

Equality and Education

Across the spectrum of 'Lifelong Learning'



Bray Partnership
Conference Report 2007





Conference Delegates

This conference was attended by 82 delegates representing all of the partners in education including mainstream education providers at primary, post-primary and higher level, adult and community education providers, students and adult learners, parents, childcare workers, youth workers, and representatives from a range of stakeholders in the voluntary, community and statutory sectors.

Some of the groups and organisations represented included:

<i>AONTAS</i>	<i>Home School Community Liaison Co-ordinator</i>
<i>Bray Institute of Further Education</i>	<i>Larkin College Dublin</i>
<i>Bray Adult Education Centre</i>	<i>LEAP Project</i>
<i>Bray Adult Guidance Service</i>	<i>Little Bray Family Resource Centre</i>
<i>Bray Adult Learning Centre</i>	<i>Loreto Secondary School</i>
<i>Bray Community Enterprise</i>	<i>Marian Centre</i>
<i>Bray Lakers</i>	<i>Marino School</i>
<i>Bray LESN</i>	<i>National Access Office</i>
<i>Bray Local Drugs Task Force</i>	<i>National Learning Network</i>
<i>BRAY MABS</i>	<i>NCCRI</i>
<i>Bray School Project</i>	<i>NYP2 Project</i>
<i>Bray Town Council</i>	<i>Older People's Cluster Group</i>
<i>Bray Travellers CDG</i>	<i>Preparing for Life Programme</i>
<i>Bray Youth Service</i>	<i>Roundwood Community Playgroup</i>
<i>Cavan Partnership</i>	<i>School Completion Programme</i>
<i>Co. Wicklow VEC</i>	<i>School Completion Programme Support Service</i>
<i>Department of Social and Family Affairs</i>	<i>Southside Partnership</i>
<i>Dept. of Education and Science</i>	<i>St. Fergal's Family Resource Centre</i>
<i>Drogheda Partnership</i>	<i>St. Kieran's Education Centre</i>
<i>Dundalk Partnership</i>	<i>St. Peters National School</i>
<i>Education Welfare Officer</i>	<i>St. Thomas's Community College</i>
<i>FAS</i>	<i>Wicklow County Childcare Committee</i>
<i>Health Service Executive</i>	<i>Wicklow Working Together</i>

Conference Aims & Achievements

The Equality and Education conference aimed to promote a shared understanding of the many complex dimensions of equality in education and social inclusion across the spectrum of lifelong learning. The conference provided a forum for reflection about the current equality challenges impacting on Education whilst the workshops provided space to explore how to turn ideas into practical initiatives. The conference also provided scope to engage in networking and critical discussion and actively promoted a culture of collaboration across a diverse range of organisations and expertise. Furthermore, it allowed an opportunity for collective reflection on the challenges to be faced in moving towards equality and social inclusion in educational provision.

It was an important conference for Bray Partnership because it brought together all of the partners in education to explore the theme of equality in education. Bray Partnership is committed to using the learning from the conference to inform its current and future action plans and to build and strengthen local initiatives to tackle social exclusion and disadvantage. To this end, this document is a record of the proceedings and learning from the day and it is hoped that the text contained within has captured the critical yet creative atmosphere that seemed to define the conference.



Opening Address

Compere: Mick Rush, UCD

In his opening address to the conference Mr. Rush referenced words from an established advocate of social inclusion and equality, Dr. Helen Burke, whereby she had written about the importance of collaboration and the values that underpin it – trust and openness. Mr. Rush welcomed the opportunity to be present as compere at an event that allows for such collaboration by providing a forum for an honest exchange of views across a variety of organisations and representatives.

Keynote Speech

‘Equality and Education: Across the Spectrum of Lifelong Learning’

Dr. Anne Lodge, NUI Maynooth

Dr. Lodge gave an extremely thought-provoking keynote speech and raised many questions for consideration for those addressing inequality in education. Her general thesis rested on the premise that many strategic changes and radical interventions still need to be engaged in order to truly accommodate diversity within schools and to achieve full equality of opportunity and outcome in education.



Understanding and defining Equality

The way we define equality impacts on actions to address inequality. For example, a purely equality of opportunities approach ignores the need to equalize conditions to benefit from these increased opportunities. A focus on equality of condition and outcome requires greater changes to the existing education system and involves a multi-faceted model of equality. This multi-faceted model includes equal distribution of resources, equal recognition of difference, equality of representation, and equality of care and caring relationships.

Examining inequalities and barriers

Early Childhood Care and Education faces particular barriers to equality and specific inequalities arise. There is limited recognition and resourcing of the sector, which is linked to the low status afforded to caring work and children. The impact of poor resourcing means segregated provision and has a particular negative result for parents living in poverty. The debate should be centred on these inequalities of resources rather than a compensatory model that focuses on specific groups as deficient.

Intercultural education also meets barriers to full equality including specific issues related to inequality of recognition and representation. There is a need to learn from errors made with respect to engagement between the Traveller Community and the Education system. Tolerating diversity is not the same as celebrating diversity. A mono-cultural education system generates many inequalities, which include a failure to challenge assimilationist practices. Resource inequalities manifest in the lack of support for education providers and practitioners working with children and young people from a variety of cultural backgrounds.

Inclusive education for people with disabilities also encompasses many inequalities. The most long-standing of these has been the impact of the ‘medical model’ and the focus on the individual rather than the disabling environment. Working within this model, difference is labeled as ‘deviance’. Integrating people with disabilities into mainstream education provision has not been an equality goal but it should be. Segregation policies are related to the lack of a rights focus in the provision of resources.

“Fitting a square peg into a round hole is no longer feasible... we need to move beyond a one size fits all model”

Strategies for action and change

A more radical view of equality encompassing equality of condition and outcomes means a more radical reform of existing education structures. It demands openness to exploring alternative structures that are inherently inclusive and diverse. There has to be a willingness on the part of key stakeholders to examine barriers to full equality created by structures, practices and traditions. This also means bringing in a wide range of voices. This wide range of voices includes empowering voices on the margins that are usually not heard rather than the minimal model of ‘representative partnership’. There is an urgent need to create a space to ‘imagine’ different ways to combat educational inequality.

“A space to imagine new ways of ‘doing business”

A particular feature of the conference was the range of workshops, which focused on exploring challenges and strategies for achieving equality in education across the spectrum of lifelong learning. The workshop speakers reflected upon their own professional experiences and expertise. A facilitated discussion following the workshop presentation allowed for an even greater exchange of information and views between workshop participants and speakers.

■ Workshop 1

The Early Years: The role of Early Childhood Care and Education in Achieving Equality in Education

Speaker: Noel Kelly, Preparing For Life, Northside Partnership

Main points in presentation

- The workshop opened with the question “Do all children have an equal chance in education?” and it was agreed that all children do not have an equal chance.
- Lack of resources invested in early childhood education as it is not as valued a stage in the life cycle as other child development stages.
- Early investment would prevent the need for larger resource investment at later stages; value for money by investing when children are young.
- Inequality begins with the segregation of children at pre-school stage.
- Ideal would be synchronized training and a curriculum model for all early years.
- One study found that 52% of children are not ready for school.
- Areas identified in different children were physical wellbeing, social emotional development/social intervention, language delay cognitive development and motor development.

Main points in discussion

- Lack of males in Early Childcare due to low status and low pay in child care.
- Rural model is an inclusive model as children are not segregated.
- The Incredible Year's and Triple P were discussed as being positive and popular.
- Training needs to be priority for quality and best practice to improve the status of the sector.

■ Workshop 2

Diversity and Equality: Targeted Responses to Counter Educational Inequality

Speaker: Benedicta Attoh, National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism

Main points in presentation

- 3 models when working with different cultures - assimilation, multiculturalism and interculturalism
- Ireland prefers the model of interculturalism which promotes interaction between different cultures
- Positives initiatives include 2 years funding to schools to support language; Free primary and post primary education; National action plan against racism launched in January 2005; Diversity in schools advocated by the Equality Authority
- Negative issues include Limited focus on education needs of migrants; Limited information available to schools on ethnicity; Language learning funding only available for 2 years; Schools managed by religious groups are allowed to exclude migrants; No real choice for parents around education needs of children; No access to third level education for asylum seekers; No access to English language lessons for migrant workers; No human rights education in mainstream schools; Grants to third level are restricted to Irish and EU persons
- Barriers to Equality in Education
 - Cultural difference can cause problems for migrants in school
 - Language is a barrier
 - Food – culturally prepared food is not available in schools
 - Effort in name pronunciation is needed
- Suggested Remedies
 - Need for targeted responses
 - Increased funding for language supply in schools
 - Anti-racist training in school system
 - Inclusion of migrants and ethnic groups in planning and decision making
 - Promotion of a comfortable learning environment
 - National days of country of origin of children should be mentioned in schools
 - Zero tolerance of racism
 - Culture awareness days in school
 - Promote non or multi denominational schools
 - Education system needs to be human rights based
 - Full access to third level grant for all leaving school

Main points in discussion

- Endorse all main points in presentation
- The need to address issues before they become problems – planning
- Need to learn from mistakes of the past
- Resources need to be allocated but policy issues are also crucial
- Negative media coverage – need to combat negative ideas
- Racism needs to be combated



■ Workshop 3

Partners in Education: The contribution of the Non-formal Education Sector to Achieving Equality in Education **Speakers: Paddy Malone, NYP2 and Ger soffe, Larkin College Dublin**

Main points in presentation

- Overview of how the Larkin Community College Attendance Monitoring Committee came about
- Response to high percentage of absenteeism and the problems caused by this for the young person and for the classroom and school
- Members of the committee are from the formal and non formal sectors and the committee is unique to education circles
- Confidentiality is central to the process
- Interventions that come out of the meetings include home visits, needs of young person assessed for after school supports, youth worker links with teacher, referrals to local clubs etc.
- Monthly statistics produced – tracking system for young people that have left
- 28% down to 17% non attendance
- Community response to the issue is central to the success – getting young person involved in the community supports
- Crucial point – the principal initiated and progressed the action
- Paddy as a youth worker working in the school means that he can make immediate contact with parents or act on their behalf with permission
- New issues presenting when working with new ethnic groups

Main points in discussion

- Understanding of young person needs is central
- Language is a barrier when trying to work with young people who do not have English as a first language
- Need to identify lead agencies when tackling early school leaving through a combined approach between the formal and non-formal sector.
- Funding for initiatives like this need to be mainstreamed
- The importance of having a youth worker involved links community with school
- More flexible and comprehensive for young people if wider community services are involved
- It allows for flexibility and creativity
- Space to work with young people in flexible ways during school hours is critical in utilising all supports available between community and school

■ Workshop 4

Flexible and Friendly: The Role of Adult and Community Education in Promoting Equality in Education **Speaker: Maureen Kavanagh, AONTAS**

Main points in presentation

- Focus on how adult education and community education promotes equality
- Wide range of providers of adult and community educations
- Adult and community education is underpinned by the principle of equality.
- Overview of inequalities in mainstream system and gaps presenting.
- AONTAS describes community education as a process of empowerment, social justice, change, challenge, and reflection as well as building capacity within communities.
- There is a range of approaches and definitions in relation to how community education is understood and defined and can range from seeing community education in a functional context to viewing it as a mechanism for change.
- Service providers should be clear on what their definition is.
- The theoretical framework for community education is well suited to the equality framework across all dimensions of equality; respect and recognition; love, care and solidarity; resources; power; and working and learning.

Main points in discussion

- The definition should be singular and should be about empowerment rather than 'functioning' as students are still leaving the mainstream education system so adult education should not be an extension of something that is not working.
- Major barriers to full equality for some groups e.g. travellers
- Needs to be resourced adequately if it is about empowering
- Important to acknowledge large range of supports and services available and build on that.
- Older people are entering adult education more and more and the numbers are set to increase in the coming years so barriers to participation for this particular target group need to be challenged now.
- Life long learning is the key concept.
- Confidence building role of adult education is critical.
- Importance of personal contact with learners – mutual respect.
- A need to target men.
- Need to reach those groups that are most removed from the formal and non-formal education system.

■ Workshop 5

Widening access: Higher Education and Equality in Education

Speaker: Muiris O' Connor, National Access Office

Main points in presentation

- Major improvements in the educational profile of the Irish population over recent decades
- Increased equality of opportunity
- However, a substantial number of population have low levels of qualifications and skills
- People in lower socio-economic groups still underrepresented regarding access and opportunity in education.
- Other groups include students with disabilities, mature students, travellers.
- Clear links between income and educational attainment.
- School completion is still a major issue.
- A lot more needs to be progressed regarding participation in lifelong learning as only 7% of Irish adults are engaged in lifelong learning.
- Widening access to education is central to economic competitiveness.
- Emerging issues gender, ethnicity, and the lower middle classes.

Main points in discussion

- Formal education system should examine the community education model, which has been successful for the under-represented groups in formal education.
- No adequate funding for supporting students with a disability in further education services – disability needs to be more visible therefore integrated and less segregated provision
- Supports for people with disabilities needs to be improved.
- Part time courses must be funded
- Work based learning also needs to be resourced and developed.
- Childcare should be a major policy concern in relation to accessing further and higher education.
- More universal grant system needed where the cut off point more realistically reflects incomes
- The need to incorporate a value for multiple intelligence into the formal education system

The conference was organised by Bray Partnership and will inform the planning process for the Partnership with respect to addressing educational inequality into the future.

Bray Partnership is one of 38 local development companies in Ireland. Our mission is to tackle social exclusion and disadvantage in the Bray area.

Our work is guided by our Area Action Plan, which is informed by extensive local consultation and sets out our strategy for tackling social exclusion and disadvantage for the target groups we work with - such as long-term unemployed people, older people, Travellers, people with disabilities, young people at risk, disadvantaged women and men, and homeless people. The last plan ran from 2000-2006 and we are currently developing our new plan.

Bray Partnership Ltd

4 Prince of Wales Terrace
Quinsboro Road, Bray

Tel: 00 353 1 2868266
Fax: 00 353 1 2868700
info@braypartnership.ie
www.braypartnership.ie

