

A Very Unlevel Playing Field: A Reflection on Young Adults in Higher Education

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Introduction

A lifetime of working with young adults has left me in no doubt that inequalities associated with the circumstances of our birth are more than likely to lead to successive waves of inequality that may accompany us throughout the remainder of our lives. This is true whether we are born into disadvantage or privilege.

In this article, I offer a personal reflection on the educational challenges encountered by young adults who are socially disadvantaged. The reflection is based on my experiences of working with young adults in Ballymun, one of the most marginalised communities in Dublin. In the following, I reflect on the relationship between social inequality and educational opportunity, and how improved access to education can break the cycle of poverty that can impede an individual throughout their lifetime. I draw on how the Jesuit University Support and Training project (known as JUST) in Ballymun provides a variety of supports aimed at breaking down the obstacles that can prevent many young adults from disadvantaged backgrounds accessing third level education.

What happens during the first twenty years of our lives have a decisive influence on how we will live our remaining decades. For some, the pre-adult years may mean a nurturing family environment, optimal physical and mental nutrition, opportunities for travel, wide-ranging exposure to all manner of cultural riches, and a first-class education. For others, those same years may mean unrelenting instability, poverty, fear, discrimination and lack of opportunity on all levels. The playing field on which young adults are formed is anything but level! And as disadvantaged young adults mature into middle age and beyond, the likelihood is that inequality will be piled on inequality. In their later years, they are more likely to suffer from ill health, unemployment, isolation, poor housing conditions and, ultimately, a shorter life expectancy.

A documentary aired in 2014 by Ireland's TV3 described the gap in educational opportunity between affluent and disadvantaged sectors of our society as a form of 'educational apartheid'.¹ By

way of example, the programme cited one area of Dublin in which practically every child can look forward to eventual university graduation, while in another part of the city, just a few miles away, only one child in seven can reasonably have the same expectation. When many families with a similar history of disadvantage are clustered together in marginalised housing estates, the problems are greatly exacerbated. Some of these estates may be notorious for high levels of anti-social behaviour, drug abuse and criminal activity. Many of the young men may be drawn into local gangs, partly for self-protection. For young women, early pregnancy can mean that all thought of education and career must be postponed, or dismissed altogether as an impossible fantasy. Needless to say, for the children of young parents struggling with severe difficulties, the outlook can be very bleak indeed.

The Impact of Social Inequality on Educational Attainment

Expensive school fees do not simply buy a first-class education, but entry into a world of influential contacts and friendships which may prove decisive when it comes to job applications, career progression, and so on. Contrast that with a young person born into disadvantage, most of whose friends have little hope of advancing to university, or even as far as the Leaving Certificate. This person will be obliged to face life utterly devoid of any supportive network of friends, relatives or old schoolmates with influence. The scenario is sometimes summed up in the saying, 'it's not what you know, but who you know, that really counts'. In my work, I have encountered countless real-life examples that lend credence to that.

Working in universities in Ireland and several other countries, I have seen many instances of moderately talented students with comfortable family backgrounds exceeding their own expectations thanks, in great part, to advantages bestowed on them by the circumstances of their birth and upbringing. Sadly, I have also seen many cases of exceptionally talented students defeated by inner and outer demons associated with a lifetime of social and economic disadvantage.

One has only to consider the disparity in results attained at the end of the secondary school cycle to understand that, for young people in disadvantaged areas, many career paths are simply out of the question. Regardless of innate talent and potential, a young person's social status plays a major role in determining future career opportunities, or the lack thereof. For those who do manage to overcome the barriers to third level it can easily be forgotten that a student from an educationally disadvantaged background will end up sitting in class and competing with students who have enjoyed the advantages offered by a stable, supportive family and a home environment conducive to study. Students who failed to complete secondary education, or who attended schools with a poor record of achievement, find themselves sitting side-by-side with others who have been educated in the country's most exclusive primary and secondary schools. Simply offering free or subsidised college fees is not nearly sufficient to counteract a lifetime of marginalisation and deprivation.²

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Breaking the Cycle of Poverty

In bygone eras which regarded social inequality as a fact of life, or even part of a divinely ordained natural order, raising the issue of life's unlevel playing field might have been greeted with raised eyebrows and puzzlement. It was largely taken for granted that being born into wealth and privilege or poverty and disadvantage was simply an unalterable fact of life that should be accepted as such. Everyone was expected to know their place in the social order and make the most of the hand they had been dealt. Nowadays, we have a much clearer understanding of the causes of social inequality, as well as some of the tried and tested solutions.

At the very top of the list of interventions that can help to counter the negative effects of disadvantage in early life and break intergenerational cycles of poverty is improved access to educational opportunity. I have witnessed the transforming power of education while working in various parts of the world, most dramatically in Latin America.



Young adults in education

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When Ballymun was launched as a sparkling new high-rise housing development back in the 1960s, many of the earliest residents moved from old, crumbling inner-city tenements. Some of those tenement dwellers, in turn, were the descendants of people driven into the city by the poverty of 19th Century post-Famine Ireland. The emotional and psychological scars inflicted by successive generations of marginalisation and deprivation are slow to heal. They continue to affect many families in Ballymun, as well as similar areas of Dublin and other Irish cities. In some families, generations of relative poverty and disadvantage have produced a home environment in which academic learning plays practically no role whatsoever, and it may even be perceived negatively, as a total waste of time.

Low levels of educational attainment often translate into poor literacy and numeracy skills. Unsurprisingly, this has a knock-on impact on employment prospects and generally makes it much more difficult to engage with everyday challenges like corresponding with State agencies or simply controlling a family budget. For some young people, personal and family difficulties can result in unhappy encounters with school authorities, leading them to drop out of the educational system at an early age. A small minority may even find a seemingly attractive alternative in a life of petty crime or antisocial behaviour.

The Jesuit University Support and Training Project (JUST)

Jesuits arrived in Ballymun in the early 1980s.³ A quarter-century spent serving the people through the Virgin Mary Parish enabled the Jesuits to glimpse into a world normally inaccessible to those whose own family circumstances and upbringing had been more fortunate. Even in a relatively small city like Dublin, it is extraordinary how one half frequently knows little or nothing about how the other half

lives. When I first came to live in Ballymun in 1999, I was astounded to find that most of the area was surrounded by a high wall, physically isolating it from neighbouring areas. Even while working in materially deprived barrios (urban areas where poor people live in very precarious conditions) in Latin America, I had never witnessed such blatant social segregation. The wall said something about Ballymun, but it said a lot more about the society that constructed it.

The Jesuit University Support and Training project (known as JUST)⁴ was formally initiated in May 2006. This followed an intense year of consultation and planning, during which key issues were identified, goals defined, and the necessary resources gathered together. The central challenge wasn't difficult to discover or justify. Available data at that time indicated that approximately three per cent of eligible Ballymun residents were participating in third level educational programmes, as against a national average of about 60 per cent.⁵ By any reckoning, such a low level of participation in post-secondary and lifelong learning programmes was shocking. The JUST project proposed to identify the principal difficulties and barriers, and respond with a variety of services and supports designed to eliminate the obstacles, or, at least, to alleviate them sufficiently to enable more Ballymun residents to take the first steps towards a third level qualification.

A little over ten years on, we can report success beyond our most optimistic initial projections. From tentative beginnings in 2006, with a small team of three and a group of twenty students, today a nine-strong JUST team annually supports an average of one hundred students. They are enrolled in a wide range of both undergraduate and postgraduate courses at universities and smaller colleges throughout Dublin. There is a healthy balance between male and female participants. Our youngest students are 18-year old recent school-leavers, while the oldest to date was a 74-year old studying postgraduate Law. Most of our students are in the early-20s to mid-30s age group. Some are enrolled in a year-long pre-college preparatory programme designed to improve basic study skills. The majority have already embarked on their chosen diploma or degree courses. We now have our first group of postgraduates, mostly pursuing Masters Degrees and several completing PhDs. It takes huge conviction and determination to meet essay deadlines and prepare for exams when circumstances are conspiring to make failure often

seem inevitable. In many cases, conventional academic support structures available in universities and other third level colleges are unable to address difficulties experienced closer to home. Family crises, financial pressures and the lack of adequate study facilities are just some of the factors that could undermine a talented student's potential to perform. The fact that so many JUST students have not only completed undergraduate degrees, but have then proceeded to post-graduate studies is a constant reminder that the human spirit can triumph over all kinds of adversity.

In an ideal world, the various problems that diminish educational and employment opportunities would be tackled simultaneously. Realistically, it is usually only possible to adopt a step-by-step approach, with various forms of personal, familial and social support. Whenever suitable support mechanisms are made available, there is ample evidence to show that most people are eager to avail of them. Frequently, the results are nothing short of life-changing. Furthermore, the multiplier effect of an investment of people and other resources in a project like JUST is incalculable, since one person's decision to pursue a college degree often results in a better life for an entire family.

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The JUST Model of Learning

The JUST model is based on individual tutoring and mentoring. Every effort is made to match students with tutors who have similar academic interests and compatible personalities. Very often, the key to overcoming adversity is the gradual development of a student-tutor relationship based on friendship and mutual trust. In order to sustain this personalised approach to supporting students, JUST relies on the time and effort of generous volunteer tutors. Some of these are active or retired professional academics, while others are recent graduates only too familiar with the challenges

faced by those taking their first tentative steps on the path towards a university qualification.

It is always wonderful for new students to meet with local graduates whose life stories are marked by the same kinds of difficulty, but whose success is living proof that obstacles can be overcome. Of the hundreds of students who have availed of JUST's support services, many examples could be cited of heroic courage and perseverance in the face of seemingly insurmountable adversity. As a network of local graduates has developed, JUST has been able to assure students that help is available at any time. When someone is struggling with an unfinished essay on a Saturday evening, with a Monday deadline looming, panic can set in and the temptation to give up soon follows. In my own teaching experience, a succession of missed deadlines was often the prelude to a student dropping out altogether. Students with a more conventional educational background can take for granted the permanent availability of emotional and academic support from within their immediate circle of family and friends. For a student with a history of educational disadvantage, no such support network exists. It can be very reassuring to know that help is never more than a phone call away.

The Future for JUST

Whither JUST in the coming years? The one sure thing is that the task far exceeds our available material and human resources. Within Ballymun, the project could easily be several times larger, given the long history of educational neglect and the growing appetite for lifelong educational opportunities. It must be remembered, also, that Ballymun is only one of many similar disadvantaged areas in Dublin and throughout Ireland. So, while the Jesuit presence in some traditional fields of educational endeavour may be winding down, we are confronted with a host of new challenges.

The Ignatian pedagogical paradigm that informs the Jesuit approach to education in schools and universities all over the world provides the blueprint for JUST. With its insistence on the need to nourish all aspects of the human being – emotional, imaginative and spiritual, as well as intellectual – its relevance for our work is self-evident. It is a simple fact that the type of comprehensive educational and personal support offered through JUST is not available through any other agency.

Some Latin American theologians speak of contact with marginalised people as a blessing, or even as an epiphany, since it opens a window onto a hitherto unknown, normally invisible reality, thereby challenging our habitual preference for whatever is comfortable, familiar and seemingly unquestionable. Consigned to the margins of our society and sometimes even isolated by high walls, traditionally disadvantaged areas like Ballymun constitute a tangible 'beyond' that can serve as a vital reminder that the apparently all-encompassing and self-sufficient world of mainstream society is by no means the whole story. They represent a fundamental questioning of conventionally accepted notions of fairness, decency and justice. Continuing to allocate access to quality education and career opportunities through a type of postcode lottery is anything but decent, fair or just.

Exposure to an alternative view of society, from the perspective of people normally consigned to the margins, acts like a slow-burning fuse that eventually produces a transformative explosion. In a word, it can result in a 'conversion' that is simultaneously personal, social and, most profoundly, spiritual. Whatever little JUST can offer to students in Ballymun is repaid in abundance through the privilege of witnessing the heroic commitment and determination of these young adults to succeed, whatever the odds.

Notes

1. The documentary called *Education Apartheid* was aired on December 1st, 2014.
2. In a previous Issue of *Working Notes* (Justice in the Global Economy, Issue 79, December 2016), Brian Flannery looked at some of the challenging questions that relate to fee-paying education, and questioned whether the challenges of our time require a more radical response and commitment in education. The full article can be accessed at: www.workingnotes.ie
3. A comprehensive overview of the Jesuits in Ballymun written by Michael O'Sullivan SJ, *Twenty three years of Jesuits in Ballymun* can be accessed at: <http://homepage.eircom.net/~jadsj/23%20Years%20in%20Ballymun.htm>
4. See: www.justballymun.org
5. See: Dublin City University. 'Access to education in Ballymun'. (Available at: <http://www.dcu.ie/community/location.shtml>)

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