

RIGHT FROM THE START



The
Report
of the
**Educational
Underachievement
Working Group of
the Unionist Forum**

> Introduction

> Statistical Background

> Findings

> Themes

- 1 Importance of the early years
- 2 The need for greater parental and community involvement with schools
- 3 Leadership
- 4 Governance
- 5 Children's and Young People's Action Zones
- 6 Academic Selection

> Recommendations

- 1 Early Years
- 2 Parental and community involvement
- 3 Leadership
- 4 Governance
- 5 Children and Young People's Action Zones

> Conclusion

> Information Sources

Introduction

Northern Ireland has experienced difficult times in the past year.

Notwithstanding the enormous progress made socially and economically following the Good Friday Agreement fifteen years ago, rumblings of discontent and increasing tensions between neighbouring communities have left the thoughtful observer in little doubt that all is not well in some of our more disadvantaged communities.

This discontent erupted in the 'Flag Protests' following the decision by Belfast City Council to restrict the days on which the Union Flag is flown on the City Hall. It was widely acknowledged that the roots of this protest lay in the raft of problems experienced by the PUL (Protestant Unionist Loyalist) community which has generated growing disillusionment and disaffection with the political process.

The flag decision was the touch paper which ignited a convulsion of protest.

The Unionist Forum is constituted by a broad coalition of unionist political parties and community and cultural organisations as a response to the protests with a remit to look at the canon of issues causing such anger. The Deprivation and Educational Underachievement working group remains one of the consistent work strands which emerged from the Unionist Forum.

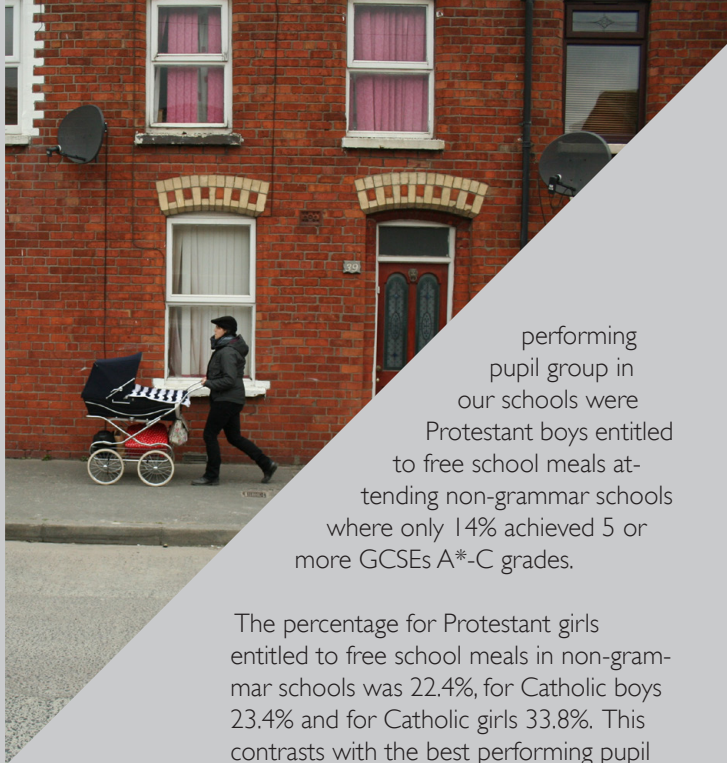
Educational underachievement is not unique to loyalist working class communities nor is it a recent phenomenon. Extensive research has been undertaken and much is known about the problem. Many reports have been compiled, strategies devised, and pilot schemes implemented yet never the less the problem persists, most acutely among younger working class protestant males.

The working group was tasked with taking an overview of the area to identify what actions are necessary to lead to improved outcomes for those groups most under-achieving. In doing this we realise that our expectations need to be realistic and outcomes realisable, given the complexity of the problem and timescale necessary to see sustainable improvement.

Political will and commitment to action are essential components to addressing the problem.

This represents a call to action to which we invite decision makers to respond -urgently.





performing pupil group in our schools were Protestant boys entitled to free school meals attending non-grammar schools where only 14% achieved 5 or more GCSEs A*-C grades.

The percentage for Protestant girls entitled to free school meals in non-grammar schools was 22.4%, for Catholic boys 23.4% and for Catholic girls 33.8%. This contrasts with the best performing pupil group, Catholic girls at Grammar schools, where 97.8% achieved 5 or more GCSEs grade A*-C

Many observers have identified educational underachievement (and consequent under-employment) as a significant contributor to the sense of alienation felt by working class communities. The belief that educational underachievement is a phenomenon primarily of disadvantaged communities is given considerable support by the statistics.

In 2011/12 62% of all school leavers achieved 5 or more GCSEs A*-C grades. If free school meals entitlement is taken as an indicator of disadvantage the worst

The working group interviewed a wide range of individuals active in the field of education including academics, researchers, teachers and head teachers. We sought the views of parents, community leaders and organisations with a particular interest in educational underachievement. In the course of our interviews many points were raised but certain themes emerged with conspicuous regularity.

THE THEMES

1 Importance of the early years

Many children who are underachieving at school have experienced chaotic and uncertain childhoods.

In areas of disadvantage there is a high incidence of teenage pregnancy. Associated problems of poor antenatal nutrition, smoking, alcohol and drug use all have a bearing on cognitive development and future academic achievement. Breastfeeding provides superior nutrition and is associated with optimal physical and intellectual development, yet rates of breastfeeding are lowest within deprived communities.

Extensive research and much comment have been devoted to the vital importance of the antenatal period and first few years of life. The foundations of all aspects of human development, physical, psychological, cognitive, social and emotional, are laid down in early childhood. Adverse events in these years can have a profound influence on wellbeing, health, and educational achievements.

'Chaotic and uncertain early years have a powerful influence on the full range of psychological and physiological systems. It takes longer to integrate new knowledge; it is harder for children to learn if they have experienced this kind of uncertainty.' (Dr Harry Burns CMO Scotland Kilbardon Lecture.)

Good speech and language development is the foundation for learning but a significant proportion of children are beginning school with very poor language skills. Many children who could benefit are not receiving Speech and Language Therapy.



Background Statistical

Early interventions are more effective and less complex than later remedial measures. Research evidence shows that positive outcomes can be achieved in the short and long term, and interventions have high benefit cost ratios. Sure Start has done excellent work in this area but many children who would benefit are not referred, are ineligible or are referred late. Provision is patchy and uptake suboptimal.

There is a need to encourage positive parenting, promoting the role of parents as educators and giving confidence and self belief to parents whose own childhood and school experience may have been difficult or negative. The Family Nurse Partnerships have been particularly effective in this regard. UK pilots have shown a range of benefits;

mothers show increased confidence and higher aspirations for themselves and their children, they stop smoking, they show higher levels of breastfeeding and their children develop in line with age group norms. Relationships within families are healthier and more stable and the home environment less chaotic and more conducive to emotional and cognitive development.

Learning begins from birth not at school entry therefore health care and education need to be coordinated and integrated to ensure optimal development in the early years. There is a need to recognise the overlap between health and education for this age group. Health Visitors have contact with every newborn and are ideally placed to reinforce positive actions and to recognise early warning signs. Their training is medically based but would be enhanced by an educational component.

Fathers have a crucial role to play at this stage and attention should be given to helping health and educational professionals interact with fathers and to creating opportunities for fathers to be role models in Sure Start, pre-school and primary school settings.

2

The need for greater parental and community involvement with schools

This will involve removing real and perceived obstacles and creating a consistent positive flow of information between schools and parents. There are some outstanding examples of schools actively involving parents and community groups but in general most schools serving disadvantaged communities struggle to achieve this. Parent support workers tasked with building relationships with parents and enabling them in their role as co-educators can act as a bridge between home and school, facilitating greater involvement.

Parental involvement in schooling results in better academic outcomes. Several interviewees commented on the lack of engagement between parents and teaching staff, particularly in working class unionist communities. Education is seen as something that happens in school. Some parents appear to lack the confidence to engage with teachers. This contrasts with attitudes in nationalist communities where many regard education as a right and a means of upward social mobility.

It was acknowledged that in unionist communities a change in culture to embrace education is needed. Although many parents value education highly others need encouraged, motivated and empowered. There is a need to make it easier for parents to be involved in their children's education.

Greater partnership between education, statutory, community and voluntary sectors is necessary since all have a role in supporting and delivering education. After schools clubs, homework classes, mentoring schemes, sports coaching and dance classes all aid children's development and are delivered by the community and voluntary sectors. The community sector needs to be encouraged to recognise its importance and responsibility. There are not enough well resourced community settings for children to get homework support. Making school facilities more available for community use would help make schools less intimidating to parents. Schools would benefit from learning how the community sector works and by implementing a community development approach when working with parents.

3

Leadership

within the non-selective secondary schools.

Notwithstanding the fact that there are examples of exceptional leadership in the non-selective secondary sector, the demands of the job are not adequately counter balanced by the rewards of senior management posts

At present head teachers of non-selective secondary schools find significant time taken up with crisis management and remuneration is considered inadequate for this stress.

The current salary structure does not allow for incentivisation of leadership in schools with high levels of deprivation or pupils with special, multiple or complex needs.

There is considerable variation in the performance of schools, particularly post-primary schools.

Children's academic achievements are influenced by the ethos, expectations and standards of behaviour within a school as well as in the home. Experienced leadership and teaching in a school can make a tremendous difference. Outstanding schools have outstanding and well distributed leadership.

There was concern that within the controlled sector career progression was associated with teaching in the grammar schools sector.

There is a lack of incentive to attract the most able to leadership

4

Governance

Poorly performing schools, heads and teachers are not held to account. Education and Library Boards and Boards of governors are often too acquiescent, do not challenge heads and teachers and do not scrutinize their performance.

There should be more rigorous performance management in schools. Poorly performing heads and teachers need to be identified and helped. The support and challenge roles within the Education and Library Boards need separated; it is difficult for one person to effectively fulfil both roles.

More people, including parents from disadvantaged communities should be encouraged to act as school governors. It is a service for the community which should be more highly esteemed and promoted. Working class parents should be actively recruited and supported in the role of school governor.

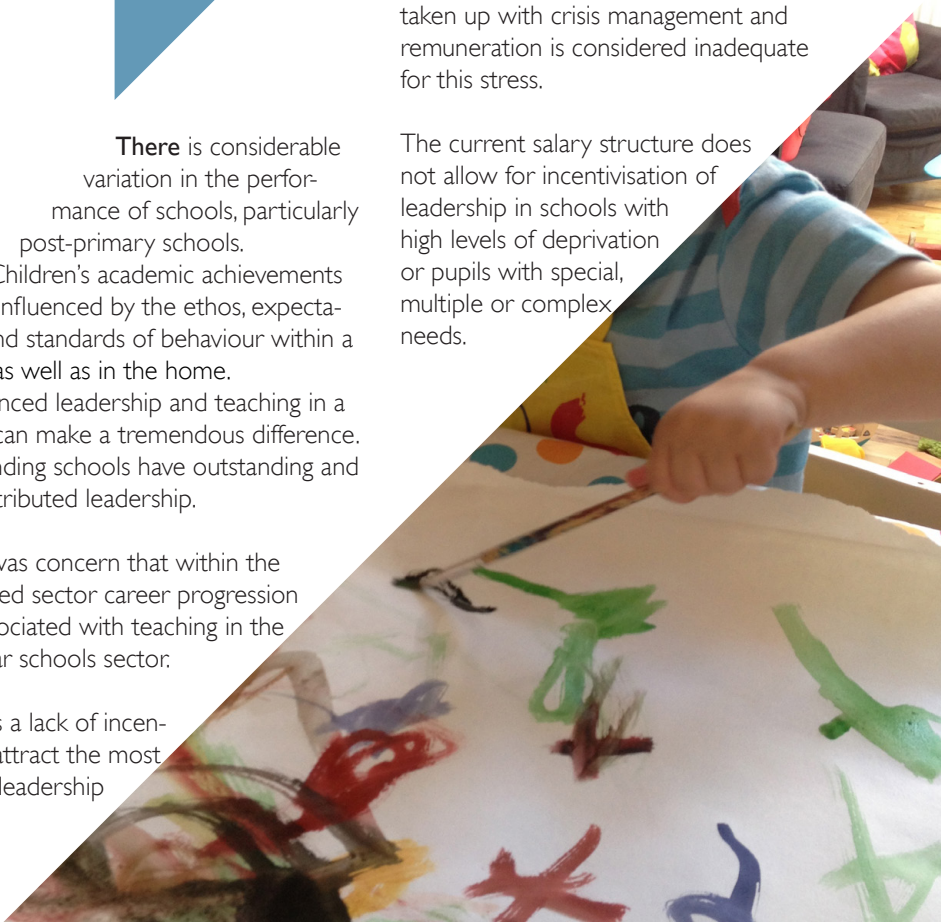
The responsibilities and authority of Boards of Governors should be reviewed and compared with practice in the Catholic Maintained Sector.

5

Children & Young People's Action Zones

Reversing the cycle of educational underachievement is a generational project which will take 15-20 years. Despite many projects proving effective at improving educational performance, the educational gains are not sustained when the project ends or the pupils move to a new class or school. The Manifesto for Education produced by the Greater Shankill Agreed Agenda Group argues convincingly the benefits of children and young people's actions zones which 'promote the focus and gain the long term commitment from all key stakeholders to drive and sustain year-on-year improvements towards the city and regional averages.'

Action zones create partnerships between schools, community, statutory



agencies and private sector partners. Action zones elsewhere in the UK 'developed a wide-range of specialist interventions at all key stages for children and young people (0-24 years old) and their families, tailored to the specific needs of the area'

The zones were successful at attracting additional resources and private sector partners bringing leadership structure, experience and resource to the work of the zones.

The effect of the zones is to ensure at every stage of a young person's educational journey and particularly at transition points progress is maintained through to entry into the labour force. However they need to be sustained over years following children through various stages of need.

Unionist political parties differ in their views on academic selection at the age of eleven. However there is general agreement that the present situation whereby grammar schools fill all available places regardless of test scores has led to increasing difficulties for non-selective post-primary schools with high concentrations of children with special educational needs and from areas of social disadvantage. This socially imbalanced intake poses severe challenges for both pupils and teachers. Research suggests that creating more socially balanced intakes will benefit everyone.

If selection is retained then placing a cap on places to grammar schools is necessary in order to protect the integrity of the educational system as a whole.

Schools need to be large enough to offer a wide, economically relevant and motivating range of courses for all young people.

Educational underachievement is not new or unique to Northern Ireland. It has exercised the minds of our most able educators and frustrated the aspirations of political leaders for decades. However the differences in international educational outcomes and examples of excellence in our own country prove that the cause is not hopeless.

Recognising the severe constraints on public spending and the difficult economic climate which has prevailed for some years and is likely to continue for some time to come, the primary emphasis of this report is on how current resources could be better used to address this long standing problem.

While this will entail doing some things better or more efficiently it may also mean a reallocation of finite resources and a raft of policy changes in the next Programme for Government.

Recommendations

Hard choices will have to be made. There is a strong argument that front-loading, including more investment in preschool years, will ultimately prevent more costly interventions being needed at a later stage.

Early Years

The Departments of Health and Education should create a task force to better coordinate their work with children 0-3 years. The importance of pre-conception and antenatal health behaviours should be given greater emphasis in the educational curriculum. Support in the antenatal period should become the designated responsibility of a specified health professional. Breast feeding champions should be sought and appointed in working class communities.

Health Visitors should have a dual role of Health Worker and Educator and their training should reflect this with more emphasis on the learning processes of pre-school children. Training in positive parenting skills needs to be much more widely delivered and will be less stigmatised if led by health professionals.

The Sure Start Scheme is too restricted in its geographical distribution and is often oversubscribed. Many children and families who would benefit from it are excluded. It should be expanded and children referred earlier.

More Speech and Language outreach workers are needed to prepare children who show signs of delayed language development for school. A more consistent approach to this is required by Sure Start, nurseries and the primary schools to ensure a seamless process.

Parent & community involvement

Training for teachers and classroom assistants should include the principles of community development and the skills for recruiting parents as co-educators. Schools should have a dedicated person, a non-teaching member of staff, to outreach into the community and engage with parents.

Community groups, particularly those working with children or with an interest in education should champion the benefits of education, and develop cooperative relationships with local schools. Every community group should look at ways in which it can contribute to the education of the children in its community.

The Department of Education and School Principals should take steps to make school facilities available for community use. This can be self-funding or even income generating.

Schools should look at ways to improve their communication with parents.

The Parent's Guide produced by the Integrated Education Fund, East Belfast Partnership and Inner East Youth Project for parents of children starting primary school in East Belfast is an example of good practice which could be rolled out province wide at minimal cost. School web-sites should carry more information for parents.

More community based, academically enriched summer schemes are needed to prevent some of the educational loss experienced by children over the summer holidays.

Leadership

Priority should be given to attracting the most able and talented to headships in the non-selective secondary school sector; to those schools which present the greatest educational challenges.

The current salary structure should be changed to incentivise leadership positions in schools with high levels of deprivation or pupils with special, multiple or complex needs.

There needs to be more resource invested in a non-selective secondary school specific leadership programme for aspiring heads such as the Future Leaders Programme in England. This would both motivate and support teachers providing fast-track and high quality training.

More consideration should be given to linkages between high performing and low performing schools to raise expectations, create confidence and produce improvement.

Governance

The Department of Education should institute more rigorous performance management in schools, identifying poorly performing heads and teachers and providing clear processes to help. Boards of Governors must be encouraged to hold heads and teachers to account. A recruitment drive for school governors should be instituted and working class parents actively sought and supported in the role.

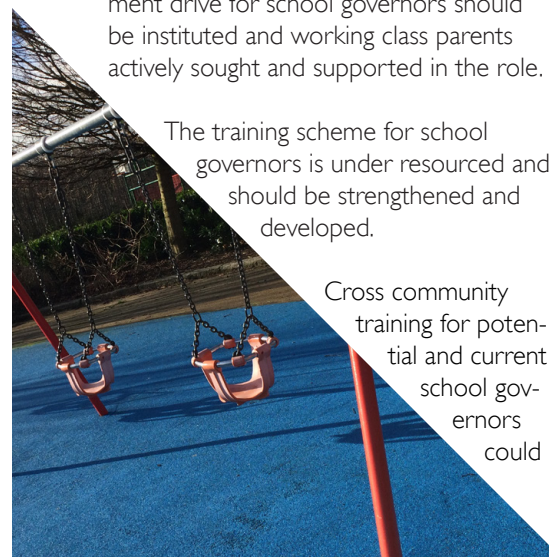
The training scheme for school governors is under resourced and should be strengthened and developed.

Cross community training for potential and current school governors could

offer benefits, increasing capacity, motivation and vision, and providing opportunity for learning from each other.

Children & Young People's Action Zone

Consideration should be given to creating Children and Young People's Action Zones in the areas where educational outcomes are poorest and where previous investment has failed to produce sustained improvement. The collaborative partnerships created and the attention to transition stages offers a more holistic approach and greater continuity maintaining progress through to employment.



Conclusion

The woeful educational outcomes for children from our most disadvantaged communities is a damning indictment of our 'world class educational system'

In fact our educational results are only average for industrialised nations (PISA 2012) and the 'long tail' of underachievement is greater in Northern Ireland than anywhere else in the UK.

We are failing our most needy children.

To change this will require political will, determination and long term commitment.

The solutions are well known but

must be implemented in a coordinated and coherent way.

Renewed focus and support for families through early childhood is essential. This should include expanding Sure Start and developing the Health Visitor role and provision.

Schools require dynamic visionary leadership, competent teaching and robust and effective governance; Boards of Governors can no longer simply be cheerleaders for a school. Meaningful partnerships between schools, parents and local communities are essential; this will require dedicated community outreach staff.

While success may have many faces every pupil should be encouraged and expected to achieve; our job as politicians is to ensure that each child is now given the chance to succeed.

The challenge of providing our students with the skills, mindset and resilience to succeed in a rapidly changing employment market will only be met by increased collaboration between educationalists, industry, business and local communities.

This is not simply an economic imperative it is a matter of social justice. We all have a role to play and our children deserve no less.

Information Sources

Connolly P, Purvis D, O'Grady P. 2013. Advancing Shared Education. Ministerial Advisory group. www.qub.ac.uk/mag

Early Years (0-6) Strategy. June 2010. www.deni.gov.uk

Greater Shankill Agreed Agenda Group. 2012. Manifesto for Education,

Joseph Rowntree Foundation. May 2012. Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion in Northern Ireland 2012. www.jrf.org.uk

van Poortvliet M. May 2012. Out of Trouble: Families with Complex Problems. New Philanthropy Capital

Purvis D. March 2011. Educational Disadvantage and the Protestant Working Class; A Call to Action

Salisbury Sir R. 2013. An Independent Review of the Common Funding Scheme. www.deni.gov.uk

Sutton Trust-Education Endowment Foundation 2013. Teaching and Learning Toolkit www.educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/toolkit



Working Group Members

Paul Clissold, Michael Copeland MLA

Cllr John Kyle (Chair)

Mervyn Storey MLA

Barbara Trotter

