

# The educational situation of disadvantaged children

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This chapter presents background information on the educational situation of socially excluded children and young people. The first part of the chapter briefly outlines some of the explanations proffered for the persistence of educational inequality in most European countries. The second and third parts examine the relationship between socioeconomic background and educational outcomes in the six participating countries: Belgium, Ireland, the Netherlands, Portugal, Scotland and Spain. This discussion provides the context for the analysis of educational policy measures to tackle social exclusion presented in the following chapters.

## The causes of educational inequality

### *Research on socioeconomic background and educational outcomes*

International research has indicated a consistently significant effect of social background on educational outcomes (see, for example, Coleman et al, 1966; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970; Jencks et al, 1972; Halsey et al, 1980). Comparative studies have shown that the pattern of association between social class background and education tends to be similar, even in countries with very different educational systems (Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993; Ishida et al, 1995). Parental education has a similar association with children's education, with children of university-educated parents having higher rates of educational attainment (Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993) and higher literacy levels (OECD, 1997a). The effect of social background has been apparent in relation to both the level of education reached and academic performance at various stages within the educational system.

Socioeconomic background is shown to have a stronger effect at earlier stages of the educational process, declining in relative terms as

students move through the system (Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993; Raftery and Hout, 1993). Two explanations have been advanced for this pattern. First, the life-course hypothesis proposes that older students are less dependent on family resources, both cultural and economic, in making decisions about continued educational participation (Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993). Second, others have argued that this process reflects selection effects since those working-class students who do go on to higher education are likely to be atypical of working-class students within the educational system (Mare, 1980).

In comparison with social class and parental education, other dimensions of socioeconomic background (such as parental unemployment, family income and 'poverty') have been relatively neglected. These dimensions tend to be correlated with social class and parental education; for example, those from the unskilled working class and/or those with low levels of education are likely to experience disproportionately high unemployment rates and higher levels of income poverty. Some researchers have argued that these dimensions may have little independent effect on educational attainment, once other background factors are taken into account; in the Netherlands, for example, Dronkers (1994) found that fathers' unemployment or non-employment had little direct effect on children's educational outcomes. Other researchers, however, have found that weak labour force attachment (Guo et al, 1996), low income (Mare, 1980; Nicaise, 1999) and poverty (Haveman et al, 1991) have significant direct negative effects on children's educational outcomes.

In spite of the considerable expansion in educational participation experienced by many countries over the second half of the 20th century, there has been a remarkable consistency in the relationship between social background and inequality in educational outcomes (Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993; Breen and Whelan, 1996). Among countries for which comparable data are available, only Sweden and the Netherlands have shown any consistent tendency towards increased equality of educational participation between the different social classes (De Graaf and Ganzeboom, 1993; Jonsson, 1993).<sup>1</sup> It has been argued that these changes cannot be attributed to educational reform alone, but reflect a more general trend towards the equalisation of life-chances in the two countries (Erikson, 1996).

### *The causes of educational inequality*

The causes of inequality in educational outcomes have been the subject of much debate (see Tyler, 1977). In general, discussion has focused on educational inequality in terms of social class background and gender, with some more limited attention to ethnic differences. Consequently, many studies have failed to identify important differences within the working class in terms of poverty and social exclusion, and little information is available on the educational experiences of the most economically disadvantaged groups. Two sets of factors are seen to influence inequality of educational outcomes: differences between social classes in academic ability/performance ('primary effects'); and differences between social classes in their level of educational participation, controlling for academic performance ('secondary effects') (Boudon, 1974). Differences in academic performance are seen to reflect differing cultural resources in the home environment (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977), variations in physical wellbeing and nutrition (Atkinson et al, 1983), and/or class bias within the school (see below). However, it has been argued that such ability/performance differences are not large enough to explain existing levels of inequality in educational attainment, nor why children from different social classes but with similar ability levels differ in their tendency to remain in full-time education (Erikson and Jonsson, 1996).

One approach to explaining this pattern is the 'rational choice' model adopted by Erikson and Jonsson (1996; see also Goldthorpe, 1996a). From this perspective, educational choice is regarded in terms of the (perceived) costs and benefits associated with continued participation, with variation in outcomes related to a number of factors. First, lack of economic resources will limit participation if families cannot afford the direct and indirect (opportunity) costs of such participation. The relative costs of schooling are likely to vary according to social class and family income levels. Second, different social class groups differ in their cultural resources. Parents with higher levels of education will have greater knowledge of the educational system, and will be better equipped to help their children with homework and study. Among recent cohorts, the effects of cultural resources (such as parental education) have become stronger than those of economic resources (Erikson and Jonsson, 1996; De Graaf and Ganzeboom, 1993). Third, the perceived benefits of educational participation may differ between class groups. The middle classes have more to lose by not staying on in education, since they risk social demotion, whereas in high unemployment areas, young people

from working-class backgrounds may not see much benefit to staying on at school. Fourth, the probabilities of success within the educational system may differ between social groups (Erikson and Jonsson, 1996). Other factors, such as geographical distance from educational facilities, may also affect the relative costs of educational participation. While this issue has rarely been considered in a cross-national perspective, experiences in countries such as Spain and Portugal indicate that geographical marginalisation may reinforce the negative effects of economic disadvantage on educational participation.

Changes over time in educational inequality in Sweden can, therefore, be seen as a result of diminishing social class differences in economic security (through increased equality in income and living conditions) in the context of an educational system which postpones the timing of educational selection (Erikson, 1996). The lack of change in other countries can be seen as the product of persistent inequalities in financial and cultural resources between social class groups, along with differences in the perceived benefits and success rates associated with educational participation (Erikson and Jonsson, 1996). Middle-class groups thus retain an advantage even in the context of radical changes in the educational system; in spite of comprehensivisation in Britain, for example, the middle class retained an advantage through maintaining access to grammar and private schools as well as more prestigious comprehensive schools (Kerckhoff et al, 1997). Raftery and Hout (1993) have suggested that, in the absence of significant changes in the distribution of economic and cultural resources, educational inequality will only decrease when the demand for education among the upper middle classes has been saturated.

### *Schools and educational inequality*

While the above discussion has focused on the factors shaping 'demand' for education, other researchers have stressed the way in which the nature of the educational system and the schooling process may influence the level of educational inequality. Institutional factors, such as the timing of educational selection, the length of various educational routes or 'tracks', the size of the system, and the principles for transferring between levels, may serve to reinforce (or reduce) existing social inequalities (Erikson and Jonsson, 1996). For example, in systems where educational selection into academic and vocational tracks happens very early, differences between social class and ethnic groups in the type of education they receive are likely to be more pronounced (see, for example,

Shavit, 1984). In the Scottish case, where educational reforms increased access to an 'academic' curriculum, there was a significant reduction in socioeconomic inequality within schools, as regards academic performance (Gamoran, 1996).

Reproduction theorists have stressed the way in which the structure and processes within schools serve to reproduce existing social inequality. Bowles and Gintis (1977), for example, have argued that the social relations within schools (with a hierarchical division of labour, alienated work, and fragmentation through competition) 'correspond' to the social relations of capitalist society. This process is reinforced by the class-biased nature of the school curriculum (see Apple, 1982), which draws on the cultural capital of the middle classes (Bourdieu, 1973). Even pupil resistance to the formal school culture may, ironically, serve to maintain existing social class differences (Willis, 1977).

Increasingly, reproduction theory has been criticised for being overly deterministic (see Lynch, 1989). More recent research has focused on the impact of schooling structures and processes on pupil outcomes. Structures such as tracking and streaming are found to increase existing social divisions. Pupils from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are disproportionately located in lower ability streams or lower status vocational tracks (Sorenson, 1987; Shavit, 1984; Jones et al, 1995; Hannan and Boyle, 1987; Nicaise, 1999). Such an allocation process is likely to increase differences in academic performance due to the polarising effect of ability grouping (Hallinan, 1987; Kerckhoff, 1993; Smyth, 1999). Research on school effectiveness has indicated a number of factors, including disciplinary climate, teacher expectations, and pupil-teacher interaction, which are consistently associated with enhanced pupil outcomes (see, for example, Scheerens and Bosker, 1997). However, other analysts have criticised such research for failing to take account of socioeconomic differences within and between schools (Angus, 1993). Recent research on American high schools has indicated that the degree of socioeconomic differentiation within schools, or 'social distribution of achievement', is found to be related to the student composition, teacher quality and interest, disciplinary climate, academic climate and academic organisation within the school (Bryk et al, 1993). Thus, schools can serve to reduce or challenge, rather than reproduce, existing social inequality.

## **The educational situation of socially excluded children**

The following sections present background information on the educational situation of socially excluded children and young people in the six study countries: Belgium, Ireland, the Netherlands, Portugal, Scotland and Spain. These countries differ in a number of respects: the nature of their educational systems (see Introduction); the relevance of different background factors to educational opportunities and outcomes; and the relative importance of various educational outcomes to subsequent life-chances and social exclusion. The selected countries should, therefore, give some indication of the situation of socially excluded children in Europe as a whole.

### *Which social background factors matter?*

Research in a range of countries has indicated that socioeconomic factors, such as parental social class and parental education, are significant correlates of educational success or failure. However, countries differ in the degree to which information on the relationship between family background and educational outcomes is readily available. In the Spanish and Portuguese contexts, policy concerns have focused on the expansion of educational attainment among the whole population, and have consequently neglected the collection of information on the situation of children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Analysis of the educational situation of children from 'poor' families has proved particularly difficult, given the debate about the definition of poverty and the absence, until recently, of large-scale data sets which contain detailed information on family economic and social circumstances.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, in the following sections, a number of different indicators of socioeconomic disadvantage, such as social class, parental education, and family size, are used to depict the relationship between family background and educational outcomes among children and young people. Other factors, such as ethnicity, are discussed where information is available. However, this issue may be less relevant in certain national contexts because of the very small size of minority groups (for example, in Ireland) or may not be taken into account in data collection. The international literature on educational deprivation mentions a range of other poverty-related background characteristics such as family breakdown, the placement of children in state care, poor health, parental illiteracy, mental distress, language barriers (for example, use of slang at

home) and so on, that are correlated with children's educational attainment (for a review, see Nicaise, 1999). However, the definitions differ between sources, and very often no comparable data are available between countries.

### ***Which educational outcomes matter?***

The impact of educational outcomes on subsequent social exclusion may differ according to the nature of particular educational systems and their linkages with the labour market. In some systems, the level of educational attainment plays an important role in securing access to (well-paid) employment, while in other systems, examination results or the type of education/training received are more significant. For example, in the Irish context, employers pay attention to exam grades when making recruitment decisions (Breen et al, 1995), while in the Dutch context there is a strong 'match' between the level and type (subject specialisation) of education received and occupational position (Smooenburg and Van der Velden, 1995). During young people's educational careers, on-going academic performance or grade retention may serve as useful indicators of potential educational disadvantage. The prevalence of being 'kept back' in a particular academic year (grade retention) differs across national systems, ranging from the Irish case, where grade retention is exceptional to non-existent, to the Dutch case, where pupils may be retained once in each year (Eurydice, 1994b). These different educational outcomes, and their relationship to socioeconomic disadvantage, will be considered in the following section.

We will also use some more 'sensitive' indicators of educational success or failure in relation to social exclusion, such as illiteracy among pupils at secondary level, truancy, or referrals to special education. Again, the information about such phenomena is highly illustrative, but fragmentary.

## **Socioeconomic background and educational outcomes: empirical evidence**

This section considers the relationship between socioeconomic background and a number of aspects of educational attainment in the study countries. While the research presented is diverse and not designed to yield comparable measures across countries, it does serve to highlight some of the main issues relating to potential educational disadvantage.

## ***Educational participation***

The six countries differ in the level of pre-compulsory (pre-school) education, with particularly low levels in Ireland and high levels in Belgium; 98% of Belgian 3-year-olds take part in early childhood education compared with only 1% of their Irish counterparts (OECD, 1998). In the Belgian case, socioeconomic influences, such as parental education, income and family size, appear to have no significant effect on participation in pre-school education. Only child age and labour force participation were found to be significant factors, with higher participation in kindergarten among older children (aged 5 years) and, surprisingly, among households where one parent does not work outside the home (Nicaise, 1999). Data are not available on pre-school participation by social background in Ireland, the Netherlands, Scotland, Spain or Portugal.

Official statistics indicate that compulsory educational participation appears to be successfully enforced in the six countries (OECD, 1998). However, 'illegal' dropout (that is, before the legal school-leaving age) may be prevalent among certain groups (for example, travellers, ethnic minorities) or in certain national contexts, such as Portugal. In other contexts such as Scotland, non-participation may reflect formal exclusion of pupils by the school, rather than 'voluntary' dropout. The level of post-compulsory participation in second-level education differs across the countries concerned, but there is, to some extent, a degree of convergence in the trends (see Introduction; also see IARD, 1998). In spite of a general increase in the level of education in the six countries, participation remains strongly influenced by socioeconomic background.

In the Dutch case, children from working-class environments, and whose parents have a low educational level, are more likely to leave the first phase of secondary education (MAVO, VBO) and the vocational phase (MBO, apprenticeships) before completion. Among this group, 7% leave the system without any educational or vocational qualifications, compared with 2% in the rest of the population (*Onderwijs Voorrangbeleid* cohort study). Dropout rates are 12% for those whose parents have a primary education compared to 0.5% among those whose parents have a university education.

The relationship between social background and educational level of school leavers has been apparent in the Netherlands throughout the 20th century. De Graaf and Ganzeboom (1993) indicate that fathers' social class and level of education have had a significant effect on educational success among all cohorts born since 1891. However, these

effects, while still significant, have been declining in magnitude over the century (De Graaf and Ganzeboom, 1993; Dronkers, 1992).

Pupils from ethnic minority groups in the Netherlands are much more likely to drop out than Dutch-born pupils (Roelandt et al, 1991), even compared to native pupils from 'poor' families. Thus, the dropout rate without qualifications for pupils of Moroccan origin is almost 15%, and for pupils of Turkish origin almost 7%. There is, however, a large overlap between lower socioeconomic status and belonging to an ethnic minority. Comparing immigrant and native pupils from the same social background, the differences in dropout rates are smaller, but a significant difference remains between the two groups (De Wit and Dekkers, 1996, p 37). In addition to socioeconomic status, other factors have an influence on the relatively low school success of immigrant children: language problems, which result in more negative school experiences, discrimination, age differences, uncertainty about staying in the country, and lack of social participation (Voncken and Babeliowsky, 1994). The dropout rate is highest in the four largest cities: Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht. This may partially reflect the concentration of ethnic minority groups in these areas (Voncken and Babeliowsky, 1994).

In spite of the introduction of free second-level education in 1967 and a general increase in educational attainment among Irish school leavers since the late 1970s, social class differences in educational outcomes are still apparent (see Breen and Whelan, 1996). Second-level completion rates are particularly high among the professional groups, with the vast majority of these young people staying on to the end of upper second-level education (the Leaving Certificate). Conversely, rates of early leaving are highest among the manual (especially unskilled manual) groups; among the 1994 cohort, 8% of young people from unskilled manual backgrounds left school without sitting any formal exam, while this was the case for fewer than 1% of those from higher professional backgrounds (ESRI Annual School Leavers' Survey).

In addition to occupational status, the employment status of parents is significantly associated with patterns of school leaving in Ireland. Young people tend to leave school earlier where there is no adult in the household in paid employment. Another dimension of socioeconomic background – parental education – is also associated with educational outcomes. Young people are much more likely to leave school where their father or mother had themselves been early school leavers. In addition, early leavers tend to come from larger families; those who leave school without sitting any formal exam have an average of 4.9

siblings, compared with 3.7 for those who complete upper second-level education (ESRI Follow-Up Survey of 1985/6 School Leavers).

The pattern of socioeconomic inequalities in educational participation is also evident in relation to the third-level sector. Those whose parents are unemployed are significantly underrepresented among entrants to higher education, as are those from semi-skilled or unskilled manual backgrounds (Clancy, 1995). It is estimated that in 1992, 89% of those from higher professional backgrounds went on to full-time higher education, compared with 13% of those from unskilled manual backgrounds. Furthermore, the more prestigious the sector and field of study, the greater the social inequality in participation levels (Clancy, 1995).

Data on the Scottish context indicate that young people are more likely to stay on in school when their father is in full-time employment or retired. A similar pattern is evident in relation to mothers' employment status, with lower staying-on rates among the children of unemployed mothers (SOEID, 1996b). In addition, children from larger families are more likely to leave school before the completion of second-level education. Differences in post-compulsory and third-level participation are evident between social class groupings; those from professional backgrounds are more than twice as likely as those from semi-skilled or unskilled manual backgrounds to stay on in post-compulsory education (75% versus less than 35% – Paterson, 1992). However, there is some evidence that these class differentials have narrowed somewhat over time (Paterson, 1997a; 1997b).

Entitlement to free school meals has been a frequently employed measure of disadvantage within the Scottish educational system. Analyses indicate that absenteeism and exclusion rates are higher in the more disadvantaged local authorities (that is, those with a higher proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals). A lower level of third-level participation is also evident in the more deprived urban areas considered Priority Partnership Areas (HMI, 1996).

School dropout in Belgium (Flanders) can be defined in the following ways. First, there are students who leave school before the end of a cycle (lower secondary or upper secondary) but who may return to another school or educational institution after a period of time. Students from single-parent families and those living in institutions show the highest probability of this type of dropout; children from non-Belgian families and with inactive fathers are also overrepresented in this group (Douterlungne, 1994). Second, there is a group of young people who leave school without any qualification. In Flanders, 3.6% of school

leavers (aged 18-25) have no degree beyond primary education, and another 16.4% have just finished lower secondary education. The corresponding figures for the French-speaking community of Belgium (7.2% and 27.2% respectively) are even more dramatic.<sup>3</sup> The third definition refers to the group of 'illegal' dropouts who leave before the official school leaving age. Little is known about this group, almost by definition. Their number is estimated between 0.9% and 3% (Van de Velde et al, 1996a) of the reference population. Boys form the vast majority of these dropouts. According to a 'guesstimate' made by Van Calster (1991), their number amounts to over 20% among children of immigrants; but youngsters from poor families – and particularly travellers' children – are also said to be at high risk of dropout.

Nicaise (1999) has found that, before the school leaving age was raised to 18, participation in upper secondary education in Belgium was significantly influenced by fathers' educational level, parents' employment status, and the cost of education,<sup>4</sup> although other background factors, such as income level and family situation, had no significant direct effects. In contrast, participation in higher education is significantly related to family income, family size, and higher education among parents.

The lack of detailed information on the composition of school leavers in Spain by social class, regional origin and school type is a reflection of the generic and diffuse nature of recent equal opportunity policies. Such policies have been more concerned with improving the general level of educational attainment than with assessing socioeconomic variation in this area. Data from 1981 indicate that the children of white-collar professionals were twice as likely as working-class children to be in school at 16 years of age (Carabaña, 1993). Moreover, the gap between the two classes widened as they climbed the educational ladder; the former were three times as likely to reach the upper secondary level, and six times as likely to go to university, as the latter (see also Justel and Martinez Lazero, 1981). The period since 1981 has seen a process of democratisation in access to education. However, it is difficult to assess the extent to which educational inequality has changed over this period.

One of the few existing studies was conducted by Fundación Encuentro. The social class structure of secondary school students hardly varied between 1981 and 1991, although pupils from working-class families constituted the largest group as well as the one with the fastest growth rate. Nor has the social class composition of university students altered very much. Thus, it appears that increased opportunities have been distributed in a uniform fashion, thereby maintaining the initial

unequal structure that existed in 1981. Working-class children have stayed on at secondary school for longer, but a large number of them do not continue their education. At third-level, participation is strongly influenced by the educational level of parents, and by family income (Mora, 1996).

Patterns of school leaving also differ across the various regions (Merino and Planas, 1996). The economically more backward regions are among the least egalitarian, with a higher than average proportion of pupils leaving school without qualifications, and lower than average percentages completing secondary school and going on to university. The most egalitarian, with the highest rates of school completion, are the northern and the Madrid regions (Martinez et al, 1993).

In the Portuguese context, there are significant regional differences in the proportion of young people leaving school at an early stage, with the lowest rates of school enrolment in the north and centre of the country. This pattern may be linked to the 'pull' away from school provided by employment growth in these regions. However, in the longer term, these young people are likely to be particularly vulnerable to the effects of economic restructuring due to their lack of formal qualifications. School enrolment rates are particularly low in areas of the country with high levels of poverty (Ferrão and das Neves, 1992). In addition, pupils from an ethnic/cultural minority group are more likely to drop out of school.

### ***Grade retention***

In some educational systems, grade retention, or 'repeating' one or more years within school, is taken as an indicator of educational underperformance. In other systems, such as Spain, grade retention is seen as a means of promoting educational success. However, the implications of repeating will differ significantly for different social class groups, and between the poor and the non-poor. The Belgian, Dutch and Spanish systems are ones in which grade retention is commonly used. In the Irish and Scottish cases, pupils are permitted to repeat years only in very exceptional circumstances, apart from the final year of school. In the latter cases, therefore, other measures of underperformance, such as exam results, are of greater importance.

Data on pupils in the first year of primary education in Flanders indicate that rates of repeating vary according to the socioeconomic background of the family. The main finding to emerge is the demarcation line between children from the lowest classes (with an economically

inactive father, or where parents have no qualifications, or are in the very lowest income category) and the rest of the population. Comparing students who have repeated at least one year in lower secondary education with others, the pattern is very similar to that found at primary level. Children from low-income families, with unemployed fathers or mothers who have not finished primary school, show particularly high rates of repeating at lower secondary level (Nicaise, 1999). If one could identify children from poor households separately, the contrast would no doubt be much sharper. Two small samples of children from Belgian families living in persistent poverty illustrate this strikingly: 64% of pupils in primary and secondary schools had resat at least one year, while 30% had resat two or more years (Nicaise, 1999).

A relatively high proportion of students repeat at least one year in the Spanish educational system, although the proportion has fallen somewhat between 1984 and 1994. At primary level, almost one-third of pupils repeat one year, with a further 11% repeating two years. At lower secondary level, 15.5% of all 11-year-olds and 26% of all 13-year-olds have repeated at least one year. The latest available data (for 1994) show that 43% of those still in school at the age of 16 have repeated at least one year of school. Unfortunately, no information is available on the social background of pupils who repeat school years in Spain.

In the Portuguese context, pupils from ethnic/cultural minority groups are more likely to repeat years than others. However, no information on the pattern as it relates to social class or poverty level is available.

### *Academic performance*

Due to the absence of national examinations at primary level, little systematic information is available on the impact of socioeconomic background on pupil performance within primary schools in Ireland. However, survey data have indicated that parental unemployment, social class, and living in a disadvantaged area have significant effects on literacy levels and on performance in ability tests (Kellaghan and Brugha, 1972; Fontes and Kellaghan, 1977). Performance in nationally standardised examinations (the Junior and Leaving Certificates) is significantly related to socioeconomic background. Underperformance in these examinations is more evident among pupils from working-class backgrounds, those with parents who are unemployed, those whose parents have lower levels of education, and those who come from larger families. In addition, the social class mix of the school attended has an

effect on pupil performance over and above that of the pupil's individual social background. That is, pupils tend to underachieve when they attend schools with a higher proportion of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. Over half of the variation in exam performance between schools is explained by socioeconomic variables; that is, most of the difference between schools in the average exam performance of their pupils is due to pupil composition factors. While socioeconomic factors have a significant effect on the variation in performance among pupils within schools, it should be noted that there is still a relatively high degree of variation in exam grades obtained when background is controlled for (Smyth, 1999).

Young people in Scotland achieve better grades in the Standard and Higher exams when their father is in paid employment or retired, a pattern that is also evident when mothers' employment status is considered; 21% of school leavers with unemployed fathers obtain no qualifications, compared with only 5% of those with employed or retired fathers (SOEID, 1996a). In addition, children from larger families are found to achieve fewer qualifications than other children; 17% of young people with four or more siblings obtain no qualifications, compared with a mere 3% of only children. Aggregate analyses indicate that exam grades are lower in areas with more disadvantaged pupils (Scottish Office, 1997b). A pattern of pupil underperformance is also evident from data on schools in deprived urban areas (HMI, 1996). Other research has indicated that neighbourhood deprivation is negatively associated with pupil performance, even when pupil ability, family background and schooling characteristics are controlled (Garner and Raudenbush, 1991). There are indications that educational underperformance among children in care is particularly marked, although little research has been carried out on this issue in Scotland.

In the Belgian context, secondary school entry test scores in Dutch and mathematics are found to be significantly related to socioeconomic background (Bollens et al, 1998). Labour market status, educational level and parental income explain 25% of the variance in pupil test scores. In addition, a contextual effect is apparent, with lower test scores found among pupils in schools with a high proportion of low-income pupils. It can be concluded from these results that socioeconomic background has a very strong influence on educational performance in Flanders.

Lack of qualifications has a formal policy definition in the Netherlands. Since the early 1990s, a target level has been set in which every young person should successfully complete a short (two year) vocational training

course. This minimum level is termed the 'starting qualification'. Under this scheme, any pupil who finishes their education without a starting qualification, even if they have obtained a VBO or MAVO qualification, is considered an 'early educational leaver'. According to this definition, around 98,000 young people, or 43% of all school leavers, leave school without a starting qualification each year (Hövels et al, 1996). As indicated above, leaving school without starting qualifications is more prevalent among young people whose parents have a low level of education, are engaged in manual work, or are not currently employed. Within schools, academic performance is significantly related to social class, language use at home, family size and birth order (Van Eyken, 1988; Dronkers and Kerkhoff, 1990). Children from poor families are found to have lower school performance, a pattern that is partially attributable to the greater incidence of health problems in this group. Furthermore, the social composition of both school and neighbourhood represent important influences on educational achievement (Dronkers and Schijf, 1984; Meijnen, 1987).

The Spanish educational system has relatively high rates of educational failure. In 1993, 84% of pupils obtained the primary school leaving certificate, although universal completion of primary schooling is only a recent phenomenon. Within primary school, a substantial minority (28%) of students fail their exams. At secondary level, 57% of 17-year-olds managed to successfully complete BUP (secondary pre-university level) in 1994, while 68% of all 18-year-olds successfully completed COU (one-year upper secondary level). Again, the failure rate is relatively high within the secondary system; only 42% of pupils enrolled in BUP first and second years (15- to 16-year-olds) passed their end-of-year examinations on first sitting, while this was the case for only 53% of COU students. A lower proportion of school leavers obtain vocational qualifications (FP-1 and FP-2) with a graduation rate of 52% for FP-1 and 38% for FP-2 students. Unfortunately, no information is available on the socioeconomic characteristics of pupils who experience educational failure, although young women appear to attain higher qualifications than young men.

Research in Portugal indicates a relatively high degree of educational failure in basic education. Rates of failure vary significantly by socioeconomic background, with 45% of those with unemployed fathers failing the first phase of the first cycle, compared with only 7% of children of directors/managers. Other research indicates lower educational

performance among working-class pupils in relation to science subjects (Morais et al, 1992; Domingos, 1989).

Socioeconomic background can continue to have a significant effect on the possession of basic skills, including literacy, even well into adulthood. Four of the study countries – Belgium (Flanders), the Netherlands, Ireland and the United Kingdom (including Scotland) – participated in a recent cross-national survey of adult literacy levels (OECD, 1997a). It was found that differences in fathers' educational background have an impact on literacy levels among adults, even controlling for their level of education. An earlier survey by the International Educational Association had shown that illiteracy persisted even among 14-year-old students. The socioeconomic status of those with the lowest literacy scores was considerably below the population average (IEA, 1991).

### *Type of education*

While type of education per se does not reflect educational disadvantage, such disadvantage may result where different educational routes have different statuses and varying implications for subsequent labour market exclusion.

In the Belgian context, first-year pupils in the 'B' (pre-vocational) stream tend to come disproportionately from lone parent families, have poorly educated parents, and have fathers belonging to the category of unskilled or semi-skilled manual workers (Van de Velde et al, 1996a). In the third year, social background variables continue to have a significant impact on educational track, even after prior academic ability is controlled for. In addition, children of working-class and poor families are extremely overrepresented among pupils in special education: roughly half the children from persistently poor families spend part of their youth in an institution (Nicaise and De Wilde, 1995). These institutions are often linked to a particular school for special education, where the children are then enrolled more or less automatically. Even excluding special medical educational establishments, around 40% of young people in Flemish special youth care institutions are placed in special education (Hellinckx and De Munter, 1990). Looking at the same phenomenon from a different angle, Goffinet and Van Damme (1990) found that 77% of the pupils in special education are children of working-class families and marginal workers.

Data from the Scottish context indicate the overrepresentation of children from low-income families among those in special education.

In 1996, over two thirds of those in special education were entitled to free school meals (an indicator of low income) compared with one-fifth of those in mainstream schools (Scottish Office, 1996d).

The Dutch educational system is highly differentiated into academic and (various types of) vocational routes. Immigrant pupils are greatly overrepresented in lower level vocational programmes such as IVBO and, to a lesser extent, VBO. Newcomers in particular (mostly refugees) mainly enter education at the IVBO level, where special programmes have been developed for the initial reception of these children into the Dutch education system. Pupils from lower socioeconomic environments are overrepresented in both school types.

In contrast, the Irish system is relatively general in orientation. At second-level, however, there are some differences in social composition by school type, with working-class and lower-ability pupils disproportionately concentrated in vocational schools, while secondary (more academic) schools tend to 'cream off' middle-class and higher-ability pupils (Hannan et al, 1996b).

No data are available on variations in type of education by social background within the Spanish and Portuguese educational systems.

## **The implications of educational disadvantage**

The previous sections of this chapter confirmed the link between social background (and poverty in particular) on the one hand, and educational opportunities on the other. However, the real tragedy is that the broken educational career of underprivileged children is, in turn, translated into poverty in the next generation. Table 1.1 shows that the risk of poverty in families where the head of the household is poorly educated is many times that of households with a better educated head. Poverty here is measured in terms of income per consumption unit, where the poverty line is defined as 50% of the average disposable income in each country.

The causal link between level of education and risk of poverty takes in various interim factors: the poorly educated are particularly at risk of being unemployed (see Figure 1.1). If they are in employment, they earn considerably less and have less stable statuses (part-time, temporary, and so on). A similar pattern is observed if the level of training is measured in terms of literacy rather than qualifications.

A poor educational career has direct consequences beyond the labour market position of the individual as an adult. The International Adult Literacy Survey (OECD, 1997a) also contains a series of references to

**Table 1.1: Poverty and education of household head in the six study countries**

	PI	FP		PI	FP
<i>Spain</i>			<i>Belgium</i>		
None	47.7	10.8	No education/unknown	26.5	3.9
Less than primary	31.1	43.6	Primary	12.2	50.6
Primary	14.0	37.2	Lower secondary	6.0	26.0
Lower secondary	9.2	4.7	Upper secondary	3.8	13.3
Upper secondary	4.5	2.2	University	2.6	3.1
University or equivalent	5.1	1.1	Higher	1.7	3.0
Higher non-university	1.6	0.3			
<i>Portugal</i>			<i>The Netherlands</i>		
None	61.9	36.8	Primary	19.5	45.9
Less than primary	46.1	11.6	Lower secondary	5.3	16.3
Primary	21.4	48.1	Upper secondary	4.9	30.4
Lower secondary	7.7	2.4	Upper technical/vocational	1.6	5.1
Upper secondary	4.4	0.7	University or equivalent	1.4	1.6
Lower technical/vocational	1.6	0.1	Not specified	24.3	0.7
Upper technical/vocational	0.0	0.0			
University or equivalent	2.2	0.3	<i>United Kingdom</i>		
			Unknown or in education	24.0	1.3
			Education ended before age 14	45.1	6.7
			Education ended at age 14	29.1	46.9
<i>Ireland</i>			Education ended at age 15	15.5	21.6
Still receiving education	10.9	0.4	Education ended at age 16	12.8	16.5
Education ended at age 13	31.0	5.5	Education ended between		
Education ended between			17 and 20	6.7	5.9
13 and 18	17.7	93.0	Education ended at age 21 or over	2.1	1.1
Education ended after age 18	1.7	1.1			

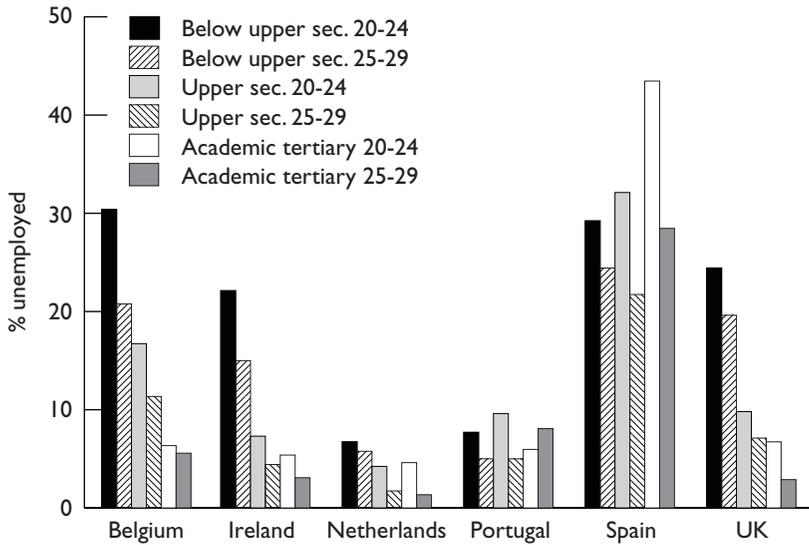
PI =poverty incidence ratio (% poor within the subpopulation); FP = fraction of the poverty population (% of poverty population in given subgroup). See Chapter 1 for a discussion of these ratios.

Source: Hagenaars et al 1994, tables A.2.1. The poverty line used is 50% of the average equivalent expenditure, using modified OECD equivalence scales

literature, together with new data on the additional effects of education on social inclusion or exclusion. For example, people with a better level of literacy enjoy markedly better health because they are better informed of risks and can make more effective use of healthcare, and because their living environment exposes them to fewer dangers. Furthermore, better educated citizens are also less likely to display socially maladjusted or criminal behaviour.

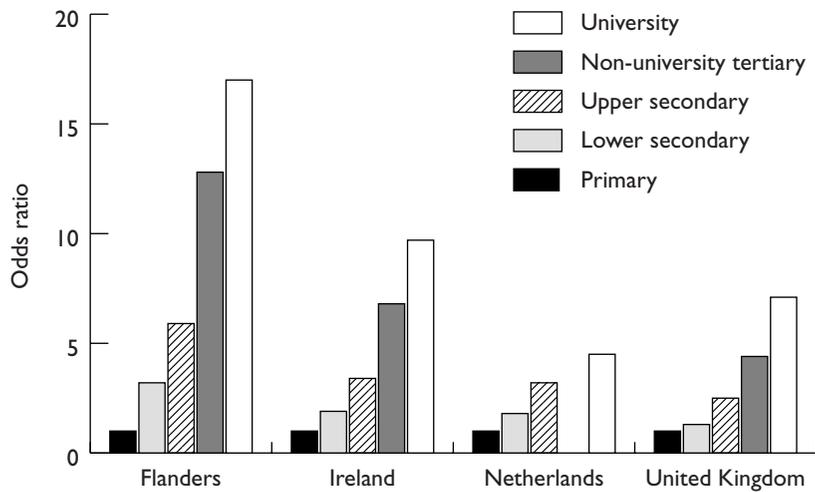
Finally, the highly educated also make better use of continuing education. Figure 1.2 reflects the ‘adjusted odds ratios’<sup>5</sup> of different

**Figure 1.1: Unemployment by level of education, 1998**



Source: OECD, *Education at a glance*, 2000

**Figure 1.2: Adjusted odds of participation in adult education in four study countries**



Source: OECD (1997a, p 95, 182)

educational categories as regards their participation in adult education. In Flanders, for example, university graduates participate 17 times more in adult education than people with just a primary school certificate. This may seem contradictory because they have a relatively lower need for this education. However, on the one hand, they see further education as more attractive as a result of their positive experience of school and, thanks to their prosperity, they can allow themselves a greater investment in human capital; on the other hand, the range of education available to adults is perhaps insufficiently suited to those with the lowest levels of education. However this may be, it is disconcerting to have to note that the exclusion of the socioeconomically weakest children at school results in an even greater wedge being driven between rich and poor in adulthood.

## **Conclusions**

A review of research in the study countries indicates that not enough is known about the particular educational experiences of the most economically or socially disadvantaged groups in society. However, available information does indicate the persistence of considerable socioeconomic inequalities in educational outcomes in the study countries. Casual information suggests that children from the poorest families are at great risk of failure and referral to special education from the very start of their school careers. In secondary education, they are faced with persistent illiteracy, high rates of grade retention, streaming towards the least profitable study fields, demotivation and early dropout.

Educational underachievement has significant consequences for subsequent life-chances, resulting in cumulative educational deficits in adulthood, lower earnings, higher unemployment, poorer health, and increased likelihood of deviant behaviour and dependency throughout life.

The importance of policy intervention to prevent or redress such educational inequalities is, therefore, particularly evident. However, different perceptions of the causes of educational inequality call for different sorts of solutions. Perspectives that emphasise the relative 'costs' associated with educational participation would suggest a focus on equalising opportunities more generally, perhaps through financial support to families and/or pupils. Conversely, perspectives that focus on the role of the school in reproducing social inequalities would appear to suggest a more radical rethinking of the educational system and the purposes of schooling. Educational policy is thus informed, implicitly

or explicitly, by particular perspectives on how inequalities in educational outcomes come about. A typology of educational strategies relating to social exclusion is presented in the next chapter. The following chapters of the book discuss some of the measures taken by different educational systems to address educational disadvantage.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Recent evidence indicates some tendency towards an equalisation of educational opportunity in Germany (Müller, 1996), albeit with a higher level of inequality than in Sweden or the Netherlands (Erikson and Jonsson, 1996). In addition, there is some evidence of a decline in inequality of educational outcomes in Scotland during the early 1980s (Gamoran, 1996; Paterson, 1997a).

<sup>2</sup> While the European Community Household Panel survey has facilitated the development of comparative research on poverty, it is less suitable for analysing educational outcomes among socially excluded children and young people; information about the current educational attainment of school-going children is not available, and no information about the social background of adults is recorded.

<sup>3</sup> Estimates from HIVA, based on the Socioeconomic Panel of the Centre for Social Policy (Antwerp).

<sup>4</sup> Direct and indirect cost; that is, including earnings forgone while studying.

<sup>5</sup> The odds have been corrected for differences in age and gender and expressed in relative terms, where the participation score for individuals with primary education is set equal to one.

