

## **EDUCATIONAL UNDERACHIEVEMENT AND THE PROTESTANT WORKING CLASS Consultation Response: December 2010**

Dear Working Group Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Consultation; 'Educational Underachievement and Protestant Working Class'. Educational under-performance among children and young people in Northern Ireland (NI) is an important issue for the NI Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY). Within our Children's Rights Review<sup>1</sup> (CRR), NICCY highlighted Protestant, working class male pupils as a group at particular risk of experiencing educational disadvantage and/or low educational attainment. NICCY is aware that educational disadvantage and inequality does not impact upon all sectors of society equally. Every child and young person in NI should have equal access to all educational provision and the opportunity to fulfil all aspects of their potential.

### **Background**

NICCY has a statutory duty to keep under review the adequacy and effectiveness of law, practice and services relating to the rights and best interests of children and young people. Where particular groups of children and young people are disadvantaged, NICCY has a role to hold Government to account to ensure that appropriate measures are put in place to address specific gaps in provision or to secure alternative, more effective provision.

NICCY is required to base all its work on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Article 28 of the UNCRC concerns children's right of access to education, and places a number of requirements on Government, including the implementation of measures to encourage regular attendance at schools and reduce drop-out rates. Article 29 requires the Government to ensure that children's education is directed (among a range of areas) towards developing children's personalities, talents, mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential. In the context of the consultation exercise, these provisions must be viewed in light of article 2 of the Convention, which requires Government to respect and ensure children's rights under the UNCRC without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of children's religion or social origin.

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<sup>1</sup> NICCY (2008) 'Children's Rights: Rhetoric or Reality. A Review of Children's Rights in Northern Ireland 2007/8'. Belfast: NICCY.



The link between poverty and low educational achievement and outcomes was highlighted in NICCY's Children's Rights Review. A 2007 report<sup>2</sup>, jointly commissioned by NICCY, the Department of Finance and Personnel and OFMDFM, noted that increased funding was given to the Western and Belfast Education and Library Boards in recognition of the higher proportions of children eligible for free school meals in those areas. Despite this, there still existed a problem regarding attainment levels, particularly for secondary school pupils in the Belfast area, in that the structures for addressing social disadvantage within the education system were not adequately addressing the problem in relation to school attainment levels.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, in its most recent Concluding Observations<sup>3</sup> regarding the UK's compliance with the UNCRC, expressed concern that significant inequalities persisted '*with regard to the school achievement of children living with their parents in economic hardship*' (paragraph 66). The Committee made a number of recommendations of relevance to the devolved NI Government regarding the need to address these inequalities, including recommendations to:

- '(a) Continue and strengthen its efforts to reduce the effects of the social background of children on their achievement in school;*
- (b) Invest considerable additional resources in order to ensure the right of all children to a truly inclusive education which ensures the full enjoyment to children from all disadvantaged, marginalized and school-distant group'* (paragraph 67).

As the Working Group's Research Summary indicates, there are a myriad of complex and interdependent factors which contribute to underachievement amongst young working class Protestant males. The statistics provided in the Research Summary are helpful in providing information regarding their performance in English and Maths at GCSE compared with their counterparts in the grammar and maintained secondary school sectors. However, in seeking to address this issue effectively and to progress the work further, it may be helpful to obtain additional quantitative and qualitative data regarding young Protestant males' educational experiences. For example, it would be interesting to identify which subjects they are most likely to select at GCSE and the subjects in which they tend to perform best. It would also be useful to track a cohort of young Protestant male's educational and employment experiences through a number of longitudinal case studies. This would facilitate more detailed insights into, for example, their motivation for selecting particular subjects at GCSE, the various influencing factors on their perceptions of education and employment, the critical points at which their views are most likely to be impacted and the nature of their paths

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<sup>2</sup> Economic Research Institute for NI and the Institute of Fiscal Studies (2007) 'An Analysis of Public Expenditure on Children in Northern Ireland'. Belfast: NICCY, DFP, OFMDFM.

<sup>3</sup> UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2008) 'Concluding Observations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child: United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland'. United Nations: Geneva.



through school, further education and employment/unemployment and the factors which have influenced these pathways. In addition, while the focus is often on young Protestant working class males in urban settings, it is be important to also consider the issues (similar or different) affecting this group located outside Belfast and in rural settings.

## **Policy-related Measures**

### *Equality Indicators*

Following publication of its report, *Every Child an Equal Child: An Equality Commission Statement on Key Inequalities in Education and a Strategy for Intervention*, the Equality Commission commissioned a project to develop an Indicator Framework to track achievements against three education-related goals of access, attainment and attitude (inclusion and participation of all children). One of the priority groups identified is Protestant working class boys. The data collected is intended to establish baseline positions to support further engagement with key stakeholders. While still work in progress, the use of indicators and data collected through the associated measures could be helpful in supporting those seeking to address the issues of underachievement affecting this particular group.

### *Funding Provision*

Research indicates early intervention and investment in children has a positive impact on children's educational experiences and indeed on many other aspects of their life. NICCY recommended in the CRR that a purely economic response (greater funding per pupil in areas of high deprivation) will not suffice for addressing lower attainment levels among the socially disadvantaged, although clearly additional funding would be welcomed. NICCY recommended that a holistic response is required, taking into account the broad range of social, cultural, educational and financial factors (NICCY 2008, p.292).

### *Multi-agency approach required*

The demand for 'joined-up collaborative working' amongst government departments has been highlighted in relation to many key policy issues in NI, however there is little evidence that this is being implemented. A pledge by Government contained in the Children and Young People's Strategy (OFMDFM) which is particularly relevant to the issue of underachievement states that 'We will work to ensure a coordinated, partnership approach to policy development across Government and the coherent delivery of services for all children and young people to produce improved outcomes...' (p,15). This is clearly an opportunity for a partnership approach to be put into action. Clearly the challenges involved in addressing Protestant male underachievement require the knowledge, expertise and resources of multiple agencies and the adoption of a co-ordinated, strategic approach. With this in mind, it



may be useful to consider whether one agency could assume a lead role in co-ordinating an initiative to tackle underachievement amongst young people in the Protestant community.

Evidently the current Inquiry of the Education Committee into 'Successful Post-primary Schools Serving Disadvantaged Communities' will yield relevant qualitative and quantitative information and it will be important to take account of any policy and practice recommendations that may emerge.

### **Practical Measures**

- Clearly it will be important to identify and learn from examples of good practice. Primary and post-primary schools attracting pupils from the Protestant working class will be able to evidence of positive educational experiences for young people. It may be helpful for the working group to highlight key characteristics and consider how these might be replicated in other schools, for example through teacher exchanges, shared teaching experiences, curriculum planning. Indeed members of the working group with teaching experience may have expertise or be able to advise on sources of expertise in this regard.
- While it is recognised that there are potential cultural differences with regard to the perceived importance of education, it may be helpful to explore educational initiatives generating positive outcomes in similarly disadvantaged Catholic communities.
- The working group may wish to consider consulting with the Education and Training Inspectorate to draw on their expertise and knowledge of effective learning approaches and initiatives.
- There may be value in working with informal education or alternative education providers to identify learning approaches and initiatives which are effective in engaging disaffected or disadvantaged young people.
- There may be merit in engaging in discussions with the parents of young Protestant working class males to explore their perceptions of education, their own experiences and their aspirations for their children. This could help to inform teachers and other key stakeholders' approaches to engaging with young people and their parents.
- Creating opportunities for Protestant working class young people to discuss their career aspirations at an early stage and gain meaningful work experience in Key Stage 3 could help to motivate young people in school and enable them to focus on achieving particular educational goals.

### **Research/Reports into 'what works in tackling underachievement'**

<http://www.hmie.gov.uk/documents/publication/hmiemoeo.html> (Sections 5-7)

[http://www.col.org/sitecollectiondocuments/boysunderachievement\\_web.pdf](http://www.col.org/sitecollectiondocuments/boysunderachievement_web.pdf)

