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Combatting Disadvantage at Primary School: An Analysis and Response to the Green Paper

Prepared for Combat Poverty
by

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Outline

This paper is in three sections. Section A summarises the main points in the Green paper 'Education for a Changing World' as they relate to primary education with particular reference to disadvantage. The relevant sections are mainly in those parts of the Green paper dealing with 'equity and access' and 'broadening education' and 'quality assurance'.

Section B presents an analysis of the nature of disadvantage, and examines the literature on the most effective means of offsetting the effects at primary school. Two complementary approaches are described; how the impact of poor homebackgrounds can be alleviated and how schools can be changed in ways that would accommodate to the needs of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Most of this section is based on the concepts and research in the CMRS discussion document (prepublication draft).

Section C sets out specific recommendations in relation to the Green Paper, in the light of the analysis of disadvantage presented in Section B. Reactions to the specific proposals made in the Green Paper are presented as well as recommendations on matters not specifically dealt with, but which we consider to have important implications for combatting educational disadvantage.

Section A - Main Proposals Relating to Disadvantage and Primary Education in 'Education for a Changing World'.

1. General Considerations relating to Disadvantage

The Green Paper recognises that access to education can be one of the most important factors in promoting equity in society. To translate equality of access to full equality of participation, the priority should be given to tackling barriers to participation which militate against those from disadvantaged backgrounds (2.1).

Building close links between the home and school is essential to the development of positive attitudes to education and the provision of special support for disadvantaged schools is essential. Attention is drawn to the home/school liaison project in 80 schools and of its aims of encouraging parents to support and enhance their children's education and to assist the parents in developing the relevant skills for that purpose (2.2).

Referring specifically to primary, the Green paper asserts that the achievement of an adequate level of literacy and numeracy is critical to the future success of students . It notes that most of those who leave school early do not have an adequate basis in literacy and numeracy and as a result are not able to benefit fully from second level education. Programmes for early school leavers

such as YOUTHREACH have a special problem in trying to provide literacy and numeracy education, in order to alleviate difficulties that might have been more effectively remedied at an early stage of education (2.3).

In relation to such learning problems, the Green paper suggests that children at risk should be identified at an early age in their schooling and that special assistance should be given at that stage. The difficulties experienced by disadvantaged children, it says, extend beyond the schools and '.....problems of motivation are often caused by adverse socio-economic circumstances in the home and the community' (2.3).

2. Proposals Specifically Related to the Primary Curriculum

The Green paper broadly endorses the findings of the Review Body on the Primary Curriculum. This latter report supported the view that a child-centred curriculum should be the central feature of the primary system. Furthermore teachers and schools (rather than Dept. of Education) should have the central role in devising specific ways in which the curriculum should meet the needs of individual children, through activity and guided discovery methods of learning in an integrated approach to teaching (4.2).

The aims of the primary curriculum as set out in the Green paper are broad and comprehensive. They include communication, language acquisition,

mathematical skills, understanding scientific ideas, appreciation of the arts, understanding of religious beliefs and a tolerance for the beliefs of others and a sense of responsibility for their health (4.2).

The Green Paper stresses that it is a central objective of the primary school that all children acquire a level of literacy and numeracy that will be essential for further education and their development as individuals who are able to function effectively in society. It is pointed out that a minority of individuals (but a significant number from disadvantage areas) do not achieve their potential in literacy and numeracy by the end of the primary school.

To assist in countering these problems it is proposed that: (i) there should be a system of early identification by means of appropriate assessment methods, (ii) the expanded home school liaison programme will provide the opportunity to take account of the adverse factors arising from inadequate home support and (iii) In-career training programmes will place particular emphasis on teaching reading and mathematics in a structured way and (iv) schools will be encouraged to examine their programmes in reading in a critical waywith the primary objective of ensuring that the needs of all students are met (4.2).

The Green paper endorses the proposal of the Primary Curriculum Review Body that the existing Nature Study and Elementary science programme form a new science programme. The aim of the new programme would be to develop a scientific approach to problem solving which would emphasise understanding

and constructive thinking (4.2).

With regard to modern European languages, the Green Paper acknowledges the arguments advanced by the Primary Curriculum Review Body against the introduction of a foreign language into primary schools, because of the demands of the curriculum including two languages. However, it draws attention to the fact that a number of schools notably all Irish schools provide programmes in modern European languages and it proposes to review the experiences of these schools.

Other primary-curricular changes mentioned in the Green Paper include a revised physical education programme, designed to enhance the health and physical well-being of children and which would involve parents and communities promoting the development of health and fitness in children. It also suggests that a revision of the **Rules for National Schools** will seek to ensure that aspects of the Rules reflect the protection in the Constitution that exist for children of religious beliefs different from those of the majority in the schools (4.2).

While the proposals regarding the amalgamation of smaller schools are not of central concern in the present context, one relevant implication of such a change is mentioned. The paper suggests that the more efficient distribution of teaching resources that can be achieved by having larger school units in urban areas would release teaching posts for targeting disadvantage (among

other possibilities).

3. Assessment at Primary Level

With regard to assessment at the primary level, the Green Paper points out that there is a need for some objective criteria by which to measure children's progress during primary school. It is noted that standardised tests are used in most developed countries to measure student progress at certain key stages and as a means of identifying students who may require particular help. The proposal is to utilise standard tests in all primary schools as a diagnostic aid. The primary purpose will be to support efforts by teachers to identify those children who are in need of special attention and the nature and extent of assistance needed. It is proposed that such tests would be given at age 7 and 11 years. While the results of individual tests would be confidential to school and parents, the aggregated results would be sent to the Department. In turn, this information would provide valuable public data on which decisions about remedial help could be based (7.3).

4. Pupil Teacher Ratio and Targeting of Resources

The Green Paper notes that the recent OECD report commented on the value of selective improvements, such as the provision of remedial teachers, or more teachers in disadvantaged areas, rather than a blanket lowering of the ratio. The paper says that the needs of disadvantaged groups requires a degree of

targeting of resources so that efforts can be made within the existing resource limits, to improve the class size in areas of greatest need.

Section B - Understanding Educational Disadvantage: Concepts and Research

Below the various conceptualisations of educational disadvantage are examined as well as research on the kinds of approaches and initiatives that are likely to be helpful in offsetting disadvantage. Having considered the research evidence we will again return to the Green Paper proposals and indicate the extent to which they are likely to benefit disadvantaged children. We will also put forward additional suggestions that would be likely to enhance the prospects for children from disadvantaged homes.

1. Meaning of Educational Disadvantage

The policies that we advocate to offset disadvantage and indeed the rationale for programmes with this aim, depend on some understanding of the nature of the difficulties that a child from a disadvantaged background experiences at

school. The early accounts of this issue tended to operate on an understanding which has since become known as a deficit model. According to the deficit model the problems of disadvantaged are due to a developmental lag. Children from poor backgrounds fall behind their peers in cognitive, social and linguistic development. Frequently this lag is attributed to child-rearing practices. Support for such a position comes from research showing that middle class and working class homes differ in the interactions between parents and children; other differences like control techniques and differences in the availability of books and school-related materials are also sometimes mentioned.

In recent years the deficit model has been largely discredited (Edwards, 1989). In relation to language, there is little evidence that the language of the disadvantaged is less well developed than that of middle class children. It is true that in the formal settings of school, disadvantaged children use less elaborate language than do children from middle class backgrounds. However, in informal settings there is evidence that they will employ elaborate language structures for an array of cognitive tasks.

Similarly, in relation to child-rearing practices, there is evidence that the practices of middle-class homes are not uniquely suited to intellectual and motivational development. Thus, the view that child-rearing practices that are different from middle-class practices in content and emphasis must be less satisfactory, is no longer sustainable.

More recently, therefore, there is agreement that disadvantaged children show evidence of a different rather than a deficient life-style. The main problem is that such life-styles result in significant obstacles that disadvantaged children have to overcome if there are to keep up with children from other backgrounds or if not the schools have to adapt their approach to meet the different life-styles. In other words there is a discontinuity between home and school in the case of disadvantaged children. We would argue that the concept of 'discontinuity' is especially valuable since it indicates that we need to consider (i) the child's inability to cope with school and (ii) the school's inability to cope with the needs of the disadvantaged child. Below we examine approaches to the alleviation of problems of disadvantage that have taken either of these approaches. Initially we consider a range of proposals that try to compensate for the home experiences of the child. Secondly we will examine approaches that attempt to change school to make them more amenable to the lifestyles of disadvantaged children.

2. Compensatory Approaches

Any attempt to bring about a compensation for disadvantaged backgrounds must begin with an understanding of what is being compensated for. Many analyses of educational disadvantage see the problems as deriving from the social divisions in society. These divisions means that people living in poverty do not have the opportunities to control their own lives. Unfortunately this lack of control extends to perspectives on several aspects of their lives including

their interaction with their children. In turn, parents may not see that education has the potential to change the life chances of their children, possibly on the basis of their own experiences of education.

Intervention in Pre-school Years. (** Given that pre-schooling is the subject of a separate paper, the evidence below will summarise only the evidence relating to how pre-school interventions influence subsequent primary school performance).

Of all the approaches to offsetting educational disadvantage, intervention in the preschool year has received the greatest attention both in terms of the number of programmes and of evaluations. The literature on this topic can be said to warrant the a number of conclusions, each of which is considered below.

Firstly, almost all preschool interventions show gains on intelligence tests (and sometimes on other relevant outcome measures) in the short-term. Secondly, while it was recently believed up until recently that beneficial effects of pre-schooling tend to diminish over the years, especially after entry to formal school, this has been challenged. There is now evidence for positive long-term effects on educational and personal achievement. Thirdly, the effects of pre-school experience on achievement in school subjects tends to be much less than the effect on measured intelligence. Fourthly, programmes which have a high level of parental involvement (and indeed home-based interventions)

tend to have stronger and more lasting effects than programmes with minimal parental involvement and those occur in institutional settings.

However, beyond the importance of parental involvement there are a few other ingredients that have been identified as crucial to the effects of such interventions. Programmes with very different educational philosophies seem to be equally effective in enhancing educational progress. While there are suggestions that the more successful programmes are those which pursue explicitly stated objectives in structured manner, the value of such a guideline is limited since it is difficult to think of any educational programme in any context that is not better for having 'explicitly-stated objectives pursued in a structured manner'.

Since the crucial factors in bringing about successful pre-school interventions have not been identified, it is worth considering the possibility that the positive effects (where they have been observed) are an indirect result of the pre-school experience. It may be that the increased parental involvement and the raised expectations associated with such experiences are a crucial link in improved school performance. Certainly, this type of explanation is consistent with the long-term and unexpected effects that have been mentioned above. Such a view of the interactive nature of effective interventions will be examined later in the discussion of community approaches to offsetting disadvantage.

One of the most exciting recent findings in recent research is one that shows

that early intervention programmes can have long-term effects which extend not only to school achievement but also to social behaviour in a broad sense. Specifically it has been demonstrated that early intervention programmes can dramatically lessen the probability that a young person will later be involved in delinquency. Zigler (1992) has recently reviewed longitudinal evidence from three programmes which have shown that in comparison to controls the children in these programmes were at reduced risk for delinquency several years later.

Among the explanations for such outcomes is the 'snowball' hypothesis, ie. that the effects of successful experiences early in childhood gather momentum to generate further success in school and in other social contexts; the programmes enhanced physical health and aspects of personality such as motivation and sociability, helping the child to adapt better to later social expectations and family support, education and involvement in intervention improved parents' child-rearing skills and thus altered the environment in which children were raised. This line of evidence suggests that the over-emphasis on cognitive outcomes may have been misplaced and that changes in social behaviour patterns may be more significant in the long-term.

Positive Discrimination Approaches. The concept of positive discrimination in terms of resources allocated to schools has been part of the stated policy of successive Governments for some time. While it is not stated specifically in the Green Paper, the concept is implicit in many of the suggestions relating to

allocation of resources.

A first important point is that primary education is underfunded relative to other sectors (postprimary and third level). An illustration of this difference is given in the Report of the Primary Curriculum Review Body which indicates that in 1989 expenditure per capita was £850 for primary, £1475 for postprimary and £3150 for third students. Tussing's (1978) study of the analysis of educational expenditure says that the primary system has tended to operate with 'spartan simplicity and frugality'. Historically the priority was to provide a system to all children and with rudimentary facilities and little expenditure on equipment. A related point was that the primary schools traditionally emphasised the subjects in the curriculum that had a low technical content and which required little in the ways of technical equipment. The great emphasis on the traditional 3RS and on moral instruction has the advantage that they did not need expensive equipment.

However, there have been a number of societal and educational changes that have created a need for resources and facilities that go far beyond the traditional rudimentary facilities. The 1971 curriculum doubled the number of subject and introduced among others Art, Science and Physical Education - subjects that require a considerable outlay on equipment if they are to be taught properly. In addition the advance in telecommunications and in technology generally created an expectations that schools should be better equipped and that pupils learning should not solely dependent on 'chalk and

talk'.

Below we consider the evidence relating to two major issues that are central to resources: (i) Providing extra teachers to reduce the teacher-pupil ratio and (ii) Providing educational equipment and materials. Consideration will also be given to the specific funding methods which are especially relevant to the ways in which resources might be allocated.

Extra teachers Reductions in class size in Irish primary schools generally, have been advocated for some considerable time. There are three features of class size in Irish primary schools that are especially worth noting. Firstly, Irish classes tend to be large by international standards. Secondly, there are quite a number of small (two and three teachers schools) in the Irish system and the relatively small numbers in these schools result in an obscuring of the problem of large classes when the national teacher-pupil ratio is cited. Thirdly, unlike most other countries, the average class sizes in postprimary schools tended to be smaller than in primary schools in Ireland. Thus, the argument that Irish primary school classes have unduly large numbers can be sustained in absolute and in relative terms.

While the evidence on the effects of class size is by no means clearcut, there is some consensus on the view that reductions in class size can bring about a significant improvement in educational performance, provided that the reductions are major. In particular, it seems that classes with less than 20

students seem to bring about better results than larger classes. Furthermore it seems that the benefits of reductions below 20 and under are relatively greater for any given reduction than are those at about 20 or above. Thus, for example, a reduction from 15 to 12 brings about a greater benefit than a reduction from 20 to 17.

Considerable attention has also been given to the circumstances that are most likely to show the beneficial effects of small classes. Some evidence seems to suggest that the beneficial effects of small classes are more likely to be found in the early years of primary school. There are also indications that children of below average ability are more likely to benefit from the effects of small classes and that children from disadvantaged ethnic minorities derive particular benefit from reductions in class size.

While the results of the work summarised here have direct implications for the focus of the present paper, it is worth noting that the relationship between class size and pupil achievement is a rather indirect one. It is not that class size directly impinges on achievement but rather that such a reduction has effects on other classroom variables that affect instruction. Thus, a reduction in class size will be expected to have effects only to the extent that it is accompanied by changes in the organisation of classroom events in such a way as to change the interaction between teacher and students. One possibly beneficial way would be if smaller classes were to result in ways of coping with individual differences and if academically weaker students were to get more attention.

In this regard two surveys of the teaching behaviours of and styles of Irish primary teachers found no relationship between class size and the extent of individualised instruction (Archer & O'Rourke (in press); Egan, 1981). While these findings have to be considered in the light of the view that the range of class sizes might not have been such as to allow for the emerge of greater individualisation in the larger classes, they underline the thesis that changes in class size do not necessarily change the organisation of instruction within the classroom.

On the other hand, a significant change in the pupil-teacher ratio would require a massive increase in funding for teachers' salaries. The Primary Education Review Body (1990) reckoned that the cost of implementing its suggestions on reduction in class size would be in the region of £15 million in salaries alone. Since almost 70 per cent of primary school children are in classes larger than 30 pupils, it would obviously need a huge investment to bring all classes close to the threshold of 20 which seems to be critical.

Conclusion regarding class size. It would seem reasonable to conclude that reductions in class size, if they are properly exploited can lead to significant improvement in achievement. However, the cost of across-the-board reductions would be likely to be prohibitive. In these circumstances, a policy of reducing class size in disadvantaged areas initially, would seem to be a viable option. However, we would argue that this should be done at a cost that would not prohibit other strategies for reducing educational

disadvantage.

Providing Extra Finances. A survey by the National Parents' Council - Primary (1990), revealed significant differences in terms of (nonsalary) funding between schools designated disadvantaged and other primary schools, largely because the fundraising in disadvantaged schools was only about half of that in the others. Furthermore, there is a general shortfall between the costs provided by the Department and the actual running costs. In addition, the costs of running schools in disadvantaged areas is relatively due to greater levels of vandalism and the associated increased insurance costs. Before extra resources can be provided for disadvantaged schools it is essential that the inequities of the present system of capitation funding be remedied.

Until recently the evidence on the effectiveness of extra resources was flimsy. While primary teachers bemoaned the lack of facilities in their efforts to implement the 1971 curriculum, demonstrations of the value of equipment and curricular resources were hard to come by. There is now more convincing evidence that appropriate use of resources can have a major impact on attainment. A forthcoming study will demonstrate such beneficial effects in relation to literacy standards (Elley, forthcoming).

3. Changes in Schools to Cater for Disadvantaged Children

As mentioned above a second strategy for alleviation of the problems of disadvantage, is to attempt to change aspects of school life. Two examples are particularly worth citing, viz., the 'achievement ethic' of schools and the impact of teacher expectations.

The achievement ethic is associated with an emphasis on competition and in turn reflects the individualism that is central to the mainstream culture. However, for young people growing up in poorer circumstances (and for whom the accumulation of material wealth does not have the same significance) this emphasis may contribute to the discontinuity between home and school.

There is firm evidence that under certain circumstances teacher expectations can give rise to self-fulfilling prophecies. This finding may be of special relevance to understanding disadvantage if teachers believe that children from poor backgrounds are less intelligent than other children. The subtle communication of this belief through various interactions (use of praise, time allowed to answer, grouping practices etc) may result in the internalisation of this belief by the child. In turn this may result in poorer school performance than might otherwise be the case. While the stages in the process outlined here are sometimes difficult to pin down, it seems reasonable to suggest that the beliefs and expectations of teachers are an important source of the home-school discontinuity for disadvantaged children.

Flexibility in the Curriculum. It could be argued that one source of discontinuity

would disappear if the curriculum were modified in ways that took into account the lifestyle and culture of disadvantaged children. A joint INTO/Dept. of Education committee suggested in 1985 that there was an urgent need to exploit the flexibility that was an integral part of the 1971 curriculum. They also recommended the production of textbooks and materials that would be suited to the needs of disadvantaged children and that a number of teachers be seconded to undertake a curricular adaptation. These suggestions seem particularly worthwhile and are worth considering during the current debate.

Only a small number of efforts have been made to adapt/devise a curriculum for disadvantaged pupils. The structured programme for Infant classes developed at the Educational Research Centre by Archer & O'Rourke (1985) was an attempt to extend the principles and practices of the Rutland Street preschool to the infant sections of primary schools. The central feature of the programme was a set of objectives and activities in the areas of reading, oral language and mathematics. Evaluations of the programme were extremely positive.

In discussing the modification of the curriculum to cater for the needs of disadvantaged children, it is worth mentioning one direction that is quite inappropriate, viz., a 'back to basics' version of the curriculum. Such an approach would be undesirable for several reasons. For one thing there is considerable doubt as to whether the features that are central to such an approach (spelling, grammar, learning tables) are actually 'basic' to further

learning. Secondly, it would seem that the overwhelming body of evidence is that teachers generally, spend relatively more time in lower-order basic skills (basic comprehension and recall etc) than in higher order skills that call for interpretation and evaluation.

In fact the adaptation of the curriculum for disadvantaged schools might take into account the various approaches that attempt to teach children to think. Such programmes such as 'Philosophy for Children' (Lipman, 1982), 'Instrumental enrichment' (Feuerstein, 1978) as well the various programmes that are focused on critical thinking offer an innovative approach to teaching higher order-skills directly and seem to challenge conventional views about the potential of teaching 'thinking' in a broad sense. It is worth noting that the Green Paper refers to the value of 'critical thinking' but seems to do so in the context of the development of the 'enterprise culture'. In our view critical thinking is basic to educational development in the broadest sense and is as central as the traditional 'basic skills' like numeracy and literacy.

4 Making Schools Better Places of Learning

It is now clear that children learn better at some schools than at others, even when account is taken of the characteristics at intake. It would be a considerable help to disadvantaged pupils if the schools they attended were organised along the lines that have been shown to enhance school effectiveness. While promoting effective schools is of importance to children

from every kind of background, there is considerable evidence that children from disadvantaged backgrounds may be susceptible to differences between schools (children from middle class background will often do well regardless of the kind of school).

The identification of the attributes of effective schools is therefore especially significant. Rather than deal with the huge literature in this area, what is set out below summarises the main points on which the research is consistent. The following features are especially important: (a) coordination and management, (b) parental and community support and (c) conditions that promote effective teaching. Each of these is considered in turn.

(a). Effective schools require coordination and management. This means that curriculum and instructional programmes are interrelated so that classroom educational objectives, the content of teaching activities and the measurement of pupils' performance are all streamlined in a way that ensures that the efforts of teachers are consistent and additive.

This kind of coordination has a number of elements. Firstly, it requires that schools have clearly set out instructional goals from which can be derived the objectives and content of instruction. Secondly, it requires that major differences between teachers in the allocation of time to the same content should not occur within a school. Thirdly, it requires that tests and examinations should be coordinated in ways that ensures that the test results accurately

reflect student learning. Fourthly, there is considerable evidence that in effective schools, principals have a key role in coordinating instructional activities. While there is no suggestion that 'the great principal' is needed, there is considerable evidence that principals need to take a proactive, leadership role, especially in relation to academic matters as opposed to a reactive, administrative and disciplinary role.

It is also worth noting that a proactive leadership role for the principal is not in any way antithetical to a democratic process in the decision-making by the staff. Indeed, as the OECD report states, what may be needed is '.....collaborative planning, shared decision making and collegial work in a frame of experimentation and evaluation' (OECD, 1989, p. 126)

(b). Effective schools require parental support and involvement as well as links with the community. The evidence on parent involvement is consistent with that reviewed in connection with pre-school programmes. Ideally, the involvement of parents should be on a partnership basis. However, even those programmes that involve parents in a supportive but subservient role have shown positive outcomes. What seems most important about parental involvement is that it needs to be well planned and enduring.

There is also evidence that community links make for more effective schools. In a study of 1015 schools in the United States, it was shown that students in Catholic and other private schools performed better on a range of

standardised tests even after allowance was made for differences in the family background of students (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). The authors concluded that the reasons for the difference had to do with the relationship between the school and the community.

3. Effective schools require policies that promote effective teaching behaviour.

There is now firm evidence linking achievement of pupils to the quantity and pacing of instruction. Thus, it has been shown that achievement is maximised when teacher emphasize academic instruction as a major part of their own role, expect students to master the curriculum and allocate most of the available time to curriculum-related activities. This is seen especially in measures of teachers' role definitions and expectations and in ratings of the degree to which teachers are task-oriented and in the time allocated to academic activities as opposed to activities with other objectives (personal adjustment or group dynamics) or tasks with no clear objectives at all ('free time').

Effective teaching is also associated with particular styles of classroom management. Better management of classrooms is associated with high levels of engagement of pupils on the assigned tasks. This will involve the installation of rules and procedures at an early stage in the school year, consistent accountability and follow-up in relation to homework and seat-work and clarity about when and how students can get help.

To learn efficiently, students need not only to be engaged in appropriate activities but also to move through the material with high rates of success and low levels of confusion or frustration. This need for consistent success needs to be balanced with providing the optimum level of challenge.

The potential for effective schools to enhance the performance of disadvantaged children is illustrated in the work of Rutter et al (1979). This study focused specifically on a disadvantaged community and on the needs of less able and socially deprived (and sometimes delinquent) children. The region of London in which the survey was carried out was one of severe disadvantage. Over one quarter of the mothers in the area were judged to suffer from some form of psychiatric disorder, while roughly the same number of fathers had been convicted of at least one offence. Reading scores in the area were well below the national average.

The most significant point to emerge from the study was that a significant relationship emerged between school ethos and pupil achievement. Even when comparisons were restricted to children with similar backgrounds and with similar characteristics, there were important variations that were related to the characteristics of the school as a social organisation. In other words even when taking into account the contribution of home, some schools were relatively better than were others. Furthermore, the effective schools brought about not only improvements in academic standards but also on social behaviour, i.e., decrease in levels of delinquent behaviour. It was also

noteworthy that the distinctive feature that seemed to enhance school effectiveness was the 'ethos', i.e. the set of values, attitudes and relationships that characterised the school as a social institution.

In summary, effective schools coordinate their efforts to promote continuity between the work of the teachers, have strong links with parents and community and set the conditions that are likely to lead to effective teaching strategies which in turn maximise students exposure to and success in learning. There is no suggestion that such features are only important in schools that serve disadvantaged communities. However, the research evidence indicates that these features and approaches are likely to enhance achievement of children from all kinds of backgrounds including children from poor backgrounds.

5. General Summary on Understanding Disadvantage

Above we have summarised our understanding of the meaning of educational disadvantage with particular reference to primary education. We have summarised the evidence on the kind of interventions that might be most likely to enhance the achievement of children for poor backgrounds. We have given special attention to particular kinds of initiatives that are likely to be most successful while being realistic in terms of the level of funding likely to be

available. Furthermore, we have discussed the evidence on the kinds of changes that need to be made in schools so that they can better accommodate the needs of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The final section will return to the Green Paper and comment on the specific proposals made and also will make recommendations with regard to areas that are not covered in as much as such recommendations may be especially relevant to alleviating the effects of disadvantage.

Section - C Specific Responses the Green Paper

1. We agree with the view expressed in the Green Paper that in order to ensure full equality of participation it is appropriate to give priority to tackling barriers to participation which militate against those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

2. We endorse the view that home and school links are essential to the development of positive attitudes to education. Specifically, we strongly recommend the extension of the home/school scheme as suggested in the Green Paper. We are also in agreement with the view that early intervention is essential in offsetting disadvantage. In this regard, pre-school education and primary school education have central role. However, in the extension of home-school links and in the provision of preschool education, it is necessary

that local communities have a full role as partners in the enterprise rather than merely having a reactive role to an initiative from other agencies.

3. We also agree with the view, expressed in the Green Paper that there should be further special support for disadvantaged areas. More specifically and in line with the analysis above, we recommend that the following initiatives be implemented in the interests of equity:

(a) Moves should be made to bring about equitable funding between the primary and postprimary sectors. In practice this will mean a substantial increase in the resources devoted to primary education, both in relative and absolute terms.

(b) The inequities of the present capitation system of funding of primary schools should be eliminated.

(c) A policy of reducing class size in disadvantaged areas, should be adopted. This should occur at a level that should allow for other strategies for alleviating effects of educational disadvantage.

(d) We agree with the suggestion in the Green Paper that the creation of larger schools (of four teachers or more), would facilitate the provision of remedial and specialist services. This suggestion is to be welcomed especially if (as suggested), the teaching resources that are made available in this way are

aimed at helping disadvantaged schools, reducing large classes and providing remedial teachers.

4. We agree with the endorsement of the findings of the Review Body on the Primary Curriculum, and the view that a broadly based child-centred curriculum should be the central feature of the primary system. While agreeing with the importance of literacy and numeracy for further education, we reject the view that such skills be given any greater emphasis than at present. We also firmly reject the view that literacy and numeracy should feature to any greater extent in the adaptation of the curriculum to cater for the needs of disadvantaged children. In our view, disadvantaged children should have access to a curriculum which is as broad and as enriched as that available to other children. At the same time, schools catering for children from disadvantaged homes should obtain the necessary funds to enable them to develop programmes in all aspects of the curriculum based on the school's local needs.

5. Given the demands of the curriculum in two languages, we think it is unrealistic to introduce modern European languages to primary schools.

6. We welcome the suggestion that for a revised physical Education programme to enhance the health and well-being of children. We welcome especially the proposed involvement of parents and communities in such developments.

7. In our view the system of assessment which is proposed is unduly narrow and restrictive. An exclusive reliance on standardised tests and their formal use at age 7 and 11 years might result in undesirable outcomes that could undo the possible value of such instruments as diagnostic tools.

In our view, pupil assessment should involve a combination of informal teacher assessment and the judicious use of standardised tests, with both types of assessment being based on the aims, objectives and principles of the curriculum. We are also of the opinion that the balance of formal vs. informal assessment should change from junior to senior classes with informal assessment being the dominant mode of assessment in the junior classes. It is our view that assessments should be structured in such a way as to allow for a cumulative record of the child's progress. Such assessments should eventually give rise to a pupil profile. Such a profile would include entries that correspond to the key objectives of the curriculum and also contain information deriving from standardised tests.

8. We strongly urge the abandonment of entrance examinations by secondary schools as a means of selecting pupils. In our view such selection is likely not to militate against pupils from poor backgrounds but also to give rise to secondary schools that draw from one kind of socio-economic background only. It is our view that entrance examinations exert an undue influence over what is taught at primary level and that they tend to be irrelevant to the main aims and objectives of the curriculum.

9. Modifications of the curriculum for the disadvantaged should exploit the flexibility of the curriculum which is an intrinsic feature of the principles of that curriculum. Such modifications should take be based on a balance of higher order skills (involving critical thinking and problem solving) as well as lower-order skills like literacy and numeracy.

10. Guidelines on the organisation of effective schools should be issued by the Department of Education. While initially such guidelines would be rather sketchy and would involve only the general principles indicated above, we feel that such a development would promote forms of organisation, management and teaching that would enhance the learning of children in primary schools generally and of disadvantaged children in particular.

11. There should be an increase in the resources devoted to policy relevant research in education with particular regard for the study of approaches and programmes that would offset the effect of disadvantaged backgrounds.

12. In the event of the school-leaving age being raised and/or an additional year at school be provided, we recommend that this additional year be spent in primary schools.