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Beyond the Stereotype

Approaches to Educational (Under)Achievement
in the Controlled Sector in Northern Ireland

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Executive Summary

Numerous academic and policy reports over many years have highlighted the underachievement of some pupils within the Northern Ireland education system as a major, persistent problem (Gallagher and Smith, 2000; Sutherland and Purdy, 2006; Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, 2017; ETI, 2018; Harris, Purdy, et al., 2021). Most recently, the *New Decade, New Approach* agreement (Smith and Coveney, 2020) and the Terms of Reference of the subsequently established Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement in Northern Ireland placed a specific emphasis on educational underachievement amongst Protestant working-class boys as a policy priority.

Beyond this narrow focus on Protestant working-class boys, we contend that there is a more complex reality to educational underachievement in Northern Ireland. Both the *Children and Young People's Strategy* and the Expert Panel Action Plan (*A Fair Start*) identify pupils with Free School Meal Entitlement (FSME), children and young people with special educational needs (SEN), care experienced children and young people, newcomer, traveller and Roma children and young people, and children and young people in custody as pupil groups requiring support and interventions. The Expert Panel also raised the issue of rural isolation representing an often-overlooked locus of disadvantage. The complex reality behind the high-level data available must therefore be better understood in order for communities, teaching professionals, and policy makers to more effectively respond to the issue.

This project sought to undertake focused research with Controlled school and community leaders, to better understand the complex challenges of educational achievement that go beyond the stereotyped image of failing working-class Protestant boys in uniquely inner-city contexts. To that end, the project did not target areas or schools of particularly acute deprivation (as many previous studies have done, e.g. the ILiAD study, Leitch et al., 2017), but rather sought a dialogue with a broad range of Controlled schools and the communities they serve, about the nature of educational (under)achievement and their approaches to improving it. In particular the objectives of the study were to: to explore understandings and experiences of educational achievement and underachievement in their broadest sense, including but not limited to attainment through testing/examinations; to nuance culturally stereotyped understandings of the links between educational underachievement and some Protestant communities; to determine the main barriers to educational achievement in the communities served by Controlled schools, and; to consider the challenges faced by school leaders in effectively addressing educational underachievement.

The study, carried out during the 2020-21 academic year, centred on a series of case studies across four different clusters spread across Northern Ireland. The initial sample was obtained by searching for clusters of co-educational Controlled schools, including one primary, one non-selective and one selective post-primary school within normal travelling distance of one another. This sample was refined by only retaining clusters located within an average SOA ranking between the 3rd and 8th decile according to the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure 2017 (NIMDM, 2017). The rationale for sampling school clusters within these SOA rankings was that one would expect to find a larger range of levels of academic achievement and socio-economic diversity than in areas of acute disadvantage or

comparative wealth. The study also deliberately avoided schools in inner-city Belfast and Derry/Londonderry where the ILiAD case studies had been located. This sample is therefore predominately of rural and town (rather than city) schools, in contrast to much of the research work to date on educational underachievement (Harris, Purdy, et al., 2021). Although a total of twelve schools initially agreed, the second period of Covid-19 school closures in early 2021 (when the project fieldwork was due to take place) eventually led to four schools withdrawing. This meant that the sample comprised eight Controlled schools across four areas: three primary schools, three non-selective post-primary schools and two grammar schools. For each school, three (online) focus group interviews were held: the first with the principal and members of the senior leadership team; the second with community representatives (often governors, parents, sports coaches, community leaders); and the third with pupils. In total, 25 senior teachers, 29 community leaders, and 42 pupils (from years 6, 11 and 13) were interviewed for this project, between January and June 2021. All interviews were carried out online.

The study's main findings are organised around three main themes:

1. **The diverse nature of educational underachievement:** the study highlighted that understandings of educational underachievement were very varied across schools and communities. In particular, post-primary pupils' understanding of educational achievement related largely (though not exclusively) to success in external assessment such as GCSE and A-level examinations, and in succeeding more than others in their peer group (e.g. coming highest in the class in English). This narrow focus contrasted with broader perspectives expressed by school and community leaders who placed greater value on a wider range of academic and non-academic skills and abilities, pupils' mental and physical health, self-confidence, happiness and willingness to learn. The school leaders in this study reported little or no differences between the achievement of pupils with or without FSME, which sounds a useful note of caution about overgeneralising when discussing the impact of FSME on educational underachievement in all contexts.

There were also particular educational challenges identified in rural communities which have not been reported extensively to date in previous studies. Many of the schools in this study were located in small towns but drew many of their pupils from surrounding rural areas and farming communities, and there were many reports suggesting that intergenerational educational disadvantage and lack of educational aspiration, so often associated with inner-city working-class contexts, were also features of many rural farming communities. This is a theme that to date has been largely overlooked in the discourse around educational underachievement and urgently requires further research and policy focus.

2. **The disconnect between curriculum and assessment:** the study also highlighted a wide disparity between the stated progressive skills-focused aims of the Northern Ireland curriculum, and the assessment-driven reality in schools where many primary school leaders spoke of being left to their own devices to buy costly standardised tests offered by private companies in the absence of DE-sponsored tests, further stretching their own already tight school budgets. This study lends support to existing calls for

DE to urgently commission CCEA to progress the development of diagnostic assessment tools for use in all schools, which would relieve budgetary pressures on schools, and provide consistency of data, the lack of which was sorely felt in the 2020-21 academic year following the postponement and eventual cancellation of the post-primary transfer tests. This might also remove the need for post-primary schools to test pupils on arrival in year 8, precisely because (as reported in this study) they cannot rely on the validity of the test scores shared with them by their feeder primary schools. For post-primary schools to require year 8 pupils to sit CAT tests on arrival in post-primary schools (often on their very first day) highlights another alarming failure of the current education system, and only serves to embed the impression among pupils that post-primary schooling is about tests and scores. What is urgently needed is a single, government-funded, standardised suite of tests providing consistent and reliable diagnostic data, which should be used to identify individual needs and support future learning.

- 3. The potential for partnership between schools, families and communities:** the study has also highlighted many instances of useful collaboration between schools, families and communities, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. It is clear that schools and families are often better connected now than ever before. Moving forward, schools should continue to reach out to families, and vice-versa, using a range of digital media (SMS, email, Apps such as SeeSaw, Youtube videos etc.), to see them as genuine “equal partners” (Warnock, 1978) in their pupils’ education, offering advice and training, listening to their perspectives, and further cementing those home-school linkages that were forged through adversity since March 2020.

This study has also clearly demonstrated the value of a place-based, context-specific approach to addressing educational underachievement in Northern Ireland, which thrives on effective, respectful, partnership between schools, families and communities. There were several innovative, context-specific examples of how that had taken place already, such as the development of links with local manufacturing companies, the involvement of the local Orange Order in funding additional support in English and maths for pupils (with additional classes held in the local Orange Hall), tutors offering GCSE support after band practice for young people involved in loyalist flute bands, active Parent Teacher Associations, committed school governors and strong links with local churches.

However, it was saddening to hear of the impact of inter-school competition between schools within the Controlled sector, which was effectively thwarting further collaboration between rival schools in some areas. This led to reports of schools holding back on further collaboration for fear of endangering enrolments and included the claim by one principal that “perhaps the person you work best with is not your local school, it is somewhere farther away”.

Finally, the findings of this study were very mixed in terms of church involvement, ranging from those who expressed scepticism and opposition to many others who valued church involvement in terms of providing governors, pastoral support, financial aid (through donations) and willing volunteers for homework clubs, mentoring

programmes etc. Church involvement could also lead to parents coming forward to access foodbanks and seek other forms of pastoral support, especially during the current pandemic.

1 Introduction

Numerous academic and policy reports over many years have highlighted the underachievement of some pupils within the Northern Ireland education system as a major, persistent problem (Gallagher and Smith, 2000; Sutherland and Purdy, 2006; Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, 2017; ETI, 2018; Harris, Purdy, *et al.*, 2021). Most recently, the *New Decade, New Approach* agreement (Smith and Coveney, 2020) and the final report and action plan (*A Fair Start*) of the subsequently established Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement in Northern Ireland (Purdy, Logue, *et al.*, 2021), specifically highlighted educational underachievement amongst working class Protestant boys as a policy priority.

The substantive *Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030* adopted by the NI Executive (DE, 2020) set as one of its key outcomes that “children and young people learn and achieve”. It reminds us that although the percentage of pupils in Northern Ireland achieving Level 2 (equivalent to five or more GCSEs at A*-C, including English and maths) has risen each year since 2008, this headline figure masks wide inequalities. Repeatedly, analysis of school-leavers' educational attainment has shown that on average girls perform better than boys, Catholics perform better than Protestants, and pupils without Free School Meal Entitlement (FSME) perform significantly better than those with FSME. As a consequence, a strong stereotype associates underachievement with working-class Protestant boys who are primarily educated in the Controlled sector¹.

Beyond this stereotype, produced by a blend of administrative datasets and public discourse, we contend that there is a more complex reality to educational underachievement in Northern Ireland. Both the *Children and Young People's Strategy* and the Expert Panel Action Plan (*A Fair Start*) identify pupils with FSME, children and young people with SEN, care experienced children and young people, newcomer, traveller and Roma children and young people, and children and young people in custody as pupil groups requiring support and interventions. The expert panel also raised the issue of rural isolation representing an often-overlooked locus of disadvantage. The complex reality behind the high-level data available must therefore be better understood in order for communities, teaching professionals, and policy makers to more effectively respond to the issue.

The Centre for Shared Education's ILiAD study (Leitch, Hughes, *et al.*, 2017) identified higher levels of GCSE attainment in three predominantly Catholic wards compared with three predominantly Protestant wards (out of a total of seven wards surveyed), and noted differentials associated with the relative value placed on education; perceived levels of attachment or detachment of schools; varying levels of community cohesion; and variances in school absenteeism rates. The report found that at school level (particularly in Controlled schools), low expectations of pupils on the part of some teachers was reflected by some parents' perception of schools and teachers as “detached” and “middle class”, pointing to social division caused to an extent by cultural stereotyping.

¹ It is acknowledged that the Controlled sector is diverse and inclusive sector. Recent figures show that 146,138 pupils attend Controlled schools in Northern Ireland, of whom 61% are Protestant, 10% are Catholic and 29% are 'other' www.csscni.org.uk/about-us/controlled-education-sector.

This division between schools and the communities they serve appears to be a long-running problem; the *A Call to Action* report to the Northern Ireland Assembly (Purvis, 2011) made the case for greater involvement in education and schools by parents and local communities in order to tackle underachievement alongside a Child Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland, greater investment in early years education, and further focused research.

The ILiAD study (Leitch, Hughes, *et al.*, 2017) also pointed to school leadership as a key area in which underachievement is conceptualised and remedial policies developed. The importance of school leadership and effective community partnership in raising attainment has been underlined in several studies in Great Britain over the past decade, particularly in evaluating the ‘London effect’ (Baars, Bernardes, *et al.*, 2014; Demie and Mclean, 2015). In a comprehensive review of ‘what works’ in addressing educational underachievement in England, Demie (2019) also prioritises strong and effective school leadership and investment in developing leadership capacity as vital elements. However, what makes school leadership and community partnership effective in one context may not be the same for another - what is important is the development and implementation of a strategic and coherent approach to improving educational outcomes. The Expert Panel report (*A Fair Start*) has also made a number of important costed actions in relation to supporting the professional learning and wellbeing of school leadership. In particular, the panel proposed the development of new professional qualifications for leadership to replace and enhance the former Professional Qualification for Headship (PQH), and with particular reference to underachievement, the panel proposed a co-designed model of sharing effective practice which included both a support and a challenge function:

As part of the Learning Leaders Strategy’s commitment to building leadership capacity at all levels, DE, EA and ETI should act swiftly to develop a collaborative co-designed model with school principals to share effective practice on tackling educational underachievement, and to challenge and support school leaders to identify and effectively intervene to address underachievement, providing long term guidance and pastoral care to school leaders. (Purdy, Logue, *et al.*, 2021:70)

The most recent Chief Inspector’s Report (ETI, 2018) stated that “too many under-achieve, struggle to learn in under-performing schools and organisations, and find educational and vocational routes needlessly blocked by decisions about curriculum and assessment made by schools and governors who prioritise the interests of their school or organisation over the needs of learners” (p12). Decision-making and leadership in schools are therefore understood to be central to removing barriers to achievement, particularly by aligning the interests of the school or organisation with improving outcomes for all pupils, including those that struggle most with schooling.

This project sought to undertake focused research with Controlled school and community leaders, to better understand the complex challenges of educational achievement that go beyond the stereotyped image of failing working-class Protestant boys in uniquely inner-city contexts. To that end, the project did not target areas or schools of particularly acute deprivation (as the ILiAD study did), but rather sought a dialogue with a broad range of Controlled schools and the communities they serve, about the nature of educational (under)achievement and their approaches to improving it.

1.1 Definitions of underachievement

The term 'educational underachievement' is common in policy and academic discourse relating to education in Northern Ireland and beyond, despite the ambiguity created by its wide variety of potential meanings. Gorard and Smith (2004) called educational underachievement "an imperfect descriptor", arguing that in the majority of cases it merely means 'low attainment', but implies that under different circumstances pupils who 'underachieve' could obtain better outcomes in the assessment in question.

The recent Expert Panel Action Plan (*A Fair Start*) adopted the definition articulated by UK government, where underachievement "means that attainment is low, and lower than other comparison groups" (House of Commons Education Committee (2014), cited in Purdy, Logue, *et al.*, 2021:ii). Such an understanding of underachievement is implicitly group-based rather than focused on the individual pupil: it considers the relative performance of groups of pupils (e.g. gender attainment gap), rather than the differences between actual and predicted individual attainment (examination grades, typically). Whilst the choice to focus on the former in government is reasonable, as the tools and methods for identifying underachievement at this level must be high-level, statistical and measurable, it is the latter that is of most relevance to individual schools and local communities, and which each of us finds relatable to our own contexts and experiences of education. This is important, because we are only able to make sense of high-level, statistically underpinned policies and therefore implement interventions within schools and communities through the lens of our contextual understandings of what underachievement means. It is a term that jumps scales and temporalities, whilst constantly evoking comparison relative to some other 'achievement.'

This purely qualitative research aims to reach a greater understanding of what underachievement is understood to represent in the practical context of a sample of Controlled schools in 2021. It therefore recognises and accepts a range of definitions of underachievement, including different measures, comparisons and examples to build up an account of how underachievement is understood in context, beyond the stereotype of inner-city working-class Protestant boys.

2 Methodology

2.1 Aim

The project aimed to explore the experiences and approaches of Controlled schools and their communities to educational achievement and underachievement, with a particular focus on leadership, in order to make recommendations to key policy makers and stakeholders. In order to achieve this, we undertook a series of case studies with participant schools across Northern Ireland, using group interviews with a sample of pupils, community leaders and school leadership to obtain a cross-sectional sample of qualitative data.

2.2 Sample

The initial sample was obtained by searching for clusters of co-educational Controlled schools, including one primary, one non-selective and one selective post-primary school within normal travelling distance of one another (such that an individual pupil might reasonably attend any of the three in the course of their school career). This sample was refined by only retaining clusters located within an average SOA ranking between the 3rd and 8th decile according to the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure 2017 (NIMDM, 2017). The rationale for sampling school clusters within these SOA rankings was that one would expect to find a larger range of levels of academic achievement and socio-economic diversity than in areas of acute disadvantage or comparative wealth.

This procedure identified four clusters dispersed across Northern Ireland, but falling outside inner-city Belfast and Derry/Londonderry, where the ILiAD case studies had been located. This sample is therefore predominately of rural and town (rather than city) schools, in contrast to much of the research work to date on educational underachievement (Harris, Purdy, *et al.*, 2021). With the assistance of Controlled School Support Council (CSSC) school support officers, the research team contacted the principals of schools in these clusters to obtain their agreement to participate. Although all twelve initially agreed, the second period of Covid-19 school closures in early 2021 when the project fieldwork was due to take place eventually led to four schools withdrawing. In order to protect the anonymity of the schools and individuals involved in the study, we do not identify the specific location of these clusters, but table 1 below provides some information on regional characteristics and the schools involved in the project.

Table 1: Study School Characteristics

Locality	School Type	Average SOA Decile (10 th =most deprived)	SOA geographical characteristics
Area 1	Non-selective post-primary	4 th	Suburban

Locality	School Type	Average SOA Decile (10 th =most deprived)	SOA geographical characteristics
Area 2	Primary	6th	Rural
	Non-selective post-primary		Rural
	Grammar		Town
Area 3	Primary	7 th	Town
Area 4	Primary	8th	Town
	Non-selective post-primary		Town
	Grammar		Town

Community leaders were identified and recruited by school principals. As such, each community group interview included a different spread of community representatives, reflecting the contexts of each participating school. Pupils – Year 6 for primary schools, year 11 for non-selective post-primary schools, and year 13 for grammar schools – were recruited by principals or a member of their team. The project team requested a mixed-ability group, but this was not measured or verified.

By engaging the views of school leaders, teachers, pupils and community representatives from a small but diverse sample of Controlled schools, this report aims to provide a more nuanced account of the school-community attitudes and relationships that underpin educational outcomes.

2.3 Data collection

A purely qualitative methodological approach was adopted, in order to focus on defining and understanding, rather than measuring and evaluating, educational underachievement in the context of participating school communities. A series of group interviews were conducted with each of the participating schools; with school leadership, community leaders, and pupils. These interviews were originally scheduled to take place during a school visit by the research team, but restrictions associated with the Covid-19 pandemic in the first half of 2021 led to data collection being postponed and eventually taking place using Zoom calls. In total, 25 senior teachers, 29 community leaders, and 42 pupils (from years 6, 11 and 13) were interviewed for this project, between January and June 2021.

Table 2 summarises the characteristics of participants in each group interview. Interview participants were selected and recruited by the school, as this was the most practical means of recruiting participants. All participants gave prior informed consent before taking part in the research.

Table 2: Characteristics of group interview participants

Locality	School Type	Interview	Participants	
Area 1	Non-selective post-primary	SLT	Principal	Pastoral Lead
			Vice-Principal	Curricular Lead
		Community	Governor	Governor (EA)
			Artist/Researcher	TA/Local Resident
		Pupil	6 Y11 pupils, mixed gender, mixed ability	
Area 2	Primary	SLT	Principal	SENCO
		Community	BoG Chair	PTA (parent)
			Governor	
		Pupil	6 P6 pupils, mixed gender, mixed ability	
	Non-selective post-primary	SLT	Principal	Vice-Principal
			Curricular Lead	
		Community	Governor	Church minister
	Pupil	6 Y11 pupils, mixed gender, mixed ability		
	Grammar	SLT	Principal	Pastoral Lead
			Curricular Lead	
		Community	BoG Chair	PTA (parent)
			Governor	BoG Safeguarding
			Sports Coach	Music Teacher
Pupil	6 Y13 pupils, mixed gender			
Area 3	Primary	SLT	Principal	Literacy Coordinator
			SENCO	Numeracy Coordinator
		Community	Governor	Governor (EA)
			Local Councillor	Church minister
		Pupil	5 P6 pupils, mixed gender, mixed ability	
Area 4	Primary	SLT	Principal	Literacy Coordinator
			SENCO	Numeracy Coordinator
		Community	PTA (teacher)	Family Centre
			Sports Coach	Governor
	Pupil	4 P6 pupils, mixed gender, mixed ability		
	Non-selective post-primary	SLT	Principal	Pastoral Lead
			Curricular Lead	
		Community	Local Councillor	Community Worker
	Businessperson			
Pupil	6 Y11 pupils, mixed gender, mixed ability			
Grammar	SLT	Principal	Pastoral Lead	

Locality	School Type	Interview	Participants	
		Community	Governor	PTA (parent)
			Local charity	
		Pupil	3 Y13 pupils, mixed gender	

Group interviews were semi-structured, following a broadly similar set of questions tailored slightly to each group. The semi-structured interview was used to encourage discussion and debate between interviewees, which would generate consensus or highlight differences throughout the course of the interview (Rubin and Rubin, 2011). The online format however introduced a series of complications to the interview format. Technology availability and set-up was variable, meaning that some group interviews were conducted with individuals at their own devices (e.g. community leaders' interviews) and others involved individuals sharing devices (e.g. pupils' and some of the school leadership interviews). Each set-up had its advantages and disadvantages: whilst having multiple interviewees in one room suited the group interview approach well and encouraged discussion and debate between interviewees, it often did not suit the technology and led to difficulties communicating with the researcher and poor-quality recording. Attempts to maintain social distancing and class bubbles exacerbated this problem. Future data collection, if being undertaken using video calls, would be better undertaken with each individual using their own device if possible, with the understanding that some of the advantages of being in the same room for group interviews are lost.

All group interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, before being coded using MaxQDA software. Qualitative data analysis was undertaken through two rounds of open coding (Charmaz, 2006). This kind of coding is an act of interpretation that is both subjective and interactive, and is thus shaped by numerous individual and wider social influences. The inductive nature of open coding allows for greater emphasis on the variety of themes actually discussed by the interviewees – whether prompted or not – than a version of deductive coding that begins with a set of pre-defined codes associated with the original research objectives (Cresswell, 2003). This approach was important for this project's aim to go 'beyond the stereotype' in discerning experiences and approaches to underachievement that nuance or contradict normative categories. As a result, the findings extend beyond the original stated objectives, outlined below.

2.4 Objectives

- **To explore** understandings and experiences of educational achievement and underachievement in their broadest sense, including but not limited to attainment through testing/examinations.
- **To nuance** culturally stereotyped understandings of the links between educational underachievement and some Protestant communities.
- **To determine** the main barriers to educational achievement in the communities served by Controlled schools.
- **To consider** the challenges faced by school leaders in effectively addressing educational underachievement.

3 Findings

The analysis below does not cover the entirety of what was discussed in the group interviews, but nonetheless seeks to reflect the wide-ranging and diverse nature of the data. Each subsection gathers together pupil, school and community leader views on a range of topics of common interest that arose in the data. Quotations are given in italics, preceded by an individual anonymous code identifying the area, school, group interview, and role (pupils are simply given a number in order of citation) – for example, the words of the principal of the non-selective post-primary in area 4, spoken during the SLT interview, would be:

4SecSLTPrincipal “being a teacher, you should be able to identify underachievement within your own class”

3.1 Understandings of underachievement

To discern pupils’ understandings of underachievement, we began by asking them about the purpose of schooling and what they hoped their education would bring them in future. Their responses were dominated by a common discourse that centred on exam grades and, subsequently, employment and/or university. This discourse was not significantly different between pupils of different stages, schools, or regions:

4SecPup1 “[with] good results, I can hopefully get a good job.”

3PrimPup1 “[The point of school is to] learn and get a good job”

2GramPup1 “I want good enough grades that will get me into university [...] I’m not really sure what path exactly I want to go down yet. I want to get enough grades that doesn’t close too many doors. So I have like, options.”

These examples are typical of our dataset, and underline a widely held emphasis on this extrinsic value of education. Only rarely did a pupil articulate intrinsic values of education, such as enjoying learning, being fascinated by new knowledge, or expressing thoughts and feelings – and of these rare examples, all were primary pupils. Post-primary pupils, understandably given their proximity to external assessment/examinations, universally focused on getting ‘good’ grades. At times, what ‘good’ meant was made slightly more explicit:

2SecPup1 “Then hopefully get good enough grades that you can go and get like a well-paid job”

4SecPup2 “To get into university you need to get Cs in your Sciences, Maths and English.”

‘Achievement’, for the pupils participating in the research, could therefore be argued to involve the attainment of examination grades that would allow them to progress to higher education and/or a well-paid job. The focus on grades was also strong in pupils’ responses to the request to share the achievements they were most proud of at school. These were frequently related to grades, often including having placed highly in the class rankings:

1SecPup1 "[My proudest achievement was] on prize day I got like the highest in the year 10 for grades"

2SecPup1 "I am sort of proud of like, you know, getting a good enough score to be second [in the class]. And like, I can't say, I've experienced that many times."

4GramPup1 "this year for our AS I got the highest in our English class, and it's really a lot."

Achievement was therefore clearly linked in the minds of the pupil participants not only to obtaining a successful 'passing' grade, but in doing better than their peers. Competition, whether actively encouraged or not within the school environment, appears to play a key role in pupils' understandings and feelings of achievement, as further evidenced by the many pupils who reported sporting feats alongside the academic:

2SecPup1 "[I'm proud of] the time the cross-country team, us girls, all went to the Ulster finals"

Inter-pupil competition was only specifically discussed by one school leader in the course of our study, and was cast in a positive light:

2GramSLTPincipal "I think there's a healthy competitiveness within the school, not just academically, but also in extra and co-curricular. Kids want to do well. And they want to do well against their peers in a nice way."

The desire to be the first among peers was encapsulated well within a discussion with among the pupil participants in one of the grammar schools in particular (4Gram), all three of whom wanted to become senior prefect, head boy or head girl:

4SecPup3 "I'd like to be a prefect, to prove that I've achieved so much in this school that they'd trust me to be one."

4GramPup1 "[Being head boy would mean] representing your school as well, leaving a mark before you go and contributing back to the school."

4GramPup2 "Yeah, like when you were in like [lower school] you'd look up to the head girl and you'd be like that would be cool to be like, just speaking up, like at events and stuff in the school and everything, like representing the school. I think that would be good"

4GramPup3 "you can tell who the prefects were [...] speaking at assemblies and being so confident and everything, and I just think it'd be really nice to, like, emulate that"

For these pupils, achievement at school was bound up in being looked up to, listened to and respected as a trustworthy and responsible individual within the school community. All of this so far is perhaps unsurprising, but it is worth pointing out that this competitive understanding of educational achievement, which necessarily creates winners and losers and is generally conceived to have an extrinsic purpose of leading to higher education and/or well-paid jobs,

is not a given but is constructed in and through the systems of assessment and pedagogy that predominate in the school environment and the values that predominate in wider society.

Interestingly, discussions changed somewhat when participants were then asked to discuss and define what *underachievement* looked like. Grades remained important, however now the emphasis was shifted from competition with peers to measuring up to expectations and targets set by family, teachers and by oneself, often linked to a lack of individual effort:

2GramPup1 "if I can get a good grade and my parents are happy with me, then grand"

2SecPup3 "[Underachievement is] not doing the best of your ability. Like say you have an exam and you don't revise for it - whereas if you had of revised you might have done better"

1SecPup2 "I think, like if you have the potential to have really high grades, but you're just not putting in the effort and the time to get the high grades, I guess it's underachievement"

4GramPup1 "[Underachievement]'s just not hitting the goals that are set by yourself"

Pupils from one of the grammar schools (4Gram) mentioned being systematically assigned target grades (the teacher present interjected to explain that these were based on prior attainment and CAT scores), and explained that attaining below this grade is underachieving in their eyes. In these examples, unlike the examples of achievement given above, there is no explicit comparison with peers. No pupil explained that being 'bottom of the class' was an example of underachievement. Rather, the personal expectations of pupils, their families and their teachers, based on a range of factors, set an individual standard to attain in exams irrespective of the attainment of classmates.

On the other hand, some pupil participants actively refuted the idea that grades were a reliable measure of achievement, and rather focused on underlying behaviour. Interestingly, these were all pupils at non-selective post-primary schools.

2SecPup4 "Grades don't always demonstrate your full extent of intelligence. So there's really no point of dwelling on the fact, if you don't do as well as you might have wanted to, as long as you try your best. And you're happy that you did try your best."

1SecPup2 "No, I don't think it's always about grades, because you'll be underachieving in behaviour as well, because like your grades obviously show your progression in class, but then your behaviour just shows what kind of person you are, and if you're underachieving as a person it's... not so good"

4SecPup2 "[Underachievement could be] not listening to the teacher and just messing around - it distracts the rest of the class and then they're not learning."

Such perspectives offer an alternative to the otherwise dominant grades-and-competition discourse. They focus on personal development and, as in the last example, indicate the shared negative effects of underachievement. Rather than a zero-sum game where the relatively low attainment of some pupils produces the relatively high attainment of their classmates by comparison – allowing them to take pride in being ‘top of the class’ as in the above examples – this behavioural understanding of underachievement points to its potential to hold back a class or cohort, such that the achievements of a whole class, school, or cohort can be understood to be interdependent.

By contrast with the pupil focus on external assessment performance, and notwithstanding the single pupil example given above, most school and community leaders eschewed talk of competition for grades to focus more on readiness for adult life:

1SecCommTA/Local Resident “if we can have them children leaving school ready for the world of work, then that's what we aim for, regardless of grades. I think that's most important, especially for the children's self-confidence.”

4GramCommCharity “I don't think underachievement is automatically not getting a certain number of GCSEs, and setting a bar that you must achieve a certain qualification. There are lots of people who don't have examinations and who achieve very well in life [...] I suppose [underachievers are] people who are not either gainfully employed or in some sort of educational establishment, who are simply sitting at home doing nothing”

Struggling to achieve high exam grades was re-cast by many as a sign not of failure, but of alternative skills that were not sufficiently recognised. The owner of a manufacturing business explained:

4SecCommBusinessperson “it's easy for me to go and get somebody who's had five GCSEs B's, absolutely. And there's a case there for them. But we have to also remember that there are other jobs I need done as well, that doesn't necessarily need that person [...] Within industry in Northern Ireland, we have a serious shortage of skilled and semi-skilled workers. And a lot of these kids would be excellent for that particular sort of work. [...] And that's what we've been doing through [the manufacturing group] is to make sure that the apprenticeship scheme is pushed forward and is presented in such a way that we can get kids from all different abilities, actually.”

Though the business owner did not elaborate further, the implication is clearly that some pupils who struggle to achieve high grades at GCSE for a variety of reasons are nonetheless able to thrive in the world of work, and indeed may possess a range of relevant skills that GCSE qualifications do not currently adequately assess. Several school principals identified the need for an alternative approach to assess and value such skills:

1SecSLTPrincipal "...what we really need is something that is fair, that is able to - Yes, the GCSE children should be doing GCSE, because that is their pathway to the next stage, if they're going to go to a Sixth form, University... all of that [is] excellent, high aspiration, wanting the best for our young ones. But it's not fair on the ones who need an alternative approach. They need to be getting a grade that is beneficial to them moving into the next stage of going to whichever pathway they go on to. So, an alternative there would be great."

4SecSLTPrincipal "One of the major strengths of our school and why we have been so popular over a number of years of parents selecting the high school, it's the child centred ethos within the school. So, it's not driven by pupils who, you know, [their main goal is] to go to university. It's not all about that university direction. It's about all those other occupations, apprenticeships that may be available to them."

The theme of recognising and celebrating diverse abilities within the school context was particularly strong in the participating primary schools:

2PrimCommPTA (Parent) "I don't really see underachievers, and I don't even see disabilities. And I mean, what we would see as maybe a disability in life in our school is certainly not made out like that. I mean, I know my child has come through it and doesn't see his friends that didn't do certain exams, his friends that can't walk the same, the friends that can't maybe speak the same, friends that don't have the same vision, any of those things, any disability on any level."

2PrimSLTPrincipal "there was a child who is a really low achieving child, we had a little auction. He's from a farming background and they have an auction, everything. That's what that child knows, he breathes it and lives it [...] [The SENCO] gave him the role of the auctioneer at this little coffee morning. Well, you'd have thought you had handed him the World Cup. Because to all the other kids who always had downed him because of his academic achievement and how he couldn't pick up things he should - this was something that he knew he could do. And he stood there as proud as with his little hammer and giving it all, what he had to say. And that, that meant a million. Do you see after that? He tackled his spellings in a different way. He tackled his reading in a different way, he tackled everything, because he just he just stood tall, you know, he could do it."

3PrimSLTPrincipal "You know, quite often children who are underachieving in literacy or are underachieving in numeracy are top of the class in PE. So it's a wonderful opportunity for them to develop their self-esteem and to make them you know, happy and feel worthwhile and in a better place for learning other subjects."

As these examples make clear, valuing diverse abilities forms a part of a broadly pastoral approach to education in these schools, that understands pupils' self-esteem, and more

broadly their mental and physical health, as central to their personal and academic development. This pastoral perspective was present across the school and community leaders' interviews, and led to understandings of underachievement that hinged on mental health issues:

4GramSLTPastoral "We do have [a growth] also of all our social issues, growing mental health issues with young people and it's not only our school, it's every school, society, we've got growth, so they are the big challenges, mental health, anxiety."

1SecCommArtist/Researcher "So, you know, it's all very well saying, you know, kids aren't achieving, and what can we do about teaching, but if the kids aren't in a fit state, if they're dysregulated, they're obviously not going to be able to learn"

3PrimSLTSENCO "And when you look at your data, there'll be child number one who's on it this year, and you think, well, there's been two bereavements. There's been a marriage break off, there's been different things in that family, you know, there's a reason for that."

Overall, what can be argued from this data is that there is a subtle disconnect between pupils' understandings of achievement, linked to success in competitive systems of grading, and their understandings of underachievement which were linked to personal development, behaviour and failure against personal expectations. All participants broadly saw entering adult life, usually in work or further or higher education, as the key purpose of schooling, and adults sought to understand underachievement in this regard in terms of individual needs such as mental health problems or special educational needs.

3.2 Links with cultural stereotypes

The project's second objective, to nuance culturally stereotyped understandings of the links between educational underachievement and some Protestant communities, led us to examine the kinds of cultural stereotypes that emerged in the project data. These were minimal in the pupil data, mostly as a result of the way the interview questions were asked. However, several primary pupils appeared to link educational and sporting aspirations in relation to academically selective grammar schools. They expressed a desire to attend a grammar school, however the most commonly given reason was related to sporting, and not academic, ambitions:

3PrimPup2 "[We want to go to the grammar school because] you can play rugby there [...] I don't think you could do rugby at the high school"

2PrimPup1 "In a lot of grammar schools there is really good sport and ... good learning"

3PrimPup3 ""[We want to go to the grammar school because] they've got an equestrian team"

Though these are only a few examples, they serve to illustrate a point that was repeatedly returned to by research participants; that school sport is important and can act as a key motivator, emotional regulator and social integrator for pupils. The fact that these pupils identified sporting pursuits typically associated with the middle and upper classes (rugby and equestrianism) indicates the possible class-based nature of their educational ambitions. It should be noted that, by contrast, pupils at non-selective schools widely reported sporting achievements in cross-country, weightlifting and dance though some did also refer to rugby. This evidence of a strong societal perception that grammar schools, and not non-selective post-primary schools, are centres of sporting excellence also serves to reinforce a cultural stereotype of high achievement within selective schools and underachievement within non-selective schools, even in relation to school sport.

University/professional aspirations were shared across all pupil groups. There was also no indication from the pupil data that gender had an impact on educational underachievement. Notwithstanding the above point developed from a few examples in relation to school sports, socio-economic background was not discussed explicitly within the purview of the pupil interviews.

The school and community leaders' interviews, however, included far more discussion of associations between underachievement and particular socio-economic groups. First, the elements of the 'Protestant, working-class boy' stereotype were discussed individually, but not systematically, by participants. Few associated underachievement with Protestant pupils directly, but the narratives offered a picture both of complacency and mistrust of authority within Protestant or Loyalist communities:

4SecCommBusinessperson "There's been an arrogance within the Protestant community with kids, and particularly in the underachievers, that we have work, we will have work and this comes from my generation from way back when Protestants were always guaranteed a job."

4SecSLTPincipal "it's generally accepted that white Protestant boys are the lowest achievers but there is, there is a flip side in that those involved, it's the more active elements of loyalism and republicanism tend to feel a wee bit disengaged with society. I think that's possibly why they don't sort of buy into education, it's [...] an apparatus of the state, it's part of the system."

Such views, to the limited extent that they were offered in the auspices of the present study, corroborate the findings of other recent work examining working-class Loyalist and Republican perspectives on educational underachievement (Purdy, Finn, *et al.*, 2021), that many working-class Loyalists feel increasingly estranged from the state institutions they once felt were on their side, including the education system and schools, and that this has led to disengagement and a strong sense of social, political and educational marginalisation.

In sharp contrast to the well documented pattern of comparatively low achievement by FSME pupils (Purdy, Logue *et al.*, 2021; Demie, 2021), and while this study did not examine school-level data to corroborate the claims, it was notable that many school leaders across regions

and phases reported that in their experience FSME had little or no impact on educational outcomes:

3PrimSLTPrincipal "When we looked at and I analysed our data this morning, there is no pattern. It's not boys, it's not girls. There's no correlation between free school meals and underachievement."

4GramSLTPrincipal "in our school, we kind of buck the trend, because at GCSE, our free school meals have five A-C and then the seven A*-C are the same, there isn't under attainment with free school meals. And at A-level actually, our free school meals pupils outperform their non-free school meals counterparts."*

2GramSLTPrincipal "our free school meals children generally all perform at exceptional level, you know, they are never really in that bottom category."

This clear message from participating principals in respect of their FSME pupils should give pause for thought. Such statements indicate firstly that socio-economic disadvantage does not preclude educational success, and secondly underlines the dangers of using FSME uncritically as a measure of socio-economic disadvantage. The shortcomings of FSME as a proxy measure are widely acknowledged: not all eligible parents choose to apply (for many reasons); families whose incomes are just above the threshold are not included; FSME measures income only and does not take account of other aspects of deprivation; FSME fails to include children who may previously have been in receipt of free school meals but whose circumstances have recently changed etc. (Perry, 2010). Indeed, the policy is intended to alleviate poverty and reduce disadvantage – meaning that children from poor families that narrowly do not qualify or choose not to avail of FSME are likely to experience greater disadvantage than their FSME classmates (Perry, 2010). Indeed, this issue of FSME pupils not getting FSM as families “too proud” to apply, or pupils with passes not using them “because they don’t want their peers to see that they’re actually getting a free school meal” (2SecSLTCurricular) was raised by project participants.

Finally, where participants discussed the relevance of gender to underachievement in their schools and communities, male disadvantage was discussed in terms of teenage low self-esteem and withdrawal:

2SecCommChurch "we find that the girls just seem to be streets ahead of the boys. And we see that in church life. And all our organizations are just brimming with enthusiastic, gifted girls just bubbling over with potential [...], who will just come in and have confidence to learn new things. But that confidence just doesn't seem to be present within most of our boys"

2SecCommGovernor "I think there's an issue with self-esteem, linked to self-confidence because at primary school, I can see where boys and girls are very equal, they'll both participate in sports and drama, and musical events. And once they get to P7, and post primary, then [the boys] sort of withdraw, or it's a peer pressure issue perhaps."

In one group interview, community leaders linked this gender achievement gap to the issue of ranking and competition explored in 3.1:

3PrimCommGovernor "that was, you know, a member of staff's own children saying I was the best boy or I was the second boy in the class, when he might have been 8th in the class, because there were seven girls ahead, but he chose even to tell his parent, that that's where he came in [the test]."

This is not to suggest any causal link, but rather to highlight that some pupils themselves factor gender into how they 'measure up' within their classrooms, and from an early age. Beyond the established stereotype of inner-city underachievement, several participants considered rural, farming communities to represent a particular challenge:

2PrimSLTSENCO "we are in a farming community, and I think that is a problem, where they don't see education as being as important."

2SecSLTVice-Principal "I don't want to belittle any of our families. But there is a culture sadly, where they come from very successful farming backgrounds and very successfully, financially viable farms. And it's like, well, I don't need to worry about school because Daddy will leave me the farm."

3PrimCommGovernor (EA) "I would suggest that in this area, and possibly in, in most rural areas of Northern Ireland, there's a particular issue with young boys from a farming background, who may feel that their destiny really is to take over the family farm. Whether or not they achieve, from an educational point of view, they have a guaranteed way of life and career set out for them."

3PrimCommCouncillor "there was a strong, and I think it's only getting stronger, a strong anti-academic kind of mindset, especially among rural fellas."

4SecSLTPrincipal "I had a meeting last week with a pupil and his stepdad. And that was the comment that came back to me, "I don't need English, I don't need maths, I drive a tractor, sir." So that's one of the huge challenges, challenges we have of a rural nature."

Such a discourse can be compared with the accounts of Protestant complacency above, where the idea that a future career path was laid out for which school education wasn't essential is understood to reduce educational attainment. When the pupils' earlier focus on the extrinsic value of education for 'getting a good job' is also taken into consideration, this perception of rural pupils focusing on farming over education for its own sake is logical. As one rural primary principal put it:

2PrimSLTPrincipal "if [helping run the farm] brings [farming children] happiness, and that's what they want to do, who am I to turn around and go, that's any lesser than then being, I suppose, academic?"

In that particular case, a range of successful post-primary school options (both selective and non-selective) and the popularity of the non-selective junior high school route within the Dickson Plan area is seen to further discourage an academic focus, compared to schools in other areas where there is no alternative to academic selection at 11:

2PrimSLTPrincipal "...we don't need this massive big push here to the end in P7 because we do have other options. We have time to wait. [In my previous, town primary school], the majority of children threw themselves at the AQE, [but here] it's all like, ah, maybe we will, maybe we won't, do you know? I mean, come the week of the Balmoral Country Show, they will all take their time off"

Nevertheless, pupils' farming ambitions were by no means only discussed by participants in a uniquely negative light in terms of academic attainment. School and community leaders pointed to the raised standards for entry to the CAFRE agricultural colleges as a powerful motivator for aspiring farmers:

2SecCommGovernor "...a lot of the boys would aspire to go to Greenmount or Loughry, the agricultural colleges. And they have raised their entry requirements considerably over the last few years and boys are required to pass English and Maths and five GCSEs with regard to entry to some of those courses. And I've noticed that some of the boys that were friends with my daughters, really outperformed, they worked hard."

2SecSLTPrin "...competition is fierce, and now Greenmount will not accept our students unless they have five GCSEs of A to C. And it must include English and maths. So that's a big driving force for those young men of ours who really are driven."*

As an aside, the discourse here is highly gendered towards boys – however the only pupil participants that expressed a desire to work in agriculture in later life were two female pupils from 2Prim.

The cultural stereotypes that condition our understandings of social phenomena, including educational underachievement are overlapping and often contradictory, and this section has demonstrated how the stereotype of Protestant, working-class boys underachieving is grossly over-simplistic and is simply not reflected in the participating schools. Rather, a complex set of locally contextualised groupings emerge from the data, which themselves should not be taken to apply universally, but highlight a wide but non-exhaustive range of understandings of underachievement in relation to certain social groups.

3.3 Barriers to achievement

To further unpack these understandings of underachievement, this section identifies key barriers to achievement – specific examples of situations where pupils are hindered in their academic progress - discussed by participants in the study. The pupil participants didn't directly discuss these barriers, though discussion did arise around general negative influences

beyond the school gates; peer pressure, antisocial behaviour, or difficult family relationships that could affect a pupil's mental health and achievement.

A key topic of discussion amongst school and community leaders was the ongoing COVID crisis, and its effects on pupil progress. The overriding impression was one of absence, and resulting pupil disengagement and regression:

2GramSLTPrincipal "the English department has actually totally ripped up what they intended to do, and gone back to actually basic things like sentence structure, because the children just last year, in lockdown, have really, really regressed."

4PrimCommPTA (teacher) "You can see how those children who have not maybe been as engaged online during COVID, a lot of children have found it difficult to come back into the classroom with anxiety"

4PrimCommGovernor "They're, there's less and less there. [Pupils are] not getting the schooling at school and they're not engaging on the online school, there's a greater achievement problem."

The COVID crisis put in place a number of significant barriers to learning, the most basic of which has been the lack of pupil time at school, engaged in learning. For pupils without access to reliable and suitable learning devices, and a supportive and secure home environment, the effects of the pandemic on academic achievement are likely to have been particularly detrimental (Purdy, Harris, *et al.*, 2021).

The short-term impacts of the pandemic are juxtaposed in the interview data with a widely shared discourse about inter-generational underachievement. This identified parents' and grandparents' own lack of educational achievement as a barrier to their children's success at school. It was linked to higher rates of long-term unemployment and special educational needs in particularly deprived families.

1SecSLTPrincipal "you're not going to stick around if you don't know the answer. And that's where intergenerational deprivation comes in"

4SecCommCommunity Worker "There's a lot of I find a lot of young people now, they have no aspiration. But I think that's coming from the home because the parents have been long term unemployed."

4GramCommPTA (parent) "there's cyclical deprivation, and I think that it starts at the foundation of where these children are coming from and the needs that they have at home... part of [parental disengagement from their child's education] is because, you know, some of these parents have not gone on to further their education and haven't you know, they don't, they don't feel connected themselves"

4SecSLTCurricular "the lack of aspiration, the lack of ambition, it's generational"

A final barrier to achievement for some pupils as identified in one school context is the form of assessment required. Teachers and community leaders singled out assessment for GCSE maths, where grades are awarded based solely on written exams, as representing a significant disadvantage to low-achieving pupils, and highlighted how the retention of a lengthy examination in this core subject stands in contrast to other GCSE subjects which have moved to include other alternative and more accessible forms of assessment. While the discussion related solely to one subject, the discussion highlights the importance of adopting appropriate forms of assessment which do not disadvantage particular pupils:

1SecSLTCurricular “I mean, from a maths teacher as well a 100% written exam for my pupils is a disaster [...] why are we not helping, you know, my pupils get the best that they can, why could it not be a class test, or a half an hour test, rather than it has to be one hour, 45 minutes? You know, what's the difference in that I have [SEN] pupils who can show their skills on a smaller scale, why is that worth less than someone who can show their skills for three times the length of time?”

1SecCommGovernor “we're talking about GCSE maths [...] maths is the only subject in that there's no coursework involved in it, it seems to be that the kids that are doing coursework, and not sitting down on that exam, are doing so much better [but] maths is the only thing that sort of has stayed like that [...] And to me, that's frightening for those kids, because they're not doing it all the time now either, but the same, some kids just blank out whenever it comes to exams, you know, when if, if your whole 100% is based on your exam, you could end up with a bit, with a bit of a trouble there.”

3.4 Challenges for leadership

Significant parts of the school and community leaders' interviews focused on the nature and challenges of providing leadership within each school and community context. Again, the immediate context of the COVID-19 pandemic provided a key locus for reflections on community engagement, communication, and leadership strategy. Overall, a common theme was that explicitly engaging parents in their children's education was a positive step:

1SecCommGovernor “So the whole COVID thing, I think, has helped a wee bit with that connection between parents and school.”

1SecCommGovernor (EA) “I suppose that we were all guilty of contracting out the education of children to schools and the pandemic has actually brought it back home again, and has kind of reinforced the role of parents.”

2GramCommGovernor “I think it's a societal problem that actually, parents have handed that responsibility of educating children over to teachers. [...] it'll be interesting in a post COVID world, you know, is there a greater appreciation from parents because certainly pre-COVID I would have said that [if at the school, a pupil was] not achieving to their full potential, the

blame was put at the, at the feet of the teachers. And whereas, in many cases, actually, how much support were they getting in the home?"

Furthermore, school leaders were finding that online lessons and meetings were more effective in communicating detailed information, such as training:

3PrimSLTSENCO "That is one thing that has come of COVID that you can connect with [other teachers and parents] online, even training, it doesn't always suit, places or times. But to be able to have things pre-recorded that you can dip into in your own time, is actually probably one of the big positives."

3PrimSLTNumeracy "the virtual lessons that we did during lockdown were good. You know a lot of parents in our surveys responded that they now understand phonics where they maybe previously didn't understand it [...] we feel that by teaching the children we may have been also teaching the parents during lockdown. We hope we've improved the literacy skills of our entire Slovakian community during lockdown"

Working and engaging with parents was central to every participating school's efforts to tackle underachievement. Many participants mentioned training for parents, in numerous guises:

2PrimSLTSENCO "we've actually taken parents with us on training, and trained them up as well at school expense."

3PrimSLTPrincipal "we train the parents and all new staff every year are trained in recognizing the signs of dyslexia. So really, that's our [focus in tackling] underachievement."

2SecSLTCurricular "if you have built that relationship, parents are more willing to be honest, you're more willing to be honest with them. So hopefully, that can change the mindset that they have."

4SecSLTPrincipal "we have provided before courses for parents themselves, and literacy courses, ICT courses, numeracy courses, we've tried to dip in and do as much as we can."

4PrimCommGovernor "As a parent, [the school] has been very good at sending home information about various parent evenings to come along, and learn a new way of doing. One of the ones that ran was - all my boys went through it - was paired reading. So we went to a parents evening, we were taught how to do it. We did it for six weeks. And then we came back to another parents evening, to see our children receive their certificates.

There were numeracy evenings, where we were taught new ways of teaching numeracy, there were math games evenings, how to deal with behaviour issues within your own family, and different evenings, and then Internet safety."

Alongside formal training, school leaders often framed their approach to engaging parents as informal and relaxed, recognising that many could be intimidated or put off by the school environment:

“2PrimSLTSENCO “we make quite a big push of getting, you know, the P1 parents into the PTA at the very beginning. And that sort of gives them a social sort of environment where it's informal, and they can chat and they get to know [the principal], and they get to know us [teachers] and it feels a wee bit more like a team.”

4SecSLTPrincipal “we consult with parents a lot. I think that's key. Tomorrow night, we're have our [weekly] zoom meeting with parents to touch base to see how things are going. We are always consulting with parents so they feel that school is not a barrier, come in, we're friendly [...] I think for those hard to reach parents, they like that more down to earth chat, you know?”

Shared Education was frequently discussed, as a valuable source of extra funding, a locus for training and an opportunity to work across community lines. The perceived benefits were diverse, reflecting the localised and specialised nature of Shared Education projects:

3PrimSLTSENCO “I have to say, probably some of the best work we have done is where we have got shared education funding [which] has very much focused on numeracy in the last wee while for ICT.”

4PrimCommSports Coach “[Shared Education] programmes where we're bringing schools together, they're definitely very important. Because I think sometimes within our own school, or our own environment, you can get bogged down and believe that maybe problems are for your school or for your class.”

4PrimCommGovernor “as a parent, if your child is, his work is being exhibited, or they're doing a little poem about what they've been doing on their shared ed, you are going to go to see it, you're going to want to/ so that encourages parental involvement. I know I'm just speaking there about the shared ed, but definitely a big success.”

Notwithstanding this generally positive assessment of Shared Education initiatives, inter-school competition for enrolments arose as a limiting factor in community collaboration within the Controlled sector. In reference to the new Shared Education facilities opening amongst the nearby high schools, which might affect applicant numbers to the grammar school, one interviewee explained:

4GramCommGovernor (EA) “Yes, there's little internal issues between schools and how schools operate in terms of ensuring their financial viability [...] But in terms of the wider community, there is a consensus, at least from what I see, that we will work together with other schools, but also there'll be certain things well, we have to protect certain aspects for the betterment of the school and for the betterment of pupils”

The theme of competition as a barrier to collaboration was carried through in school leaders' discussions of collaboration and training. Several participants described external school visits and inter-school collaboration in professional development as extremely valuable in their own practice as leaders, but indicated that local competition could stand in the way of effective collaboration:

4SecSLTPrincipal "I think there needs to be a network of collaboration across our school sector that allows us [to learn from one another] and the elephant in the room is competition. Collaborating with my neighbouring school who is maybe competing for numbers - although it shouldn't be about that - can become problematic."

4GramSLTPrincipal "I mean, schools are in competition with each other. So perhaps the person you work best with is not your local school, it is somewhere farther away."

Several participants described travelling to visit schools "up the motorway", or "jumping on a plane" to visit schools in England, even going to San Francisco "to look into supporting LGBTQ+ pupils" (4SecSLTPastoral). Closer to home, several also pointed to becoming an ETI assessor as a significant element in the development of their professional practice:

4GramSLTPrincipal "the best [professional development] experience I've had in terms of schools is actually I am an assessor for the ETI. So, I've had the privilege of being in other schools. And I've had the privilege of seeing what other schools do. And it's very much schools working together and having a network of schools."

2GramSLTPastoral "I was given the opportunity to apply to be an associate assessor with the ETI. And I found that tremendous, because that's where I really got a lot of impetus and direction from for looking at teaching and learning in the school"

A key pillar of every school's approach to tackling underachievement, and a particular challenge for leadership, was the provision of strong pastoral care. Without exception, principals invited their pastoral leads and/or SENCOs to join them in their group interview. It was clear from the interview discussions that pastoral leadership was not something delegated away from the principal, but shared and highly valued in each of the schools.

2SecSLTVice-Principal "Our pastoral relationships are key, because at the end of the day, you know, we've worked hard from the minute they arrive, even before they arrived from P7 to really build this portfolio of understanding, we don't shy away"

4SecSLTCurricular "we pride ourselves in knowing our youngsters, and knowing more than what's on the standardized test scores, for example, CATs, and we're always thinking about the value added, what more can we add to that child's educational experience."

4SecSLTPrincipal “What we’ve tried to do, over the last number of years is merge pastoral with curriculum, so they’re not seen as two totally different silos where they work in separation. Our pastoral heads of year, most definitely look at behaviour, but also look at underachievement and achievement.”

2GramSLTPastoral “we would have at the centre of our school an ethos really that, I suppose, runs through it. And it’s basically known personally, cared for individually. And I think that’s absolutely vital in there as well. That idea, right, this teacher is interested in me, I will respond to them. And that’s something that we have pushed throughout the years, that, that personal interest in them from an academic and from a pastoral viewpoint”

The value placed on pastoral care by school leaders was reflected in the community interviews:

4GramCommLocal Charity “I have nothing but the greatest respect for the school, I do think their pastoral care is excellent. I think schools are putting more and more emphasis into it because they see the statistics to see how many young people are in crisis”

2GramCommBoG Chair “One of the big strengths of the school I feel is the fact that it has a very good pastoral system. Staff are well involved, well informed, and there is a good follow up.”

4GramCommPTA (parent) “we all want our children to achieve. But if these kids are not connected and supported pastorally, they’re not going to achieve the grades or wherever they want to [achieve]”

4GramCommGovernor “my son during sixth year decided that he doesn’t want to work anymore. I think he was more concerned about a girlfriend at the time. And effectively, I could see how the pastoral care kicked in so well, in terms of trying to get him back on track [...] he still looks back and says you know, that support that he got at the time was so helpful.”

One of the non-selective post-primary schools (2Sec) and one of the grammar schools (4Gram) mentioned recently changing their school’s pastoral structures to have continuity of Head of Year and form tutors throughout the school career of a given cohort in order to prioritise teacher-pupil relationships and strengthen pastoral care. The implication is that this approach had been effective so far, but this was not explicitly stated.

3.5 Community support

An important area of discussion related to the ways in which members of the community beyond the home and beyond the school gates were active in supporting the work of the school and the learning of pupils. When asked to think of significant adults outside school and family that help them with their learning, several pupils mentioned having private tutors. These were pupils attending grammar schools, or hoping to attend and preparing for the transfer tests:

2PrimPup3 "My tutor that helps me see an AQE question of this stuff that [my teacher] has sent home and I don't really understand it, my tutor will go over it and help me with that."

2GramPup3 "At GCSE level I had a maths tutor who like wanted me to get the grade that my mum wanted me to get."

4GramPup3 "I had a tutor for Physics. And even now we're done the exams and stuff, she still messages me and asks because we have started A2 now."

Sporting and artistic pursuits outside of school also represented significant vectors of community support for education, and individual coaches and teachers were commonly cited by pupils as significant mentors outside their schools and families:

2SecPup1 "Well, my coach [at a club in another town], if I struggle with something like say, for example, I want to do PE with muscle groups [he] sort of helped me and showed me because he studied it, and as well as that, like if I'm, if there's something in the back of my head that I'd be anxious or worried about that he'd sort of, you know, he's easy to talk to and he's very supportive."

4SecPup3 "I feel I can ask [my dance teacher] any questions if I have any [...] There's been a couple of times with English questions [when I] remember asking for help."

4GramPup1 "Well, I mean, indirectly, through extracurricular activities, coaches, like I go to [a running club], like my coach would still ask how school's doing. And obviously, he helps mental health-wise. Like to help, that all contributes to a good exam performance"

4GramPup2 "my drama teacher outside of school would be very involved, like, I've achieved my grade 8 in drama. And she helped me through that. And that also, like, indirectly helped with English in school as well"

Community and school leaders similarly pointed to community sports organisations as significant sources of support for education, with a particular importance for pupils struggling with school:

4GramSLTPrincipal "some of the boys that I can think of who were at danger of underachieving were rugby boys. And we got them involved as leaders and role models with the juniors. We ran, it was actually over a weekend, a program for them as leaders. Their achievement was unbelievable. And I can think of one, during the year and he ended up with grades we never thought he would have got because it just all clicked. So that idea, the sport in our school for our children, and the extracurricular is vital to the academic."

2SecCommGovernor "On drilling and the discipline, I think the football has made a big influence. There's a brand new 3g pitch in [the high school],

and they have teams ranging from primary right up to 18 years. [...] Opening the gates so that other primary schools can come in and use the facilities means the outreach is phenomenal"

3PrimSLTPrincipal "we currently have an IFA coach, [which] we got through shared education and now we have it just solely on our own, and it's brilliant, we have a brilliant coach who comes in and teaches physical literacy skills once a week at the moment"

Several pupils, all female, identified their church community as a source of support for their education, in ways ranging from the very broad to the specific:

2PrimPup2 "[At church] you get to like learn about God and you get to like practise your writing. And you get like little booklets about like God and everything like that. And it helps with your RE"

4SecPup2 "[People at church] help me understand more things about life"

2GramPup2 "there's a lady at my church and she was an art teacher at a different school. And she brought me around to her house a few times to like, show me different techniques and stuff I could use to help further my art knowledge"

Adults' discussions of the place of the church in supporting education were more varied. For some, the involvement of the church in the life of the school and in youth services was something undesirable:

4GramSLTPrincipal "the minute that you bring one person in from one church, you'll have offended someone else [...] So yeah, we don't feel the need to bring churches in."

4SecCommBusinessperson "When you're giving something, you should be giving it unconditionally. Unfortunately or fortunately - and fair play to them, to a certain extent, for being there - the main places, you will find, are Christian based to get help for drug abuse and what have you. But unfortunately, it's not unconditional."

4SecCommCommunity Worker "young people won't listen to, you know, the church, they don't go to church, they're not interested in it"

For others, the church represented a key source of volunteers and extra funding to support school and community activities:

4PrimCommFamilyCentre "The churches are a great source of volunteers for one thing [...] if there are initiatives going on, where it's bodies that are needed, whether that's for mentoring, or a reading club, or a homework club, you know, they would have that, that kind of background of volunteers that I'm sure would be happy to come in and help as well. And it does give you then it gives you those numbers that you need to be able to impact more children."

2SecCommChurch “And as far as, you know, helping to support the school financially, anything the school runs, the PTA runs, as churches, we are 100% behind it [...] sometimes we have certainly made donations to schools and to be as part of their budget. We are in quite an under privileged or deprived area, so money is a constant headache.”

4GramCommLocal Charity “I suppose [churches] could do more social intervention. I mean, the big thing amongst all the, as I would call them, the sort of ‘home churches’ that have sprung up throughout Northern Ireland [...], a lot of their emphasis is on social care for the people who attend the church and the people in their community [...] They reach out to their community and they are assisting in all sorts of ways, be it in education, be it in provision of food and services, advice [...] I think the problem is, some Protestant churches have been far too stuffy for years. And they're not prepared to dip their toe in the water and go and actually serve the community rather than be there to wait for the people to come to them.”

The common thread between these examples is the emphasis on churches serving unconditionally, giving without expecting any influence or benefits in return. Navigating such a balance clearly represents a challenge for church and school leadership, but church leaders participating in the community interviews expressed both an appreciation of this balance and a willingness to search out appropriate ways to support the work of their local schools:

2SecCommChurch “If we thought that there was a place or a niche for churches to be, you know, having like a breakfast club [...] obviously those things have to be set up and run extremely transparently and carefully. And but if we thought that there was a place for that kind of ministry, we would look very seriously at that”

2SecCommChurch “[It is important for church leaders] to demonstrate how engaged we are with school, and that we care about the school. So really every opportunity the school offers us, so I mean for ministers, for example, that, you know, involves assemblies, and there, I suppose we made connections. And we've made some really good connections with families who have been in crisis, simply because a member of the family recognized my face and got in touch for food parcels. So there is certainly presence: being seen and visible. We're at every school event as well, whether it's their Christmas events and things, just that we're there that we're seen.”

4GramCommPTA (parent) “the school has done, in my opinion, a great job of supporting children when they're in the school. But a lot of the issues are coming from their needs and the complex situations at home and it's, it's, it's addressing those issues and supporting the parents and supporting the child [that the church could contribute to].

3PrimCommChurch “[as ministers] we will do what we can do, to support and encourage children to engage with education, and also to help

children understand the significance of education and the impact that it has - not just on whether you pass tests or not, but how you can then contribute to the wider life of society and how that can help you and your feelings of self-worth and connection and maturity”

Beyond the role of the churches, community fundraising was widely reported by interview participants, particularly amongst local businesses:

4GramSLTPastoral “In terms of rewards programs, businesses are very supportive in terms of funding and so on, for our rewards program.”

Other examples included businesses and parents donating a polytunnel and PE equipment at one of the non-selective post-primary schools (2Sec), counselling for students at one of the grammar schools (4Gram), businesses donating stock for fashion shows and sports days at one of the primary schools (4Prim) and businesses and churches donating laptops at during lockdown in another of the the non-selective post-primary schools (1Sec). These examples of tangible support were raised by school leaders as vital elements in the life and operation of the school, without which the school budget would be insufficient to provide a quality education.

A third key category of community organisations working with schools to help tackle educational underachievement, particularly amongst Protestant boys, included local Orange Order lodges and Loyalist Bands:

2SecCommGovernor” the Orange Order got funding for additional support in Maths and English in the area. And I have nephews who were able to participate in that. And that gave them more confidence when it came to GCSEs and preparing for examinations, for example.”

2SecSLTVice-Principal “The local orange orders in [town] pre-COVID were able to secure funding and offer basically extra English and Maths tuition to people who were interested, obviously families with affiliated links, whether it was through parents, you know, their fathers or grandfathers, whatever. And that wasn't seen that that school wasn't doing enough. If anything, it was seen that this is extra on top of what you are receiving in school. And I know from what I've heard that, you know, that was well supported, well attended, parents liked it. And [it allowed] the children, the young men particularly, to take whatever they had learned here, if there was maybe something they were struggling with, or whatever, and spend a little bit of extra time at evening time to go over that. And that was all based in a local hall here in [town].”

4SecCommCouncillor “They're in bands, their loyalist bands, they identify with bands, quite happy to put a band uniform on, dress extremely well. Go out on a Friday night, on a Saturday night, and behave extremely well. Then they come into school on a Monday morning with their tie down and you know, almost the opposite [...] There was maybe about a dozen of them signed up to do extra work, towards the maths and the GCSE [...] the

tutors went out into the band halls during their band practices. And that's where they did it, because they weren't comfortable in the school setting [...] And as far as I know, there's a good number of them young fellows where their grades have gone up. Or they're at least, where they're heading in the right direction."

2GramCommMusic Teacher "[What] comes to mind is my previous experience in [another] high school, which musically was quite a tough school to be a music teacher, then, you know, it was hard to get the pupils in and get them focused, you know, playing a guitar from week to week, that was difficult. But they had a huge amount of flute players and drummers that would never leave the music department. They were the noisiest bunch of "hallions" I have ever seen in my life. But they were in the music department, they were making, they were making music, and they were happy. And they weren't, you know, nipping off out of school doing whatever they did at breaktime and lunchtime"

These examples demonstrate a disparate range of ways that Loyalist community organisations might have a positive impact on the education of Protestant boys, by harnessing an interest beyond the school curriculum and providing spaces for learning outside the school context. In some of these examples, the school was an active partner, in others it was not, but remained informed and supportive of what was being done. All of the above examples refer to non-selective post-primary schools, including that of a grammar school community leader, suggesting a real or imagined equivalence between the pupils of non-selective schools and those involved in Loyalist organisations.

Across all the areas of community engagement discussed above, there is a discernible difference between the primary schools and non-selective post-primary schools, where catchment areas are smaller, and the two grammar schools, which draw pupils from much further afield. Overall, community relationships appear more concrete in the primary and non-selective post-primary schools, based on relationships of need, geographical proximity, and strong personal relationships. One grammar principal explained:

2GramSLTPrincipal "If truth be known, we're on our own. That's the honest truth. We have huge help and support in terms of our extra and co-curricular dimension. And we grew that, and we have to grow that, and we make the effort. EA do little or nothing to help [our school]. And over the years have done little or nothing to help us. Likewise, any of the external statutory agencies do little or nothing to help us. In terms of help from the community, we don't have that same link for, for example, a local GAA club coming in doing homework club, and all of that stuff, doesn't happen. So there's no involvement, we have no transfer reps, we have limited involvement or no involvement from the church. And that's the same in every school I've taught in, by the way, every school I've taught in, whether it be in the Controlled sector, or different sectors, the schools that I look on with envy are the Catholic sector, where there is much, much greater emphasis from the community to support the school in everything they do, and to back the school in everything they do."

The above quote articulates a perception shared by other school leaders: that, compared with the Catholic-maintained sector, schools in the Controlled sector lacked wider community support and that this had been the case for many years. Notwithstanding the above evidence of community support and partnerships, therefore, there may still be value in learning from the success of certain Catholic-maintained schools in this area.

3.6 Areas for change

This final section of findings goes beyond the original stated objectives of the research to report the key areas for change as reported by school and community leaders throughout the group interviews. These include changes that individual schools are currently making, and emerging needs that will require sector-wide responses.

Leadership training came up frequently in the interview discussions with school leaders. Most felt that they had primarily learned the skills required for school leadership at both middle and senior level 'on the job', and although many had completed the PQH (Professional Qualification for Headship), felt that the model, now suspended and under review, was not fit for purpose:

4GramSLTPrincipal "But as regards to training, training as a leader... Yeah, I've done my PQH, that's all I'll say about it"

1SecSLTVice-Principal "it just seemed that very few people ever got on to the senior leadership course. And then it went straight on to the PQH. You know, this is, everybody seemed to have a PQH. You know, I did a NPQSL [National Professional Qualification: Senior Leadership]. But there seems to be a real dearth of leadership courses out there at the moment."

2GramSLTPrincipal "What needs to happen is training programmes through middle leadership, senior leadership to learn the job. So not the PQH model, but almost see if you have VPs, or senior teachers who aspire to be a head, pay for them to come out for six months, and be placed in a school to learn leadership to learn the journey."

Networking and collaboration between schools was identified as a key area for the development of leadership capabilities, particularly in areas of practical application around tackling underachievement:

2SecSLTPrincipal "You know, when you when you do your first-time principals' courses, there's never anything to do with underachievement [...] That's something that would be useful. What I find useful is sharing good practice among other principals. So, if there was some format, that can be done, you know, we've gone through this process in our school, this is what we did. This is how it's worked for us. And we could share that in sort of those principal forums."

4SecSLTPrincipal "I think that if there was a network of schools [across our school sector] where we could collaborate together and look at best

practice and what [works well and] what doesn't work, that would be really beneficial."

2SecSLTVice-Principal "if there was ever a place to network and meet people, not only in a post primary setting, but obviously from all the kind of categories and sectors I loved a Tuesday night in Stranmillis [during taught Master's programme]"

The need for alternative leadership training opportunities to the PQH, which were broad enough to network and attract education professionals from a range of backgrounds and settings, clearly emerges from these examples as an area for change.

Another common area of discussion related to testing and data-led decision-making in education. School leaders often expressed frustration at the cost of testing provided by private companies, and the lack of standardisation that came with them. Several suggested standardised Key Stage 2 assessment, administered and/or paid for by the Department of Education, as a more reliable and less costly option than the current system:

2PrimSLTPrincipal "if primary schools were talked to earlier, and the primary schools had testing in position from P4, using a Northern Ireland based test, and we didn't have to spend [thousands of pounds from our school budget] - if we were able to have had tested those children, from P4 to P7, consistent for regulated tests with outside testers coming into schools, what a picture we would have now for those children that were leaving P7, in comparison to the amount of money that we had spent over the number of years... and we still couldn't stand over [data from private assessment companies]. You still can't stand over that. Because it's not fair. It's not consistent. And it's not done in the same approach. If you want to track underachievement and you want to track educational achievement, how you do that? When there's so many different tests, ideas of what is what is right, what is wrong?"

3PrimSLTPrincipal "we spend over £5000 every year on these tests, so it's a considerable amount of money. I mean, that would pay for a classroom assistant for a term supporting a child. But when the ETI come out, they want to see data and they want to see what we're doing with the data [...] It is a really good resource, but it is very expensive. And it would be great if somebody else could provide it free of charge, it would be wonderful [...] Don't ask them to produce it, just ask them to pay for it, it's already there."

All post-primary schools tested incoming pupils, always with Cognitive Ability Tests (CATs) and often other tests, to establish a baseline rather than relying on the data given to them by primary schools. The perception of unreliability appeared primarily to be due to the ability of schools to test the same pupils multiple times using the same test, thus producing scores that did not consistently reflect the pupils' learning. This year 8 baseline served two main purposes: firstly to identify potential underachievers and put in place necessary pastoral and pedagogical support from the start, and secondly to identify the school's value-added.

1SecSLTPrincipal "When [pupils] come in year 8, we carry out our own testing. We need to have it because it's where they are at that point in time. But also, it's our own data, and there's nothing influencing it, let's say."

1SecSLTVice-Principal "But we have to do it, we have to find the money [for private testing]. That's the thing, we have to have the baseline of whenever they come into our school, no matter what. And also, the thing is, [you need to be sure there is] progress and value added."

2GramSLTPrincipal "So what you will find is I will go out to primary schools as all of our senior team go out and visit and I will have, a primary school literally said to me, what do you want the levels to be? I said, "No, you have done the assessment?" "No, no, what do you want them to be, we'll make them whatever you want them to be." So, you do not have this objective standardized assessment."

4GramSLTPrincipal "We do those CAT tests again in year 10. And we do our PTM and PTEs again in year 9 so that for the maths and English department, we look to see what value we've added to the children."

Given the widespread dissatisfaction with the cost of private external testing shouldered by individual schools, and the perception that attainment data supplied or shared by other (primary) schools was not reliable, participating school leaders are clearly suggesting that this is an area for change. A non-intensive system of standardised external (DE-funded) testing, at the end of KS2 at the very least, would alleviate pressure on school budgets and allow for more standardised tracking of pupil progress, schools' value-added, therefore better equipping school leaders to identify cases of underachievement and intervene early.

At a more school-specific level, two post primaries (2Sec and 4Sec) reported having recently moved from an established system of streaming to mixed-ability classes, and advocated this as a means of overcoming the notion of the 'bottom set' which they felt exacerbated disadvantage and underachievement:

2SecSLTCurricular "But we were finding that those two classes at the bottom [had poor] behaviour, and weren't being stretched as much as they should be. So the aim was to spread that across school within all of the classes so that you weren't having this class that was being placed as an underachieving class, it was a class that the behaviour was awful, nobody wanted to teach. And we actually have found that there has been a massive improvement in terms of behaviour across school, and as well as achievement [...] we're finding that attainment has improved, and particularly with some of our SEN children."

4SecSLTPrincipal "How we structure our curriculum now is totally different. You know, streaming was a big thing. And streaming actually enhances disadvantage, because evidence would suggest that if you start to stream kids, those kids who are on free school meals generally end up in your bottom classes, so we changed around this whole thing, and we went for

mixed ability [...]. It's been a huge challenge for our staff, it's been welcomed by parents."

Although it will take time for these systems to become established, and the pandemic disruption has made evaluations of these changes difficult to achieve, the participating school leaders were confident that they were having positive effects, both academically and pastorally.

4 Discussion

This qualitative study set out to gain a more nuanced understanding of educational underachievement and how it is being addressed in a range of Controlled schools across Northern Ireland in 2021. The study aimed to go ‘beyond the stereotype’ of the already well documented incidence of educational underachievement in inner-city Belfast and Derry/Londonderry (e.g. Leitch, Hughes, *et al.*, 2017) and to cast the net wider to provide a broader and more representative picture of how this complex and multi-faceted phenomenon is being experienced and addressed in Northern Ireland.

As expected, the research has highlighted the highly contextualised nature of educational underachievement in Northern Ireland. While it is acknowledged that the very term ‘educational underachievement’ is an ‘imperfect descriptor’ (Gorard and Smith, 2004), the term is widely used in government policy in Northern Ireland and is a familiar term in wider society, including among school and community leaders.

4.1 Identifying ‘underachievement’

However, this study has highlighted that understandings of the term across schools and communities can be very varied. In particular pupils’ understanding of educational achievement related largely (though not exclusively) to success in external assessment such as GCSE and A-level examinations, and in succeeding more than others in their peer group (e.g. coming highest in the class in English). Only one school provided a clear exception to this where the year 13 pupils spoke of individual target grades established on the basis of CAT scores and prior attainment. Educational achievement was perceived by pupils as a route to further or higher education and a “good job”, leading to an emphasis on an extrinsic rather than intrinsic motivation to learn. No one, for instance, spoke of the joy of learning for its own intrinsic value. Where a pupil underachieved, this was attributed to a lack of individual effort through not listening to the teacher or not revising adequately before an examination.

This narrow interpretation of educational (under)achievement with its focus on grades and inter-peer competition contrasts sharply with the much broader perspectives shared by many school and community leaders in the study, who placed greater value on a wider range of skills and abilities, pupils’ mental and physical health, self-confidence, happiness and willingness to learn. It is clear, moreover, that such broader skills are valued by local employers. Many acknowledged that the current education system was too heavily focused on academic success (“It’s not all about that university direction”) and that the current ‘one size fits all’ model of assessment disadvantaged many less academic children leading to disengagement, especially among post-primary boys for whom the curriculum often lacked relevance.

Nor is it correct to assume that educational underachievement and Free School Meal entitlement (FSME) are necessarily synonymous, despite many recent reports which have underlined strong correlations at a Northern Ireland system level (e.g. Demie, 2021). The school leaders in this study reported little or no differences between the achievement of pupils with or without FSME, which sounds a useful note of caution about overgeneralising and perhaps raises important questions about the appropriateness and validity of FSME as a proxy measure of social disadvantage in educational contexts. While this small study involving

8 schools in 4 areas across Northern Ireland cannot be seen to be representative, it does re-emphasise some of the misgivings expressed by Perry (2010) and confirms the importance of a thorough review of the FSME measure, as recommended by the Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement in Northern Ireland (Purdy, Logue, *et al.*, 2021).

There were particular educational challenges identified in rural communities which have not been reported extensively to date in previous studies. Many of the schools in this study were located in small towns but drew many of their pupils from surrounding rural areas and farming communities. Some school leaders spoke of the difficulty in motivating young boys to work hard towards GCSEs (“I don’t need English, I don’t need maths, I drive a tractor, sir”). They also spoke of how intergenerational educational disadvantage and lack of educational aspiration, so often associated with inner-city working-class contexts, was also a strong feature of many rural farming communities. While there were some positive accounts of pupils being motivated to achieve the entry requirements for agricultural college (CAFRE), often it appeared that a ready-made path to “take over the family farm” discouraged academic engagement in an academic curriculum which bore little relevance to their chosen career. Going forward, there is a need for more research into this largely unexplored rural dimension of educational underachievement, examining further the nature and extent of the problem and identifying effective strategies to address it.

4.2 Disconnect in curriculum and assessment

One of the clearest messages to emerge from the study was that schools had been left largely to their own devices in terms of professional development opportunities and in relation to sourcing standardised tests offered by private companies in the absence of DE-sponsored tests. As a result, school leaders reported that they were often reliant on buying in their own professional development and their own tests, further stretching already tight school budgets. This study lends support to existing calls for DE to urgently commission CCEA to progress the development of diagnostic assessment tools for use in all schools, which would relieve budgetary pressures on schools, and provide consistency of data, the lack of which was sorely felt in the 2020-21 academic year following the postponement and eventual cancellation of the post-primary transfer tests. This might also remove the need for post-primary schools to test pupils on arrival in year 8, precisely because (as reported in this study) they cannot rely on the validity of the test scores shared with them by their feeder primary schools. For post-primary schools to require year 8 pupils to sit CAT tests on arrival in post-primary schools (often on their very first day) highlights another alarming failure of the current education system, and only serves to embed the impression among pupils that post-primary schooling is about tests and scores. What is urgently needed is a single, government-funded, standardised suite of tests providing consistent and reliable diagnostic data, which should be used to identify individual needs and support future learning.

In many ways, this study raises important and fundamental questions about the purpose of education and about how we measure success. The study has highlighted that while school, community and business leaders generally see a broad spectrum of abilities and routes to success in life and in work, there is a significant disconnect between such a perspective and the narrow grades-focused interpretation by the majority of the children and young people who participated in the study. This strong focus on examination grades is arguably inevitable,

given the highly competitive culture of education in Northern Ireland where, in the absence of broader measures of achievement, schools and individual pupils are compared largely as a result of success in external GCSE/A-level (or equivalent) assessments, and where there is such a level of competition between neighbouring schools that discourages genuine collaboration and the sharing of ideas and expertise.

At a fundamental policy level, this study thus raises important questions about the (currently limited) extent to which the stated objectives of the Northern Ireland Curriculum translate into the lived experiences of children and young people. While the curriculum aims “to empower young people to develop their potential and to make informed and responsible choices and decisions throughout their lives” (CCEA, 2007:4), too often children’s experiences relate to achieving or failing to achieve “very high grades” or, alternatively, their experiences are of a curriculum which bears little relevance to their future career outside the established professions in vital areas of the local economy such as farming, fishing, industry, hospitality or retail.

It is apparent that despite the direction charted in the Northern Ireland curriculum, children’s experiences have been thrown off course by the unrelenting pressures of assessment, accountability, competition between schools, and a curriculum offer which is too inflexible, especially at Key Stages 3 and 4 when there is the greatest likelihood of disengagement, especially but not exclusively by boys. This is not to suggest that there is anything wrong with the “healthy competitiveness” that is celebrated by one of the principals in this study; but the overall findings of this study give a clear message that there is a disconnect between theory and practice, between curricular objectives and classroom practice, and between what policy-makers might imagine is taking place in schools and how that is being experienced by children and young people on the ground.

4.3 Partnership between schools, families and communities

This study has highlighted a range of challenges that are faced by schools, many of which have been exacerbated by the experience of the past 18 months during the Covid-19 pandemic and have been reported elsewhere (Walsh, Purdy, *et al.*, 2020; Purdy, Harris, *et al.*, 2021). The study has nonetheless highlighted the sterling work that is being undertaken by school and community leaders in the participating Controlled schools in many significant areas. For instance, the report has highlighted one of the few positives to emerge from the pandemic: the increased ability of schools to engage remotely with many parents, offering training, upskilling parents, and making parents more aware than before of what their children are learning in school and how they can support them in that learning. While this doesn’t underestimate the significant challenges faced by many parents during the two extended periods of home-schooling (for instance in terms of digital access, juggling work and home-schooling commitments etc.), this study has found that schools and families are often now better connected than ever before. This is very definitely an area where there is enormous potential for future growth, and so, rather than rushing to return to a pre-covid normality of the annual face-to-face parent-teacher meeting supplemented by letters home in schoolbags, it would be important for schools to maintain closer contact with parents. Teachers and schools should continue to reach out to parents, and vice-versa, using a range of digital media (SMS, email, Apps such as SeeSaw, Youtube videos etc.), to see them as genuine “equal

partners” (Warnock, 1978) in their pupils’ education, offering advice and training, listening to their perspectives, and further cementing those home-school linkages that were forged through adversity since March 2020. As one school governor remarked in this study:

1SecCommGovernor (EA) “I suppose that we were all guilty of contracting out the education of children to schools and the pandemic has actually brought it back home again, and has kind of reinforced the role of parents.”

This study has also clearly demonstrated the value of a place-based, context-specific approach to addressing educational underachievement in Northern Ireland, which thrives on effective, respectful, partnership between schools, families and communities. There were many instances in this study where school leaders spoke of the importance of this community engagement, but there were also many striking accounts by the community leaders themselves of how they were passionate about supporting their local schools and helping children in their local community to succeed. This was particularly evident in the primary schools and in the non-selective post-primary schools, where catchment areas were smaller than in the case of the two grammar schools which draw pupils from much further afield.

Nonetheless, there was a shared sense among all that the community had a vital role to play in supporting their local schools and there were several innovative, context-specific examples of how that had taken place already, such as the development of links with local manufacturing companies, the involvement of the local Orange Order in funding additional support in English and maths for pupils (with additional classes held in the local Orange Hall), tutors offering GCSE support after band practice for young people involved in loyalist flute bands, active Parent Teacher Associations, committed school governors, and various levels of church involvement (see below). This emphasis on community partnership is a central pillar in effectively addressing educational underachievement (Demie, 2019) and forms the basis of the ‘Reducing Educational Disadvantage’ programme recommended by the Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement in Northern Ireland which aims to be “strategic in scale and collaborative in nature, mandating co-design and the building of authentic partnerships between schools and communities using a place-based approach” (Purdy, Logue, *et al.*, 2021:36).

This study has drawn attention both to the benefits to be gained from schools collaborating, sharing effective practice, and learning from each other, and some of the barriers to doing so. In particular, there was broad support for the funding available through Shared Education which had enabled schools to reach out across the community divide, access additional training and build relationships. This is especially important, given the repeated claims that there was a lack of available leadership training available at a regional level (following the withdrawal of the PQH) which meant that school leaders often reported learning ‘on the job’. However, it was saddening to hear of the impact of inter-school competition between schools within the Controlled sector, which was effectively thwarting further collaboration between rival schools in some areas. This led to reports of schools holding back on further collaboration for fear of endangering enrolments and included the claim by one principal that “perhaps the person you work best with is not your local school, it is somewhere farther away”. While there can always be value in reaching out beyond the local context to visit schools “up the

motorway” or “jumping on a plane” to visit schools in England or even in the USA, it is an unfortunate consequence of our current open enrolment system that local collaboration among neighbouring schools (with such potential for sharing of context-specific expertise) is being prevented by principals’ fears of losing pupils to competitor schools, often within the Controlled sector.

Finally, this study, funded by the Transferor Representatives’ Council (which represents the Church of Ireland, Presbyterian Church in Ireland, and Methodist Church in Ireland), heard a range of perspectives on the role of the Protestant churches in supporting educational achievement in local communities. This is an area which has attracted relatively little research interest in recent years (Purdy and Meneely, 2015) and there is very clearly a need for more research into how churches are addressing educational underachievement in local communities in Northern Ireland. There are of course historic challenges for the Protestant churches related to the transfer of control for their schools to the state following the establishment of Northern Ireland in 1921, which has made the role of the Protestant churches in Controlled schools less clear than, for instance, the role of the Catholic church in its denominational schools (see Armstrong, 2009 for a fuller account).

The findings of this study were very mixed in terms of church involvement. At one end of the spectrum, there were several individuals, including one school principal and two community leaders, who were very sceptical about or even opposed to the involvement of churches in schools, citing a concern that the involvement of churches was not “unconditional” or that it would be impossible to involve one or more churches without “offending someone else”, given the increasing diversity of the pupil population. At the other end of the spectrum were church and community leaders who saw the value of church involvement in terms of providing governors, pastoral support, financial aid (through donations) and willing volunteers for homework clubs, mentoring programmes etc. Church involvement could also lead to parents coming forward to access foodbanks and seek other forms of pastoral support, especially during the current pandemic. A third set of comments reflected a more ambivalent position, with one minister claiming that if there was an identified need for a breakfast club or other form of support in the local school, “we would look very seriously at that”, and another community leader who appreciated the community outreach work pioneered by some churches but lamented the reluctance of some “stuffy” Protestant churches “to dip their toe in the water and go and actually serve the community rather than be there to wait for the people to come to them.” While there is undoubtedly a need for more research in this important area and robust evaluation of the effectiveness of church-led intervention programmes such as homework clubs or volunteer support (Purdy and Meneely, 2015), it is clear that where school leaders are open to church involvement (which cannot be assumed) and where a church engages meaningfully, tangibly and ‘unconditionally’ in its local school, there is enormous potential to improve educational outcomes.

5 Conclusion

This qualitative study has exposed the limitations of the stereotype of educational underachievement restricted to Protestant working-class boys from disadvantaged inner-city communities. In deliberately seeking to expand the scope of enquiry to encompass a broader demographic (in terms of MDM deciles) and geographic spread, this study is significant. It has given a voice to a much wider cross-section of school leaders, pupils, and community representatives than in previous studies, and in doing so has highlighted a divergence of experience and opinion across and between educational phases within the diverse Controlled sector. It has exposed a disparity between the lofty objectives of the Northern Ireland curriculum and the narrow test-focused experiences of our children and young people, and shed new light on previously under-explored issues such as rurality and the intergenerational disengagement of some families from farming backgrounds. It has revealed the limits of sharing between schools who, within and beyond the Controlled sector, are effectively in competition with each other for pupil places. It has provided a challenge to church leaders to engage with their local schools in a meaningful, tangible and 'unconditional' way. And finally, it has highlighted the urgent need for system level reform in relation to leadership training and the provision of funded, standardised tests.

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