

The merits
encompassing
equality of
opportunity education
essay



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This essay explores equality of opportunity in education. It examines various factors that have the potential to impact on students' ability to succeed and the measures that can be implemented to prevent negative impact. In the early stages I provide the reader with a comprehensive definition of equality of opportunity along with my own personal interpretation of the phrase. My chief aim is to raise awareness of the importance of inclusion, regardless of race, gender, social status or learning ability. In order to achieve this I have accumulated a vast range of data from both literary and primary sources. I also explore policies implemented by the Government in an effort to ensure equality of opportunity in education for all. I conclude by presenting my findings which include interesting insights into a learning environment where self-efficacy and a sense of belonging is achievable by all children in an inclusive education system (Drudy, 2009, p. 58).

“ In the late fifties and early sixties the concept of equality of opportunity had been introduced into the political debate on policy” (Ó’Buachalla, 1988, p. 357) In the literature various definitions of ‘ equal opportunity’ are offered one of which states that, “ Equality of opportunity broadly refers to the notion that everyone is given an equal chance to succeed regardless of factors such as class, gender, disability, race or any other aspect of identity” (Considine & Dukelow, 2009, p. 288). This does not mean that all members of society are to be recognised as equal, it simply means that provisions are implemented to enable all students to have an equal chance in society. In a sense, “ it is a means of fairly allocating positions within society” (Considine & Dukelow, 2009). For this reason, it is a key component in the formation of educational policies. “(i)n education, ‘ equality of opportunity’, ‘ efficiency in

resource utilisation’ or ‘curricular reform’ constitute common megapolicies” (Ó’Buachalla, 1988, p. 312). Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) is an action plan set up by the Department of Education and Science for Educational Inclusion. (DES, DEIS, 2005)

This essay explores some of the key policies that are in place and their impact on individuals in this society. Ireland in the twenty first century is alive with cultural diversity, which has increased the importance of this topic in recent years. Race and religion only represent a fraction of the broad spectrum that this topic encompasses. Equality of opportunity in Ireland, or as some might argue, the lack of it dates back as far as 1695 when the penal laws were introduced, which, “ forbade any Catholic from acting as a schoolteacher” (Quin, Kennedy, Mattews, & Kiely, 2005, p. 84). This gave rise to illegal hedge schools being set up which were held in open air and financed by student donations. It was not until the nineteenth century that, “ a number of religious orders, devoted specially to education were founded” (Quin, Kennedy, Mattews, & Kiely, 2005, p. 84).

Firstly I will focus on the cultural diversity in existence in today’s schools. Subsequently, through the medium of both primary and secondary research methods, I will examine the provisions in place enabling those with learning difficulties and special needs access to equal opportunity in education. My primary research encompasses an expert interview with an experienced resource teacher, on the merits and demerits of inclusion. Finally I will offer a conclusion of my findings.

2: CULTURAL DIVERSITY

“ Increasing and rapid immigration into Irish society has resulted in schools and classrooms becoming more ethnically diverse spaces” (Drudy, 2009, p. 57). Schools and classrooms should capture elements of all cultures in order to ignite a bond between students, in turn creating the social aspect or community spirit coined by Dewey. In his creed Dewey states, “ that much of present education fails because it neglects this fundamental principle of the school as a form of community life” (Dewey, 1897, p. 78).

Community life often suffers due to racism, which forms a barrier to social interaction. A case study in a Dublin school quoted a Nigerian student saying, “ I like to use an Irish accent... if you speak normally they don’t slag you” (Drudy, 2009, p. 65). In this particularly school, “(I)nitia accounts from the children seemed to suggest that racial abuse was experienced infrequently in the school” (Drudy, 2009, p. 62). This could suggest that students did not believe that their comments were racist, resulting in a failure to understand the hurt they were potentially causing to others. In such situations, policies are implemented to educate students on the effects of bullying and racism, in the hope of eradicating it. Curtailing racist activity could be a move towards interculturalism. “ Interculturalism in education is anti-discriminatory, based on respect for and engagement with, cultural diversity, and the promotion of equality” (Considine & Dukelow, 2009, p. 322).

3: SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

“ The 1998 Education Act places an obligation on the Minister for Education and Science to make available the support services and the level and quality
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of education that will meet the needs and abilities of every person”

(Considine & Dukelow, 2009, p. 321). This along with, “ The Education for Persons with Special Needs Act, 2004” (Considine & Dukelow, 2009, p. 322) provides legislation ensuring people with special needs are given equal opportunities in education. Inclusion is a word often associated with special educational needs. A recent government initiative, outlines inclusion by stating that, “ a child with special educational needs shall be educated in an inclusive environment with children who do not have such needs” (DES, Special Needs Education, 2004), subject to the best interests of the child. Effects on the, “ education for children with whom the child is to be educated” (DES, Special Needs Education, 2004) are also taken into consideration.

In addition to my literary research on Special Educational Needs (SENs), I interviewed a Resource Teacher with experience in Learning Support.[1]She argued that the concept of equality of opportunity is somewhat flawed. In support of her argument she mentioned that expecting children with severe SENs to reach the same goals as the average student is not pragmatic. She then went on to say that while resource hours are beneficial to these children and improvements can occur in their learning, the levels of enhancement are limited in comparison to that of the average student. With regard to students with mild or moderate SENs, she alleged that the benefits can appear more fruitful with students excelling and in some cases surpassing the average student. This opinion is echoed in a case study of fourteen DEIS schools where teachers highlighted, “ the nature of the

presenting disabilities” (Drudy, 2009, p. 80), as a reservation to the merits of inclusion.

4: CONCLUSION

Critiques will argue that, “ in an unequal society those with the greater resources will have the means and the power to find ways to stay ahead of any policy measures designed to equalise opportunity” (Considine & Dukelow, 2009, p. 291). This is a fair argument, however, on further analysis one may begin to see a second meaning to this statement. As the elite move ahead of policy, policies are forced to improve, thus, improving the education experience for those who avail of these policies.

Mulcahy and O’Sullivan believe that the aim of education is, “ to develop pupils for personal and family life, for working life, for living in the community and for leisure” (Mulcahy & O’Sullivan, 1989). Dewey, on the other hand, stated that, “ education is life itself, a social function, direction and growth but is not something that unfolds or is for the future ” (Dewey & Archambault, 1964). Through the use of dialectics my own definition is in agreement with Dewey, in that education is life. However I do not see any problem with setting goals throughout this process in order to enhance all other aspects of life as outlined in Mulcahy’s definition. Irrespective of which definition is undertaken, the concept of ensuring equal opportunity for all in the education system is of paramount importance. “ When children experience a sense of belonging, recognition and inclusion in school, it contributes to feelings of self-efficacy and motivation to learn” (Drudy, 2009, p. 58) and this can have enormous benefits for individuals and society as a whole.

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