

# Is the right to education in Ireland shared equally by all?

The right to education in Ireland is protected through three major documents. On an international level, article 26 of the UNDHR and article 28 of the UNCRC give us the right to compulsory primary education and insist that universal secondary and higher education be gradually implemented through progressive realisation. Nationally, Bunreacht na hÉireann promises a right to education in its 42nd article. In theory these rights are universal and inalienable, however I do not believe that the right to education in Ireland is enjoyed equally by all.

It seems clear to me that equality of access and outcome varies throughout Ireland's economic tiers and that, as long as economic inequality exists in our society, educational equality will follow. The prominent Irish social commentator Kathleen Lynch asks us how a child from a background of poverty and deprivation (a state in which according to the CSO, one in five children in Ireland live), can possibly share an equal right to education with a more fortunate child. In an article as part of the 'No Child 2020' programme, the Irish Times found that children in disadvantaged schools have lower literacy and numeracy scores and a higher dropout rate. It is clear that equality of outcome is not enjoyed by these disadvantaged pupils who struggle to cope in a less supportive or less secure home environment. This situation worsened during the austerity years during which, according to another report from the Irish Times, child poverty doubled and homelessness, hugely prevalent among young children, rapidly increased.

However, all we must do to turn this issue on its head and argue that the right to education is in fact shared equally by all is simply to look at a different definition of equality: the equality of access. Political thinker Robert Nozick would no doubt argue that Ireland's excellent record when it comes to equality of access would provide sufficient evidence for us to assume that equality of education is shared by all. It is his firm belief that it is not the duty of the state to provide equality of outcome, and that it is only to make sure that education is available to all. The fact that UNICEF ranks Ireland as second best out of 41 nations in promoting educational equality and the state has

consistently provided free primary and secondary education as well as subsidised third level education is enough to defend this argument, even if it means ignoring Kathleen Lynch's findings relating to low educational attainment for traveller children and the destructive effect austerity has had on educational attainment for those with physical and mental disabilities.

However, in my opinion, Nozick's view of equality is idealistic and makes little sense when put into practice. The simple provision of easy access to schools and competent teachers is all very well and good, but for real equality to exist we must take into account that students do not begin on a level playing field. Maslow's pyramid of needs shows us that for a child to learn, they must first have behind them a level of safety and a feeling of belonging which many Irish children simply do not enjoy. This belief that for a child to learn, they must first be living in a stable environment is also held by thinker Martha Nussbaum, who believes that there are ten central capabilities which people need if they are to enjoy equality in any area of society. Some Irish children, for example any of the nearly 4000 who according to focus Ireland are now homeless, will not even have one of these ten capabilities and thus they cannot be counted as sharing an equal access to the right to education when compared to a child with all ten of the aforementioned capabilities.

While equality of access to education in Ireland is high across the board, no matter what your economic or social background, equality of outcome is not. Time and time again we see people from less fortunate socioeconomic backgrounds be left behind by the Irish education system in favour of their wealthier peers (see minister Shane Ross' generous contribution to Wesley College as a perfect example). Private schools continue to dominate third level attainment leader boards and the most disadvantaged in our society repeatedly face more obstacles to the attainment of education than those of the middle and upper classes. Irish society is unequal, thus Irish education is unequal.