



Policy Submission

**Submission to the
Task Force on Truancy**

May 1995

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TO THE
TASK FORCE ON TRUANCY

COMBAT POVERTY AGENCY
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1. THE COMBAT POVERTY AGENCY

The Combat Poverty Agency was established in 1986 under the Combat Poverty Agency Act.

Under this Act, the Agency has a statutory duty to advise and make recommendations to the government on all aspects of economic and social planning in relation to poverty in the State.

2. POVERTY AND EDUCATION

2.1 Poverty

In the Agency's view, poverty is about not having an acceptable standard of living which is based on the norm for other people in society. People in Ireland are poor where their resources are so inadequate as to preclude them from enjoying a minimum acceptable lifestyle. Such a view of poverty takes account of the fact that people have social, emotional and cultural needs as well as basic physical needs. Thus poverty is about exclusion, isolation and a sense of powerlessness as well as lack of money.

In Ireland, households with children are particularly at risk of poverty, especially those with three or more children. Thus there is greater likelihood that children will be in poverty as compared to adults. Children living in poverty are at an educational disadvantage relative to children from more comfortable backgrounds. As a result there is a cycle of poverty by which the children of poor parents are destined to remain poor and marginalised in the future.

2.2 Education

In a response to the Green Paper on Education¹, the Agency set out two main premises in relation to education:

(i) Education is a social right: the education system should strive to provide the necessary treatment to deliver equitable outcomes to those it serves.

(ii) The education system should provide a vision of society which is committed to the value of social equity and justice: this ethos should permeate all levels of education and all subject areas and should enable participants in the education system to learn to respect and value themselves and others.

Education is of very great importance in the struggle against poverty. It can either

¹ Education, Inequality and Poverty, A Response to the Green Paper on Education, Combat Poverty Agency, 1993

perpetuate poverty and inequality or be an important mechanism for preventing and providing routes out of poverty. In Ireland, young people from deprived social class and family backgrounds are more likely to leave school with low or no qualifications. The main consequence of such educational failure is a greater risk of unemployment and poverty. The connection between poor educational qualifications and unemployment contributes to reinforcing the cycle of poverty and inequality. Educational qualifications or lack of them are significant factors in determining career opportunities, and also in developing personal self-confidence and the capacity to participate fully in society.

3. BASIS OF SUBMISSION

The Agency welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Task Force on Truancy.

This submission raises the key issues identified in the Agency's work to date with disadvantaged youth. This work was initiated in 1994 when the government allocated the Combat Poverty Agency additional resources of £100,000 to run a Pilot Programme for Disadvantaged Young People. As the work is still in progress it is important to emphasise that this submission can only raise the key issues identified in the course of the Agency's work to date.

These issues constitute the main concerns expressed by the fourteen funded groups during the evaluation process. These are also borne out both by the analysis of the applications to the grant scheme and by current material, including the Department of Education Report on School Attendance and Truancy. The Agency hopes that they can help to inform the work of the Task Force.

The Agency will be happy to maintain close links with the ongoing work of the Task Force in order to pass on insights gained from the work as it develops.

4. AGENCY'S PILOT PROGRAMME FOR DISADVANTAGED YOUNG PEOPLE

Preliminary research commissioned by the Agency indicated that the most appropriate focus for this new programme was to pilot measures aimed at addressing early school leaving because of the well-established links between poor educational attainment and high rates of unemployment and poverty. The Pilot Programme is being developed in stages. The first stage, in which the Agency is funding fourteen groups on a once-off basis to develop work in this area, will be completed in June 1995. The funded groups are listed in Appendix 1.

The Agency has commissioned an evaluation of this funded activity as well as a research paper which will examine effective models of intervention aimed at addressing early school leaving which draws on international research material.

In addition, an analysis of the applications (208) to the once-off funding programme was commissioned as it was felt that these gave a good indication of the range of initiatives that exist for tackling this problem. All these pieces of work will inform the development of the pilot programme as well as making a contribution to the

policy debate in this area.

This submission will begin by giving an overview of the type of activity funded under the 1994 Once-off Grant Scheme. It will then discuss the key issues identified from the work to date and make recommendations under the following headings:-

- * School/Community Linkages
- * Parent Participation
- * Age of Intervention
- * Resourcing Interventions
- * Special Interests - Travellers.

5. OVERVIEW OF FUNDED ACTIVITY

Four schools, seven youth/community projects and three Youthreach/Community Training Workshops received funding, totalling fourteen projects. The type of work which received funding is described below.

5.1 Type of Work Funded

School/Community Access:- combining in-school and out-of-school activities to encourage young people to stay within the formal education system

(i) group work with potential early school leavers focusing on personal and social development and skills development eg literacy, outdoor pursuits;

(ii) group work with parents of potential and actual early school leavers to influence attitudes re education and to improve communication with young people and parenting skills generally;

(iii) development of guidance and counselling services for potential early school leavers;

(iv) courses for teachers aimed at developing an understanding of the dynamics of educational disadvantage and looking at innovative ways of addressing these;

(v) specific projects (in Tralee and Limerick) aimed at improving young Travellers' participation in school through a combination of awareness training work with the Traveller community and schools and groupwork with young Travellers.

Progression:- work with young people who have left school and who have specific support and training needs to progress towards further education and/or employment

(i) Course in Child Care/Care Assistant for girls (15 - 17 yrs) to provide certification to participants with no formal educational qualifications, to enable participants to develop awareness of the developmental needs of children and to equip participants to pursue a career in this area.

(ii) Group work with Youthreach participants using outdoor pursuits programme to develop social and leadership skills.

6. ISSUES ARISING FROM THE PILOT PROGRAMME

6.1 SCHOOL/COMMUNITY LINKAGES

In advertising the 1994 Once-off Grant Scheme the Agency particularly welcomed applicants from projects which "link the formal and informal education sectors and the wider community with a view to encouraging young people to stay within the formal education system". It was envisaged that a key feature of such projects would include "the development of out-of-school curriculum to compensate and complement the school curriculum".

There was a surprisingly low number of such applications (14 out of 208) to the grant scheme but many of these are represented in the projects currently funded. The experience of the groups to date suggests that, where this collaboration has occurred, the benefits accruing to the identified target group of poor attenders/potential early school leavers have been very significant. Despite the short-term nature of the interventions (January - June '95) improvements have been recognised by both parents and teachers of the programme participants. Key elements of the interventions which have been identified by groups as contributing to their effectiveness are the following:-

- * programme engages the interest of participants (using methodologies which included drama, arts and crafts, murals, video, personal and social development)
- * the programme is achievable
- * it offers immediate gratification in accomplishing short-term achievable goals
- * it can be completed and there is a definable outcome and end product.

There was a widespread recognition from these "collaborative" projects of the complementary skills of teachers and youth/community workers and that both sets of skills were vital to the success and effectiveness of projects.

In most instances of this school/community collaboration the initiative has been facilitated by two factors:-

- i) a local youth/community group with a track record of effective work with disadvantaged young people;
- ii) Home/School liaison personnel who take on a role of promoting, organising and administering these programmes within the school system.

The main concerns expressed by these projects related to the lack of integration of such programmes within the school system. In most instances the Home/School

Liaison Officer carried full responsibility for the programme. Any criticisms, and there were many, from teachers who viewed such programmes as "rewarding bad behaviour", were borne by this individual, any promotional and awareness-raising work was carried out by this individual

6.1.2 Key issues

- * Any such interventions need to be fully integrated into the school and education system. They must be supported and promoted by the Department of Education, school management and school principal and built into the timetable.
- * Such programmes would benefit from a parallel awareness-raising course for school staff on issues of disadvantage.
- * There needs to be careful consideration given to the process of recruiting participants so as to ensure that this is perceived positively by them and not as a further stigmatization.

Finally, feedback from projects is supportive of a broader networking forum which would bring together all relevant groups (e.g. primary and secondary schools, youth services, Youthreach, community training workshops, health board, community development groups) in order to co-ordinate and offer different options and opportunities for disadvantaged young people.

As discussed in the analysis of the applications to the Grants Scheme, it is possible that the area-based partnerships established by the government, under the Local Development Programme of the EU Community Support Framework, for integrated local economic and social development may offer an opportunity to develop such structures.

6.2 PARENT PARTICIPATION

Despite the promotion in recent years of the role of parents as integral partners in their children's education, it is generally the case that the young people in most difficulty within the education system are the very ones whose parents are least involved in their children's education.

Six of the fourteen projects funded under the Agency's Grant Scheme undertook work with parents of identified potential early school leavers. This work was based on the premise that these parents feel alienated from the education system as a result of their own experiences of it. In order to facilitate their participation as partners they need an opportunity and time to work through and overcome this alienation. The projects undertaking work with parents experienced a lot of frustration in trying to get their programmes up and running.

6.2.1 Key issues

From this work the following issues emerge:-

- * Parents' interest and level of participation develops when there is regular, supportive contact between school and home;
- * Programmes with parents benefit from being linked to existing activity in local areas e.g. personal development, adult education, issue groups etc.
- * Parental involvement requires practical commitment e.g. creche facilities;
- * Schools need to be genuinely receptive to parental participation and, therefore, need to develop structures and mechanisms that will foster and encourage such participation.

6.3 AGE OF INTERVENTION

The Agency's Once-off Grant Scheme targeted work with disadvantaged young people in the 14 - 17 year age group. Funded activity fell under two main headings as outlined earlier:-

- i) school/community access programmes aimed at encouraging young people to stay within the formal education system and
- ii) progression aimed at enhancing the access of young people who have left school to further education and training and/or employment.

Broadly speaking then, the school/community access programmes are preventative in their thrust and the progression programmes are remedial.

Feedback from the work to date, preliminary research undertaken by the Agency and other research all emphasise that measures aimed at preventing early school leaving has to be targeted at a younger age group in order to be effective. The suggested age range needs to be between 8-13 years or, in school year terms, from 4th class through to 1st year secondary. It is not surprising that projects identify the Transition from primary to secondary as a particularly vulnerable time for at risk children.

The key concern expressed by projects in relation to this critical transition period is the absence of a single agency or institution with responsibility for supporting and monitoring children during this transition.

6.4 RESOURCING INTERVENTIONS

The analysis of the applications to the Agency's Once-off Grant Scheme identifies a key issue in relation to the resourcing of interventions aimed at disadvantaged young people. It states that groups and organisations felt that they had developed some type of formula which worked with young people. Current funding was precarious

These projects also make the point that the ambitious targets for Traveller participation in second-level education set out in the Education White Paper, *Charting our Education Future*, cannot possibly be achieved without the development of a coherent, well-resourced integrated plan and delivery mechanism.

6.5.2 Other groups

While the issues above arise specifically from the work with Travellers, there needs to be a recognition that some of these are equally relevant to other groups which experience disadvantage or exclusion such as people with disabilities. However, no such group is funded under the Once-off Grants Scheme.

7. EARLY INTERVENTIONS

Available evidence indicates that good quality early education provision can improve the quality of educational experience, particularly for those children at risk of educational failure. Furthermore, research shows that early education has a beneficial effect on the current and subsequent cognitive development, educational achievement and behaviour of children. Socially disadvantaged children have been found to gain slightly more from educational experiences at the pre-primary stage than their advantaged peers. Evaluations from America, from the Head Start pre-school programme, targeted at disadvantaged children, showed that there were long-term advantages for disadvantaged in attending such pre-school programmes.

Contrarily, there is no evidence to show that it is at the higher levels of second level education that additional provision is most effective, in terms of combatting educational disadvantage and ensuring greater equality in education.

The 1990 Review Body on the Primary Curriculum, in the section dealing with educational disadvantage, points out the "need for early (pre-primary) intervention strategies to ensure greater access to primary education for disadvantaged children". It goes on to state that a "substantial body of research from Ireland and abroad suggests that properly structured, professionally staffed pre-primary provision can foster positive attitudes to schooling and can contribute significantly to the development of linguistic and cognitive abilities among disadvantaged children".

The Agency concludes from this evidence that early education interventions are important in combatting educational disadvantage and would support the allocation of state resources in this area which are targeted towards more disadvantaged children and their families.

8. CONCLUSION

As explained at the outset, the Agency' work with disadvantaged young people is at an early stage of development. Experience from the various elements of the first stage - the funding of innovative projects, research, evaluation and analysis - will inform the development of future stages of work.

The Agency will be happy to keep the Task Force informed of outcomes from this

and/or inadequate and they desired that the once-off grant scheme would enable them to continue or extend the actions which had been developed.

In order to access funding to cover their programme costs groups are constantly forced into a situation of applying to pilot funding programmes which require innovation as a central feature. Whilst the groups funded by the Agency would acknowledge the role of pilots in developing and pushing out the boundaries of work practice, they also feel strongly that there is a key issue around the absence of mainstream provision for interventions which have proved to be effective. A strong commitment to integrate the lessons from effective pilot work into mainstream provision is required.

Another issue identified by groups was the short-term nature of funding provision which militates against the longer-term, more strategic planning and development of work programmes.

6.5 RECOGNISING DIFFERENCE

6.5.1 Travellers

Two of the fourteen projects funded by the Agency are undertaking programmes with young Travellers. They are both operating within a youth/community work context.

6.5.2 Key Issues

The following are the key issues which they have identified in their work to date:-

- * Travellers should be named, acknowledged and resourced as a group with special needs and not just incorporated under the generic term "disadvantaged".
- * There is a need for a structured networking process between all education providers, formal and informal, to examine, inform and provide for the needs of young Travellers.
- * The learning environment should promote respect for cultural diversity.
- * Travellers and Traveller organisations should be involved in and consulted with in the development of appropriate curriculum to meet the special needs of Traveller children.
- * The prejudice experienced by Travellers acts as a strong disincentive for their participation in education.
- * There is a need for awareness-raising about Travellers needs, experiences and issues for educators.

work as it believes this learning can help to improve the life-chances and opportunities for disadvantaged young people.