceannaithe and the one-day Headstart programme provided for newly appointed principals

\(^8\) [http://www.pdst.ie/MisneachMainPage](http://www.pdst.ie/MisneachMainPage)
experience professional difficulty; graduate qualifications for aspiring school leaders and establishment of a centre for leadership is under active development. The challenge of filling principal posts in smaller, primary, rural schools has contributed to exploratory discussions with education partners (and potential pilot project) in redefining the role of a school leader - in terms of appointment procedures, the level of flexibility in the deployment of leadership staff and contract types for school leaders (permanent/fixed/renewable).

Within the context of a 'whole school approach' efforts are underway to develop the concept of ‘distributed leadership’. This has generated questions about how best to create a culture of distributed leadership in the school system; how to support the school organisation make whole school plans and how to deal with the impact of financial measures on schools resulting in a salary decrease for teachers and other staff, reduction in staffing thresholds in primary and post primary schools and significantly, non-replacement of promoted posts of responsibility.

In recent years, there has been a greater focus on quality assurance and accountability. As documented in the Background Report in more detail, the Inspectorate uses a range of inspection models to evaluate the quality of provision in schools. These range from short unannounced inspections, through more detailed inspections, to intensive examinations of the work of schools. Inspectors judge the quality of provision in each aspect of the work of the school that has been evaluated on a quality continuum (strengths to weaknesses). Judgements are based on a range of evidence, including meetings with stakeholders, management, relevant personnel, parent and student representatives, observation of teaching and learning, review of documents and parent and student surveys.

As also reported in the Background Report, since November 2012, all primary and post-primary schools are required to take a whole-school, evidence-based, reflective approach to school self-evaluation. As part of the SSE, all schools are asked to include the student and parent voice in their evidence. They are required to identify strengths and areas for improvement and to prepare SSE reports and school improvement plans, which identify improvement targets and actions to be taken. From 2013/14 onwards they are also required to provide summary reports and plans to the school community each year. While a six-step approach to the SSE process is suggested, schools have autonomy over how the SSE is conducted. To support the implementation of self-evaluation, a range of supports is available, including advisory visits from inspectors, SSE seminars provided by national support services, and materials and newsletters on the website [http://www.schoolself-evaluation.ie/](http://www.schoolself-evaluation.ie/).

As described above, in accordance with legislation, there is a strong commitment to engaging parents in the education of their child. A range of support structures and mechanism are in place to enhance parental involvement. For example, there is the National Parents Council Primary (NPC), concerning primary education. The NPC has published guidelines for parent associations, developed in consultation with parents and parent associations throughout the country, in accordance with the Education Act 1998, and agreed with the Minister for Education and Science. There is also a National Parents Council post-primary (NPCpp) who offer training programmes for establishing parent associations.

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9 Significant strengths; more strengths than weaknesses; more weaknesses than strengths; and significant weaknesses.
10 [http://www.npc.ie/](http://www.npc.ie/)
12 [http://www.npcpp.ie/](http://www.npcpp.ie/)
3.3 Whole School Approach in action: examples of good practice in and around the school

During the workshop, visits were organised to a number of DEIS and non-DEIS schools where key characteristics of a ‘whole school approach’ in and around the school were identified and are categorised below. These characteristics apply to the schools visited during the workshop and not necessarily to all schools in general.

3.3.1 Strong focus on social inclusion and equality

Following presentations made during the workshop and visits to a number of different schools, it is evident that there is a strong focus on social inclusion and equality, with a strong ethos of caring and reaching full potential. This is typically linked to the overall mission statement of the school, rooted in the religious / historical context of the school. Developing appropriate methods of integration and inclusion is a priority for all schools. Schools are typically based on a strong sense of belonging, strengthened by a requirement for all pupils to wear school uniforms and opportunities for pupils to be part of a range of different committees, teams and school initiatives. Working towards social inclusion and equality means that the needs of individuals are respected and understood. As such a culture of respect, order and discipline was highly evident in the schools visited. Schools with a strong sense of identity and mission are considered better placed to minimize educational inequalities/differences that may exist between children.

Different initiatives to facilitate social inclusion and equality include breakfast clubs, lunch clubs, chess clubs and homework clubs. Schools were able to demonstrate the benefits of providing an early morning breakfast - this includes improved school attendance and retention, improvements in punctuality, interaction with adults, allowing students to have fun whilst at the same time developing social skills, meeting nutritional needs and developing positive links between the school and the family. In addition, extra-curricular activities and out-of-school activities (enhancement activities), often built around the arts and sports for inclusion are on offer. As part of the DEIS initiative, some schools offer ‘Holiday programmes’ offering young people at risk of ESL continual support during the holiday periods.

3.3.2 A healthy school climate and focus on the well-being of all learners

The focus on social inclusion and equality contributes significantly to a focus on the well-being of all learners and the school climate as happy and healthy schools where children feel safe. A range of initiatives are in place not only to support the emotional, health and well-being of the learner but also to reflect the diversity of the study population. Guidance, counselling, psychological provision is common practice, complementing less formal provision aimed at embracing/engaging learners. For example, some schools have introduced mediation rooms/corners, yoga/mindfulness classes, or place stronger emphasis on arts and sports.

To provide illustrations from the workshop, St. Clare’s Primary School run the Active School Programme and promotes ‘skipping’ as a physical activity and as a method of integration and inclusion. The school hosts a ‘Skipping Challenge’ whereby all students are given the opportunity to learn high levels of skipping skills (delivered by professional skipping coaches) in order to receive prestigious skipping awards (Junior Skip Star, Super Skip Star, Bronze, Silver, Gold awards). A buddy system has been introduced whereby older children buddy up with younger children or children with special needs. As an inexpensive initiative, all children benefit from increased fitness levels, increased confidence and have the opportunity to develop social skills, empathy and communication skills. As part of the Active School Programme, the school day begins with ‘Wake Up, Shake Up’. Staff and pupils alike take part in this 10 minute activity every morning before the official start of the school day. It is a routine of different movements to dance and is organised by the Active School Committee.
3.3.3 **Culture of celebrating learning and achievements**

Linked to a strong ethos of caring and reaching full potential, there is also a strong sense of celebrating learning and learner achievements. Through support from school leadership, schools and teachers typically promote participate in national programmes/competitions such as the Green Flag award. Depending on the nature of the programme/competition, schools may be involved in developing projects with neighbouring schools. The outcomes of such participation are widely celebrated.

School notice boards, newsletters and websites proudly display details of recent award and learner achievements. News is shared with parents and the local communities through various methods and means of communication – such as open days, taster days and community events. Chanel College recently celebrated winning the 2015 Dublin Gaelic Football League. A small group of children from the 6th Class at St Audoens Primary School in Dublin were presented with the Dragon’s Den Community Final award as part of a SOLAS project. The Green School Committee at St. Clare’s Primary School recently attended an awards ceremony to collect the schools 8th Green Flag.

3.3.4 **Strong leadership permeating through the school environment**

At the school level there is clear evidence of schools building leadership capacity through a range of different initiatives and across different levels – including (though not limited to), the Active School Programme, Green Schools Programme and literacy/numeracy initiatives. Here school leaders play a key role in facilitating and promoting collaborative approaches in and around schools, by adopting a more distributed leadership style and creating space and time for cooperation. In many schools there were examples of teachers, staff members, parents and pupils taking on leadership roles with an acknowledgement that each stakeholder has a role to play to support and contribute to educational success. Teachers were seen to lead in their own subject/specialist domains but to also lead on broader/additional aspects of the school organisation/community, such as morning clubs, school committees, reading clubs etc (often on a voluntary basis).

The notion of student leadership is also highly important and evident, again with examples of pupils taking part in various school committees and leading school initiatives – many of which have been established to improve links between the school and the local community/parents.

3.3.5 **Monitoring and evaluation**

A ‘whole school approach’ to monitoring and evaluation implies a whole system approach not only to address ESL but to tackle a range of issues. As part of the school self-evaluation, all schools are required to prepare SSE reports and school improvement plans. There is a view that schools actively using school planning and school evaluation for improvement should be in a stronger position to eradicate ESL.

Both the external evaluation and school self-evaluation process is intended to support school and enable the outputs to be used as a reflective, evidence based means of improvement school. It was however noted that there is a need for monitoring and evaluation to be advisory, integrated into teaching and school life (non-judgemental). It was further noted that the Inspectorate should serve as a ‘critical friend’ to teachers and school leaders, realising their commitment and achievements. As mentioned above, there is evidence of teachers coming together in networks for peer review activities – this is a welcome step forward thought the use of threatening language must always be avoided.

3.3.6 **School development plans for improvement**

All schools are required to engage with School Self Evaluation (SSE) which is primarily about school improvement and development. SSE is a collaborative, reflective, inclusive process of internal school review. During SSE, the principal, deputy principal and teachers,
under the direction of the board of management and the patron, and in consultation with the parents and pupils, engage in reflective enquiry on the work of the school.

School self-evaluation improves pupils’ learning and enriches the professional lives of teachers. Experience in Ireland and in other countries shows that when teachers reflect on their own practice regularly and focus on improving teaching and learning in classrooms, they can improve the learning achieved by pupils.

Furthermore school development plans for improvement include a focus on distributed leadership. Examples of cooperative strategic planning through the process of school self-evaluation and whole school evaluation, involving all staff, students and parents is evident.

There was clear evidence of school leaders facilitating a supportive environment for teachers, where teacher-teacher learning, time for feedback, reflection and networking within the school is encouraged. There was also evidence of school leaders facilitating a strong sense, look and feel of inclusion, demanding high academic expectations for all. As discussed during the workshop, the notion of peer review is also becoming stronger, with the view of the Inspectorate as a critical friend, allowing time for reflection, improvement and celebration of the dedication and commitment of teachers.

### 3.3.7 Attributes of the teacher

In Ireland, the voluntary aspect of the teacher is considered important and unmistakeably apparent. Teaching is regarded by many as a vocation. To work in a disadvantaged area/school there is a need for commitment, enthusiasm, passion and energy.

Effective schools operate with multi-functional and highly motivated teachers. Teachers are more than teachers, they typically and voluntarily take on roles outside of formal school hours to provide additional activities to support the needs of the pupils and community the school serves. No doubt, examples can be found across all schools in Ireland, however good practice examples identified during the workshop include, the ‘Run a Mile’ club offered at St. Clare’s Primary school. This club runs twice weekly before the start of school – it was initiated and led by two individual staff members who offer their time to the club on a voluntary basis.

As part of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (2011), every teacher is also a teacher of literacy and numeracy. Dedicated literacy and numeracy link teachers are responsible for informing the planning, teaching and assessment of literacy/numeracy within the school.

### 3.3.8 Development, well-being and emotional support for all staff

Staff working in schools with high concentrations of ESL and educational disadvantage may be presented with complex, challenging situations when supporting young people and their families. Such demands can only be tackled by teachers working together, in cooperation and dialogue. Collective participation, good communication, regular observation and feedback and mentoring amongst staff is key. More broadly, teachers are encouraged to undertake CPD within their working day. The need for professional development, well-being and emotional support for all staff is recognised. In-service training is highly important so staff members feel fully supported and understand inclusion and diversity challenges and opportunities.

In relation to the HSCL initiative, Continuous Professional Development is ongoing for all HSCL coordinators with training in relation to Child Protection, Special Educational Needs, etc. HSCL coordinators must also undertake CPD in their subject areas, in order to facilitate their efficient return to the classroom after five years in post.

### 3.3.9 Ensuring a smooth transition between primary and post-primary and world of work

Pupils typically transfer from primary to post-primary at twelve years of age where they enter the junior cycle (lower secondary education) between the ages of 12 and 15. Pupils then
proceed to senior cycle (upper secondary education) where they choose a range of programmes over a two to three year cycle (generally from 15 to 18 years of age). Examples of good practice to support young people through these different transition points were presented during the workshop. For example, measures are in place as part of the School Completion Programme to support transition through homework clubs, induction days, taster days etc.

In terms of supporting young people with their transition from post-primary to the world of work, a one-year Transition Year (TY) programme is available. The TY programme is taken over the school year immediately after Junior Cycle and before commencing the two-year Leaving Certificate programme. It is designed to act as a bridge between these 2 phases in second level schooling and broadly promotes the personal, social, educational and vocational development of students. While TY is available to all second-level schools it is currently offered in approximately 550 schools. TY may be optional or mandatory for students depending on the policy of the school. Each school designs its own TY programme, within set guidelines, to best suit the needs and interests of its students. The programmes provided as part of TY include experiential learning and activities such as work experience and/or community service and will often involve the support of local businesses.

Further support in the transition from post-primary includes effective guidance/counselling which is a strong feature, embedded within the curricula. Guidance and counselling in second level schools are a whole-school responsibility, with guidance counsellors playing an important part within an overall school team approach. Group work and class-based approaches are taken generally and one-to-one support is provided to those students who are most in need of it.

### 3.3.10 Fostering dialogue with parents

In Ireland the role of the parents as the prime educator is enshrined in legislation (both the Irish Constitution and in Section 28 of the Education Act 1998\(^{13}\)) and is embedded in school decision making and education policy. As such there is a strong culture of parental involvement in the school community, with specific examples of schools reaching out to marginalised families beyond the tradition/formal methods of participations (such as Board of Management). The POTHOLEs initiative at St. Aidans is an excellent example of a school successfully reaching out to and engaging parents. The POTHOLEs group was formed as a result of HSCL coordinators from 3 different schools in West Tallaght coming together in January 2011 with the aim of helping parents of different background and cultures meet with other parents from their own school and similar schools and share experiences, introduce parents to other opportunities and to engage parents who perhaps may feel isolated. The group runs tours for parents and are funded under the HSCL budget. POTHOLEs was awarded the South Dublin County Social Inclusion Award in 2012.

Other examples of parents involved in educational activities in the classroom include sessions to explain aspects of the curriculum (e.g. in relation to new teaching methods). Furthermore, the Be Active After-School Activity Programme for example at St. Clare’s Primary School aims to improve the attitudes of both children and their parents towards physical activity.

Parents are used as a resource to the school, offering their time to support various activities, including school career guidance activities for example by sharing their professional experiences as a solicitor, a nurse etc, adding to the support young people need in making successful transitions from school to the world of work.

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3.3.11 Culture of stakeholder engagement and collaboration

Consultation is a key feature of national policy development and implementation in Ireland where it is accepted that policy developments cannot be ratified unless stakeholders are involved. Through legislation the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders are clear. Parents are key stakeholders in the consultation process.

Schools work in partnership with a range of services / stakeholders as multi-disciplinary teams to support the implementation of the DEIS programme / educational disadvantage initiatives e.g. in the case of anti-social behaviour the school works with the Juvenile liaisons Officer. As noted above, there are examples of local employers offering expertise to support the work related relevance of the curriculum and transition year.

3.3.12 Networking between schools

During the workshop, a presentation was given on the OSCAILT network - a network of principals coming together from Limerick City DEIS primary and post primary schools. Limerick is the third largest city in Ireland and has a large migrant population as well as a significant level of communities on the lower socio economic scale which has resulted in a high number of schools in the DEIS programme. The educational level of parents is low, retention rates on both the Junior and Leaving Certificate are also low. With high rates of unemployment (100% in some areas), educational disadvantage is extreme in certain cases. With high rates of children with poor oral language development and emotional/behavioural difficulties there is a high level need for therapeutic services for children. The characteristics of the city described above, call for a city wide approach to address educational disadvantage and capacity building of teachers and school leaders.

As a network for school leaders, principals come together in a safe and supported environment to support each other and share experiences in addressing ESL and educational disadvantage. Experiences are shared across DEIS schools and through collaboration and support from DES, experiences / lessons learnt are extended to non-DEIS schools. It is recognised that barriers to education progress / participation in Limerick in part is caused by wider issues outside of the education system. It is also recognised that the solution is not just within the system but also through working across other departments, through inter-agency projects and through a clear forum of communication and stakeholder collaboration for example.

3.4 Challenges associated with a whole school approach

Drawing from the Irish experience and lessons learnt from the workshop, this section presents some general challenges that can be associated with the implementation of a whole school approach to ESL.

3.4.1 Complexity of existing administrative structures

Depending on the administrative structure of public education, countries, such as Ireland (who has no intermediate tier or sub-national administrative structures) together with a dominance of church authorities highlight the challenge of changing the status quo. The rate of progress in moving from policy discourse to policy enactment and implementation can be considered in this respect.

3.4.2 Cultural aspects of education

All schools are required in their management and planning processes to ensure that the rights of children, regardless of their religious or cultural orientation are protected in a caring manner. The challenge is to ensure diversity is recognised and supported and that methods are in place to engage all learners, including those who are marginalised.
3.4.3 Changing demographics, changing religious values\(^{14}\) and demand for multi-denominational school

Changing demographic profiles across Europe will require education sectors to deal with challenges in an appropriate and timely way. Priorities will be to promote quality, relevance and inclusiveness by supporting schools in developing an inclusive environment for all learners, targeting interventions to address educational disadvantage, raising educational attainment, meeting the needs of children with special education needs, providing supports for immigrant children and their families. Ensuring appropriate links are in place between the school and the home is therefore critical.

3.4.4 Finding the right teachers and retaining their expertise

A key challenge for schools in disadvantaged areas or for schools with high levels of ESL is the challenge of recruiting and retaining the right calibre of teachers. This includes concerns regarding the high turnover of staff in such schools and loss of expertise as teachers do not always move on to other schools facing similar challenges. Rotation of staff and expertise between schools can be potentially advantageous in the longer term in terms of sharing expertise and approaches to ESL.

3.4.5 Economic austerity

In the context of economic austerity experienced across Europe a number of measures to reduce government spending were introduced in Member States. In Ireland for example, this included salary decrease for teachers and other staff and a decrease in capital grants to school. This has resulted in a change in teacher/pupil ratio and the non-replacement of promoted posts of responsibility. As a consequence, the gaps where people retired and were not replaced has led to staff taking on extra roles and responsibilities.

4 Concluding remarks

The aim of this workshop was to provide an overview of the ‘whole school approach’ to early school leaving (ESL) in terms of the policy approach, legislative framework as well as how the system supports the implementation of a ‘whole school approach’ across the education system. A further objective was to reflect on the importance of school leadership as well as specific supports to target ESL.

The visit provided excellent examples of a ‘whole school approach’ in action at the school level, supported by a series of presentations and discussions positioning a WSA in a policy and legislative framework.

Measures to address ESL are part of a much bigger policy priority to address educational disadvantage and benefits from political and financial support and commitment. Through the implementation of the DEIS national programme a system level response to ESL is in place and are similar/the same as those required to address broader issues impacting on the lives and learning of young people.

A key factor of success is ensuring that the expertise developed as part of the DEIS initiative are retained and further developed. Although teachers/experts move outside and between DEIS schools, this movement of staff can be highly beneficial in the longer term. As many DEIS schools are trailblazers in their approach to addressing ESL and educational disadvantage – this rotation, movement of expertise is advantageous.

Peer support between staff is highly evident on many levels. Peers support exists between teachers and staff within schools, across schools, different services and networks. Strong

\(^{14}\) See Breen, M. J. & Reynolds, C. (2011)
and distributed leadership is needed to facilitate peer support as is an Inspectorate that serves as a critical friend in the school improvement process.

In Ireland the role of the parents as the prime educator is enshrined in legislation and is embedded in school decision making and education policy. Parents needs are supported and a range of measures are in place to engage all parents in the life of the school. The benefit of these measures is highly evident. Parents benefit from interaction with the school and with each other and serve as resource to the school.

At a time of economic austerity, efforts have been made to ensure teachers and school principals are supported and professionally developed. A range of new/revised programmes of initial and continued professional development have been introduced in this respect.

As noted above, the changing demographic profile of the population means the education sector will need to respond to diversity. Priorities will be to promote quality, relevance and inclusiveness for all learners together with targeted interventions to address educational disadvantage.

At the heart of Ireland’s policy approach to ESL and educational disadvantage more broadly, is the learner. The provision of holistic, pastoral care to support the well-being of the child is considered to be the bedrock to successful education, regarded both as an educational goal, and as a fundamental aspect of education. The teaching profession, the education sector, the mission statement of each and every school aims to implement a ‘whole school approach’ that serves to develop the individual talents and potential of every learner.
5 Bibliography


Mulcahy, D.G. Curriculum and Policy in Irish Post Primary Education (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration).


Annex 1  Self-evaluation and school improvement plans

The ETUCE member of the workshop group produced a detailed paper on self-evaluation and school improvement plans. This paper was derived from information and examples provided by members of the Working Group from Sweden, Norway, Poland, Lithuania, Estonia and Hungary, Portugal, Italy, Luxembourg, England and Malta. This Annex serves to briefly summarise the main points extracted from the paper.

The paper began with an introductory discussion on central evaluations of schools, recognising that there is a spectrum of central/national evaluation systems which run from obligatory to non-obligatory – some being established in legislation, others not. Some systems have a supervisory/monitoring role and grade schools following inspection. In some countries, national standards are in place and are used to evaluate schools.

In terms of school self-evaluation/assessment, in some countries, school self-evaluation is obligatory, in others not, although in practice, it was reported all schools typically engage in self-evaluations to prepare for inspection or in preparation of school development plans for example. Variations in the processes of school self-evaluation were also reported in terms of timescales, methods of self-evaluation and participants in self-evaluation.

In terms of school development plans, as with school self-assessment, in some systems, school development plans are obligatory, in others they are not – in which case; schools have a degree of autonomy in their creation and form. Variations are reported in terms of duration of development plans, as well as variations in the processes involved in creating a school development plan.

Annex 2  Policies to address educational disadvantage and ESL

Over the past years, the Irish Department for Education and Skills (DES) has developed a number of policies to address educational disadvantage and early school leaving. These are briefly summarised below (additional information in these and other initiatives can be found in the Background Report):

5.1.1 Delivering Equality of Opportunity

Delivering Equality of Opportunity\textsuperscript{15} (DEIS), the Action Plan for Educational Inclusion, which was launched by the Minister for Education and Science in 2005, is the Department’s main policy initiative to tackle educational disadvantage. The aim of DEIS is to ensure that the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities are prioritised and effectively addressed. Its core elements include an integrated School Support Programme (SSP) which brings together and builds upon existing interventions for schools and school clusters/communities with a concentrated level of disadvantage.

During the academic year 2014/15, there were 849 schools participating in DEIS. All participating primary and post-primary schools receive a range of additional resources including additional staffing, funding, access to literacy and numeracy programmes and assistance with activities such as school planning. As part of the School Support Programme, interventions such as the Home School Community Liaison Scheme and the School Completion Programme are available to DEIS urban primary schools and DEIS post-primary schools.

\textsuperscript{15} http://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/DEIS-Delivering-Equality-of-Opportunity-in-Schools-/

18
5.1.1.1 School Completion Programme (SCP)

The SCP is a central element of the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) plan, which is a policy instrument for educational inclusion. The DEIS Action Plan brings together a range of school based supports aimed at improving educational outcomes in some 878 targeted schools throughout the country. The SCP was first introduced in 2002 by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and the programme was significantly expanded in 2005 with the roll-out of supports under DEIS. On its establishment the SCP subsumed a number of earlier schemes with related objectives, namely the Early School Leavers Initiative (ESLI) and the Stay in School Retention Scheme (SSRI). In May 2011 responsibility for the NEWB and its services was transferred from the Minister for Education and Skills to the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. In January 2014, the NEWB was disbanded and the educational welfare services of the Board transferred into the new Child and Family Agency (TUSLA).

5.1.1.2 Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL)

The HSCL Scheme operates under DEIS Action Plan for educational inclusion. The HSCL Scheme is a preventative strategy, targeted at pupils who are at risk of not reaching their potential in the education system, due to circumstances in their background which tend to adversely affect pupil attainment and school retention. It focuses directly on the salient adults in children's lives, in order that they may be better able to support the children's attendance, participation and retention in the education system. The Scheme seeks to promote partnership between families and schools, bring parents closer to their children’s learning and build parents capacity, so that they are enabled to support and contribute to children’s successful experience in the education system.

Children at risk of ESL are identified in consultation with school management, where factors, such as those listed below, are taken into consideration:

- Socio-economic background
- Family history of ESL
- Single parent family
- Traveller family\(^{16}\)
- Poor attendance

Whilst the focus of the scheme is disadvantaged families, one challenge is how to provide the HSCL services for other families with broader support needs, such as immigrant families. Ensuring appropriate links are in place between the school and the home, specifically reaching out to marginalised families is important.

In addition, policies implemented by DES to foster education disadvantage are articulated with other measures and institutional arrangements as part of urban policies, family policies and integration policies for migrants.

\(^{16}\) "Irish Travellers are an indigenous minority who, according to historical evidence, have been part of Irish society for centuries. They have a long shared history, value system, language customs and traditions that make them a group recognised by themselves and others as distinct. This distinctive life-style and culture, based on a nomadic tradition, sets them apart from the settled population". Extract from "Report and Recommendations for a Traveller Education Strategy" published in 2006