Education Policy in Northern Ireland: a Review

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Abstract: While Northern Ireland (NI) society continues on its journey away from conflict, schools and teacher training colleges remain largely segregated on a religious basis. Since the establishment of the first integrated school only twelve more have been established out of 215 post-primary schools. While successive education ministers have attempted to end academic selection at eleven, it remains an option for primary school pupils. While academic outcomes are very good among the most able, international assessment outcomes indicate underperformance among too many, despite strategies to address this. A modern curriculum is in place which aspires to equip students for the world of work by focusing on the development of transferable skills with a strong emphasis on information technology. Schools increasingly collaborate through the growth of area learning communities. The strong accountability agenda driven by the Department of Education (DENI) and the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) creates a climate of 'performativity' among headteachers. There is a need for school leadership development which is being addressed to some extent.

Keywords: education, policy, segregation, integrated education, selection, long tail of underachievement, collaboration, performativity, Northern Ireland

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Context

Regarding the current educational system in NI, Frank Cassidy, president of the Association of School and College Leaders, (ASCLNI), accurately articulated the present situation:

> We are 'a house divided' both into broadly non-denomination/catholic sectors and selective and non-selective post-primary schools. The educational arguments are difficult enough, but they are further compounded by conflicting political and social change ideologies and the direct involvement of politicians. (Cassidy, 2009, p. 1).

The history of the NI state has its origins in the 17th century when the north of the island of Ireland was colonized by Scottish and English Protestants, establishing Ulster as different from the rest of Ireland which was predominantly Catholic. During the 18th and 19th century, the standard of living in the north rose as industry and manufacturing flourished, notably ship-building, rope manufacture and the production of linen, while in the south the unequal distribution of land and resources resulted in a relatively poor standard of living for the large Catholic population. Political separation of NI from the rest of Ireland did not come until the early 20th century, when Protestants and Catholics divided into two warring camps over the issue of Irish home rule. In an attempt to placate both factions, the British passed the Government of Ireland Act in 1920, which divided Ireland into two separate political entities, each with some powers of self-government.

Fitzpatrick (2007) reports that, in the census of 2001, there were 1.7 million people living in NI and it has changed little in the intervening years. The population is relatively young with 22% of the population under 15, compared to 19% in GB and 22% in the Republic of Ireland (RoI). In 2005 the NI birth rate at 12.9 births per 1,000, population was the highest in the UK. The population level is expected to peak at 1.8 million around 2030 resulting in a population younger than most other industrial countries. The fast growing

population has resulted in higher unemployment rates and greater inactivity rates, and with the global economic downturn, this situation is unlikely to improve.

The Contemporary Educational Situation in the Society, with Particular Reference to Schooling

Before 1921 and partition, almost all National (primary) Schools in Ireland, established from 1827 onwards and publicly funded, were denominational schools controlled by the churches. In 1920 the Lynn committee was established to give advice on educational matters. Its report in 1922-3 formed the basis of the Education (NI) Act 1923. The Catholic Church was not represented on the Committee despite Lord Londonderry issuing invitations to the Catholic authorities. They declined each invitation asserting 'the only satisfactory system of education for Catholics is one wherein Catholic children are taught in Catholic schools by Catholic teachers under Catholic auspices'. This refusal of the Catholic authorities to join the Lynn Committee was the single most important determinant of the educational history of NI from 1920 to the present. By refusing to sit, they surrendered their influence when the basis of NI's educational development was being determined. It was unsurprising that the committee subsequently based its report and recommendations according to Protestant educational assumptions, nor that not all of the members of the Lynn Committee were disappointed that the Catholic authorities stayed away.

Over the next two decades, the Protestant churches transferred control of their schools to the state, while Catholic churches maintained control of theirs. Consequently, state schools became 'controlled schools' and the Catholic schools as 'maintained schools'. While teacher salaries in both types were met by the state, the state share of capital costs in maintained schools was 50% which has now risen to 100% where schools waive the right to a majority on the board of governors (Osborne, 1993).

The Education (NI) Act in 1947 provided access to secondary and university education for people from less advantaged backgrounds. In the 1960s and 1970s, while the rest of the UK adopted a comprehensive education system, NI retained academic selection at age eleven with pupils proceeding to a grammar or a non-grammar school. There are two types of grammar school, controlled and voluntary, the latter having much greater autonomy. There are maintained and non-maintained voluntary grammar schools, Catholic and Protestant respectively, managed by Boards of Governors. Until 1987, it was possible to attend such schools by paying fees, a strategy benefiting the better-off.

The majority of maintained schools are controlled by the Catholic Church. In order to facilitate the management of these schools the Education Reform (NI) Order 1989 transferred responsibility for all Catholic maintained schools to a statutory body, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), which exercises certain responsibilities in relation to Catholic maintained schools, including providing advice in matters relating to this sector and the employment of teaching staff. The 1989 Order also introduced a new category of schools, the integrated school, whose primary focus is to provide a religiously mixed environment capable of attracting reasonable numbers of both Catholic and Protestant pupils supported by the NI Council for Integrated Education (NICIE). Managed by a Board of Governors, there has been a steady increase in the numbers of these schools. In addition there are 8 Irish language schools supported by Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, most grant-aided from government, and 10 independent Christian schools associated with the Free Presbyterian Church which do not receive government funds.

When direct rule of NI from Westminster was introduced in March, 1972, legislation for NI, on various matters including education, was by way of Order in Council at Westminster. This resulted in legislation in Westminster being largely mirrored in NI with limited discussion or debate. As a result of the MacCrory report (1970) five Education and Library Boards (ELBs) were established to take over the duties of the then County Education Authorities. These boards were quangos with delegated power to supervise the allocation of

budgets, transport matters, school meals and human resources and eventually give support on curricular matters.

Curriculum Reform

Before 1989 schools had great freedom in choosing the curricular experience of their students. The post-primary experience was aimed at success in the 'ordinary-level' and 'advanced-level' examinations. The Education Reform (NI) Order, 1989, established open enrolment, a statutory curriculum, the reform of governing bodies and Local Management of Schools (LMS). In addition to the traditional subject areas six cross-curricular themes were introduced, Information Technology, Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU), Cultural Heritage (CH), Health Education and Economic Awareness.

> Education for Mutual Understanding is about self-respect, and respect for others, and the improvement of relationships between people of differing cultural traditions. (NICC, 1990).

As an integral part of their education the themes aimed to enable pupils.

> …to learn to respect and value themselves and others; to appreciate the interdependence of people within society; to know about and understand what is shared as well as what is different about their cultural traditions; and to appreciate how conflict may be handled in non-violent ways. (NICC, 1990).

EMU and CH represented a courageous move towards conflict resolution, yet Smith (1992) reported that the inclusion of EMU caught schools unaware and unprepared in terms of policy documentation and skills. The same author (1996) reported a less than enthusiastic approach to implementation due to several factors including the perception of government meddling. However, the common curriculum provided the prospect of developing programmes of study

such as history and religious education which took cognizance of two main cultural traditions in NI (Richardson, 1990). The initial research into the introduction of Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) to the statutory curriculum in NI (Smith and Robinson, 1996) had shown that, in conceptual terms, teachers found EMU to be elusive. While there was contact between children from different religious and cultural traditions engaged in a range of activities, there was recognition that EMU should address wider global issues. The inclusion of EMU in the formal curriculum precipitated more widespread debate and concerns about its purpose, many feeling that such cross community contact was unsophisticated 'social engineering' in its crudest sense.

Since 2002 and following the Harland study (2000) the curriculum has been extensively reviewed with an emphasis on skill development. White (2003, p. 2) reported:

> The traditional subjects are still key building blocks in the whole structure. Art and design, music, English, Irish, geography, history, modern languages, mathematics, science, technology and design and physical education are each separable 'strands' within 'general learning areas' and have their own objectives and learning outcomes.

While all pupils study this broad base of subjects the reformed curriculum has a powerful and challenging emphasis on skills-based areas such as Self Management, Working with Others, Critical and Creative Thinking, Managing Information, Problem Solving, Decision Making, Communication, Application of Number and ICT.

While this approach was compulsorily introduced to Key Stage 1, 2 and 3 students (5-14) and teacher training provided through officers from the Curriculum and Advisory Service (CASS) of the five local education authorities, termed Education and Library Boards (ELBs) and was a clear follow-on from the revised Primary Curriculum, it presents challenges to many teachers in terms of meeting the assessment imperative around examination results at GCSE and A-level. The emphasis on skill development needs to be

matched by a change in the traditional, paper-based assessment techniques. To address this, the Council for Curriculum and Assessment (CCEA) is developing new 'controlled assessment' strategies. There is a commitment to develop thinking skills that help children go beyond the mere acquisition of knowledge, to deepen their understanding and application of their ideas, to make decisions, as well as to monitor and evaluate their own progress. CCEA list these skills as Managing Information; Thinking, Problem-solving and Decision-Making; Being Creative; Working with Others; and Self-Management. The problem remains with the strategies used to test such skills. As long as these remain largely paper-based they will continue test the students' ability only to recall information and handle data. At the highest level of assessment, GCSE and A-level, the students learn the skill of constructing mental maps of the subject matter, and practise the skill of accessing these maps in the context of examination questions. For highly motivated students and those with appropriate cognitive skills, such an exercise is possible. For others it is difficult. The other skills that the world of work requires are not tested. School teachers know this and teach to the test, so that student skill development is limited.

The aims and objectives of the new NI curriculum show a strong connection to personal development, and to contribution to society and the economy. At age 14, pupils select which subjects to continue to study for General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examinations. Currently it is compulsory to study English, mathematics, science and religious studies. Most pupils usually elect to continue with other subjects and many study for eight or nine GCSEs and in some cases up to ten or eleven. GCSEs mark the end of compulsory education in NI. At age 16, many pupils stay at school and choose to study Advanced Level AS and A2 level subjects together with an increasing range of more vocational qualifications . Those choosing AS and A2 levels normally pick three or four subjects and success in these can determine acceptance into higher education courses at university. Many others attend Further Education (FE) colleges where they can access a range of vocational courses. A development of the past few years has been the increase in collaboration

between post-primary schools and FE colleges, discussed in detail later. One of the greatest challenges for leadership through all of the innovations has been the implementation of the Entitlement Framework (EF) which became mandatory through the Education (NI) Order (2006). It places a requirement on schools to offer greater breadth and balance in the courses and pathways Available to young people is a key contributor to our overall goal of raising standards within all post-primary schools and of improving educational achievement. It is designed to offer all post primary pupils aged 14 and above greater choice and flexibility by providing them, by 2013, with access to a minimum number of courses at Key Stage 4 (current target 24) and minimum number of courses at post-16 (current target 27). In both cases at least one-third of the courses must be general (academic) and at least one-third applied (vocational/professional/technical).

Segregated Education

Fitzpatrick (2007) writing for the OECD provided a detailed summary of the school types and populations. The system is administered by the Department of Education and the five ELBs, though plans are well in train to transfer their work entirely to the new Education and Skills Authority (ESA), a body which will also take on the previous activities of the (CCEA) and the Leadership College, known as the Regional Training Unit (RTU). The 300,000 pupils are educated predominantly on a segregated basis. In the primary sector there are 383 controlled (predominately Protestant) and 396 maintained Catholic schools with only 42 integrated. In the post-primary sector there are 74 controlled (grammar and non-grammar) and 71 maintained non-grammar schools with 29 Catholic voluntary grammar, 22 other voluntary grammar schools and only 20 integrated schools.

The first planned Integrated school in NI opened in 1981 when Lagan College began its first cohort of 28 pupils (Moffatt, 1993, Abbott *et al*., 1999). In the 1980s Lagan was joined by nine new planned primary schools and an

additional second-level school, Hazelwood College. The rate at which new Integrated schools was opening increased as a consequence of the Education Reform (NI) Order 1989 which committed government to support its development. However since 2000 the emphasis has moved from new build schools to the conversion of existing schools to integrated status, the most recent being Parkhall Integrated School in Antrim in 2009.

This slow rate of movement towards integrated status is a source of frustration to those who support it, particularly as recent research indicates strong public support. (Ipsos Mori, 2011, p. 1):

> The vast majority of people in Northern Ireland support schools sharing facilities, partnering or collaborating from different religious traditions.

The research further claims that even in the current period of financial austerity, the majority would choose the amalgamation of schools and the sharing of resources over cut backs in other educational areas. Peter Robinson (2011a), NI's First Minister has recommended that a commission is set up to examine a way of bringing about integration of schools.

> We cannot hope to move beyond our present community divisions while our young people are educated separately ... I believe that future generations will scarcely believe that such division and separation was common for so long...The reality is that our education system is a benign form of apartheid, which is fundamentally damaging to our society.

Using ICT to address the issue of a Divided Society

Smith and Robinson (1996) argued that despite the intuitively obvious nature of the notion that increased contact and interaction between groups was likely to lead to a reduction in conflict, the empirical evidence to support this notion is limited. They believed that the difficulty of establishing causal links

between inter-group contact and attitudinal change, range from the lack of sensitivity in research instruments to the possibility that attitudinal changes only emerge over a long period of time. They suggest that

> there may be merit in adopting approaches to evaluation which trace significant numbers of individuals who have participated in a variety of educational and reconciliation programmes during the past 25 years (Smith and Robinson, 1996, pp. 77-78).

Pollak (2011), reflecting on a number of cross-border educational programmes, described one such programme, Dissolving Boundaries, as the 'single most outstanding example of mutually beneficial cross-border cooperation between schools … anywhere in Europe, let alone Ireland.' Dissolving Boundaries uses information and communications technology to link teachers and pupils in primary, secondary and special schools in NI and the RoI. The programme, which is managed by the School of Education at the University of Ulster and the Education Department at National University of Ireland, Maynooth, began in 1999 with 52 schools. In the 2010-11 academic year there were 180 participating schools. Funding is provided by the Department of Education and Science in RoI and the Department of Education in NI.

The group of academics at University of Ulster and NUI Maynooth who manage the programme published a report in October 2011 entitled "Dissolving Boundaries: Through Technology in Education' (Austin *et al*., 2011, p. 2). In the report, Matthew Gould, British Ambassador to Israel commented:

> I want to congratulate you on the Dissolving the Boundaries Programme. I think it's a really fantastic programme - and you are real role models to others around the world who want to do the same. We should make sure you share your experiences with people in this region!

Academic Selection at 11

The most significant research on academic selection at 11 was carried out by Gallagher and Smith (2000). In a comprehensive study they reported that:

> We noted above the high academic standards achieved by grammar schools. The corollary of this is that a selective system appears to produce a longer tail of low-achieving schools... no school system has emerged to solve the problem of low-achieving schools. However, a selective system produces a disproportionate number of schools which combine low ability and social disadvantage in their enrolments, thereby compounding the educational disadvantages of both factors. Gallagher and Smith (2000, p. 45) .

With the establishment of the NI Assembly in 1999, direct rule ceased and devolution was reintroduced to NI. This gave the Minister for Education, Martin McGuinness, legislative responsibility for education; he abolished the recently introduced school league tables and initiated the abolishment of the Transfer test (11+), following the Gallagher and Smith review.

Following publication of the Burns Report (2001), he set up a consultation process on its recommendations. The responses from 200,551 households, including 162,000 parents and 21,000 teachers, showed that while 57% of households, 58% of parents, and 64% of teachers, were in favour of abolishing the 11+, 64% of households, 63% of parents, and 62% of teachers favoured the retention of academic selection *per se*. (Department of Education, 2002). The intention was that the last transfer tests would be held in 2008 for pupils transferring to post-primary schools in September 2009.

However, political compromise agreement among politicians around the implementation of the St Andrews Agreement (2006) permitted grammar schools to set their own tests if they desired, and this despite the strong wishes to the contrary of the then Minister for Education, Ruane. These arrangements have resulted in even more testing as the Catholic grammar schools and the state (mainly Protestant) grammar schools could not agree on a common test,

and transferring pupils are required to decide which test to take, many choosing both. Feelings continue to be strong for and against selection at eleven on academic grounds, and there seems little chance of a solution which will satisfy both sides.

Academic Outcomes

In terms of GCSE and A-level examination results, students from NI consistently outperform their peers in the rest of the UK. In 2010 at A-level, for example, 35.7% achieved grades A-A*. When English and Welsh results were added to those, the percentage achieving those grades fell to 27%. (Belfast Telegraph, 2010a).

However while NI students perform well at the top end of the academic spectrum there is much evidence of underperformance at the bottom end. Evidence for this is available from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results.

In response to the need for internationally comparable evidence on student performance, the OECD launched the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). PISA represents a commitment by the governments of OECD countries to monitor the outcomes of education systems in terms of student performance on a regular basis and within a common framework that is internationally accepted. First results from PISA 2000 were published in 2001, revealing wide differences among countries in the performance of 15-year-old students in key subject areas.

Over the decade, in NI much of the debate has concentrated on academic selection of pupils at eleven years. The Northern Irish Minister for Education Catriona Ruane (2009) asserted in a parliamentary statement that,

> The mean scores of students in the north of Ireland dropped over the last three PISA cycles in 2000, 2003 and 2006. The gap in PISA scores on mathematics and reading is larger than the average of OECD countries. It

is larger than the gap in England, Scotland or Wales and considerably larger than the gap in the RoI. Relative to the situation internationally, weak students fall further behind strong students here.

The 'gap' which the minister referred to is the difference in scores between the 5th and the 95th percentile. The 5th percentile is the score at which five per cent of pupils score lower, while the 95th percentile is the score at which five per cent score higher.

She continued:

… 21% of students failed to show baseline reading proficiency in the 2006 PISA cycle. Although that is close to the OECD average of 20% and the figure in England, which is 19%, it is considerably worse than countries such as the RoI, where only 12% of students do not reach the baseline.

The data with regard to PISA from 2000 to 2006 were taken almost exclusively from the Report of the Literacy and Numeracy Taskforce 2008/2009 led by Sir Robert Salisbury (2009, p. 5) who stated that:

The mean scores of students in NI have dropped over the three PISA cycles (2000, 2003, 2006). For example, whereas the mean score for maths in 2000 was 524 (statistically significantly above the OECD average of 500), the score in 2006 was 494 (below the OECD average of 498, but not significantly so). For reading, the mean of 524 obtained on PISA 2000 (OECD: 500) fell to 495 in PISA 2006 (not significantly above the OECD mean of 492).

An issue emerges if one examines what was happening in the schools in the time leading up to the publishing of the 2006 PISA results. Over the period 1998-2003 £40 million was spent by the NI Department of Education (DE) on literacy and numeracy initiatives. In 1998, the DE launched the 'Strategy for

the Promotion of Literacy and Numeracy in NI' in which they promised to focus on:
- Helping teachers become more skilled in identifying the specific weaknesses of pupils with literacy problems and in tackling these weaknesses effectively, and as early as possible;
- the promotion of higher standards across the whole ability range, and particularly among boys;
- and, underpinning both aspects, the need to recognise, disseminate and build on the valuable lessons learnt from the many examples of good practice in the teaching of English, both within NI and further afield.

However, in 2007, the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts Improving literacy and numeracy in schools (NI) Second Report of Session 2006-07 confirmed the existence of a long tail of underperforming children despite the £40 million spend. They described how, despite the establishment of a framework of targets covering expected levels of achievement, 'Significant numbers of children fail to reach appropriate levels of attainment despite the additional funding' CCEA (2006) reported that, at Key Stage 3, in secondary schools, almost 7,000 of the pupils tested (41%) failed to reach the standard expected of their age.

The Public Accounts committee's comments focused sharply on the failure of the Department of Education's initiative to support schools to develop the literacy and numeracy strategy. Following the implementation of this strategy came the reported failings at Key Stage 3 in 2006 along with the 3.8% drop in the PISA figures.

Leigh (2007, p. 1) placed the blame firmly at the door of the department of Education when he asserted:

> … progress in literacy and numeracy attainment levels has been manifestly unsatisfactory and the Department has failed to show sufficient leadership in driving things forward.

Bradshaw (2007, p. 34) suggests a causal link between the 'long tail of underachievement' and the selective education system.

> NI, along with several other countries, displays wide variation around its mean: while some students performed very well, others performed more poorly, a phenomenon often referred to as 'the long tail of underachievement'. This may reflect the fact that NI has a selective education system.

She continued, with reference to the 2006 PISA results:

> In NI, 7.7 per cent of students scored below PISA level 1, which was similar to the OECD average of 7.4 per cent. Balancing this, however, NI also has some high achievers. In the top two levels combined, NI is again slightly above the OECD average with almost 32 per cent compared with an OECD average of 29.3 per cent.

Minister Ruane (2009) blamed the 'underperformance' on selection at eleven years of age.

> I recently met with the Education Minister for Poland, who explained how his country removed academic selection several years ago and they are already seeing improvements in educational standards for all children. A similar picture emerged in Finland where selection was abolished 30 years ago. Finland is currently the top performing country in the PISA tables. Both countries have clearly shown selection is not necessary to achieve high standards in education.

Focusing on this argument that the PISA results confirm the imperative to end selection she commented:

> It is clear from the 2009 PISA survey that the progressive countries where academic selection is not a major factor are capable of

outperforming us to a significant degree. These include Scotland, Estonia, Finland, Canada and New Zealand.

Turning her attention to what she has termed the 'long tail of underachievement' allegedly arising from the existence of academic selection at 11 years, she asserted:

> The survey shows that we are among those with the widest spread in our scores.

Bradshaw (2010) used a comparison of the scores at the 5th and the 95th percentiles giving a robust indication of the typical spread of attainment. He pointed out that NI has indeed, in reading, a larger than average distribution than the OECD mean. The average score of pupils in reading in NI at the 5th percentile was 341 while the score of those at the 95th percentile was 676, a difference of 335 scale points. This was larger than the OECD average difference of 308 scale points and only eight comparison group countries had higher scores. Thus, in this domain, the minister's comment accurately reflected this result.

In mathematics, NI's mean score at the 5th percentile was 348 while the mean score at the 95th percentile was 637, a difference (spread) of 289 scale points. This was lower than the OECD average difference, which was 300 scale points. Just over two-thirds of the OECD countries had a larger difference between the highest and lowest percentiles than NI.

In science the mean score of pupils in NI at the 5th percentile was 336 while the score of those at the 95th percentile was 651, a spread of 315 scale points. By comparison, the average spread across the OECD countries was 305 scale points, indicating that NI has a slightly wider distribution of scores around its mean. Fourteen of the comparison group countries exceeded NI's spread of attainment.

Reasons for the Underperformance

Pricewaterhouse, Coopers (2008) identified reasons for the long tail of under-achievement that included a lack of parental involvement in their children's education, a perceived lack of value placed on education in certain areas, particularly deprived Protestant areas, a shortage of positive role models, the impact of 'The Troubles' and a decline in readiness for schooling at primary level in recent years in terms of behaviour and linguistic development.

Purvis (2010) argued that a series of contributors to underachievement, particularly among male, protestant students include perceptions of literacy as 'female', gender stereotyping on the part of teachers, greater vulnerability of boys to poor teaching, greater likelihood that boys may be less ready to begin formal schooling. She pointed out issues of prolonged attention span, peer group culture, greater incidence of behavioral problems around Attention Deficient Disorder together with the lack of male role models including fathers and male teachers.

There is nothing new in Purvis' observations about working-class youths. Willis (1997) carried out research on a group of 12 working class boys attending Hammerton School in the Midlands during a period of high employment. These Hammerton 'lads' had developed their own 'anti-school' culture which led them to manual employment. He argued that this self-reinforcing educational failure of manual working-class children was different from middle-class patterns found in schools. It had its own logic, experiences, relationships, choices and decisions forged by the widespread influence of a form of patriarchal male domination and sexism within working-class culture itself.

The Hammerton boys, like the Belfast boys decades later, lived with the perception that 'credentialism' could never lead to the 'dismantling of the whole class society' (Willis 2000, p. 38) and the system sought to 'trap them in the foothills of human development' (*ibid.*, pp. 38-39). They saw the gaining of the few meagre qualifications possible for them to be a 'fraudulent offer to the majority of what can really mean something only to the few' (*ibid.)*

Tolson (1977) suggested that school was the place where multiple masculinities were generated, often in opposition to school authority and curriculum. Since then, many others have studied the stances taken by boys as they actively shape gender relations, constructing their masculinity within issues of gender, class, age and sexuality (for example, Brown 1988; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Sewell, 1997/8)

Purvis' argument regarding the perception of literacy as 'female' finds resonance with Bourdieu (1997) who argued that working-class males have much to lose in terms of hegemony through educational success. Young males in Belfast hold the perception that academic success will reduce their masculinity and so they refuse to collude with attempts at education in order to maintain personal significance among peers. Sadly, whereas in the Hammerton example, there was manual work to engage in after school, in Belfast's current economic climate there is none, so while many Belfast protestant boys find significance in the trappings of 'loyalism' such as bonfires and marching bands, others are drawn into the world of drugs and crime.

The Role of the Department of Education (DENI) and the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI)

DENI expresses a vision for education: **"DE exists to ensure that every learner fulfils her or his full potential at each stage of development"**. Around the vision there are four strategic themes:
- Valuing Education;
- Fulfilling Potential;
- Promoting Equality and Inclusion;
- Resourcing Education.

These themes are developed through 'Every School a Good School' (ESAGS) (2009), their school improvement policy, which expresses the characteristics of a successful school in terms of :
- Child-centred provision

- High quality teaching and learning
- Effective leadership
- A school connected to its local community

These themes are adopted by the ETI and used in ESAGS which focuses on several key areas:

- effective leadership and an ethos of aspiration and high achievement;
- high quality teaching and learning, tackling the barriers to learning that many young people face;
- self-evaluation and self-assessment, using performance and other information to effect improvement;
- support to help schools improve – with formal interventions where there is a risk that the quality of education offered in a school is not as high as it should be; and
- engagement between schools, parents and families, recognizing the powerful influence they and local communities exercise on educational outcomes.

The policy, which was published in final form, in April 2009 includes both medium and long term targets for improvements in educational outcomes and an action plan for implementation. In order to make these areas clear to schools, the Deputy Secretary of the DE (2009) clarified the arrangements for monitoring and evaluating progress towards improvement:

- the delivery of the Department's Public Service Agreement targets and other high-level educational outcome targets;
- evidence from ETI inspections on the overall quality of provision and the particular improvements made in the areas of leadership; high quality teaching and learning; tackling the barriers to learning; self evaluation and the effective use of performance data; and links between schools and their local communities;
- the delivery of progress by ESA against the targets in its annual school Improvement Plan; and
- through an Implementation Plan, the timely and effective delivery of the commitments and actions set out in the document.

However, the reality of experience of post-primary school headteachers has been a strong focus on accountability with school inspections carried out by the ETI. This body provides inspection services and advice on all professional educational issues as well as on standards of educational provision throughout schools, colleges and grant-aided institutions.

Prior to devolution, policy on inspection in NI was largely influenced by the English model where, since 2000 there has been reappraisal of inspection regimes. Awareness of the need for more "Intelligent Accountability" (Secondary Heads Association 2003) encouraged greater emphasis on school self-evaluation. Inspections are to be carried out on a regular cycle but at short notice so that less time is taken preparing for them; a key element is the school's ability to become more aware of strengths and areas for development through its own self-evaluation.

While there is a dearth of research on inspections in NI, Cowie's (2007, p. 35) articulation of the concerns of educationalists in Scotland applies equally to those in NI.

> At first sight, the term 'self-evaluation' might give the impression of a 'bottom-up' approach, and to suggest that teachers and school-management teams are reflective practitioners thinking about their own practice. However, the reality of the Scottish system of self-evaluation is that it is a 'top-down system' using prescribed indicators rather than self-chosen goals.

Such an approach carries the dangers of 'performativity', associated with a culture of regulation that uses judgments of data as means of control and associated attrition and change. Ball (2001, p. 143, 2003, p. 216) warns against an approach of using productivity or output as a display of quality.

> Performativity is a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic). The performances (of individual subjects or

organizations) serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of 'quality', or 'moments' of promotion or inspection... as such they stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organization within a field of judgement. ...Typically, at least in the UK, these struggles are currently highly individualized as teachers, as ethical subjects, find their values challenged or displaced by the terrors of performativity.

Earl (2003) argues that the real test for leaders is to use data collection and interpretation, not as a surveillance activity but in the service of improvement. Overt accountability controls may serve the useful purpose of creating a sense of urgency, but accountability is much more than providing a ledger sheet or identifying the 'culprits'. Data should be used to inform judgements about current practice and to make action plans for improvement. Significantly, the actions which will make a difference happen in the classroom, and this still remains a sanctuary for the mediocre practitioner.

The department (2010) has presented the document 'Together Towards Improvement'(TTI) which drives the post-primary self-evaluation agenda providing a detailed list of indicators that provide a useful tool for school self-evaluation and for schools to benchmark and assess themselves.

Significantly the NI government's Committee for Education (2010) has expressed skepticism regarding the validity of the whole self-evaluation process since reference to quality assurance of classroom practice is not explicit in the documentation and thus carries the danger of remaining an aspiration. Unless more attention is paid to this key area, the exercise will continue be retrospective in nature focusing on outputs rather than on practice. It will carry the mark of quality control rather than of proactive quality assurance.

Area Learning Communities

Over the past two decades there has been a drive towards consolidation of the schools estate. The Burns Report (2001) was quickly followed by the Costello Report (2004), both advising a change of culture for post-primary schools away from competition and towards collaboration. Both reports envisaged grouping of schools on a geographical basis with a resolve to meet the requirements of the Entitlement Framework by such strategies as shared classes at A-level and GCSE. Schools were required to form clusters and to devise plans to collaborate. This was a challenge for headteachers.

There are two explicit aspects of the NI context which can be a help to the headteacher in moving into collaboration with other schools. The first is around the argument that the competitive climate which pertained in the eighties and nineties was harmful to young people's academic progress, contributing to the formation of a 'long tail of underachievement' discussed previously.

The argument from supporters of the development of ALCs is that the development of strong learning communities will improve academic performance and this will support those who are currently performing least well – the tail will shorten. Zhao (2004, p. 3) supports this contention:

> Within learning communities, students are able to interact with peers who share similar interests and stimulate conversation about the topic. Such conversations are beneficial because they expose the members of the community to new ideas and methods.

The second aspect of the NI situation which can help the headteacher in his task of convincing colleagues of the need for a 're-visioning' exercise relating to the imperative to combat sectarianism by intentional collaboration with schools across the sectarian divide.

The concept of *community* in a schooling context has various shades of meaning, the most challenging expressed by Hopkins *et al.* (2007) who argue for the development of headteachers as 'system leaders' who care about, and

work for, the success of other schools as well as their own. Such an approach represents a massive challenge for school leaders who have been used to operating from an approach of competition rather than of collaboration with others. Cassidy (2010, p. 1) wrote:

> It is a great pity that NI is better known for the division and strife it has endured over the last 30 years rather than for the quality education. Schools have provided oases of calm and order for children in the midst of turmoil and have always aimed to be a force for good in very difficult circumstances. As our fledgling democracy emerges from its violent past, schools are leading change and even moving ahead of politicians who are still cautious about how our new shared future will work.

Bottery (2003) sets out crucial factors for success in building area learning communities; the development of the values set founded on the beliefs of our cultures and social development, challenging participants critically to analyse and question previously accepted practices, values and norms. Distributed leadership below headship level has to be created to manage the collaboration.

There are several factors which may impede or enhance the successful development of a learning partnership. One is the school inspection process since it focuses on individual schools and not on area learning communities, thus placing pressure on headteachers to attend to their own schools as a priority over any collaboration. Dunne (2010, p. 1) argues that, in England currently, there is a focus on the inspection of compliance:

> Rather than Ofsted being independent and reliable in evaluating the work of schools, the teachers clearly state that there is a perceived need to comply with a set of predetermined criteria.

There is a danger that the same is happening in NI with the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) monitoring school development planning and self-evaluation processes oriented towards improvement in stipulated areas and in accountability. As a result there are few incentives for school leaders to take

risks or be innovative with new collaborative enterprises. Collaborative decisions that headteachers make could compromise their individual school success. There is a potential clash of priorities for heads between school collaboration and school competition – whether that is competition for pupil numbers or in league tables. Hill (2008) asserts that such a tension may be reduced if reporting of combined results for the partnership of schools carries as much weight as the reporting of the individual schools.

Establishment of the General teaching Council (GTCNI)

The GTCNI was established under the auspices of the Education (NI) Order 1998 as the independent professional body for teachers in NI, and is dedicated to enhancing the status of teaching and promoting the highest standards of professional conduct and practice. The Council's responsibilities involve registration of teachers, development of a Code of Professional Values and Practice for the profession, functions relating to professional misconduct. The body also provides advice to the Department of Education and Employing Authorities on the training, career development and performance management of teachers, standards of teaching and of conduct. The GTCNI sets out ten evidence based principles for teaching and learning. The Council has published 27 teacher competences for teachers in NI within 3 broad areas, Professional Values and Practice, Professional Knowledge and Understanding, and Professional Skills and Application. These competencies form a useful template for professional development and for initial teacher training.

Teacher Education

Teacher education is distributed between four/five providers. While Queen's University, Belfast (QUB) and the University of Ulster (UU) at Coleraine and Jordanstown, offer courses leading to teacher qualified status,

other providers are St. Mary's University College, Belfast who train teachers for the Catholic sector and Stranmillis University College who provide training for the state (mainly Protestant) sector. Currently, there are discussions regarding the possible merger of QUB and Stranmillis College This arrangement is under review by the Minister for Education and Learning, Dr Steven Farry (2011c):

> A critical question is whether a relatively small society requires five different teacher education providers, including two dedicated teacher training colleges.... a clear example of a cost related to a divided society. I have decided to undertake a two-stage process to examine the current and the potential future teacher training landscape. The ... process will engage the key stakeholders on the potential for a more shared and integrated system for the funding and delivery of teacher training.

Prescribed Approaches to Management and Administration

Leadership and management arrangement are enshrined in the Education reform Order (NI) 1989. While school Boards of Governors have the legal obligation to determine the individual school's strategic direction, in practice the majority take great cognizance of the guidance and advice of the headteacher, who is responsible for the day-to-day organization and management of the school, and is required to offer strong leadership. Leadership training is provided across the province by the Regional Training Unit (RTUNI). A report commissioned by the RTUNI and carried out by Price Waterhouse Coopers (PWC) claimed that while setting the strategic vision was mentioned by 8% of headteachers as taking up most of their time, 30% stated that this should be their most important task.

Strangely, while 88% of headteachers in England and Wales thought that their most time-consuming task was accountability, only 57% of headteachers in NI asserted this. Do such findings provide evidence of a need for an increased emphasis on leadership development, indicating a lack of awareness

of key leadership issues, perhaps because of an emphasis on management activities rather than on leadership for change?

The RTUNI awards the Professional Qualification for Headship (PQHNI) drawing on the best leadership and management research and practice. While the qualification demonstrates readiness for headship it is not a mandatory qualification. It is underpinned by the National Standards for Headteachers (NI):

- Shaping the Future
- Leading Learning and Teaching
- Developing Self and Working with Others
- Managing the Organisation
- Securing Accountability
- Strengthening Community

There are now 1620 candidates who have gained the qualification, and while a proportion of graduates proceed to headship, there are many who use the skills gleaned to improve leadership in their own context.

The University of Ulster awards a Master of Education degree in Leadership and Management which provides a three-year developmental programme focusing on team-building, accountability issues, leadership focused on learning, and strategic development planning, underpinned by key research material and embedded in a blended learning environment mixing face-to-face sessions with a robust virtual learning environment. One participant commented

> This approach meant that I never felt overwhelmed by material but, rather, was able to build my knowledge and understanding gradually. The online discussions allowed us to delve into certain aspects covered in the face-to-face sessions in more detail and also to support one another with the assignments which were designed to lead us through the materials progressively.

As well as in NI, the degree is popular in the Republic, and the cross border exchange leads to beneficial comparisons.

Queen's University, Belfast offer a similar M. Ed. with the aim

> … to develop, or to enhance, knowledge and critical understanding of leadership theory and the management of change within educational institutions, and their application in the context of school improvement. It aims to encourage participants, by reflecting upon their own experiences and skills in the context of the research literature, to evaluate how their own practice can be enhanced in order to contribute to the more effective operation of the institutions in which they work, or intend to work.

With regard to shared leadership, the RTU/PWC research found that 75% of voluntary school headteachers felt that leadership was 'very' or 'totally' distributed against a mean of 33% for all school types. However while there was consensus about the need for distributed leadership in schools, there was also a strong message from the research that many staff 'did not feel engaged and involved in a way that was consistent with the existence of such distribution of leadership in schools.' Evidence from school visits that many school leaders were clearly over-stretched and taking on a large range of administration-type responsibilities, was inconsistent with the widespread existence of *genuinely* distributed leadership. A key finding was that there is a need for broader and deeper distributed leadership in schools going well beyond the distribution of tasks and embracing distributed decision-making and autonomy.

The DENI expresses it view of leadership through 'Every School a Good School' (ESAGS) stating goals as:

- To make school governance an attractive and rewarding experience and an opportunity for the community to play its part in helping all young people achieve their full potential.
- To make school headteachership an attractive career option and support aspiring leaders and existing leaders to fulfil the role effectively.

Their articulation of the effectiveness of leadership is founded on planning, on personal development and on shared leadership, putting emphasis on

management and accountability in terms of evaluation of policies, practices and procedures.

A stated criterion of the effective school provides an attractive summary of the effects of good leadership in a Northern Irish School. (DENI, Every School a Good School, 2009).

> An effective school development plan is in place, providing clear and realistic targets for improvement based on a sound vision for the school. Governors understand their responsibilities and provide clear strategic direction as well as support and challenge to the Headteacher in carrying forward the process of improvement. School leaders demonstrate a commitment to providing professional development opportunities for staff, particularly teachers, and promote a readiness to share and learn from best practice. Teachers are given the opportunity to share in the leadership of the school. The resources at the disposal of the school are managed properly and effectively, with appropriate arrangements in place for financial management; attendance management; and working relationships. School leaders monitor and evaluate effectively school outcomes, policies, practices and procedures and the School Development Plan itself.

The Future

While Northern Ireland continues as a 'house divided' and as a state which selects children at eleven in terms of academic ability, Cassidy's assertion (2009) that progress will require diplomacy and compromise is not necessarily filled with pessimism. There is much goodwill especially as the Area learning Communities develop, and as teachers and students share an understanding of each other's viewpoints. Where schools once competed with each other, they now increasingly collaborate through the growth of Area Learning Communities, and development planning is a robust feature of their activities. Combined with appropriate development of school leadership, it is with these

ALCs that our greatest hope may lie. The country has moved well beyond mere 'tolerance' of each other. There is a growing respect for the other tradition which seems, to the author, to come from an intentionally inviting approach (Novak, 1991) and which promises good times ahead for NI. Smith and Magill (2009) have made specific recommendations regarding this position suggesting that the NI Assembly Education Committee should discuss the role of education in dealing with the past and a position paper issued for consultation. The committee should seek the views of school authorities on the role that schools should play in enhancing young people's understanding the Troubles and how they might contribute to a more peaceful future.

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