



Education across the island of Ireland: comparing systems and outcomes

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Education across the island of Ireland: comparing systems and outcomes

1. Context

John Fitzgerald, the economics correspondent for the Irish Times, argued that “Northern Ireland urgently needs to reform its educational system to deliver better results for children of all abilities and backgrounds”, labelling the current system as “a recipe for failure”.¹ While not quite bringing himself to say it, Fitzgerald’s implication was that education in the Republic of Ireland (RoI) was in much better condition than that in Northern Ireland (NI). The NI view of their education system seems to be different. The Belfast Telegraph, for instance, proclaims that “Northern Ireland has repeatedly produced the best results in the UK in GCSE and A-Level exams”, and voiced with approval “the favourable reputation [that students from NI] enjoy with the top English and Scottish universities”.² This paper will explore the systems of education on both sides of the border in Ireland to see what we can learn from them.

Before the partition of Ireland in 1921 and the formation of NI and what would become the RoI, there was a common system of universal, free primary education across the island. There had been previous attempts to impose a national education system, for instance in 1811 through the Kildare Place Society (officially known as the Society for the Promotion of the Education of the Poor of Ireland). While non-denominational, ‘While nondenominational, aiming to deliver a bible-based education acceptable to Catholics, it ultimately failed as it was viewed by many as undermining the Catholic faith.’³ The subsequent roll-out of National Schools in 1831 was designed to provide, as Chief Secretary Edward Stanley wrote at the time, “a system of education from which should be banished even the suspicion of proselytism, and which, admitting children of all religious persuasions, should not interfere with the peculiar tenets of any”.⁴ Despite this aim, by partition most National Schools across the island had become denominational in character and governance.⁵ Most young people’s education ceased at age 12 or 13. There were grammar schools providing an academic education to those older learners whose families could afford it but, as most had been established by religious orders or churches, these too were divided by community background.

Since partition, the two education systems, in NI and in RoI, which from this point we will refer to as Ireland, have diverged significantly and it is those differences and the impact and effectiveness of school-level education in both NI and Ireland that form the focus of this paper.

2. Evolution of two systems

• Northern Ireland

Following partition, initial efforts to create an integrated system of education in NI akin to Stanley’s vision of a century before were thwarted by church leaders from both sides, concerned with loss of control of their schools and what they saw as secularisation. The Catholic Church was concerned not to give control of the education of their parishioners to ‘a Protestant Parliament and a Protestant people’ as NI’s first Prime Minister later characterised it. Following amendments to the legislation in 1930, the Protestant churches eventually ceded some control of ‘their’ schools to the ‘Protestant’ state, but retained considerable influence within them.⁶ Thus, denominational education became institutionalised, with learners attending either Catholic Church-run Maintained schools or state, but effectively Protestant, Controlled schools.⁷

¹Fitzgerald, J. (2019) North’s poor education system a recipe for failure. *Irish Times* 26th April 2019. <https://www.irishtimes.com/business/economy/john-fitzgerald-north-s-poor-education-system-a-recipe-for-failure-1.3871711>

²Belfast Telegraph 4 December 2012 Why Stormont is out to destroy our Education System. <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/news-analysis/why-stormont-is-out-to-destroy-our-education-system-29001157.html>

³Hislop, H. (1992) The management of the Kildare Place School system 1811–1831. *Irish Educational Studies*, 11(1), pp.52–71.

⁴Irish National Schools Trust. http://irishnationalschoolstrust.org/document_post_type/the-stanley-letter/

⁵Farren, S. (1994) A divided and divisive legacy: education in Ireland 1900–20. *History of Education*, 23(2), pp.207–224.

⁶Akenson, D.H. (1973) *Education and Enmity: The Control of Schooling in Northern Ireland 1920–50*. pp.107–118

⁷The use of the terms ‘Protestant’ and ‘Catholic’ to describe the communities in NI does not necessarily imply theological adherence, acting instead as a marker of ethno-political affiliation.

Free post-primary education was introduced in NI in 1947, mirroring to a large degree the system following the 1944 Education Act in England and Wales. The new system effectively divided pupils into two types of school, based on academic assessment at the age of 11: grammar schools for the highest achieving 30% of pupils, and secondary schools for the remainder. School attendance was compulsory until 15 years of age, later raised to 16. Since 1947, educational developments in NI have closely reflected any changes implemented in England and Wales. There was one notable exception: the widespread replacement of academic selection with comprehensive education in England and Wales in the 1960s was not adopted.⁸ NI largely retains academic selection, with children separated at the age of 11 according to their performance in a series of tests.

Almost all pre-schools,⁹ and most primary and post-primary schools in NI are also separated by community affiliation. Maintained schools are mostly attended, staffed and run by members of the Catholic community while Controlled schools largely draw their enrolment from and employ teachers from the Protestant community.¹⁰ It is clear that “the role of the Churches remains strong in school level education, as does the level of religious separation”.¹¹ There are smaller sectors which are neither owned nor governed by the churches, including Irish Medium schools and Integrated schools (Table 1).

Most learners in NI attend a free year of pre-school education at the age of three, moving to primary schools at four years of age. After seven years in primary school, they transfer to post-primary schools where they take formal GCSE examinations at 16 years of age, usually in eight subjects, and can then legally leave school. A proportion remain for a further two years and complete even higher-stakes A Level examinations. These are more specialist courses, with learners generally studying three or four subjects.

Table 1: Schools in Northern Ireland (2021)

	Enrolment % Catholic	Enrolment % Protestant	Enrolment % Other Christian/ non-Christian/ No religion/ Not recorded	Proportion of pupils in school sector (%)
Primary Schools (4-11 years)				
Controlled	8.0	59.6	32.4	46
Catholic Maintained	94.2	0.9	5.0	46
Grant Maintained Integrated	39.9	29.0	31.1	3
Controlled Integrated	27.5	34.5	38.0	3
Other Maintained (mostly Irish Medium schools)	84.3	6.9	8.8	2
				100
Post-primary Schools (11-16/18)				
Non-grammar				
Controlled	4.3	75.0	20.7	25
Catholic Maintained	93.6	#	#	30
Controlled Integrated †	16.8	52.9	30.3	3
Grant Maintained Integrated †	40.9	36.4	22.7	8
Other Maintained (Irish Medium)	94.4	*	#	1
				100
Grammar				
Controlled	10.9	66.3	22.9	8
Voluntary schools under Catholic management	95.0	1.4	3.6	15
Voluntary schools under other management	14.5	58.4	27.0	11
				100

Source: 2020/21 data adapted from DENI census returns

Number suppressed

* Fewer than 5 cases

† These schools have a comprehensive intake, but some have a grammar stream

⁸McWilliams, S., Cannon, P., Farrar, M., Tubbert, B., Connolly, C. and McSorley, F. (2006) Comparison and evaluation of aspects of teacher education in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 29(1), pp.67-79: p.69.

⁹Roulston, S. and Cook, S. (2020) *Pre-school Education in Northern Ireland*. https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/751800/TEUU-Report-06-Pre-School.pdf

¹⁰Milliken, M., Bates, J. and Smith, A. (2019) Education policies and teacher deployment in Northern Ireland: Ethnic separation, Cultural encapsulation and Community cross-over, *British Journal of Educational Studies*.

¹¹Gallagher, T. (2019) *Education, equality and the economy*. Queen's University Belfast, Belfast. <https://www.qub.ac.uk/home/Filestore/Fileupload,925382,en.pdf>

• Republic of Ireland

After partition, in Ireland (south of the border) the system of National Schools established in the previous century continued to provide free primary level education, largely unchanged. Mostly, these schools were denominational in character; generally Catholic but with a small number of minority faith schools, largely Protestant. There was a very small number of multi-denominational schools.¹² For around one third of learners who completed National School education, this was the highest educational level attained and just over one third stayed at school until 16 years of age.¹³ Ireland introduced free second-level education for learners only in 1967, 20 years after NI, with the school leaving age increasing from 14 to 15 in 1972, and to 16 in 2000. These changes greatly increased participation rates in post-primary education.

Historical public-private partnerships (mainly with the Catholic Church) mean that Ireland's schools are publicly funded but remain to a great extent run by private providers. These must adhere to public regulations in terms of, for example, the curriculum and teachers' pay and conditions.¹⁴ Church control is particularly strong at primary level¹⁵ with approximately 90% of primary schools classified as Catholic.¹⁶ Denominational patronage of primary schools has been described as "a key legacy of British colonial and Irish sectarian bargaining"¹⁷ and the newly established Irish state in 1921 effectively subcontracted responsibility for education to the churches¹⁸ with state funding given to provide free education on its behalf. This model of privately-owned but state-funded education dominated by churches still exists in Ireland today¹⁹ (Table 2) although "the typical Irish school is neither strictly public, nor strictly private, but a hybrid".²⁰

Table 2: Schools in Republic of Ireland (2020)

	Description	Percentage of sector (%)
Primary schools (4-12 years)		
National schools Catholic ethos *		89.6
National schools Church of Ireland ethos		2.9
Multi-denominational *	Catering for students of all backgrounds often under the patronage of voluntary organisations such as Educate Together or An Foras Pátrúnachta.	7.2
Others	Including preparatory schools, which are fee charging, often under religious patronage, but not reliant on the state for funding. These generally prepare young people for transfer into voluntary/fee-paying post-primary schools	0.3
		100
Post-primary schools (12-18/19 years)		
Voluntary +	Owned and managed by religious communities or private organisations. 90% of teachers' salaries are paid by the State. Many of these schools require fees.	57.0
Education and Training Board +	Owned and managed by Education and Training Boards, 93% of costs met by central government.	28.0
Community/ Comprehensive schools +	Established in the 1960s, fully funded by central government. Often formed by the amalgamation of Vocational and Voluntary schools	15.0
		100

Source: Adapted from <https://assets.gov.ie/129338/6f97f952-0551-45de-8789-c64fdf34b85f.pdf> and <https://data.cso.ie/>

* Gaelscoileanna are Irish-medium primary schools in English-speaking communities, attended by around 6% of pupils.

These can be National or Multidenominational schools.

+ Gaelcholáistí are Irish-medium schools located in English-speaking communities which may be in any category. 3% of post-primary learners attend such schools.

¹²Darmody, M. and Smyth, E. (2018) Religion and primary school choice in Ireland: school institutional identities and student profile, *Irish Educational Studies*, 37(1), p.2.

¹³O'Brien, C. (2017) Fifty years after free secondary education, what big idea do we need in 2017? *Irish Times* <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/fifty-years-after-free-secondary-education-what-big-idea-do-we-need-in-2017-1.2967984>

¹⁴Skerritt, C., & Salokangas, M. (2020). Patterns and paths towards privatisation in Ireland. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 52(1), pp.84-99.

¹⁵Hyland, A. (1996) *Multi-denominational Schools in the Republic of Ireland*, Paper Delivered by Professor Áine Hyland, Professor of Education, University College, Cork, Ireland, at a Conference on Education and Religion organised by C.R.E.L.A. at the University of Nice. 21– 22 June 1996. http://www.educatetogether.ie/sites/default/files/multi-denominational_schools_in_the_republic_of_ireland_1975-1995_by_aine_hyland.pdf. p1-2

¹⁶Byrne, R., & Devine, D. (2018) 'Catholic schooling with a twist?': a study of faith schooling in the Republic of Ireland during a period of detraditionalisation. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 48(4), pp.461-477.

¹⁷Kitching, K. (2020) A thousand tiny pluralities: children becoming-other than the requirements of postsecular neoliberal policy recognition, *Critical Studies in Education*, 61(2), pp.133-148.

¹⁸Coolahan, J. (1981) *Irish education— history and structure*. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration.

¹⁹O'Mahony, C. (2013) 'Religious education in Ireland', in Davies, D.H., Miroshnikova, E. (eds.). *The Routledge International Handbook of Religious Education*. New York: Routledge, pp.156- 166

²⁰Rougier, N., and Honohan, I. (2015). Religion and education in Ireland: growing diversity—or losing faith in the system? *Comparative Education*, 51(1), pp.71-86, p.73

At post-primary level, over half of all schools are voluntary secondary schools, most of which are denominational (Catholic) schools. There is a small comprehensive/community school sector in Ireland, regarded by some as a reflection of a reformation in the 1960s sweeping through the Republic's institutions²¹ and responding to a shift towards comprehensive education elsewhere in Britain and across Europe.²² However, recent research into correspondence and discussions between the Minister of Education and the Catholic Bishops highlights the crucial influence the Catholic Church exercised in the formation of comprehensive schools, reducing the potential of their growth and thus protecting the denominational voluntary schools in which the church has such a stake. This effectively "placed these new schools under denominational influence".²³

Indeed, church influence seems to be felt throughout the education system in Ireland, as "almost the entire responsibility for the provision of education in the Irish state lies within the remit of the Catholic Church".²⁴ The multi-denominational sector is growing steadily, but remains relatively small.²⁵ Even in the apparently more diverse post-primary school sector, 50.1% of schools are under the direct patronage of the Catholic Church and many of the others, while nominally non-Catholic, have a strong Catholic influence in their governance and operation.²⁶ For example, publicly managed Education and Training Board (ETB) schools, previously known as vocational schools, make up approximately one third of the post-primary sector. While originally established by the state to be administered by what became the ETBs, with no link with the Churches, many now have religious representatives on their boards of management²⁷ and, as a result, these schools are often described as inter-denominational rather than non-denominational.²⁸

Ireland's combination of voluntary secondary schools and vocational schools (now known as ETB schools) in post-primary education, with a small number of community and comprehensive schools occupying the middle ground, has some parallels to NI's division between grammars and secondary schools but, crucially, unlike NI, Ireland did not embrace academic selection, although many schools do run entrance tests and even community schools have used entrance examinations to stream learners. These tend to replicate divisions based on socio-economic status just as academic selection appears to in NI, and the private fee-paying schools, especially in the Dublin area, exacerbate this. Nonetheless, the post-primary school sector in much of Ireland is said to cater for learners from a range of backgrounds and represent all abilities, whether academic or vocational, under the one roof. In some towns, this has been strengthened as a result of the amalgamations of post-primary schools, and the development of comprehensive/community schools. Even the incidence of streaming in Ireland's schools is much reduced, as its impact on outcomes was found to be of limited value, at best.²⁹ However, policies for dealing with oversubscription in Ireland's schools can replicate social division and, for example, "such selection criteria work against families without long-term intergenerational ties to a locality"³⁰ to the detriment of migrant families.

Most learners in Ireland attend a free year of pre-school education at the age of three, moving to primary schools at the age of four or five. After eight years in primary school, they transfer to post-primary schools at the age of 12 or 13. They complete the Junior Cycle of three years, sitting the formal Junior Certificate. Most learners take examinations in between 8 and 10 subjects in this state examination. While learners can legally leave school at 16 or after three years of secondary education, whichever is later, most continue into the Senior Cycle, lasting two years. A growing proportion, however, complete a Transition Year between the Junior and the Senior Cycles. The Senior Cycle ends with a series of examinations, the Leaving Certificate, in which candidates take a minimum of six subjects.

3. Key differences between education systems in both jurisdictions

3.1 Scale and cost of education

NI (1.9 million) and Ireland (4.98 million) differ in population size, with a corresponding contrast in the number of pupils and schools (Table 3). Growth of pupil numbers seems currently to be stronger in Ireland and the number of post-primary schools has increased significantly, while the number of primary schools has decreased only slightly. In NI, the numbers of all schools have decreased, largely due to the closure of smaller primary schools deemed unsustainable. Rationalising small, generally rural, primary schools is also a policy in Ireland, but it seems not to be so fully implemented there. "Small schools ... comprise a large proportion of primary schools in Ireland. 41.6 per cent of all schools in the 2020 academic year had 4 mainstream classes or fewer... [and] while the number of small schools has been declining in recent years they nonetheless remain very prominent, particularly in rural areas."³¹ A fairly static or shrinking school population in NI contrasts with rapid growth in Ireland. Both sets of circumstance pose challenges for education authorities, albeit different ones.

²¹ Lee, J.J. (1989) *Ireland 1912-1985, Politics and Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

²² Coolahan, J. (1981) *Irish Education History and Structure*. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration.

²³ Clarke, M. (2010) Educational reform in the 1960s: the introduction of comprehensive schools in the Republic of Ireland. *History of Education* 39(3), pp.383-399.

²⁴ Sullivan, G., 2019. *I think it's very difficult to be different! How does Religious Education contribute to inclusion in an Irish Roman Catholic post-primary school?* (Doctoral dissertation, Dublin City University) p.24

²⁵ Department of Education (2020) *Statistical Bulletin: Enrolments September 2020* <https://assets.gov.ie/129338/61971952-0551-45de-8789-c64fd134b85f.pdf> p.3.

²⁶ Rougier, N. and Honohan, I. (2015) Religion and education in Ireland: growing diversity—or losing faith in the system? *Comparative Education*, 51(1), pp.71-86.

²⁷ Drudy, S. and Lynch, K. (1993) *Schools and society in Ireland*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan.

²⁸ Fischer, 2009, p.144.

²⁹ Smyth, E. (2020) Educational Inequalities: The Role of Schools. *Against the Odds—(In) Equity in Education and Educational Systems*, 5, p.107.

³⁰ Ledwith, V., 2017. State supported segregation? Examining migrant clustering in schools in Ireland. *Space and Polity*, 21(3), pp.335-354. p.340

³¹ Department of Education (2021) *Statistical Bulletin* – July 2021, p.12.

Table 3: School and pupil numbers (2020-21), and trends

	Northern Ireland		Republic of Ireland	
	Numbers	Trends	Numbers	Trends
Numbers of primary schools	803	Falling	3,240	Falling slightly
Number of primary school pupils	173,266	Falling	545,463	Rising
Average number of pupils per primary school	214		168	
Number of post primary schools	193	Falling	730	Rising
Number of post primary pupils	148,918	Fluctuating but rising slightly	379,160	Rising
Average number of pupils per post-primary school	772		519	

Source: data.gov.ie and nisra.gov.uk

The investment in education by the state shows some contrasts.

Per pupil spending (£)	Ireland (2015) ³²	UK (2017) ³³
Primary and lower Secondary	6,249	7,685
Upper Secondary and post-Secondary non-tertiary	8,513	7,570

It has been noted that Ireland “spends well below the norm for advanced high-income economies when it comes to education [and, to reach the average] ...public spending on education would have to increase by close to £1.7 billion per annum”.³⁴ The underspend is particularly significant at primary and lower secondary level. In 2019, Ireland spent only 1.3% of its GDP on pre-primary and primary education, compared to 4.4% in Sweden and an average of 1.6% in the EU27 countries.³⁵

While across the UK, expenditure per pupil seems higher than that in Ireland, at least in primary and lower secondary, in NI the spending per pupil appears to be lower overall. In 2019, it was reported that NI spent £5,500 on education per pupil. It is not clear what proportion of this is targeted at primary or post-primary learners but, overall, this was much less than any of the other countries of the UK, being lower than Scotland per pupil by £1,100 for example. Indeed, education spending in NI had fallen by 11% since 2009/10.³⁶ Schools in NI are also increasingly running into problems with their allocated budgets and the numbers in deficit more than doubled to 396 in the five years before 2017/18, more than a third of all schools in NI at that time. One was over £7 million in the red. “The system is coming close to a tipping point” said the Auditor General.³⁷

While differences in data gathering methods make it difficult to be certain which jurisdiction spends most on education per pupil, it seems that neither Ireland nor NI is investing sufficiently in education.

3.2 Delivering for all learners?

In the Education Order (NI) debate in the House of Lords in 2006, the virtues of the education system in NI were repeatedly voiced, largely by NI peers. Lord Steinberg, who took great pride in his NI grammar school background, argued that “...for countless years the standard of education in NI has been higher than that in Great Britain, and that continues to be the case.” Many other speakers repeated this assertion and there was little evidence of a contrary view, although Lord Rogan, one of the few to attempt balance, said

“It is true that, at the top end of the achievement scale, more pupils leave school with good GCSEs and A-levels, but the overall performance figures for pupils on average are on a par with or slightly below those for England. Northern Ireland has one of the most unequal education systems in the world... Such a system cannot be regarded in total as excellent.”³⁸

The unequal education system in NI is largely based on academic selection and social class, and “...the odds of a child securing a place at grammar school [are] five times less if they are entitled to free school meals compared to all other children”.³⁹ It has been argued that “...the division into grammar and non-grammar schools facilitates a form of social segregation”.⁴⁰

³² For ease of comparison, we will give all euro values in pounds sterling, using the rate correct at the time of writing

³³ Eurostat (2020) *Educational Expenditure* https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/images/0/03/Educational_expenditure_ET2020_IL.xlsx, Figure 5.

³⁴ McDonnell, T.A. and Goldrick-Kelly, P. (2017) *Public Spending in the Republic of Ireland: A Descriptive Overview and Growth Implications*. NERI, p.20.

³⁵ Eurostat (2021) *Government Expenditure on Education* https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Government_expenditure_on_education#Expenditure_on_27education27, Table 1.

³⁶ Institute of Fiscal Studies (2019) *School spending* <https://election2019.ifs.org.uk/article/school-spending>

³⁷ Meredith, R. (2018) *School Budgets reduced by about 10%, report finds*. BBC <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-45864099>

³⁸ Education NI Order debate (2006) [https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2006-07-10/debates/0607102600001/Education\(NorthernIreland\)Order2006](https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2006-07-10/debates/0607102600001/Education(NorthernIreland)Order2006)

³⁹ Connolly, P., Purvis, D. and O'Grady, P.J. (2013) *Advancing Shared Education*. Report of the Ministerial Advisory Group on Shared Education. Department of Education (Northern Ireland). https://pure.qub.ac.uk/files/14596498/Fileupload_382123_en.pdf p.58.

⁴⁰ Nolan, P. (2014) *Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report No.3*. Belfast, Community Relations Council. <http://www.community-relations.org.uk/sites/crc/files/media-files/Peace-Monitoring-Report-2014.pdf> p.93.

The quality of education in Ireland is generally deemed to be relatively high and there is a “positive regard in which education, teachers and school principals are held by wider society”.⁴¹ However, just as in NI, the Irish education system seems not to be fully successful in addressing persistent social inequalities. While gender inequalities have been reduced through education in Ireland, “the effects of social class background on third-level participation do not appear to have changed substantially”.⁴² This has continued, with 94% of pupils from middle class schools applying for higher education, compared to just half from working class schools.⁴³ Some research points to the impact of a small number of elite schools in Ireland which contribute to the reproduction of social inequality there.⁴⁴ Recent research has shown that children from less affluent areas tend to have a more restricted language set which restricts access to certain forms of knowledge and, ultimately, may limit their prospects of educational success.⁴⁵ Some researchers highlight “a preservation of the status quo of class difference ...that militates against social mobility”.⁴⁶ There is no selection by academic ability in Ireland as there is in NI, but social class divisions also persist in Ireland and have an impact on educational opportunities and outcomes for many.

While class divisions are apparent in both NI and Ireland, Ireland seems to be having more success in retention rates and ensuring that a high proportion of the population is well qualified. Despite the minimum leaving age for pupils being 16 in Ireland, it is reported that only 6% of learners leave school before age 17 or 18, with the vast majority completing post-primary education to Leaving Certificate level.⁴⁷ While NI has the same minimum leaving age of 16 years, only 63% of 16-17 year-olds are studying for A Levels or their equivalent. While the proportion taking A Levels had risen from just 46% in 2003/04, that growth seems now to have stopped. The retention rate after compulsory education ends at 16 years is lower for boys, as only 55% of boys remain at school to complete A Levels or their equivalent (even for girls, it is just 72%).⁴⁸

In Ireland, there is an impressive percentage of students taking one or more STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) for the Leaving Certificate – 90.2% of boys and 85.7% of girls in 2019,⁴⁹ although there are concerns about drop-out rates in third level courses.⁵⁰ Developing STEM skills is a key initiative for NI’s Department of Education also and, in 2021, STEM subjects accounted for 42% of all NI’s GCSE entries.⁵¹ However, more needs to be done in NI to increase the uptake of these subjects in schools and in Higher Education. In Ireland, 63% of all learners move into Higher Education⁵² while just 48% of young people in NI do so.⁵³ There is a skills shortage in NI; in 2020, just over 33% of the working population had a degree or higher qualification there. At almost 43%, Ireland has the highest proportion of people across the EU aged 15-64 with a degree.⁵⁴

At the other end of the scale are those with no qualifications. “In 2017, 16.6% of Northern Ireland residents aged 16 to 64 had no qualifications, compared to 8.0% of all UK residents.”⁵⁵ While leaving school early is still something that education in Ireland is also having to tackle, particularly with groups such as Travellers,⁵⁶ it appears not to be such a pressing issue, compared to NI. Reducing the number of early leavers from higher secondary education and training has been a key target of the European Union.⁵⁷ Ireland’s rates have been dropping, reaching 6.9% in 2015, better than the European average of 11%.⁵⁸ In NI, the proportion who were early leavers from education and training was 12.4% in 2013.⁵⁹ A recent report suggested that “the relatively low level of skills in the [NI] regional economy” would deter foreign direct investment, something which they note has been addressed in Ireland.⁶⁰ It may not be unrelated that NI is one of the UK regions with the lowest growth rates⁶¹ and has the poorest productivity in these islands.⁶²

Both NI and Ireland are trying to address underachievement in schools. For NI, however, the tail of underachievement seems to be longer and more concentrated in certain schools than in Ireland. Academic selection in NI has resulted in “...a high concentration of less socially and economically advantaged students in the non-selective post-primary schools”.⁶³ A selective system of education has been shown to reduce educational attainment overall, but it particularly impacts on learners from deprived areas.⁶⁴ As recent research concluded, “in creating education systems where children at such an early stage of their development can be deemed winners and losers, the winners enjoy the advantages, but ultimately, the losers suffered the most”.⁶⁵ However, despite sustained criticism of academic selection from numerous official reports, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the Community Relations Council, the NI Commissioner for Children and Young People and others, a small number of politicians have held steadfastly to this system. The Equality Commission for NI state that the “transfer test, and academic selection, contributes to social exclusion and that is heavily influenced by social class”.⁶⁶ Might Ireland be better placed in further reducing academic underachievement, given that it has not adopted academic selection?

⁴¹ OECD (2007) Improving schools Leadership Background Report – Ireland March 2007. p.61.

⁴² Smyth, E. (1999) Educational Inequalities Among School Leavers in Ireland 1979-1994. *The Economic and Social Review*, 30(3). 267-284. p.282.

⁴³ McCoy, S., Smyth, E., Watson, D., & Darmody, M. (2014). Leaving school in Ireland: A longitudinal study of post-school transitions Research Series. Dublin: ESRI.

⁴⁴ Courtois, A. (2017) *Elite Schooling and social inequality: privilege and power in Ireland's top private schools*. Springer.

⁴⁵ Skerritt, C. (2017) The code for success? Using a Bernsteinian perspective on sociolinguistics to accentuate working-class students' underachievement in the Republic of Ireland. *Irish Journal of Sociology*, 25(3), pp.274-296.

⁴⁶ Cahill, K. and Hall, K. (2014) Choosing schools: explorations in post-primary school choice in an urban Irish working class community, *Irish Educational Studies*, 33.4, pp.383-397, p.395.

⁴⁷ Fitzgerald (2019)

⁴⁸ NISRA *Annual enrolments at schools and in funded pre-school education in Northern Ireland 2020-21*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/annual-enrolments-at-schools-and-in-funded-pre-school-education-in-northern-ireland-2020-21> p.11

⁴⁹ Department of Education (2020) *Education Indicators for Ireland* <https://assets.gov.ie/117558/ef43dc12-56c3-4f5a-9e78-bafce7ef9764.pdf> p.16.

⁵⁰ O'Brien, C. (2021) Drop-out rates in some third-level STEM courses hitting 80% <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/drop-out-rates-in-some-third-level-stem-courses-hitting-80-14522466>

⁵¹ Campbell, N. (2021) *STEM subjects accounted for 42% of all NI's GCSE entries* SyncNI blog <https://syncni.com/article/7258/stem-subjects-account-for-42-of-all-ni-s-gcse-entries>

⁵² Department of Education (2020) *Education Indicators for Ireland* p.24

⁵³ NISRA (n.d.) School Leavers <https://www.ninis2.nisra.gov.uk/public/PivotGrid.aspx?ds=10421&h=73&yn=2008-2019&sk=130&sn=Children%20Education%20and%20Skills&yearfilter=2019>

⁵⁴ Statista (2021) <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1084737/eu-28-adults-with-tertiary-education-attainment/>

⁵⁵ NISRA (n.d.) <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/uk-national-wellbeing-measures-northern-ireland-data/education-and-skills>

⁵⁶ Social Justice Ireland (2020) *Early School Leaving* <https://www.socialjustice.ie/content/policy-issues/impact-early-school-leaving>

⁵⁷ European Commission (2009) *Progress towards the Lisbon objectives in Education and Training: Indicators and benchmarks*.

⁵⁸ Flynn, L. H. (2017) *Early School Leaving: Predictive Risk Factors*. https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/V3_Heeran_Flynn_L_Early_School_Leaving_-_Predictive_Risk_Factors_July_2017_.pdf

⁵⁹ European Commission (2014) *Tackling Early Leaving from Education and Training in Europe: Strategies, Policies and Measures* p.208

⁶⁰ Jordan, D. and Turner, D. (2021) *Northern Ireland's Productivity Challenge: Exploring the issues*. The Productivity Institute <https://www.productivity.ac.uk/publications/northern-irelands-productivity-challenge-exploring-the-issues/> p.18

⁶¹ Measured as Gross Value Added Growth

⁶² Jordan and Turner (2021) p.1

⁶³ Shewbridge, C., Hulshof, M., Nusche, D., Stenius Staehr, L. (2014) *OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Northern Ireland*. OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education, OECD Publishing.

⁶⁴ Furlong, J. and Lunt, I. (2020) Social Mobility and Higher Education: Are Grammar Schools the Answer? Occasional Paper 22. *Higher Education Policy Institute*. p.9.

⁶⁵ Brown, M., Donnelly, C., Shevin, P., Skerritt, C., McNamara, G. and O'Hara, J. (2021) The Rise and Fall and Rise of Academic Selection: The Case of Northern Ireland. *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, 32(2), p.498.

⁶⁶ The Equality Commission Northern Ireland (2017) *Key Inequalities in Education* <https://www.equalityni.org/KeyInequalities-Education> Annex 114.4

3.3 Targeting disadvantage

In Ireland, since the 1990s, there has been a policy of addressing educational disadvantage by targeting additional resources and support at schools in disadvantaged areas. The Delivering Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme was introduced into schools in the 2006/07 school year, combining and extending many previous schemes. DEIS aims to address the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities. In 2021/22, there were 880 schools on the DEIS initiative; 684 primary and 196 post-primary. DEIS schools receive a grant based on level of deprivation and enrolment, and other staff and pupil support including access to apply for a School Meals Programme for all learners.⁶⁷

There is some evidence that the DEIS initiative is making steady progress at combatting underachievement. Test results in reading and mathematics among primary level students in urban DEIS schools improved on each round of testing between 2007 and 2016, although their achievements are still below the national norm.⁶⁸ Retention rates have increased in DEIS schools, and the proportions completing the Junior Certificate are now comparable to non-DEIS schools. This has been achieved against a background of continued, and in many cases increased, poverty as the numbers of learners with medical cards⁶⁹ has increased since DEIS was introduced.

The success to date has been tempered with continued challenges in DEIS schools. There was evidence that teachers in the most deprived DEIS primary schools were less likely to use active teaching methods,⁷⁰ despite the success those approaches seem to bring to promoting learning. There still seems to be an emphasis on basic skills which, while not in itself a detrimental approach, may lead to an impoverishment of the curriculum, further increasing social division.⁷¹ Some recent research concluded that the progress made through the DEIS programme has been “marginal”⁷², as it does not tackle the underlying reasons for social inequality and poverty. However, the more commonly expressed viewpoint is that, in relation to tackling educational under-attainment, “progress is being made, under a number of headings, albeit at a slow rate”.⁷³ Nonetheless, despite the considerable improvements made, reaching the fullest educational potential can be elusive for many learners in DEIS schools and from working class backgrounds.⁷⁴

In NI, educational disadvantage is also an issue and the Department of Education there emphasise that “a wide and varied range of policies and programmes [are] in place designed to support children from deprived backgrounds [in reaching] their full potential”.⁷⁵ An expert panel to examine educational underachievement was established by the Department of Education in 2020. The terms of reference for the panel make clear that “educational underachievement linked to economic disadvantage is an issue that has persisted for many years despite numerous policy interventions and significant financial investment by the Department of Education and others”.⁷⁶ They highlight the poor results of learners with Free School Meal Entitlement (FSME) but, given the wealth of evidence, it is surprising that academic selection is not mentioned in the terms of reference, an omission noted by the panel. In their report, they comment “as a panel, we feel addressing this systemic inequality should be a priority going forward”.⁷⁷

Among the panel's recommendations, a re-focus on Early Years was suggested, with greater investment and more integration of the Department of Health and the Department of Education, whose shared responsibility for Early Years has drawn criticism. A review of the curriculum is also recommended, as the NI Curriculum was established in 2007 and needs revisited. The variation in esteem between vocational and academic routes was highlighted as an issue, and they recommend ending short term funding from DENI to address underachievement, instead moving towards a ‘whole community approach’, engaging families and addressing disadvantage more effectively. Other recommendations included support for school leaders and greater collaboration and more effective delivery across government departments. Following oral briefings by the Department of Education and Members of the Expert Panel to the Education Committee, the Fair Start report appeared to be well received across political parties, and recommendations have been made to the Minister to keep the report a priority, and to ensure its implementation.⁷⁸ It was reported that 18 of the 47 actions recommended in the report had been initiated within months of the report being released, alongside other initiatives such as the relaunch of Ulster University's Taking Boys Seriously project.⁷⁹ Fair Start also proposed

“a new place-based “Reducing Educational Disadvantage” (RED) programme ...strategic in scale and collaborative in nature, mandating the building of authentic partnerships between schools and communities... allowing greater flexibility within local communities to direct the nature of the spend.”⁸⁰

There certainly appears to be a need for radical interventions. Protestant boys in particular seem to do badly, with only 42.8% reaching the 5 GCSEs at A*-C threshold. This has been dismissed as an ‘urban myth’ by a former Education Minister, John O’Dowd, who pointed out that more Catholic than Protestant boys leave school without proper qualifications, reflecting the greater number of Catholic pupils in the education system.⁸¹ It can be argued that there are particular difficulties in working class Protestant communities, often ascribed to paramilitarism, the decline of employment in heavy industries such as shipbuilding, once dominated by male Protestants, and the decline of community networks.⁸² However focusing discussions on underachievement in Protestant working class communities alone misses the point that this issue is largely a consequence of social class differences. More than three times as many FSME pupils in NI leave school without any GCSEs, compared to non-FSME leavers.⁸³

⁶⁷ Department of Education (2020) *DEIS Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools* <https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/4018ea-deis-delivering-equality-of-opportunity-in-schools/>

⁶⁸ Kavanagh, L. and Weir, S., 2018. *The evaluation of DEIS: The lives and learning of urban primary school pupils, 2007-2016*. Dublin: Educational Research Centre, p.20.

⁶⁹ Medical cards are available to Irish residents with a low income relative to their family size. While Free School Meals Eligibility is a measure of deprivation commonly used in the UK, this is not available in Ireland so eligibility for a Medical card is used instead. Free school meals to individuals are not provided in Ireland; instead all learners in DEIS schools in Ireland get free school meals.

⁷⁰ McCoy, S., Smyth, E., & Banks, J. (2012) *The primary classroom: Insights from the Growing Up in Ireland study*. Dublin: Educational Research Centre.

⁷¹ Gilleece, L. and Clerkin, A. (2020) A REVIEW OF THE SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS LITERATURE: LESSONS FOR IRELAND. *The Irish Journal of Education*, 43, pp.30-60.

⁷² Fleming, B. and Harford, J. (2021) The DEIS programme as a policy aimed at combating educational disadvantage: fit for purpose? *Irish Educational Studies*, pp.1-19, p.15.

⁷³ Fleming, B. (2020) *The DEIS Programme: Fifteen Years On*. <https://educationmatters.ie/the-deis-programme-fifteen-years-on/>

⁷⁴ Skerritt, (2017).

⁷⁵ DENI (n.d.) *Tackling Educational Disadvantage* <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/tackling-educational-disadvantage>

⁷⁶ DENI (2020) *Terms of Reference* <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/terms-reference-for-expert-panel-persistent-educational-underachievement>

⁷⁷ Purdy, N., Logue, J., Montgomery, M., O’Hare, K., Redpath, J. (2021) *A Fair Start: Final Report and Action Plan of the Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement in Northern Ireland*. Bangor: Department of Education. <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/fair-start-final-report-action-plan>

⁷⁸ Committee for Education, Northern Ireland Assembly (2021) *Minutes of Proceedings 6th October 2021* <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/committees/2017-2022/education/minutes-of-proceedings/2021---2022/committee-for-education---minutes-of-proceedings---06-october-2021.pdf>

⁷⁹ Bain, M. (2021) *Project launched aimed at preventing boys from falling behind in the education system*, Belfast Telegraph 21 Oct 2021

⁸⁰ Purdy et al., (2021) p.39

⁸¹ Kula, A. (2020) *SF's John O'Dowd rubbishes idea that Protestant boys under-perform at school as expert panel set up to tackle inequality* Newsletter, 28th July 2020. <https://www.newsletter.co.uk/education/sfs-john-odowd-rubbishes-idea-protestant-boys-under-perform-at-school-as-expert-panel-set-up-to-tackle-inequality-2926709>

⁸² Northern Ireland Assembly (2020) *Research Matters* <https://www.assemblyresearchmatters.org/2020/10/12/every-child-deserves-a-real-chance-in-life-a-renewed-government-focus-on-solving-educational-underachievement-in-northern-ireland/>, Figure 2.

⁸³ DENI (2020) *Independent Review of Education* <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/independent-review-education>

NI is a relatively poor region of the UK and almost 100,000 children have a Free School Meal Entitlement (FSME), 28.4% of all children. In non-grammar schools, 37.1% of pupils are FSM entitled, compared to just 13.7% in grammar schools.⁸⁴ The cycle of poverty, low aspiration and low achievement is much discussed and considerable efforts are being made in developing Early Years education and in the targeting of school funding through the Common Funding Formula. However, it remains clear that the efforts to tackle these problems have thus far been insufficient. There is considerable waste in education funding in NI, with an estimated £57 million spent every year supporting duplication and division in schooling.⁸⁵ Additionally, despite the clear evidence that academic selection is responsible for much of the continued underachievement, with the majority of children being labelled as 'failures' at age 11, some political parties seem determined to block reform of this aspect of the education system. Meanwhile, and possibly not unconnected, vocational qualifications are held in very low esteem compared to those deemed 'academic'.⁸⁶

3.4 Making schools open to all in a changing society

Communities in both NI and Ireland are increasingly diverse.⁸⁷ Since 2008, Ireland, traditionally a country of emigration, had net immigration leading to a wider population mix, including in schools. Some of this movement was returning Irish migrants, bringing with them new ideas and viewpoints, but many were from more diverse backgrounds and the result is a changed country. Back in 2013 it was argued that "traditionally characterised as 'Catholic, white and Gaelic', Irish schools are said to be finding it difficult to recognise and acknowledge new expressions of race, culture and religion".⁸⁸ In the five years before 2016, for instance, there was a sharp rise from 16% to 22% of the population in those from non-Catholic backgrounds.⁸⁹ Additionally, "the increase in the number of people stating that they have no religion has been quite spectacular",⁹⁰ with more in that category now than in the Church of Ireland, the second largest religious group in the state.

Ireland increased its cultural diversity in a very short time, and yet the control of Christian churches, particularly the Catholic Church, over aspects of citizens' lives remains strong. There have been moves to challenge many of the orthodoxies about how schools should be run and, in some cases, what they should teach, especially in Religious Education (RE) classes. Pressure has been mounting on the Irish Government to ensure that "there is diversity of provision of school type within educational catchment areas throughout the State which reflects the diversity of religious and non-religious conviction now represented".⁹¹

There are a "rising number of Irish parents who have turned towards alternatives to the denominational schools of their own childhood"⁹² and multi-denominational Educate Together schools are increasing in popularity. While still a small sector, there are now 95 primary and 21 post-primary Educate Together schools in Ireland catering for 34,000 learners⁹³ in a total school enrolment of over 940,000.⁹⁴ There is a strong ethical dimension to Educate Together schools, and pupils "...learn about the values, cultures and lifestyles of those that are different to them [and] learn to name difference with a language of respect".⁹⁵ The sector was endorsed by the President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins, when he recognised Educate Together's role in the "challenging of a status quo that had existed for many years, one which many felt no longer reflected all of the needs of an evolving society and a slowly changing demographic, gradually becoming more diverse and more secular."⁹⁶

Pressures on the established order have not occurred without challenge. Some responses seem to show an acceptance by the church that their influence in education should reduce, as indicated in the recognition by a Catholic Archbishop that the "Catholic Church could divest itself of the patronage of a significant number of the national schools in areas where there was no longer a need or a demand for so many with a Catholic ethos".⁹⁷ On the other hand, some in the church argue that the present system brings many benefits to Ireland, as "from the point of view of public administration and expenditure, it is difficult to envisage a cheaper system",⁹⁸ and appear resistant to widespread change.

NI has similar issues to those of Ireland. Migration into NI has changed the composition of the population and newcomer pupils, who do not have sufficient language skills to participate fully in the school curriculum, comprise 5% of the school population. There are approximately 89 first languages spoken by pupils, with Polish and Lithuanian being the most common after English.⁹⁹

There has been some reduction of religiosity in NI also. While church attendance is still relatively high,¹⁰⁰ like elsewhere across Europe, secularisation has increased, albeit later than in most other countries.¹⁰¹ This increasing diversity has been overlain on an already divided society and serves only to increase questions about the control wielded by diminishingly powerful church authorities over the running and ethos of schools, and the content of the RE curriculum.

⁸⁴ NISRA (2021) *School Meals in Northern Ireland 2020-21* <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/School%20Meals%20in%20Northern%20Ireland%202020-21%20statistical%20bulletin.pdf>

⁸⁵ Cavanagh, C. (2021) A United School System Fingerpost – CRC, Issue 2 A United School System, Colm M Cavanagh — Fingerpost

⁸⁶ Irwin, T. (2019) Further education and skills in Northern Ireland: policy and practice in a post-conflict society. *Journal of Education and Work*, 32(3), pp.266-276.

⁸⁷ Faas, D., Smith, A. and Darmody, M. (2018): Between ethos and practice: are Ireland's new multi-denominational primary schools equal and inclusive? *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 49(4), pp.602-618

⁸⁸ Parker-Jenkins, M. and Masterson, M. (2013) No longer 'Catholic, White and Gaelic': schools in Ireland coming to terms with cultural diversity, *Irish Educational Studies*, 32-4, pp.477-492, p.

⁸⁹ Faas, D., Foster, N. and Smith, A. (2018): Accommodating religious diversity in denominational and multi-belief settings: a cross-sectoral study of the role of ethos and leadership in Irish primary schools, *Educational Review*, 72(5), pp.601-616, p.601,

⁹⁰ Fischer, K. (2009) Adapting the School System to the Globalization of Ireland's Population — an Irish Solution to an Irish Problem? *The Irish Review* 40(4) pp.141-154, p.143.

⁹¹ Irish Human Rights Commission (2011) *Religion and Education: A Human Rights Perspective* <https://www.ihrec.ie/download/pdf/educationreligion.pdf>, p.104

⁹² Fischer (2009) p.142.

⁹³ <https://www.educatetogether.ie/about/overview/>

⁹⁴ Department of Education (2021) *Statistical Bulletin July 2021 Overview of Education 2000-2020* <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/139883/8cc02789-a453-4abd-8940-b6195377909f.pdf#page=null>

⁹⁵ Mihut, G. and MacCoy, S. (2020) *Examining the Experiences of Students, Teachers and Leaders at Educate Together Second-level Schools*. ESRI, Economic & Social Research Institute, p.8-9

⁹⁶ Higgins, M.D. (2016) *Speech at Educate Together AGM* <https://www.president.ie/en/media-library/speeches/speech-at-educate-together-agm>

⁹⁷ Quinn, R. (2012) The Future Development of Education in Ireland *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 101(402), pp.123-138, p.134.

⁹⁸ Connolly, P. (2014) Religion and the Primary School. *The Furrow*, 65(4), 2pp.03-211, p.210.

⁹⁹ NISRA (2021) Annual enrolments at schools and in funded pre-school education in Northern Ireland 2020-21. <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Revised%2028%20May%202021%20-%20Annual%20enrolments%20at%20schools%20and%20in%20funded%20prescho...pdf> p.15.

¹⁰⁰ Fahey, T., Hayes, B. and Sinnott, R. (2005) *Conflict and Consensus: A study of values and attitudes in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland*, Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, p.46.

¹⁰¹ Hayes, B.C. and McAllister, I. (2004) *The political impact of secularisation in Northern Ireland*. Institute for British-Irish Studies. https://www.academia.edu/3152016/The_Political_Impact_of_Secularisation_in_Northern_Ireland?auto=download

With its roots in a parent-led movement established in the early 1970s at the height of the intercommunal conflict in NI, the first Integrated school, Lagan College, was opened in 1981. Aimed at bringing “children, staff and governors from Catholic and Protestant traditions, as well as those of other faiths or none, and of other cultures, together in one school”,¹⁰² Integrated schooling received political support in the Belfast/Good Friday agreement in 1998. While both Educate Together schools in Ireland and the Integrated schools movement in NI are both growing, Integrated education is proportionally a stronger force with around 7.5%¹⁰³ of all children in NI attending Integrated schools compared to around 3.6% in Educate Together schools in Ireland. Both systems are growing: the number of Integrated schools in NI grew by four in September 2021 and all new mainstream primary schools opened in the last five years in Ireland have been multi-denominational in ethos.¹⁰⁴ Those who attend Integrated schools have been shown to develop more moderate political views,¹⁰⁵ and to have more cross-community friendships,¹⁰⁶ with an enduringly positive impact on addressing sectarianism.¹⁰⁷

However, over 90% of NI learners are educated in schools alongside others mainly from the same community, often not encountering those from other communities until they enter employment or university. Faith schools are not uncommon elsewhere in the UK and further afield, but in NI most young people attending single faith schools also are resident in single faith residential areas, which diminishes further any prospects of contact across the divide.

3.5 Curriculum and assessment systems

Understandably, after a century of separate development, the curriculum, pedagogic approaches and assessment in Ireland and NI are markedly different. There has been some recent convergence with the roll-out in 2015 of Ireland’s Junior Certificate, a national examination for learners after the Junior Cycle – the first three years of post-primary education.¹⁰⁸ This introduced fundamental changes to approaches to learning, teaching, curriculum and assessment. The rationale behind the reforms has been questioned by some,¹⁰⁹ and school-based assessment, an important aspect of the reform, was contested by many teacher organisations at the time.¹¹⁰ However, there was a logic in reforming the Junior Certificate, given that the vast majority of students continue to attend school after that time, and it signalled a reform to approaches to teaching and assessment, including inquiry-based learning and more active forms of teaching and learning.

The Leaving Certificate in Ireland is the terminal examination of the post-primary system at the end of the Senior Cycle determining, for example, University entrance. It has been criticised “for the reliance on memory recall over higher-order thinking skills in the assessment process”¹¹¹ and that, in turn, skews teaching and learning. There has been some reform with curriculum change and novel forms of assessment in many subjects, but concerns remain as to the impact on young people of an examination perceived to be so high-stakes. The Higher Education Minister said “the Leaving Cert is long and tested and there are good points, but we should be willing to open our minds to actually have a discussion about how we can do better by students.”¹¹²

Transition Year (TY) is an aspect of the education system in Ireland for which there is no parallel in NI. This year between the completion of the Junior Cycle and the start of the Senior Cycle has a strong focus on active citizenship and personal and social development.¹¹³ Whether a school offers TY and whether it is mandatory or optional is devolved to individual school’s Boards of Management, although most do; students in 661 of the 714 post-primary schools are involved in TY.¹¹⁴ Although there are some concerns about loss of academic focus, overall there appears to be a strong support for TY as a positive and valuable opportunity for personal development.¹¹⁵

In NI, the National Curriculum, which had mirrored the same approach as England and Wales, was replaced from 2007 by the revised NI Curriculum, which diverged from England and Wales and was much less prescriptive in terms of content and teaching approaches. The new curriculum from age four to the end of compulsory education at age 16 aims to meet the needs of learners more effectively than was the case previously, explicitly preparing them for a world which is rapidly changing, and where previous skillsets may not be sufficient. The curriculum sets out to equip pupils to become lifelong learners, and to develop as individuals, as contributors to society, to the economy and environment.¹¹⁶ There are more opportunities for active learning and a focus on assessment *for* learning, and increased teacher autonomy. The Junior Certificate developed later in Ireland seems to have learned a lot from its philosophy and its implementation.

After GCSE examinations, children can opt to remain in school and study for A Levels or their equivalent. These too are high-stakes examinations used by universities to determine entry to Higher Education courses. For many years, NI was careful not to stray too far from the assessment regimes dominant in England and Wales. GCSEs and A Levels were graded in the same way and exercises were regularly undertaken to ensure consistency in the curricula and the rigour of assessment mechanisms across the different countries of the UK. More recently, however, NI has begun to diverge slightly from the arrangements in England and Wales. Specifications which were able to be assessed as individual units were replaced by terminal examinations in England and Wales; NI did not follow suit. The grades at GCSE in England and Wales were changed from A* to U to 9 to 1. Again, NI did not follow suit, although they did amend their grade structure to make it easier to map grades from one system to the other. It remains to be seen whether these different approaches are temporary or presage further divergence.

¹⁰² Integrated Education Fund (2018) *An Alternative Manifesto*. Available at <https://www.ief.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/IEF-Alternative-Manifesto-A42018.pdf>, p.3.

¹⁰³ This figure represents 2020-21 figures and does not include the pupils in the four schools which became Integrated in September 2021

¹⁰⁴ Department of Education (2021) p.4.

¹⁰⁵ Tausch, N., Hewstone, M., Kenworthy, J. B., Psaltis, C., Schmid, K., Popan, J. R., Cairns, E. and Hughes, J. (2010). Secondary transfer effects of intergroup contact: Alternative accounts and underlying processes. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 99 (2), pp.282–302.

¹⁰⁶ McGlynn, C., Niens, U., Cairns, E., & Hewstone, M. (2004). Moving out of conflict: The contribution of integrated schools in Northern Ireland to identity, attitudes, forgiveness and reconciliation. *Journal of Peace Education*, 1(2), 147–163.

¹⁰⁷ Hayes, B., McAllister, I., & Dowds, L. (2007) Integrated education, intergroup relations, and political identities in Northern Ireland. *Social Problems*, 54 (4), pp.454–482.

¹⁰⁸ MacPhail, A., Halbert, J. and O’Neill, H. (2018) The development of assessment policy in Ireland: a story of junior cycle reform, *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 25:3, pp.310–326

¹⁰⁹ Printer, L. (2020) A critical analysis of the rationales underpinning the introduction of Ireland’s Framework for Junior Cycle. *Irish Educational Studies*, 39(3), pp.319–335.

¹¹⁰ McManus, B. (2015) *School assessment is the key to proper reform of the Junior cycle*, The Irish Times. <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/student-assessment-is-the-key-to-proper-reform-of-junior-cycle-1.2058974>

¹¹¹ Baker, N. (2020) *UN committee asks Ireland about efforts to reform Leaving Certificate*, Irish Examiner. <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-40076195.html>

¹¹² The Journal (2021) *Reform needed on Leaving Certificate and CAO application, says higher education minister* <https://www.thejournal.ie/leaving-cert-cao-reform-5387038-Mar2021/>

¹¹³ Jeffers, G. (2011) The Transition Year programme in Ireland. Embracing and resisting a curriculum innovation. *The Curriculum Journal*, 22(1), pp.61–76.

¹¹⁴ Wayman, S. (2018) *Transition year: A time to grow or just an excuse to doss?* The Irish Times. <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/health-family/parenting/transition-year-a-time-to-grow-or-just-an-excuse-to-doss-1.3412043>

¹¹⁵ Clerkin, A. (2016) *Personal development in Irish education: A longitudinal study of student participation and psychosocial development in Transition Year*. PhD thesis, Dublin City University. <http://doras.dcu.ie/22480/>

¹¹⁶ Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) (2007) *The Northern Ireland Curriculum (Primary)*. http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk/docs/key_stages_1_and_2/northern_ireland_curriculum_primary.pdf

4. Conclusions

So, is Fitzgerald right that education in NI is a “recipe for failure”? There are certainly serious failings within it, and structural issues that should be addressed, albeit with no little difficulty. However, while they may be less challenging than those in NI, Ireland too has its issues with education. There is a need for both jurisdictions to learn from other systems and to move towards systems of education which meet the needs of all, and not just a privileged few.

NI has, until recently, looked east to follow closely the shifting educational policies emanating from Westminster, but there may be much to learn from looking south as well. There is a pressure not to diverge too far from GB which might disadvantage NI students in applying for GB universities. Depending on the political party which holds the Minister of Education brief, the idea of divergence from GB and some adoption of educational policies which have worked successfully in Ireland may also be more or less sympathetically considered.

A lot, however, comes back to the community divisions in NI's education system and the dogged retention in NI, thus far, of an 11+ system despite the accumulating evidence which suggests that it contributes to generating inequalities across the system. Arguably, that may be the biggest structural barrier to making positive change to education in NI.

Should political developments result in NI's and Ireland's two education systems becoming more closely aligned again, considerable work would be required as education structures on both sides of the border have evolved significantly in the century since partition. There are disparities in school structures, in teacher pay, in school governance and in assessment, for example. However, the basics of education – preparing children and young people for a changing and uncertain world – appear to be more in alignment, particularly evident in the parallels between the Junior Certificate in Ireland and the Revised Curriculum in NI. However, the implementation of the Revised Curriculum in NI took over a decade and the debate over the Leaving Certificate has been going on for even longer than that in Ireland without any sign of resolution: both of those are comparatively minor changes compared to re-aligning two systems. There are certainly advantages to be gained in each education structure adopting successful approaches used in the other, but the perceived threat to some communities in NI in doing that may militate against the potential benefits that might accrue in a closer alignment.



transforming education

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