Focus Ireland's 'Education Matters' Programme: Measuring Impact

Camille Loftus
January 2017

This report was funded by Human Dignity Foundation

1 Executive summary

This paper was commissioned by Focus Ireland as part of its *Education Matters* programme, a range of interventions with young people who are homeless, or at risk of becoming homeless, designed to support and maintain their educational participation and thereby facilitate their progression to independent, sustainable living.

Research has long established a relationship between socio-economic factors and homelessness, and as both cause and consequence of educational disadvantage. This paper therefore does not aim to either establish a rationale for the *Education Matters* programme, or to evaluate it. Rather the purpose here is twofold: firstly, to locate this Focus Ireland work within the broader context of policy and practice to tackle educational disadvantage, and relevant literature, in Ireland. Secondly, Focus Ireland hopes to use the findings from its *Education Matters* programme to influence policy and practice, and to this end is implementing a detailed programme of monitoring in relation to impacts at individual participant level. To support this aim, Focus Ireland wanted to explore the indicators used at national level to identify and monitor educational disadvantage, and how best it might report on programme outcomes in that context.

The paper begins with a brief overview of the policy context; and the implications of that from a monitoring perspective. Programmes to tackle educational disadvantage in Ireland are mainly targeted at schools with high levels of socio-economically disadvantaged students. This means that much of the relevant administrative data is collected at school, rather than individual student level. This data gap means that it is "difficult to measure the achievement gap specifically for disadvantaged students" in Ireland (Smyth et al., 2015:ix).

A clear and strong relationship is established in the literature between socio-economic disadvantage and poorer educational outcomes, this relationship is found across all major indicators of educational disadvantage. Recent findings from Ireland's national longitudinal study of children, the *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI, 2016:11) survey identified "the extent to which attitudes towards and performance in the education system are related to various measures of social advantage" as one of the issues of greatest concern for the 17-18 year old cohort in Ireland. However, OECD (2011) makes clear that disadvantage is not destiny: socio-economically disadvantaged students are found amongst the highest performers internationally.

One of the strongest findings to emerge from studies looking at the relationship between different elements of socio-economic and educational disadvantage is that it is a gradual, accumulative process that occurs over time. With appropriate and well timed interventions, this is a process that can be interrupted.

Many of the factors associated with educational disadvantage are largely within the control of schools. However, there are a number of themes which are highly relevant to the interventions provided under the *Education Matters* programme:

- Confidence in one's own academic ability and a positive orientation towards school and learning are associated with better educational outcomes, but also with socio-economic advantage. Children report growing dislike for school as they progress through the secondary school cycle, but this is more pronounced for disadvantage children.
- Clear markers of the gradual process of withdrawal are identified in relation to a number of behavioural and attendance indicators. Children from poorer socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to report negative relationships with teachers, and higher instances of being 'given out to' and disciplined. A pattern of being late for school, unexplained absences etc. is also predictive of early school leaving.
- Bullying (but only in the first year of secondary school) and not having friends from primary school were found to be associated with subsequent early leaving. While not specifically explored in the literature, children who are homeless may be at greater risk for this kind of social isolation e.g. if they had to move school, or if their home situation made them the subject of bullying in school. The involvement of parents in children's lives also emerged as a significant factor in educational disadvantage: how frequently they talked about school, and ate dinner together.

While the literature identifies a number of school specific factors implicated in the process of educational disengagement, the issues outlined above are all amenable to action outside of that realm. The participant targeting and interventions provided under the *Education Matters* programme appear appropriate and well designed in this context.

Finally, there is the question of which are the most appropriate indicators against which to benchmark impact. It is clear from the literature that the process of educational disadvantage is both complex and multi-layered. While the performance gap has been closing somewhat over the

years, it is nonetheless a sizeable one on most indicators. Many items in the tool box to tackle educational disadvantage are not within the scope of the *Education Matters* programme: it cannot address the broader context of socio economic disadvantage, for example. The particular intervention under consideration here is a 12 week programme; targets and indicators should be appropriate to the nature and scale of the intervention. Accordingly, benchmarking against attendance and retention rates, which are published regularly and disaggregated between disadvantaged schools and others, represents a reasonable proxy against which to benchmark. Performance in state examinations, not least because it would require a very extended period of monitoring post intervention, is not considered a practical benchmark.

Education Matters is monitoring retention and attendance at individual level, along with a range of other indicators such as catching up on school work, improved self-confidence etc. Given the complexity of the issue, the scale of the challenge, and the nature and duration of the intervention, being able to demonstrate the progression of individual participants, and locate this within the national context, will be of significant value in demonstrating the programme's impact.

2 Introduction

This research paper aims to support Focus Ireland work with families who are homeless, or at risk of becoming homeless, to keep children aged 12-18 in education. This section provides a brief overview of salient information on family homelessness in Ireland, along with a more detailed description of Focus Ireland's *Education Matters* programme, and an overview of this paper.

2.1 Family homelessness

Family homelessness, which in the relatively recent past was a very rare phenomenon in Ireland, has been rising steadily for the last number of years; the length of time people spend in emergency accommodation has also risen significantly, with almost two-thirds of adults in emergency accommodation for over six months (DRHE, 2016). The most recent data available on families who are homeless in Ireland is published by the Department of Housing, Planning, Community & Local Government (DHPCLG) for in its Homelessness Report for November 2016.

Nationally, 4,436 adults were homeless during the week of 21–27 November, of whom 57% were male and 43% female. There were 1,205 homeless families, almost two-thirds (788, 65.4%) of

whom were one parent families. Homeless families included 1,622 adults and 2,549 children (61% of those in homeless families. Overall therefore, 60% of the homeless population in November 2016 were families, and over a third were children. While the Department's monthly report does provide an age breakdown for homeless *adults*[1], it does not do so for children who are homeless (DHPCLG, 2016).

Focus Ireland's *Insight into Family Homelessness* series has contributed to addressing that information gap; the first of the series[2] analysed 307 families, including 636 children, who were both homeless at the start of November 2015 and allocated to the Focus Ireland Homeless Action Team (HAT). Amongst these families, just under a fifth of children were aged over 12, while 82% were of primary school age or younger. Two-thirds were lone parent families, 98% of whom comprised mothers parenting alone.

Education had been identified by front line staff working with homeless families as "one of the greatest areas of concern", and the third of this series[3] looked at this issue with the same cohort of families. Homelessness is clearly an extremely adverse event for a child to experience, and can be disruptive of a child's education in and of itself; the day-to-day reality of living in emergency accommodation significantly exacerbates the challenge of maintaining participation in education. Children are often tired in school, having had a poor night's sleep because the whole family share one room, and/or because they need to get up very early to do a long commute to school. Children can end up missing breakfast, making it even more difficult to concentrate in class. They rarely have somewhere quiet and private where they can do their homework. These issues present significant challenges to children, their parents, and their teachers and schools.

The main route through which schools are provided with additional supports is through the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS, see below) programme. Of the sample of

[1] Of the 4,436 adults recorded as homeless in the November report, 16% were aged 18-25; the vast majority, 61%, were aged 25-44; 21% were aged 45-64, with less than 2% being aged 65 or older.

[2] Focus Ireland (2016a)

[3] Focus Ireland (2016b)

homeless families living in emergency accommodation attending primary or secondary school[4], just over half (55%) were attending DEIS schools, while 45% were not.

In relation to children in secondary school (which is the focus of this paper), 18% of the overall sample was over age 12; of those whose school could be determined, 9.4% (29 children) were in the 'DEIS Post Primary' category (Focus Ireland, 2016b). While the absolute number of children is low, this indicates that the breakdown between DEIS and non-DEIS schools at post-primary level is similar to that of the sample overall .

Focus Ireland's *Insights into Family Homelessness* series also gives some insight into the socio-economic background of families becoming homeless, confirming a well established link betweens socio-economic disadvantage and the risk of homelessness. The most recent in the series surveys families who became homeless during June 2016. It reports a "persistent link between joblessness and homelessness", with 84% and 83% of the March and June intake respectively being unemployed. Just over half of the June intake comprised one parent families; in March it was two-thirds. Migrant families were also very over-represented: 51% of the June intake, and 36% in March came from outside Ireland (Focus Ireland, 2016c:8-15).

2.2 Focus Ireland's *Education Matters* programme

Focus Ireland is delivering a programme of innovative service interventions with young homeless people with the aim of increasing their capacity for independent living, and more broadly to impact on homelessness policy. The programme targets two groups of young people who are homeless, or at risk of becoming homeless, and involves two discrete service interventions for each group.

This research relates to one strand of Focus Ireland youth services, which aims to sustain engagement in education for young people aged 12-18 who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness; in the majority of programme referrals to date, young people are still with their families.

Young people in this group are more likely to come from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are more

[4] Of the 636 children in the full sample, the specific school being attended could be identified in respect of 307. Most of the remaining 329 children were either too young to attend school, or their school had not been identified clearly enough in records.

likely to be educationally disadvantaged. The disruptive impact of periods out-of-home for such young people can make participating in education extremely challenging. The combination of poor educational attainment and being out-of-home presents extremely high risk for longer term, recurrent homelessness. For out-of-home teenagers, maintaining participation in education is thus critically important to making a successful and sustainable transition out of homelessness and into independent living.

The *Education Matters* programme matches young people who are out-of-home or at risk of experiencing homelessness, and who have been identified as requiring educational assistance, to volunteer tutors, whose background is in primary or secondary school teaching. The programme provides a number of different interventions:

1. **Weekly one-to-one tutoring:** the young person meets initially with their key-worker, the tutor, and the programme coordinator, to develop a plan for an 8-12 week period. The plan is developed with input from all relevant parties, including the young person's school and parent/guardian. The support provided can include homework support, 'catch-up' support if a child has missed school, or specific support with a subject they are having difficulty with.
2. **Weekly support group for young people with behavioural issues:** where young people have behavioural issues that are affecting their participation in school, a volunteer tutor works with young people in a group setting over an eight week period. The group works through a personal development programme incorporating positive behaviours and communication skills.
3. **Family literacy programme:** a volunteer tutor works intensively with families with the aim of increasing literacy overall within the family, and particularly parents to increase their capacity to support their children with homework and reading.

As part of the *Education Matters* programme, young people identified as being at risk of not returning to school can also participate in activities tailored to their needs.

Focus Ireland aims to secure impacts at individual and at policy/practice level from this work, with the overall aim of reducing the rate of early school leaving among participants to the national average.

From the policy/practice perspective, the aim is to continue to influence homelessness policy and practice to prevent homelessness, improve provision for those who become homeless, and to

secure sustainable transitions out of homelessness. Focus Ireland is implementing a detailed monitoring framework to capture robust empirical evidence of participant impacts to demonstrate the programme's added value to decision makers.

The programme has attracted the attention of educational policy makers (in part) because it seeks to build upon current provision, with the aim of enhancing effectiveness and securing better, more sustainable outcomes, for this particularly vulnerable group. This research paper aims to place this work within the broader context of policy and practice to tackle educational disadvantage in Ireland.

2.3 Overview of paper

Section 3 provides a brief overview of some relevant literature on the relationship between socio-economic and educational disadvantage, the policy framework for addressing that in Ireland, as well as some pertinent findings from international literature.

Section 4 provides a detailed description of key official data on educational disadvantage, against which the *Education Matters* programme could benchmark its outcomes. As this is the purpose of this section, indicators with potential in this regard are discussed in more detail, with a brief overview of other key markers for educational disadvantage.

Finally, Section 5 draws the key findings together and makes some recommendations in relation to impact and outcome monitoring for the relevant strand of the *Education Matters* programme.

3 Educational disadvantage

The purpose of this section of the paper is to overview key findings from relevant literature in the Irish context on educational disadvantage, so as to locate the *Education Matters* programme within the broader policy framework, research findings on the dynamics of educational disadvantage, and on the factors that have been identified as successful in addressing educational disadvantage.

3.1 Context: policy on educational disadvantage in Ireland

"Since the 1990s, policy to address educational disadvantage in Ireland has centred on the targeting of additional resources and supports towards schools serving disadvantaged populations" (Smyth et al., 2015:vi).

The main policy mechanism is the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme – under the aegis of the Department of Education – along with the School Completion Programme (SCP) and the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) service – under the Educational Welfare Service in Tusla, the Child and Family Agency.

DEIS was introduced in 2006, consolidating a number of earlier stand alone programmes. The rationale underpinning this approach is that of a 'multiplier effect' i.e. that schools serving students with a high concentration of socio-economic disadvantage have poorer academic outcomes, even taking social background into account. DEIS provides additional funding (relative to the level of disadvantage), along with other resources including literacy and numeracy programmes, and support with school planning to schools in the programme[5]. The most disadvantaged urban schools also have smaller class sizes, while DEIS secondary schools and urban primary schools can access the SCP and HSCL (Smyth et al., 2015:vi).

This policy framework has a number of implications in relation to the *Education Matters* programme.

The first relates to the availability of data. Administrative data in a wide range of social policy areas is generally collected to implement and monitor policy. While more detailed longitudinal studies are increasingly available in Ireland e.g. the Growing Up in Ireland survey, much of the data regularly published by statutory sources is concerned with monitoring and evaluating public policy programmes.

The identification of schools for inclusion in the DEIS programme for example is based not on an analysis of disadvantage at student level, but on reports submitted by school principals on the level of disadvantage in their school population. Similarly, a 2014 survey to inform a resourcing model of mainstream schools, with a particular focus on socio-economic disadvantage, was also completed by school principals. Of note in this regards is that the non-response rate to questions

[5] Smyth et al. (2015:iv) note that there were 657 primary and 193 post-primary schools in the DEIS programme

on socio-economic indicators was "fairly high" (Weir & Denner, 2016:4-5). While Weir & Denner (2016:17). find that the responses to the survey are generally in line with central data sources, indicating the responses are accurate, the data are not readily available for analysis at individual student level.

In sum, much of the data collected on the interplay between socio-economic and educational disadvantage in Ireland is for the purpose of identifying schools where a multiplier effect is likely to apply, and to compare the performance of schools who receive additional support with those that don't. The data is collected to identify and asses the relative performance of schools (as an aggregate of student outcomes) rather than individual students.

As Smyth et al. (2015:76) put it "the lack of data on individual student background means that we are unable to … compare students from disadvantaged backgrounds who attend DEIS schools with students from disadvantaged backgrounds who attend more socially mixed schools". Because of the lack of data on individual students' social profile it is "difficult to measure the achievement gap specifically for disadvantaged students, and to capture the additional effect of the concentration of disadvantage in a school on achievement (the so-called 'multiplier effect')" (2015:ix) .

It also means that more detailed analysis, for example of the incidence of educational disadvantage in students who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, is not possible from administrative sources.

A second consideration relates to an issue already flagged in Focus Ireland's analysis of children in homeless families: many were not attending schools supported to address educational disadvantage. Smyth & McCoy (2009:58) find that "a considerable proportion of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds attend non-DEIS schools. School targeting alone cannot, therefore, address the needs of all children and young people in the relevant groups". They argue that there is a "need for joined-up planning and provision between education, health and welfare services in addressing the holistic development of children". This finding has relevance for the *Education Matters* intervention.

3.2 The dynamics of early school leaving

The literature on educational disadvantage establishes a clear relationship between socio-economic disadvantage and poor educational outcomes; a dynamic that contributes to the inter-

generational reproduction of poverty. In perhaps the most recent piece of analysis to consider this issue (albeit focusing on the resourcing needs of schools) Weir & Denner (2016:8-9) confirm the relationship between students' socio-economic backgrounds and their educational achievement[6]. Their analysis finds that "all of the socio-economic variables are negatively and significantly related to all of the educational outcome variables … students from poorer home backgrounds tend to perform more poorly than their more affluent counterparts in the JCE overall, as well as in the individual subject areas of English and mathematics".

Staying in school is clearly a necessary (albeit not sufficient) component of all efforts to combat educational disadvantage. As Byrne & Smyth (2010) note, preventing early school leaving has been a central goal of policy to tackle educational disadvantage in Ireland.

Byrne & Smyth's (2010) study used data from the Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (PPLS)[7], supplemented with a specific follow-up of early school leavers to explore the *dynamics* of early school leaving in Ireland. Their analysis confirms a number of pre-existing understandings around early school leaving, but contributes to a better understanding of how the various risk factors interact, and which are most salient.

The Department of Education & Skills (DES) has now published the second in a series of reports tracking early school leavers a year after they leave school[8]; the focus of this report is primarily on the next destination for students who leave school early, however there is also some information in the reports relevant to the dynamics of early school leaving.

The Growing Up in Ireland survey – the national longitudinal study of children in Ireland – has recently published the first of its 'Key Findings' series in relation to the child cohort at 17/18 years of age, which looks at education and early work experiences.

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[6] Weir & Denner's (2016) report analyses a survey of 723 post-primary schools which was conducted in 2014 to inform the resourcing of mainstream schools offering the Junior and Leaving Certificate, with particular reference to the school's socio-economic context. The survey focused mainly on the socio-economic characteristics of families in each school, and was completed by school principals.

[7] The PPLS follows a group of young people in twelve case study schools from their entry to secondary school

[8] The reports are based on a detailed analysis of students on the Post-Primary Pupil Database who were enrolled in DES-aided post-primary schools, focusing on students who were enrolled in secondary school in a particular academic year, but not a year later. The most recent report (2016) relates to the cohort of pupils who were enrolled in years before the final year of senior cycle in 2010/11 and who were not enrolled in the 2011/12 academic year.

The key findings from Byrne & Smyth's study are outlined below, supplemented with information from the DES Early Leavers report, and findings from Growing Up in Ireland.

- **Gender:** school drop out has long been established as a gendered phenomenon and this was reflected in the PPLS, with 15% of boys dropping out compared to 9% of girls; even within the same school, boys were more likely to drop out than girls (Byrne & Smyth, 2010:47). However, girls tend to leave earlier than boys: in the first or second year of junior cycle, less than 20% of boys dropped out, but the figure was over 20% for girls; just under a quarter of girls left after the third year of the junior cycle, compared to just over a fifth of boys (DES, 2016:6-7).
- **Socio-economic background:** the highest dropout rates were found among young people from non-employed, semi/unskilled and skilled manual households; hence early school leaving is particularly prevalent among boys from working class backgrounds. Members of minority group(s) were also more likely to leave school early e.g. just under a quarter of Travellers in the PPLS left school early, compared with 10% for the settled population[9]. 'Newcomer' or immigrant children[10] were also found to have a much higher drop out rate, with a fifth of students in this group leaving early compared to 11% of children of Irish parents (Byrne & Smyth, 2010:49).
- **Academic ability:** students who start secondary school with low test scores in reading and maths were found to be "significantly" (p.50) more likely to drop out of school early: a third of the lowest scoring group left school early, along with a substantial portion of those in the second lowest group; in contrast, very few students with the highest maths scores dropped out. Byrne & Smyth (p.50) caution that early school leaving cannot simply be reduced to academic ability: school completers are found across all performance levels, and even within the lower performing students, considerable variance was found across schools for students with similar levels of academic ability.
- **Variation by school type:** significant variation across the sample schools was found, confirming previous research on school drop out in Ireland. While early school leaving was much more

[9] Note that this is likely an underestimation of early school leaving in the Traveller community, as it's based on students who did make the transition to secondary school.

[10] Newcomer or immigrant parents are defined in this instance as children both of whose parents are not Irish

prevalent in schools with students predominantly from a working class background, Byrne & Smyth (p.47-48) also note variation among schools with a similar intake profile.

- **Transition to secondary school:** "integration into social networks within the new school setting appears to play a positive role in promoting school completion" (Byrne & Smyth, 2010:50-1). Students who had very little idea about what to expect from secondary school were more likely to drop out: 27% of those who had 'very little' idea of what to expect in post-primary dropped out, compared to 11% of those who had 'some idea', and 19% of students who said they had 'a good idea'. Students who didn't have any of their primary school friends with them in secondary school were also more likely to drop out: 22% compared to 15%, as were students who knew no-one in their school in the first year (22% compared to 16%).

  Continuity in curriculum from primary to secondary school also appeared to be significant, with the lowest drop out rates among students who found Irish, English and/or Maths 'about the same' in secondary as in primary school. Of note is the finding that there were somewhat higher drop out rates among those who found material *easier* in first year than primary school, which Byrne & Smyth (2010:52-3) attribute to "the lower level of academic challenge found among students allocated to lower stream classes". Finally, while almost a fifth of students who didn't get their choice of subjects went on to drop out, this was the case for only 9% of students who did get their chosen subjects.

- **Relations with teachers:** a clear cut relationship was found between patterns of negative teacher-student interactions and early school leaving, with drop out preceding more negative relations with teachers; a finding confirming earlier research on the topic cited by Byrne & Smyth (e.g. Smyth, 1999; McCoy, 2000). A negative teacher-student relationship was more prevalent even in the early part of first year among students who subsequently dropped out.

- **Misbehaviour & discipline:** Significant differences in misbehaviour levels were found between early school leavers and other students, apparent as early as the end of first year[11]. Being late for school, or repeatedly absent from school, is highly predictive of early school leaving: e.g. a quarter of those who truanted in first year went on to drop out of school early, compared with a rate of a tenth for those who hadn't. "Early school leaving is preceded by a period of gradual

[11] Byrne & Smyth (2010, p.52) find that this "applies across all forms of misbehaviour; the exception to this pattern is 'messing in class' which is not predictive of early school leaving".

withdrawal from school involving being late for school, absenteeism and truancy" (Byrne & Smyth, 2010:53).

Students who were frequently in trouble for not following school rules were more likely to drop out early: 17% of those repeatedly (>3 times) in trouble in first year left school early compared to 7% for students who never got into trouble. More than a quarter of students who received detention frequently in first year dropped out, compared to 7% of students who had never received detention. Four in ten of the students who had been suspended from school subsequently dropped out of school.

GUI (2016:6) finds that students from the most socially disadvantaged families ('never worked') reported more negative experiences with teachers than students from the most socially advantaged backgrounds ('professional/managerial/technical'): they were significantly more likely to say they were given out to for misbehaving in class (24% compared to 11%), or because their work was 'untidy or late' (24% compared to 15%). They were also less likely to report having been praised by a teacher for work well done (52% compared to 60%) or been told by a teacher that their work was good (63% compared to 76%).

- **Relationships with other students:** Byrne & Smyth (2010:54-57) found that students who had experienced repeated bullying at the start of first year were much more likely to drop out of school. Early school leavers were also more likely to report feeling anxious and isolated at the beginning of first year, which the authors attribute to bullying, as these differences aren't apparent at other time points. However, there wasn't a difference in being bullied at other stages in the school cycle, nor was being seen as (un)popular among class mates associated with early school leaving.
- **Student attitudes towards teachers and school:** Byrne & Smyth (2010:57) find that over the course of first year, differences emerge between students who go on to drop out and those who don't in the degree to which they report liking school and their teachers. By third year, early school leavers are more negative about school and teachers than other students. GUI (2016:5) found that "attitudes towards school and teachers varied significantly by social class. Young people from the most socially disadvantaged homes had more negative views of teachers and, especially, school – 39% of the most socially disadvantaged 17/18-year-olds disliked school compared with 19% of those in the most socially advantaged group "

- **Academic orientation:** early school leavers had a more negative academic self image, were more inclined to feel unable to cope with schoolwork, even from first year onwards. Students who invest little time in homework are also disproportionately likely to drop out early: over a third who spent less than a half an hour on their homework per evening a the start of first year dropped out early, compared to a tenth of those who spent over two hours a night. Unsurprisingly, a third of students who intended only to complete the Junior Certificate left school early compared to 5% who wanted to continue to degree level (Byrne & Smyth, 2010:54-57). In this context, it is worth noting that the GUI (2016:4) found that "63% of 17/18-year-olds in the highest income quintile were taking grinds in their Leaving Certificate year compared to 33% of young people from families in the lowest income quintile".

- **Parental involvement:** perhaps surprisingly, Byrne & Smyth (2010:59) found only two aspects of parental involvement were associated with early school leaving. Firstly, 33% of students who reported that their parents 'never or hardly ever' talked with them about how school was going subsequently dropped out, compared to 16% for those who had these conversations 'several times a week'. Secondly, how frequently students had dinner with their parents was also significant: 33% of students who did this 'never/hardly ever/a few times a year' left school early, compared to 13% among those who had dinner with their parents 'several times a week'.

- **Out-of-school activities:** Students who work part-time during junior cycles are more likely to leave school earlier; drop out rates are particularly high (25%) for those who work during first year. This finding is consistent with previous research showing that part-time work may act as a 'pull' factor for early school leaving. Involvement in sports was not found to be significant, which is not in line with previous research indicating that this promoted a send of 'ownership', thereby improving retention. Byrne & Smyth (2010:60-61) attribute this to a changed policy context, with the School Completion Programme facilitating greater access to such activities in working class schools; while cautioning that such measures are, in and of themselves, unlikely to be sufficient to ensure retention.

- **School organisation:** Byrne & Smyth (2010:61-62) find "dramatic differences" in drop out rates depending on whether schools allocated students to classes on the basis of assessed ability: only 7% of students in mixed ability classes dropped out of school, compared to 60% of students who had been allocated to a lower stream class in junior cycle. Even when controlling

for individual academic ability[12], students from lower streamed classes were more likely to drop out than students of similar ability allocated to other classes.

Byrne & Smyth also conducted a multivariate analysis (p.63-66) to explore factors influencing early school leaving controlling for initial differences between students.

The analysis confirmed that rates of early school leaving are highest among boys, members of the Traveller community, newcomer students, and those from working class and non-employed backgrounds.

Adding reading score on entry to secondary school shows, unsurprisingly, that those with higher scores are less likely to drop out. The analysis also shows that the higher drop out rate for members of the Traveller community is mainly attributable to their lower reading scores on entering secondary school. This does not hold for newcomer students, who have higher drop out rates even controlling for academic ability. Social class differences are also less marked when reading scores are factored in, however, all else being equal, students from higher professional or farming backgrounds have lower rates of drop out, while those from non-employed families have higher rates.

When school experiences are taken into account, class allocation at junior cycle is found to have the strongest impact. Even controlling for social background and initial ability, students in mixed ability classes had the lowest drop out rates, while the highest rates were for students in lower streamed classes. The analysis identifies a number of school factors which predict early school leaving, controlling for social background, ability and class allocation. Of particular relevance for this paper are difficulties in coping with schoolwork; not liking school; higher levels of misbehaviour; being 'given out to' frequently by teachers; and being bullied during the transition to secondary school.

Finally, factoring in student engagement and motivation shows that the amount of time spent on homework is "significantly predictive", with those who spend least time most likely to drop out, and vice versa. Students with higher educational aspirations by second year are also less likely to leave school early. The analysis finds that middle class students and those with higher reading scores are less likely to drop out because of their higher aspirations and engagement in schoolwork – a finding that suggests the *Education Matters* programme is well targeted on the

[12] By comparing outcomes only for students in the lowest 40% in terms of reading scores across class types

factors that can mitigate against early school leaving. The authors further note that school climate appears to actively shape student motivation: students who have negative relationships with teachers seem to withdraw from engagement with school work, which subsequently leads them to leave school early. (Byrne & Smyth, 2010:63-66).

The conclusion is clear: "early school leaving is influenced by social class background, with the highest rates of drop out found among young people from non-employed, semi/unskilled manual and skilled manual households. Social class should not be considered in isolation from gender since it is largely working-class boys who leave school early. As with gender differentiation, part of the explanation of the social class gap in early leaving resides in the greater tendency of working-class students to experience the school climate as negative and to be allocated to lower stream classes"(Byrne & Smyth, 2010:66-8) . GUI (2016:11) notes that "one of the most concerning issues" to emerge from the analysis "is the extent to which attitudes towards and performance in the education system are related to various measures of social advantage", concluding that "additional interventions may be needed to reduce the apparent dependency of educational outcomes on family characteristics such as social class and income".

What is also apparent is that this is a process, which occurs over time, and which with appropriate intervention, can be halted: "There are clear indications that school drop-out is the result of a long-term accumulative process of disengagement from school. … For many young people, leaving school is preceded by a gradual withdrawal from school life, comprising being late for school, being repeatedly absent from school, and truanting" (Byrne & Smyth, 2010:68). While their analysis identifies a number of school specific factors that are active in this process of disengagement; it is also clear that the interventions provided under Education Matters are well targeted on critical factors in the process of early school leaving.

3.3 What works? Evidence on addressing educational disadvantage

While it is not the purpose of this paper to provide a comprehensive overview of policy and practice to tackle educational disadvantage, it is useful to review some key findings on policy in this area, to distil relevant learning for the *Education Matters* programme.

In their study of educational disadvantage, Smyth & McCoy (2009:3-5) report on findings in relation the three "main strands of policy designed to counter educational disadvantage" noting that these have been subject to the "most rigorous empirical analyses":

- **Early childhood education:** robust findings on the critical value of high quality early education and care for pre-school children are now well established in the literature, and have been demonstrated to have both a short and long-term positive impact on educational retention and attainment, most particularly for socio-economically disadvantaged groups: systematic evaluation of these programmes in the USA "indicates that they are the most cost-effective way of reducing educational inequality".

  Given Focus Ireland's (2016a) findings that almost four in ten children living in emergency homeless accommodation, this is a critically important dimension of counteracting the impact of a period of homelessness on a young child's future development. While such interventions are outside the scope of this paper, the recent decision to provide 25 hours' of free childcare for children aged 0-5 in homeless families[13], should be noted as a positive development. This initiative, co-designed by Focus Ireland with the DCYA, has the potential to mitigate the impact of a period of homelessness on the educational trajectory of young children.

- **Measures to boost academic achievement:** measures in this strand of interventions include things like smaller class sizes (e.g. as is the case for the most disadvantaged urban schools under DEIS), intensive literacy and/or numeracy programmes etc.

  The evidence on class size is contentious, as it can be difficult to isolate the impact of class size from other relevant factors (and provision for children with learning difficulties is often in smaller classes); it is also of less relevance to the focus of this research: class size is not an issue Focus Ireland can impact upon in the context of this project.

  However, providing intensive literacy and/or numeracy supports have generally yielded positive outcomes, and in "particular reading programmes with cooperative learning at their core tend to be more successful". Smyth & McCoy (2009:4) cite the *Success for All* programme in the USA, which involved intensive reading activities and close liaison with parents in schools serving disadvantaged communities (albeit this programme focused on children in the early years). While the *Education Matters* programme is targeted on older students, the inclusion of a 'family focused' element in the programme appears appropriate.

[13] From January 2017, pre-school children whose parents are homeless and those transitioning out of homelessness into permanent accommodation are entitled to access 25 hours of free (parents cannot be asked for 'top-ups' or co-payments) childcare per week (including 15 hours on the free preschool programme if applicable). This provision also includes a daily meal. http://www.dcya.gov.ie/viewdoc.asp?DocID=4073

- **Additional resources for schools serving disadvantaged students:** this third type of intervention targets additional resources at disadvantaged schools and/or areas; the approach taken by the DEIS programme in Ireland. Smyth & McCoy (2009:5) cite a number of examples of such programmes internationally[14], but note that evaluations have shown mixed, or relatively poor outcomes. For example, they cite Benabou et al.'s (2006) finding that such resourcing produced "no significant effects on student achievement and school completion within the second level sector" in the France, and note that research in the US context, finds that while such funding is associated with improved student achievement, it is not of a sufficient scale to close the achievement gap between high and low income students, a not dissimilar experience to the DEIS programme in Ireland. One of the criticisms of this kind of approach is that it fails to take account of the geography of inequality i.e. there can be significant variances within any given area – as is the case in Ireland where we know that a significant proportion of disadvantaged children do not attend DEIS schools – and more fundamentally, that this approach fails to consider disadvantage within the overall process of social inequality.

The focus so far has been on the association between socio-economic disadvantage, and how it interacts with a range of other factors, to produce educational disadvantage. While it is very clear that students from lower socio-economic groups are at much higher risk of leaving school early and/or lower educational attainment, it is also the case that not all students with these disadvantages under-perform: what are the factors that help these students overcome their disadvantage?

This question was considered in an OECD study on 'resilient' students: those students who, although in the lower socio-economic group, perform well academically. The promising message from this study is that disadvantage is not destiny when it comes to education: while the proportion of disadvantaged students that succeed varies considerably across systems, in some[15] countries "close to half of disadvantaged students exceed an internationally comparable benchmark and can be considered successful from an international perspective". Further, "when looking at disadvantaged students that are successful within countries, resilient students' performance is high even when compared to their more advantaged peers" (OECD, 2011:11).

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[14] For example, educational priority policies in Belgium (Flanders) and the Netherlands, the *Zones d'Education Prioritaire* (ZEP) in France, the *Title I Program* in the US and the *Disadvantaged Schools Program* in Australia

[15] OECD (2011:14) cites Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Finland, Japan, Korea and Portugal

The study considered three different factors that could contribute to resilience among students: i) students' approaches to learning; ii) hours spent and lessons taken in school to learn science; and iii) school characteristics. In relation to the latter two areas, OECD (2011:74-78) finds:

- Students attending compulsory science courses perform at higher levels in PISA science assessments than those who don't. Both advantaged and disadvantaged students benefit, but in some countries, disadvantaged students appear to benefit to a greater extent. In eight OECD countries, disadvantaged students benefited most from compulsory courses in biology, chemistry or physics (rather than general science courses); the difference was particularly marked in the case of Ireland (OECD, 2011:73-75).
- Students spending more time in regular science lessons at school perform better; all students are equality likely to benefit from more time in science classes at school.
- Perhaps surprisingly, and with wider application to policy to tackle educational disadvantage in Ireland, is the finding that school characteristics – specifically whether the school is private; competes with other schools for students; uses academic records in admission procedures; whether it provides activities to promote science learning; whether the school has good educational resources were not found to play a significant role in improving performance in the PISA science assessment for either disadvantaged or more advantaged students.

Of greater relevance to this paper, and echoing the findings of both Byrne & Smyth (2010) and GUI (2016), is that "overall, across most countries, disadvantaged students have lower levels of motivation and less positive approaches to learning than their more advantaged peers". Motivation and attitude matters: a strong association was found between self-confidence and general interest in science and higher science assessment scores, across OECD countries – but in a number of countries, the benefit for disadvantaged students was found to be less than that for other students[16]. This finding causes the OECD to caution: "unless policies aimed at promoting greater motivation and positive attitudes to science learning are directed specifically at reducing disparities in motivation and attitudes towards science learning between social groups, this analysis suggests they will result in absolute improvements in science achievement but may contribute to widening existing inequalities in performance across social groups" (OECD, 2011:69-

[16] The analysis showed that this was the case for Ireland too, but the differential was small and not statistically significant (OECD, 2011:71)

78). While these OECD findings relate specifically to science learning, the issues of motivation and attitude are also flagged in broader literature on educational disadvantage (and its relationship with socio-economic disadvantage), suggesting that the targeted approach adopted by *Education Matters* of focusing support on the most disadvantaged students, is appropriate.

3.4 Conclusion

Policy and practice to combat educational disadvantage in Ireland is strongly focused on supporting schools; a key consequence of this is that a) data on individual students is not readily available in a format that facilitates analysis at student rather than school level, most particularly in relation to specific risk factors such as being homeless or at risk of homelessness, and b) a significant proportion of disadvantaged students don't attend schools supported to address disadvantage. This latter area is very under-explored in Ireland, as a result of data deficits, and is an area in which the *Education Matters* programme may be able to contribute some learning: currently, we have very little insight into how the experience of vulnerable students varies in DEIS and non-DEIS schools, and how a programme such as this can address those different experiences during very difficult times in students' lives.

It's clear that a wide range of factors interact in particular ways to contribute to early school leaving and that these build cumulatively to a process of disengagement from school. Socio-economic factors are found to be strongly associated with educational disadvantage – those from working class and non-employed backgrounds, particularly boys, as well as members of the Traveller community and newcomer students are at particular risk. However these risks are not insurmountable.

Much of Ireland's effort on educational disadvantage is focused on schools, and a number of these findings are relevant to the school system in particular: for example that greater effort be invested in narrowing the gap in reading and numeracy before entry to secondary school (socio-economic differences become less salient when reading scores are factored in), and that the practice of 'streaming' children into classes based on ability, particularly in schools serving disadvantaged communities, hinders rather than helps those students at greatest risk.

However, the focus of this paper is on the *Education Matters* programme – what implications do these findings have for this programme? Focus Ireland cannot impact upon students' socio-economic circumstances, their ethnic/minority status, or their reading score at a younger age, but

controlling for these factors, the research does identify a number opportunities in which the process of disengagement from school can be interrupted.

One key area identified by the literature is that confidence in academic ability, and being motivated to learn, contributes to academic achievement. It's not only attitudinal: those students who invest more time on their homework are more likely to succeed and less likely to drop out. The research also finds that dislike of school develops during secondary school – most children say they like school when they enter secondary school, the differences emerge after that.

The second area that emerges very strongly from the literature is that of relationships with teachers, misbehaviour, being 'given out to' by teachers and rarely receiving praise from teachers.

One finding may have a particular relevance to the *Education Matters* programme is that of bullying, which when it occurred in first year, was associated with drop out, as was having few friends in a new school. Most families who experience homelessness go to considerable length to keep their children in the same school, even if they are living some distance away, in order to minimise disruption. But where classmates become aware of the family situation, or where the child has to move school, the risk of bullying contributing to a negative cycle of withdrawal from school may be significant.

The last area to mention at this juncture is that of family involvement. Children's "educational performance from nine years onwards is consistently related to level of mothers education" (GUI, 2016:11). However the factors that Byrne & Smyth (2010) found to be salient were not to do with parents' academic ability, but the degree to which parents and children interacted with each other around how children were getting on in school, and how frequently they ate dinner together. The experience of homelessness forces many families into closer proximity for much longer periods of time putting family dynamics under considerable strain; while the issue of homelessness is not explored specifically in the literature, the family dynamic would appear to be a particular risk factor in the context of this element of Focus Ireland's work.

Finally, a targeted rather than a more generalist approach to this issue appears well supported by the literature. Given the gender profile of early school leavers, gender should be considered as a 'risk factor' in relation to identifying programme participants, with boys more likely to drop out, but girls more likely to drop out at an earlier stage.

4 Key indicators on educational disadvantage

Weir et al. (2014:3) point to a range of indicators used by the DES as possible target areas for educational disadvantage work (in the context of DEIS); these include student attendance and retention rates, as well as a number of indicators to measure educational attainment, such as literacy and numeracy attainment/progression, achievement in exams for second level students[17].

The findings from the literature outlined above make clear the need to interrupt the gradual process of withdrawal that typically precedes early school leaving: it is this process that Focus Ireland's intervention aims to prevent and redirect.

This section discusses various sources of published administrative data that are relevant to this process of disengagement, and which can be analysed by socio-economic status, against which the Focus Ireland programme can benchmark its impact. These are largely the indicators that the Educational Resource Centre (ERC) uses to monitor achievement outcomes on DEIS, as they are centrally available data sources. Note that while the ERC doesn't use attendance data in its formal monitoring, given the dynamics of early school leaving this is both a key marker of success in disrupting the process of educational disengagement, and is publicly available data.

4.1 School attendance

Continued attendance at school can pose a very significant challenge for children in families who are homeless. In addition to the significant disruption to family life, temporary/emergency accommodation may not be located in the area in which the family formerly lived, meaning that children can be faced with long (and more costly) commutes to get to and from school. Maintaining children's attendance at school is therefore a key goal for the *Education Matters* programme.

Schools are required, under the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000, to submit data on school attendance to the Educational Welfare Service in Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. Schools submit quarterly data with the aim of identifying problems to enable early intervention[18], and also

[17] As the DEIS programme is school based, additional target areas suggested include fostering parent and community partnerships as well as partnerships between schools and with other agencies. These are not discussed here as they are not relevant to the Education Matters programme.

[18] Schools submit Student Absence Reports four times a year in relation to students falling within the following criteria: a student has been absent from school for a cumulative total of twenty days or more; a

complete an Annual Attendance Report. Four variables form the core of the Tusla data-set on school attendance:

- total number of days lost through student absence in the entire school year;
- number of students who were absent for 20 days or more in the school year;
- total number of students expelled (where all appeal processes had been exhausted);
- total number of students who were suspended.

No data are collected on student characteristics, accordingly the primary mechanism to monitor school attendance in Ireland does not examine the relationship between school attendance and student characteristics.

Key statistics from the most recent Annual Attendance Report, for 2014-15 (Millar, 2016) in respect of post-primary schools include:

- The percentage of overall student/days lost through absence was 7.7%. Around 26,100 students are estimated to miss secondary school each day, equating to a loss of 13 days from the 167 day school year.
- The 20 day absence rate In post-primary schools was 16.2%. Based on population numbers, this represents about 55,000 post-primary students missing more than 20 days from school.
- All forms of non-attendance were higher in post-primary schools within the School Support Programme (SSP) under DEIS. However, while non-attendance increased in post-primary schools as a whole, there was no increase in either general non-attendance or 20 day absences in DEIS schools.
- 133 students were expelled from post-primary schools in 2014/5, a decrease of 13 on the previous year. The number of suspensions also saw a decrease, from 4.5% in 2012/3, to 4.1% in 2013/4, and falling again in 2014/5 to 3.8%.

It is worth noting that absence rates (student/days lost, 20 day absence rate) are higher in post-primary than primary school. While children in families who are currently homeless are

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student's name is to be removed from the school register for any reason; a student has been suspended for a cumulative total of six or more days; the school has expelled a student; a principal is concerned about a student's attendance. http://www.tusla.ie/services/educational-welfare-services/information-for-schools-inc-absence-reporting/reporting-absenteeism

predominantly at primary school age and younger, the *Education Matters* focus on educational participation among older children in homeless families appears well targeted in this regard.

Table 1: Mean percentages of key attendance indicators by DEIS and Other schools

Post-primary schools		2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
Student/days lost	All	7.7	7.5	7.7
	a) DEIS	10.5	10.3	10.3
	b) Other	7.2	6.9	7.2
	Difference (a–b)	*3.3*	*3.4*	*3.1*
20 day absences	All	15.5	15.4	16.2
	a) DEIS	25.2	25.3	25.3
	b) Other	13.8	13.5	14.2
	Difference (a–b)	*11.4*	*11.8*	*11.1*

Source: Millar, D. (2016a&b)

Millar's (2016a, 2016b) analysis of the annual attendance reports does provide a breakdown between DEIS and non-DEIS schools. While a significant proportion of socio-economically disadvantaged students do not attend DEIS schools, Smyth et al. (2015:vii) note that large scale surveys such as *Growing Up in Ireland* confirm that DEIS schools do differ markedly in respect of "social class background, parental education, household income and family structures of their students". This comparison can be therefore considered a reasonable proxy for the impact of cumulative socio-economic disadvantage on school attendance rates.

This analysis demonstrates very marked differences in attendance between the two groups of schools (Table 1), with both indicators considerably higher among DEIS schools. However, DEIS schools have made better progress in improving attendance rates, so that the difference between schools serving very disadvantaged students and others has narrowed over the last three years[19].

4.2 School retention

School retention levels at junior and senior cycle are considered important indicators of educational attainment, and are among the indicators used to identify schools for participation in DEIS (Millar et al., 2014:43).

[19] Disaggregated data in earlier Annual Attendance Reports were presented in a different format and are not directly comparable.

The Department of Education & Science (DES) publishes a regular *Report on Retention Rates of Pupils in Second Level Schools*, the most recent available being for the 2009 entry cohort[20]. Overall retention rates to Leaving Certificate had been on a steady upward trajectory until 2006, when the national rate exceeded 90% for the first time; since then the rate has stabilised at just above 90%.

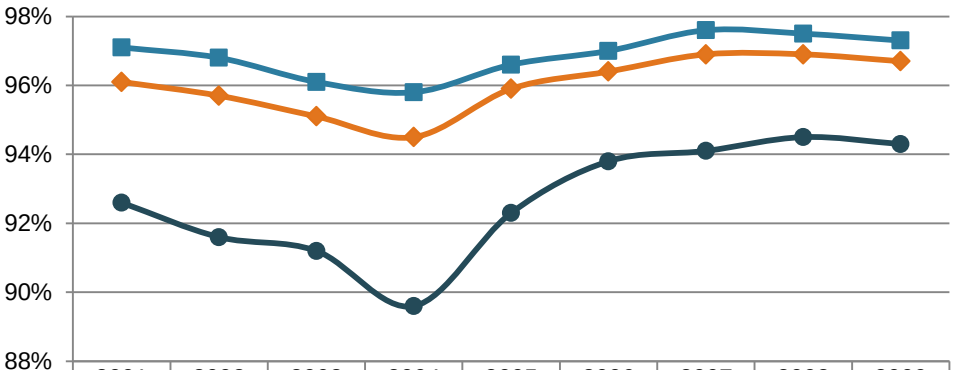
The DES report disaggregates retention rates between schools supported by the DEIS programme, and others. While the provisos noted in the section on school attendance above hold here too, this comparison is the closest proxy to an indicator on the relationship between socio-economic disadvantage and completing the school and state examination cycle available.

Figures 1 and 2 below illustrate the trends in retention rates to Junior and Leaving Certificate level by DEIS designation over time (DES, 2016).

Looking first at retention to Junior Certificate level, there was a significant improvement in overall retention rates from 2004, reversing the previous trend, before stabilising at just under 97% from the 2007 cohort on. There was significant improvement in DEIS schools, coming from a much lower base in 2004, with a slight decline for the 2009 cohort, compared to the peak which occurred with the 2008 cohort. At 94.3% the retention rate to Junior Certificate in DEIS schools was just 3 percentage points below that for non-DEIS schools for the 2009 cohort, less than half the gap at the low point of 2004.

[20] The cohort year refers to the year in which students entered second level i.e. not the year they took the Junior or Leaving Certificate exam. Students require at least 5, and often 6, to be tracked through to senior cycle in order to calculate a retention figure. As retention data work on a 5-6 year cycle, junior cycle retention rates are not reported until the entire cohort has completed senior cycle. (Millar et al., 2014, p.43)

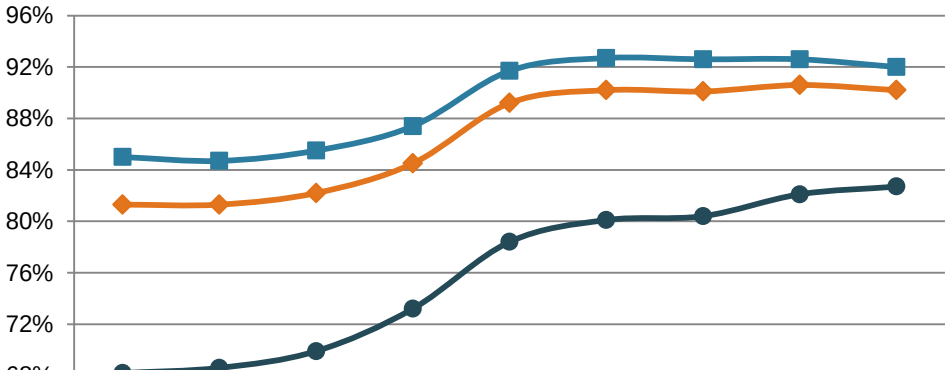
Figure 1: Junior Certificate Retention Rates by DEIS Designation, 2001-2009 Cohorts



	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
DEIS	92.6%	91.6%	91.2%	89.6%	92.3%	93.8%	94.1%	94.5%	94.3%
Non-DEIS	97.1%	96.8%	96.1%	95.8%	96.6%	97.0%	97.6%	97.5%	97.3%
All Schools	96.1%	95.7%	95.1%	94.5%	95.9%	96.4%	96.9%	96.9%	96.7%

Source: DES (2016)

Figure 2: Leaving Certificate Retention Rates by DEIS Designation, 2001-2009 Cohorts



	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
DEIS	68.2%	68.6%	69.9%	73.2%	78.4%	80.1%	80.4%	82.1%	82.7%
Non-DEIS	85.0%	84.7%	85.5%	87.4%	91.7%	92.7%	92.6%	92.6%	92.0%
All Schools	81.3%	81.3%	82.2%	84.5%	89.2%	90.2%	90.1%	90.6%	90.2%

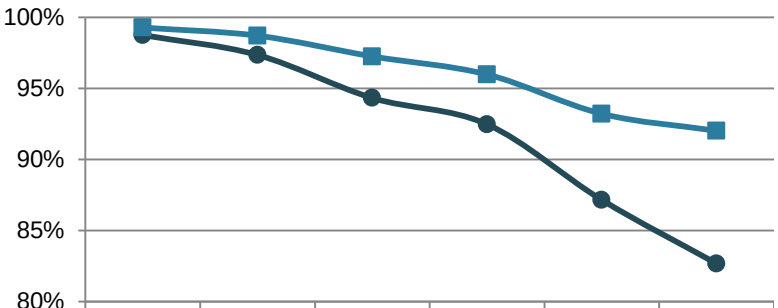
Source: DES (2016)

The gap in retention rates to Leaving Certificate has also been narrowing. The retention rate in non-DEIS schools has declined very marginally over recent years to 92%. In DEIS schools the retention rate appeared to stabilise for the 2006 and 2007 cohorts, at just over 80% – over 12 percentage points behind non-DEIS schools. However 82.7% of the 2009 cohort completed to Leaving Certificate; this represents progress: there was an almost 17 point difference for the 2001

cohort. Nonetheless the gap in retention rates to Leaving Certificate between DEIS and non-DEIS schools remains significant at 9.3 percentage points for the 2009 cohort.

Looking more closely at the trajectory of the 2009 cohort, Figure 3 below shows that the greatest loss of students occurs after the first year of the senior cycle.

Figure 3: Retention Rates by Milestone and DEIS Designation, 2009 Entry Cohort



	Junior 2	Junior 3	Junior Cert.	Senior 1	Senior 2	Leaving Cert.
DEIS	98.8%	97.4%	94.3%	92.5%	87.2%	82.7%
Non-DEIS	99.3%	98.7%	97.3%	96.0%	93.2%	92.0%

Source: DES (2016)

DES (2013) supplements this analysis with its annual *School Leavers – What's Next?* Report, providing an overview of what early school leavers do next, and showing that gender differences in early school leaving are not limited to the rate.

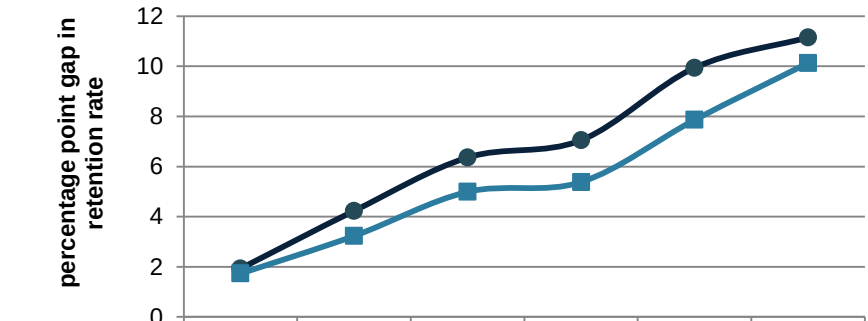
According to the DES over half (55%) went on to further education/training/continued second level within Ireland[21], while a further 13.9% went to education or training outside the state. That leaves just under 30% of early leavers not continuing in education/training. Of those, 6.6% were in receipt of a social welfare payment, while 6.1% were employed in 2010 (DES, 2013:6) .

Males (1%) enrol in PLC courses at twice the rate females (2%) do; males (31.3%) also partake in Youthreach to a far greater extent than females (19.5%). However more females (7.5%) enrol in FÁS and other second level training courses than males (4.7%). While the same proportion of males and females were recorded as having social welfare activity, slightly more females had some employment during 2010 (DES, 2013:8). Leavers with these kinds of destinations were most likely to have left after the junior cycle.

[21] This includes students who were tracked to other databases and estimations for students enrolled in Youthreach courses and private educational institutions

Perhaps of greater concern is those early leavers on which there is no information available on their destination: in contrast to the general trend above, the highest proportion of these left school after the first or second year of the junior cycle; girls form the largest share of this particular group (DES, 2013:10).

Figure 4: Difference in Retention Rates by Milestone, DEIS Designation and participation in TY, 2009 Cohort



	Junior 2	Junior 3	Junior Cert.	Senior 1	Senior 2	Leaving Cert.
DEIS	1.9	4.2	6.4	7.1	9.9	11.2
Non-DEIS	1.7	3.2	5.0	5.4	7.9	10.1

Source: calculated from DES (2016)

Finally, it is worth mentioning a finding from Byrne & Smyth's analysis in relation to one factor that appears to make a significant difference in relation to retention right through to senior cycle completion: participation in the Transition Year (TY). For the 2009 cohort, the retention rate of students who did TY was over 95%, 11.4 percentage points higher than the students who didn't partake, for whom the rate was just under 84%. There is a large decrease in retention of 4.9% between the first and second years of the senior cycle for students who didn't do TY (DES, 2016).

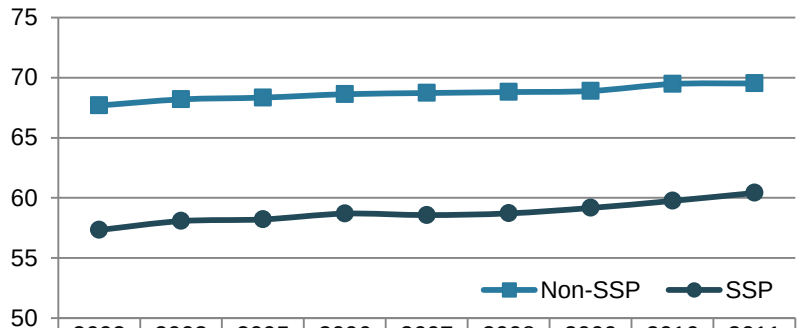
However, only 39% of student in DEIS schools did the TY, compared to 61% of students in non-DEIS schools. The retention rate to Leaving Certificate in DEIS schools was 89.5% for students who did TY, compared to 78.3% for those who didn't – a difference of 11.2 percentage points. Indeed participating in TY appears to have a slightly greater impact on the retention rates of students in DEIS than in non DEIS schools: the difference in the retention rate for students who did and did not do TY is higher at each milestone for students in DEIS than in non-DEIS schools.

4.3 Academic achievement

Weir et al. (2014) analyse results at Junior Certificate Examination (JCE) level using an Overall Performance Scale (OPS) which allocates numerical values to alphabetical grades and sums these to produce an index of achievement[22].

This data shows that the average OPS score increased in all schools from 2002, and that scores in schools *not* under the School Support Programme[23] performed consistently better than those that were. However, there has been progress in closing the performance gap, with the increase in OPS score in each year being "significantly greater" for schools under the SSP than those that were not. Weir et al. (2014:39-43) also find that "the increasing trend in OPS was significantly higher during the years following the introduction of DEIS".

Figure 5:Year-on-year changes in average Junior Cert. OPS scores for SSP & non-SSP schools



	2002	2003	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Non-SSP	67.7	68.2	68.3	68.6	68.7	68.8	68.9	69.5	69.5
SSP	57.3	58.1	58.2	58.7	58.6	58.7	59.2	59.8	60.4
Difference	10.4	10.1	10.1	9.9	10.2	10.1	9.7	9.7	9.1

Source: Weir et al. (2016)

Similar data is available in relation to English and Mathematics at Junior Certificate and at Leaving Certificate level; the salient point from all of these is that there is a persistent, albeit somewhat

[22] Further detail on how the index is constructed is available in Weir et al. (2014:37-38)

[23] The School Support Programme (SSP) consolidated existing interventions for schools and school clusters/communities with concentrated levels of educational disadvantage. Participating schools receive some or all of the following measures under the SSP: from the 2012/3 school year all DEIS post-primary schools benefit from an improved staffing ratio; a DEIS grand paid based on level of disadvantage and enrolment; access to the Home School Community Liaison service, the Schools Meals Programme, a range of supports under School Completion Programme, Junior Certificate Schools (some of these schools have a library) and the Leaving Certificate Applied Programmes, funding under School Books Grant Scheme, and a range of professional development supports (Weir et al., 2014:1-3)

narrowing, gap in achievement levels between schools designated as disadvantaged and others. However, for the reasons outlined below, it is not proposed to explore these in detail as they are of limited relevance to the purpose of this paper.

The gap in achievement levels is the ultimate indicator of educational disadvantage, however, performance in state examinations is not a suitable indicator to measure the impact of the *Education Matters* programme. Firstly, the range of factors that combine and interact to produce educational disadvantage are diverse; the project has the capacity to impact on some, but by no means all of these. This kind of impact indicator is disproportionate to the scale and duration of the intervention. Secondly, it is not practical for a project of this nature to track students over the extended time period required in order to use it as an impact indicator.

4.4 Conclusion

The aim of this section of the paper was to identify impact indicators that would best capture and demonstrate the effectiveness of the *Education Matters* programme in addressing educational disadvantage. In particular Focus Ireland sought advice in relation to published sources of administrative data against which it could benchmark participant outcomes.

The literature points to educational disadvantage being a gradual process of disengagement from school, with lateness and attendance issues, along with behaviour and deteriorating relationships with teachers all associated with early school leaving and educational disadvantage more broadly.

Both attendance and retention rates are published regularly, disaggregating between schools that receive additional support because of concentrated levels of disadvantage and those that don't. Both provide reasonable proxy indicators against which to benchmark the project (depending on the age of the student, retention rate are available for each year of the secondary school cycle).

While the gap in educational performance as measured in examinations can be considered as the definitive indicator of disadvantage, it is not a practical one against which to benchmark this project.

It may be useful to supplement these published sources by tracking relevant indicators on which progress can be assessed on an individual basis. For example, instances of being late for school, or late submitting homework, unexplained absences from school, grades received for school work, instances of being 'given out to', detention etc.

5 Conclusions and recommendations

Policy in Ireland on educational disadvantage is focused primarily on schools: the main programme of support provides additional resourcing to schools serving populations with concentrated levels of disadvantage. This means that much of the relevant administrative data is collected at school, rather than at individual, level. Because of the lack of data on individual students' social profile it is "difficult to measure the achievement gap specifically for disadvantaged students" (Smyth et al., 2015:ix)

A clear and strong relationship is established in the literature between socio economic disadvantage and poorer educational outcomes, this relationship is found across all major indicators of educational disadvantage e.g. attendance and retention rates, achievement in state exams. Indeed GUI (2016:11) identifies as one of the issues of greatest concern "the extent to which attitudes towards and performance in the education system are related to various measures of social advantage", recommending that additional interventions may be needed to break this relationship.

Nonetheless, OECD (2011) makes clear that disadvantage is not destiny: socio-economically disadvantaged students are found amongst the highest performers internationally.

It is also clear from the literature that the process of withdrawal from education is a gradual, accumulative one that occurs over time, and which, with appropriate intervention can be interrupted.

"There are clear indications that school drop-out is the result of a long-term accumulative process of disengagement from school. … For many young people, leaving school is preceded by a gradual withdrawal from school life, comprising being late for school, being repeatedly absent from school, and truanting" (Byrne & Smyth, 2010:68). While their analysis identifies a number of school specific factors that are active in this process of disengagement; it is also clear that the interventions provided under *Education Matters* are well targeted on critical factors in the process of early school leaving.

Many of the factors associated with educational disadvantage are largely within the control of schools, however the literature identifies some key areas relevant to the *Education Matters* programme:

- The one to one tutoring should help to build students academic abilities, and perhaps just as importantly, their own confidence and belief in their abilities. The literature indicates that not only is academic capacity important, but that a positive attitude to school and learning is associated with better outcomes.
- Critically important in the process of withdrawal, particularly for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds is a deteriorating relationship with teachers, growing dislike for school, higher instances of being 'given out' to and disciplined. The group work element can help students develop their social skills to manage difficulties in school for more productive outcomes.
- "Educational performance from nine years onwards is consistently related to level of mothers education" (GUI, 2016:11), the provision of intensive literacy supports is an appropriate measure in this context; the literature also points to the importance of parental involvement with the child in maintaining participation in school.

In summary, the interventions delivered under the *Education Matters* programme appear appropriately designed and targeted to impact on salient factors implicated in the process of disengagement from school.

Finally there is the question of indicators against which to benchmark impact. Attendance and retention rates are published on a regular basis, and disaggregated between 'disadvantaged' schools and others: these represent reasonable proxies against which to benchmark the project. Note that while Focus Ireland states that it wishes for participants to achieve the national rate; given the scale of the gap in many of these indicators, and the considerable additional challenge that being out-of-home presents, it may be appropriate to benchmark against the averages for DEIS schools.

While the gap in educational performance as measured in examinations can be considered as the definitive indicator of disadvantage, it is not a practical one against which to benchmark this project.

Education Matters is monitoring retention and attendance at individual level, along with a range of other indicators such as catching up on school work, improved self-confidence etc. Given the complexity of the issue, the scale of the challenge, and the nature and duration of the

intervention, being able to demonstrate the progression of individual participants, and locate this within the national context, will be of significant value in demonstrating the programme's impact.

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