

Access and Social inclusion at school - DCU research findings

Thursday 13 September 2007



Minister for Education and Science, Mary Hanafin, TD speaking at the conference

Irish policies on access and social inclusion through education will be influenced by the research findings presented at a conference held at DCU today. The 'Accessing Education' conference was a joint Irish/US venture.

The conference was opened by Minister for Education and Science, Mary Hanafin, TD and was attended by over 100 delegates who work in the area of inclusion. Delegates were welcomed by President of DCU, Professor Ferdinand von Prondzynski and Charge d'Affaires at the US Embassy, Robert Faucher.

The aim of the conference was to examine ways of promoting social inclusion through education. Guest speakers from the US included Victoria Baldwin, High School Principal of Gonzalo Garza High School, Texas and Professor James Banks, Director of the Centre for Multicultural Education at the University of Washington.

Dr Carmel Mulcahy, Dr Charlotte Holland and Mr John Lalor of Dublin City University's School of Education Studies also presented the results of a EU-funded project 'Includ-ED'.

These preliminary findings of 'Include-ED' are part of a five-year project on educational reforms in the EU and it is the largest single research project undertaken in education throughout the European Community.

They showed that while schools reproduce social inequalities, they can also play a significant role in the prevention of exclusion. Consequently, it is necessary to identify those strategies and elements which contribute towards success at school for all children. The findings also indicate that on a positive note, social inequalities can also be turned around.

Dr Carmel Mulcahy, project leader and Head of Education Studies at Dublin City University, said, "While the research is based on the findings across 13 European states, it is clear that in some instances Ireland is leading the way in terms of the prevention of exclusion. Initiatives such as DEIS and also the extensive work conducted on interculturalism in Irish education can serve as examples of best practice for the rest of Europe. However, in terms of the recognition of cultural and religious diversity within our schools, major reforms need to be undertaken - in particular at primary level".

The report stresses the importance of creating schools in which all religions can freely and equally find their expression. Cultural and religious diversity within the school frameworks create benefits for pupils from cultural minorities and for all other members of the educational community. This diversity improves academic performance.

The participation of family members and the community in educational centres is fundamental in order for people to achieve success at school. The active involvement of the family and the community is directly linked with positive performance at school. Schools which try to increase this participation achieve this aim through dialogue and the principle of equality between professionals, families and participants from the community.

Linguistic diversity should be recognised, the report also finds. Schools should support native language recognition, and second languages should not be learnt at the expense of linguistic competence in the mother tongue. Schools should provide proficient tools in order to ensure adequate language acquisition by all.

Other findings centre around gender discrimination in schools, autonomy in schools and the exclusion of certain groups of pupils, and 'tracking' and 'streaming' which limit proficient achievement for all pupils.