



## **ATTITUDES OF THE SOCIALLY DISADVANTAGED TOWARDS EDUCATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

### **Key Findings**

- ◆ The research suggests a clear link between social disadvantage and the rate of teenage pregnancy/early motherhood.
- ◆ A considerable proportion of young mothers in Northern Ireland enjoyed school and appear not to have lost their educational aspirations.
- ◆ Belfast primary school principals in disadvantaged areas suggest that the two biggest problems are that parents have their own more pressing problems and also that they do not know how best to support their children's education.
- ◆ The level of pupil educational alienation, where the pupils do not settle in to the secondary school, correlates significantly with social background, parental education and interest.

- ◆ Alternative curriculum innovations in socially disadvantaged areas have led to rises in motivation and attendance, the pupils often welcoming the more relaxed and adult atmosphere of the education offered.
- ◆ When compared to other disadvantaged homes, the homes of persistent absentees for non-medical reasons often tended to suffer from emotional upheavals and family discord and the homes were also often more disorganised.
- ◆ Few parents of absentees were opposed to education, but they gave less priority to attendance than other parents.
- ◆ The negative attitudes of excluded pupils tend to focus on individual teachers, rather than the whole school or education in general.

## **INTRODUCTION**

1. It is a common assumption that children and their parents from disadvantaged areas hold very negative attitudes towards education. This review considers recent studies into children and young people from the preschool/nursery years through compulsory education and beyond, and seeks to establish, firstly, if there is a link between social disadvantage and attitudes towards education. Where social disadvantage is a factor, this report sets out to present the views of the children and young people and their parents, as well as detailing efforts within schools and communities to ameliorate the situation. The report examines the recent Northern Ireland literature, but sets this in the wider context of corresponding national and international studies. A number of conclusions are reached.

## **MAIN FINDINGS**

### **2. Early Motherhood**

- ◆ The research suggests a clear link between social disadvantage and the rate of teenage pregnancy/early motherhood.
- ◆ A considerable proportion of young mothers in Northern Ireland enjoyed school and appear not to have lost their educational aspirations.
- ◆ Home tuition is welcomed by the young mothers but is perceived as insufficient as preparation for GCSEs. Communication is often poor between schools and tutors.
- ◆ A lack of affordable childcare prevents young mothers being able to return to education.

### **3. Pre-School Education**

- ◆ Studies of preschool projects in areas of social disadvantage reveal major attitudinal benefits for children, which continue throughout their years at school.

- ◆ In the same projects, many parents are also encouraged to resume their education and become more supportive of their children's education.

#### 4. The Primary Years

- ◆ Belfast primary school principals in disadvantaged areas suggest that the two biggest problems are that parents have their own more pressing problems and also that they do not know how best to support their children's education.
- ◆ There have been few studies carried out in Northern Ireland analysing the attitudes of primary children to education according to their social background.
- ◆ Indications are however that there is broad approval by children for the education they are receiving, and criticism of a lack of after school activities and local facilities.

#### 5. Transfer from Primary to Secondary School

- ◆ Northern Ireland studies reveal differences in attitudes among parents according to social background concerning the desirable criteria for their child's secondary school.
- ◆ More educationally or socially disadvantaged parents appeared less concerned as to whether the secondary school was co-educational or integrated, and more interested in schools offering special needs support, and in a local area, where the child's friends were likely to be going too. These parents were also less interested in whether the school had a sixth form, a wide range of subjects or good teaching resources.

#### 6. The Years of Compulsory Secondary Education

- ◆ The level of pupil educational alienation, where the pupils do not settle in to the secondary school, correlates significantly with social background, parental education and interest.

- ◆ More socially disadvantaged secondary pupils tended to see their curriculum as more relevant, both for their immediate circumstances and for their future employment.
- ◆ Alternative curriculum innovations in socially disadvantaged areas have led to rises in motivation and attendance, the pupils often welcoming the more relaxed and adult atmosphere of the education offered.
- ◆ There appears to be little evidence to confirm the stereotype of more socially disadvantaged pupils being more negatively disposed towards their schooling.

## 7. The Post-Compulsory Years

- ◆ Continuing in full-time education beyond the age of 16 is more likely where the child's parents are employed, and in non-manual occupations.
- ◆ School leavers who are not only out of education but also out of work and not in training are more likely to come from a large family or a household with unemployed or economically inactive parents.
- ◆ There is a need for more evidence from Northern Ireland studies to confirm whether young disadvantaged people leave education purely out of economic necessity.

## 8. Persistent Absentees from School

- ◆ There is clear evidence from several Northern Ireland studies to show that pupils absent from school for non-medical reasons come disproportionately from disadvantaged homes. This correlation is strongest at Key Stage 3.
- ◆ When compared to other disadvantaged homes, the homes of persistent absentees for non-medical reasons often tended to suffer from emotional upheavals and family discord and the homes were also often more disorganised.

- ◆ Pupils absent for medical reasons are also about 50% more likely to come from disadvantaged homes.
- ◆ Few parents of absentees were opposed to education, but they gave less priority to attendance than other parents.

## 9. Pupils Excluded from School

- ◆ There is a clear link between school exclusion and social disadvantage in Northern Ireland studies, as elsewhere in the UK.
- ◆ Small studies in Northern Ireland suggest that children in residential care, boys (as opposed to girls), and pupils with special educational needs, are also more likely to be suspended or excluded from school.
- ◆ The negative attitudes of excluded pupils tend to focus on individual teachers, rather than the whole school or education in general.

## 10. Young People with Serious Behavioural Problems

- ◆ A small Northern Ireland study suggests that the pupils with serious behavioural problems were more disadvantaged in terms of fraught family relationships than in their socio-economic profile.
- ◆ Small Northern Ireland studies of school behavioural units in socially disadvantaged areas suggest that they are having marked success in reducing disaffection and improving attendance.
- ◆ Further positive findings emerge from studies of Northern Ireland centres educating pupils with serious behavioural problems. These reveal high levels of disadvantage among the young people, but major improvements in the young people's attitudes to education and their future employment. The young people interviewed were appreciative of the help they were receiving from sympathetic staff.

## OVERALL CONCLUSIONS

11. Many of the studies cited in this report, both from Northern Ireland and further afield suggest that there is often some link between levels of social disadvantage and the attitudes of both children and their parents towards education. However the nature of this link is complex and is complicated by many other factors.

12. Findings from a number of Northern Ireland studies suggest that alternative and innovative projects and forms of education, when offered in areas of social disadvantage, are welcomed and are highly successful in improving participants' attendance, motivation and attitudes towards their education and future employment.

13. In contrast to much national and international research, many of the Northern Ireland studies reported are small in scale, often based on one case study and offer purely qualitative data from interviews. There is a need for larger scale investigations in Northern Ireland to reveal the attitudes of the pupils themselves who are clearly identified as coming from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. This would help to confirm the often tentative conclusions drawn from the current body of research.

## THE PROJECT

14. The project was undertaken for the Department of Education by the Graduate School of Education at Queen's University Belfast. The cost of the project was £1,000.

## FULL REPORT

15. The full report, entitled "Attitudes of the socially disadvantaged towards education in Northern Ireland" by Anne Sutherland & Noel Purdy, is available on the Department of Education website at [www.deni.gov.uk/index/32-statisticsandresearch\\_pg.htm](http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/32-statisticsandresearch_pg.htm)

*This paper is a summary of the research report and as such any views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Department of Education.*



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