

EXPERT PANEL ON
EDUCATIONAL UNDERACHIEVEMENT
IN NORTHERN IRELAND



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ANNEX G

MAY 2021

THE EDUCATIONAL UNDERACHIEVEMENT OF DISADVANTAGED PUPILS IN NORTHERN IRELAND: Challenges and good practice for tackling inequalities

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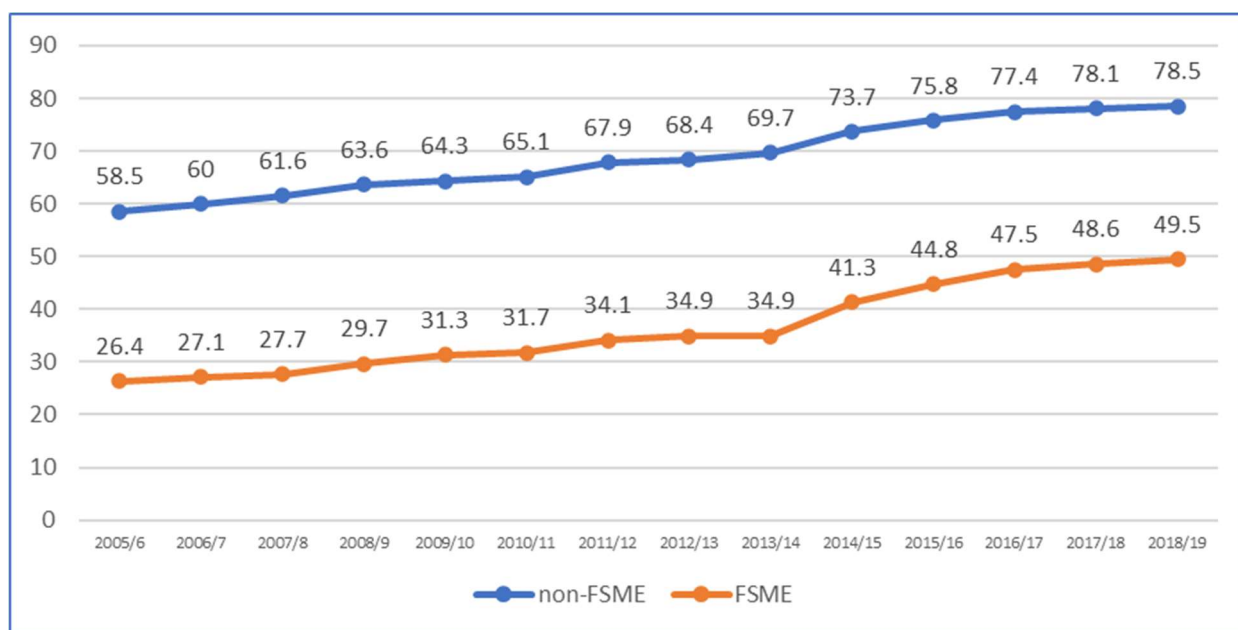
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1. Introduction

1.1 Aims of the paper

One of the challenges that faces educational policy makers in Northern Ireland is how to tackle the underachievement of disadvantaged pupils². There is a long-standing achievement gap in Northern Ireland associated with socio-economic status. Of a particular concern is 49.5% of pupils eligible for free school meals achieving 5+A*-C GCSEs including English and maths compared to 78.5% not disadvantaged pupils, with significant gap of 29.0 percentage points (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. The GCSE Achievement gap between pupils eligible for free schools and Non-FSME in Northern Ireland (5+ A*-C including English and Maths) - percentages



Source: Department of Education School Leavers Data (2005/06 to 2018/19)

The Northern Ireland “New Decade, New Approach” (NDNA) agreement in January 2020, recognise this challenge and clearly sets out details of the need for:

“the NI Executive to establish an expert group to examine and propose an action plan to address the links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background, including the long-standing issues facing working class, Protestant boys.” (NDNA 2020:40).

The Education Minister pointed out, in launching the initiative, that underachievement in education has remained entrenched, despite significant funding and policies to tackle these issues over the last decade. Speaking in the Assembly, he argued:

“Every child in Northern Ireland, regardless of their community background, deserves a real chance in life. From birth, some children will face significantly greater obstacles,

² For the purpose of this paper the term ‘disadvantaged pupils’ refers to those pupils from low income background who are eligible for free school meals. The merit of free meals is that it provides a clear and comprehensive means of differentiating between too broad groups of FSM pupils and non-FSM Pupils’ (see Demie and Mclean 2016:4)

which need to be overcome before they are in a position to realise their full potential. Currently some manage to overcome these barriers and others do not.”³

Education researchers in Northern Ireland also identified similar evidence showing there are long standing achievement gaps associated with socio-economic status, gender, type of school (grammar and non-grammar), religious status (Protestant and Catholic) and areas of residence (rural and urban) (see Henderson et al 2020; Burns et al 2015; Borooh & Knox 2017; DE 2020 b, c, d).

This paper aims to examine the educational achievement of disadvantaged pupils in Northern Ireland. Drawing on Key Stage 1 (KS1), Key Stage 2 (KS2), Key Stage 3 (KS3) and General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) data from the Department of Education, documentary policy evidence and the lessons from research into what works in targeted interventions in schools, it provides evidence to answer the following questions:

- What does the data tell us about the achievement of disadvantaged pupils in schools?
- What are the factors influencing the attainment of disadvantaged pupils?
- What are the lessons from research to tackle the underachievement of disadvantaged pupils?
- What are the implications for policy makers and the Expert Panel for targeted interventions to close the gap?

Most importantly, it draws conclusions intended to inform the current work of policy makers, the Expert Panel, and the Department of Education to tackle underachievement.

1.2 The concept of underachievement

There has been widespread misunderstanding of the concept of the term ‘underachievement’. For example, for some psychologists, it is seen in terms of differences between actual and predicated attainment for individuals or groups, with predictions of potential attainment based on IQ scores or other prior summation assessment. This is criticised as inappropriate for education by sociologists and educational researchers who use the term for relative performance of groups of pupils by factors such as gender, eligibility for school meals, ethnic group, family income, fluency in English, language spoken, attendance rate, terms of birth, mobile and non-mobile pupils, grammar and non-grammar schools and Catholic and Protestant schools (Gorard and Smith 2004, Demie 2002). Gorard and Smith (2004) also addressed the issue of underachievement and low achievement. They noted that the terms are used synonymously to mean lower achievement of one group or individual relative to the other. In discussion of the approach used, Plewis also stressed the problems associated with statistical approaches used by psychologists but argued that *“the approach adopted by educational researchers whereby underachievement is defined by a group’s relative position is simple and unambiguous”* (1991:383).

In this paper the term underachievement is used to describe the difference in the average educational attainment of different groups. Strictly speaking, underachievement *“means that attainment is low, and lower than other comparison groups”* (House of Commons Education Committee 2014:2). It is argued elsewhere that *“the notion of underachievement should emphasise the difference in attainment between groups and is a useful concept particularly to identify an inequality of opportunities.”* (Demie 2003:232-233)

2. The Northern Ireland Context

2.1 Unique characteristics of the Northern Ireland school system

Education in Northern Ireland has unique characteristics and differs from systems used elsewhere in the United Kingdom. The model of education practised continues to be selective from the age of 11 almost

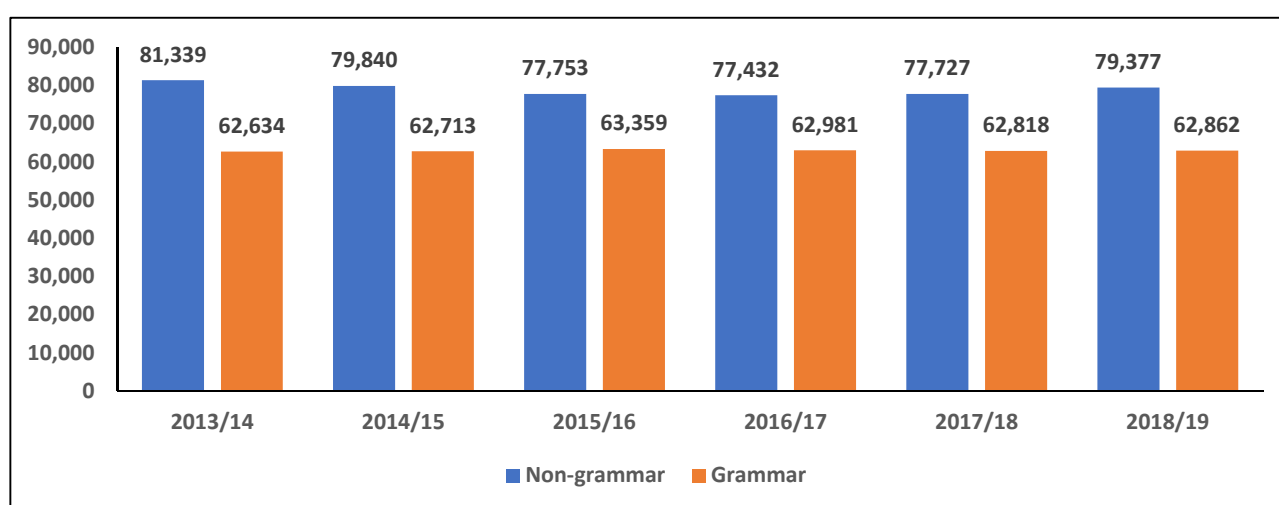
³ Education Minister Statement to the Assembly ‘Appointment of members of an Expert Panel to examine links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background’ Tuesday 28 July 2020

universally and runs as grammar and non-grammar schools. In most UK jurisdictions, Grammar schools are said to cater to pupils deemed suited to a more traditional academic education while non-grammar schools offer a mix of more academic and vocational qualifications at KS4. In Northern Ireland, the Entitlement Framework requires all post-primary schools to offer 1/3rd academic qualifications, 1/3rd vocational qualifications and 1/3rd a mixture of the two at Key Stage 4 and post-16. See EF policy [here](#).

Religion and/or community affiliation still plays a large part in the education system in Northern Ireland and historically children have been educated largely with other children from their own religious/community background, although around 7%⁴ of the school population now attend formally integrated schools and there is an increasing number of children who identify as ‘other’ religion. There is also a small but growing Irish Medium school sector⁵.

2.2 Background to school populations in Northern Ireland (NI)

Figure 2: Number of pupils in grammar and non-grammar schools in Northern Ireland



Source: Department of Education (Annual School Census) <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/school-enrolments-overview>

The number of pupils in non-grammar schools has fallen slightly between 2014 and 2019, from 81,339 to 79,377 pupils – a drop of 2.4%. There are fewer pupils in grammar schools and their numbers have stayed more constant, with a small rise of only 228 pupils or 0.4% over the same period.

2.3 Disadvantaged pupil numbers and trends in Northern Ireland

Table 1: Number and percentage of pupils with FSME for grammar and non-grammar schools in NI

		2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Total Enrolment	Non-grammar	81,339	79,840	77,753	77,432	77,727	79,377
	Grammar	62,634	62,713	63,359	62,981	62,818	62,862
FSME	Non-grammar	22,046	29,626	30,990	31,461	30,866	31,080
	Grammar	4,606	7,610	8,811	8,978	8,951	8,848

⁴ 23,624 pupils in integrated schools in 2018/19 – Source: [Integrated education infographic - school census pdf \(education-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

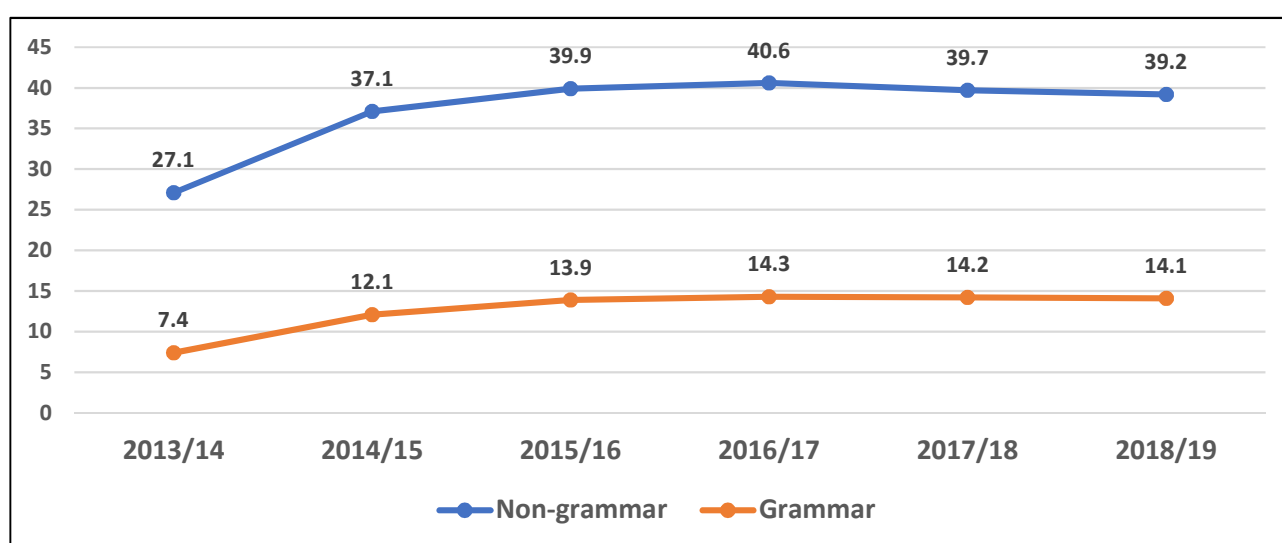
⁵ 6,519 pupils in Irish Medium schools in 2018/19 – Source: [Irish Medium infographic - school census pdf \(education-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

% FSME	Non-grammar	27.1	37.1	39.9	40.6	39.7	39.2
	Grammar	7.4	12.1	13.9	14.3	14.2	14.1

Source: Department of Education (Annual School Census) <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/school-enrolments-overview>

Table 1 and Figure 3 shows that the proportion of FSME pupils has increased in both grammar and non-grammar schools. In 2014, about 19% of all pupils were FSME, but by 2019 this had increased to 29% (DE 2020c, d). The distribution of FSME pupils was not however spread equally between grammar and non-grammar schools. In 2014 about one in four pupils in a non-grammar school was FSME, compared to one in 13 grammar school pupils. By 2019, the proportion in grammar schools had doubled to 14%, still well below the 39% recorded in non-grammar schools. The notable increase in FSME pupils from 2014/15 is largely a result of the change in eligibility for free school meals under the Working Tax Credit free school meal criterion.

Figure 3 - Percentage of FSME pupils in grammar and non-grammar schools



Source: Department of Education (Annual School Census) <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/school-enrolments-overview>

3. Educational attainment in schools: What does the data tell us?

3.1 Primary KS1 and KS2 trend evidence

Table 2: KS1 and KS2 attainment of pupils achieving the expected standard in primary schools⁶

	% of pupils achieving expected standard						Change 14-19	Change 18-19
	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19		
KS1 Communication (English)	91.1	88.7	87.5	88.2	86.8	86.9	-4.2	0.1
KS1 Using Maths	92.2	90.3	88.4	89.3	88.0	88.8	-3.4	0.8
KS2 Communication (English)	79.8	76.8	78.0	78.8	77.7	78.7	-1.1	1.0
KS2 Using Maths	80.3	77.4	78.7	79.6	78.6	79.5	-0.8	0.9

Source: Department of Education (School Development Planning and Target Setting)

⁶ These results are based on “Best Estimates” since data returned by schools has been very limited due to industrial action during this period.

Overall, there has been a fluctuation in results at KS1, between 2014 and 2019 with a decrease of 4.2 percentage points in English and 3.4 percentage points in maths, to 86.9% and 88.8% respectively. Results improved between 2018 and 2019 by 0.1 and 0.8 percentage points respectively. Trend data for KS2 shows that results have also fluctuated over the last six years, with a net fall in attainment in both subjects over the period, although results improved between 2018 and 2019, up by 1 percentage point in English and 0.9 of a point in maths.

3.2 Secondary KS3 and GCSE trend evidence

Table 3: KS3 and GCSE attainment 2014-2019

	% of pupils achieving Level 5 or above						Change 14-19
	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	
KS3 Communication (English)	74.1	74.0	78.2	75.8	74.5	77.0	+2.9
KS3 Using Maths	77.1	77.3	78.7	75.9	77.5	78.9	+1.8
	5 + A*-C including equivalents including English and Maths						
GCSE	63.5	66.0	67.7	69.6	70.6	70.8	+7.3

Source: Department of Education (School Development Planning and Target Setting and School Leavers Survey)

The trend was upwards at KS3, with English improving by 2.9 percentage points over the last six years, and maths improving by 1.8 points. GCSE has shown a gradual improvement of 7.3 percentage points between 2014 and 2019

4. Factors influencing the attainment of disadvantaged pupils in schools

4.1 Gender differences and attainment

Differences between boys' and girls' performance in academic tests and examinations have been known for many years. Tables 4, 5 and 6 show the achievement of all pupils at Key Stage 1, 2, 3 and GCSE.

At KS1, whilst there have been fluctuation of results between 2014 and 2019 with a reduction of 4.2 percentage point in English, there was a very small increase in attainment in English between 2018 and 2019 of 0.1 of a percentage point. However, this masked much wider fluctuations in the different groups of pupils. Boys' attainment improved overall by 1.8 percentage points, almost exactly the rate by which girls' attainment dropped (1.6 percentage points). Girls still outperformed boys overall in English by 4.3 percentage points in 2018/19. Similarly, in maths, there was fluctuation in results between 2014 and 2019 however between 2018 and 2019, boys made the most improvement between the two years, up 1.4 percentage points, while there was no real improvement for girls (0.1 percentage points), although girls still outperformed boys by 0.6 percentage points in 2018/19.

At KS2, results fluctuated for English between 2014 and 2019. The outcomes in 2019 were 1.1 percentage points lower than in 2014, but this masked a bigger drop for girls than boys, who narrowed the gap to 9.2 percentage points. Similarly, in maths, boys had narrowed the gap with girls to 4.1 percentage points.

At KS3, boys improved more strongly than girls in both subjects, up 5.8 percentage points in English, and 3.8 points in maths (narrowing the gap to 12.8 percentage points and 4.8 points respectively). However, this narrowing was not noted at GCSE, where girls improved at a faster rate than boys. This might suggest that any action that schools have taken to tackle gender difference has had more impact in the earlier years of education.

Table 4 and 5 clearly show that girls outperform boys in tests and examinations. The variation in the size of the gap stands out starkly if we look at the difference in boys' and girls' performance across key stages.

Gender is not the only factor that has an impact on achievement – poverty, type of school and other factors impacts as well, and this will be discussed later in the report.

Table 4: Pupil attainment at Key Stage 1 (2018-2019)⁷

		2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	Change 14-19	Change 18-19
KS1 Communication (English)	All	91.1	88.7	87.5	88.2	86.8	86.9	-4.2	0.1
	Boys	88.0	84.5	84.5	85.7	83.0	84.8	-3.2	1.8
	Girls	94.3	93.1	90.5	90.7	90.7	89.1	-5.2	-1.6
	Gap	6.3	8.6	6.0	5.0	7.7	4.3		
KS1 Using Maths	All	92.2	90.3	88.4	89.3	88.0	88.8	-3.4	0.8
	Boys	91.2	87.9	87.0	88.2	87.1	88.5	-2.7	1.4
	Girls	93.2	92.8	90.0	90.5	89.0	89.1	-4.1	0.1
	Gap	2.0	4.9	3.0	2.3	1.9	0.6		

Table 5: Pupil attainment at Key Stage 2 (2014-2019)

		2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	Change 14-19
KS2 Communication (English)	All	79.8	76.8	78.0	78.8	77.7	78.7	-1.1
	Boys	74.5	71.2	71.6	74.2	73.4	74.2	-0.3
	Girls	85.5	82.8	84.7	83.4	82.2	83.4	-2.1
	Gap	11.0	11.6	13.1	9.2	8.8	9.2	
KS2 Using Maths	All	80.3	77.4	78.7	79.6	78.6	79.5	-0.8
	Boys	77.6	74.0	75.9	78.8	77.1	77.5	-0.1
	Girls	83.2	81.1	81.6	80.4	80.1	81.6	-1.6
	Gap	5.6	7.1	5.7	1.6	3.0	4.1	

Table 6: Pupil attainment at Key Stage 3 and 4 (2014-2019)

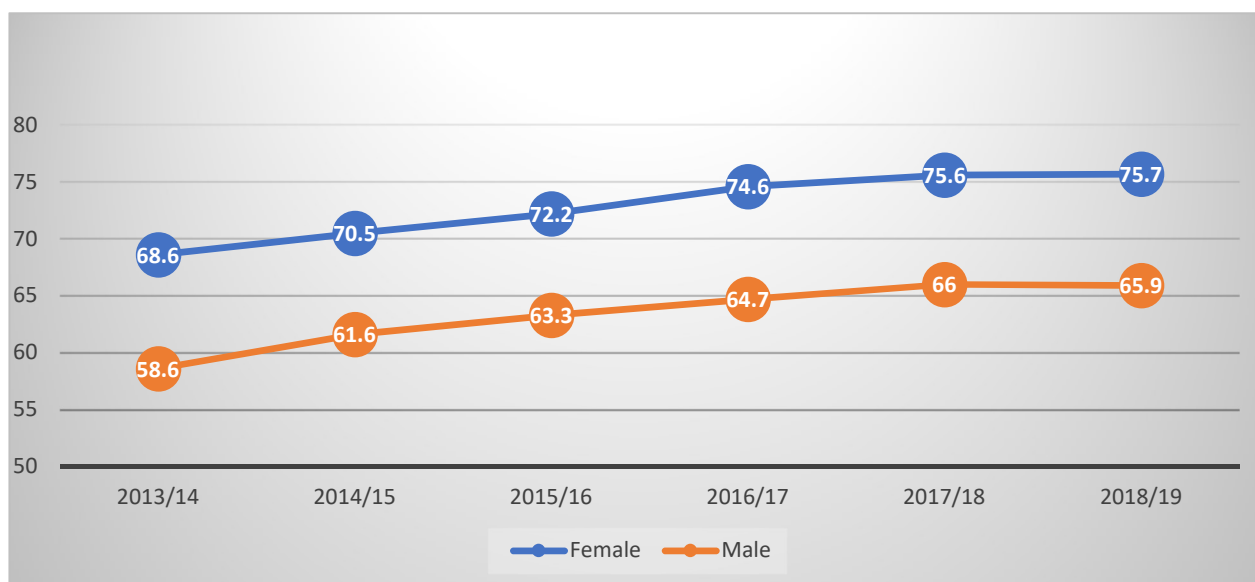
		2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	Change 14-19
KS3 Communication (English)	All	74.1	74	78.2	75.8	74.5	77	2.9
	Boys	64.8	67	71.1	68.2	65.9	70.6	5.8
	Girls	84.1	81.2	85.4	83.8	83	83.4	-0.7
	Gap	19.3	14.2	14.3	15.6	17.1	12.8	
KS3 Using Maths	All	77.1	77.3	78.7	75.9	77.5	78.9	1.8
	Boys	72.7	75.8	76.2	72.8	74.4	76.5	3.8
	Girls	81.5	78.8	81.2	79.2	80.5	81.3	-0.2
	Gap	8.8	3	5	6.4	6.1	4.8	
5+ GCSEs A*-C including GCSE English and GCSE mathematics	All	63.5	66.0	67.7	69.6	70.6	70.8	7.3
	Male	58.6	61.6	63.3	64.7	66.0	65.9	7.3
	Female	68.6	70.5	72.2	74.6	75.6	75.7	7.1
	Gap	10.0	8.9	8.9	9.9	9.6	9.8	

Source: Department of Education (School Development Planning and Target Setting and School Leavers Survey)

⁷ These results are based on “Best Estimates” since data returned by schools has been very limited due to industrial action during this period.

Figure 4 shows that girls were more likely to meet the benchmark standard at GCSE than boys in each of the last six years, and that both groups had improved over the period. However, although boys appeared to be narrowing the gap in each of the years between 2014 and 2016, the gap widened in 2017 to be the largest in any of the five years – up to 9.9 percentage points. Figure 4 illustrates how boys attainment plateaued in 2018.

Figure 4: GCSE 5+ A*-C including English and maths, by gender



Source: Department of Education (School Leavers Survey)

4.2 Socio-economic differences and attainment (FSME and Non-FSME)

The free school meals variable is often used as a proxy measure of the extent of social deprivation in the backgrounds of pupils and has been linked to underachievement in a number of studies (see Gorard 2018, Demie 2019). Tables 7-10 indicate that there is a marked difference in performance between pupils eligible for free school meals and the most economically advantaged groups in schools. At the end of primary education (KS2), the attainment gap between pupils eligible for FSME and non-FSME for English was 19.9 percentage points and for maths was 22.3 percentage points.

Table 7: KS1 attainment by FSME status (2018-2019)⁸

		2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	Change 14-19
KS1 Communication (English)	All	91.1	88.7	87.5	88.2	86.8	86.9	-4.2
	FSME	86.1	81.4	78.7	80.7	75.2	76.7	-9.4
	Non FSME	93.3	92.1	91.6	91.3	91.5	91.2	-2.1
	Gap	7.2	10.7	12.9	10.6	16.3	14.5	
KS1 Using Maths	All	92.2	90.3	88.4	89.3	88.0	88.8	-3.4
	FSME	87.2	82.7	79.8	82.5	77.4	79.0	-8.2
	Non FSME	94.4	94.0	92.5	92.3	92.4	93.0	-1.4
	Gap	7.2	11.3	12.7	9.8	15.0	14.0	

⁸ These results are based on “Best Estimates” since data returned by schools has been very limited due to industrial action during this period.

Table 8: KS2 attainment by FSME status (2014-2019)

		2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	Change 14-19
KS2 Communication (English)	All	79.8	76.8	78.0	78.8	77.7	78.7	-1.1
	FSME	65.1	62.6	63.4	65.1	63.7	64.8	-0.3
	Non FSME	86.2	83.3	84.6	84.7	83.9	84.7	-1.5
	Gap	21.1	20.7	21.2	19.6	20.2	19.9	
KS2 Using Maths	All	80.3	77.4	78.7	79.6	78.6	79.5	-0.8
	FSME	65.6	64.1	64.3	67.2	64.1	63.9	-1.7
	Non FSME	86.8	83.6	85.2	84.9	85.0	86.2	-0.6
	Gap	21.2	19.5	20.9	17.7	20.9	22.3	

Source: Department of Education (School Development Planning and Target Setting)

These findings from the primary phase were replicated at secondary level. In 2019, the gap for English was 23.2 percentage points and for maths was 22.6 percentage points, although in both cases this gap had reduced over the last six years.

Table 9: KS3 attainment by FSME status (2014-2019)⁹

		2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	Change 14-19
KS3 Communication (English)	All	74.1	74.0	78.2	75.8	74.5	77.0	2.9
	FSME	52.6	55.2	63.2	58.5	59.2	60.6	8.0
	Non FSME	79.6	81.4	84.5	84.2	81.7	83.8	4.2
	Gap	27.0	26.2	21.3	25.7	22.5	23.2	
KS3 Using Maths	All	77.1	77.3	78.7	75.9	77.5	78.9	1.8
	FSME	55.3	58.1	63.7	59.2	60.2	63.0	7.7
	Non FSME	82.5	84.7	84.8	83.9	85.3	85.6	3.1
	Gap	27.2	26.6	21.1	24.7	25.1	22.6	

Source: Department of Education (School Development Planning and Target Setting)

Table 10 and Figure 5 shows an interesting pattern at GCSE for the performance of FSME leavers. Since 2006 they have improved year on year, and at a slightly faster rate than non-FSME leavers, to narrow the gap from 32.1 percentage points to 29.0 percentage points in 2019. Nevertheless, in 2019, 78.5% of non-FSME leavers and only 49.5% of FSME leavers met the expected standard, showing that there is still some considerable way to go before there is parity between these two groups.

⁹ These results are based on “Best Estimates” since data returned by schools has been very limited due to industrial action during this period.

Table 10: FSME and non-FSME school leavers achieving 5+ GCSE (A*-C) including English and Maths

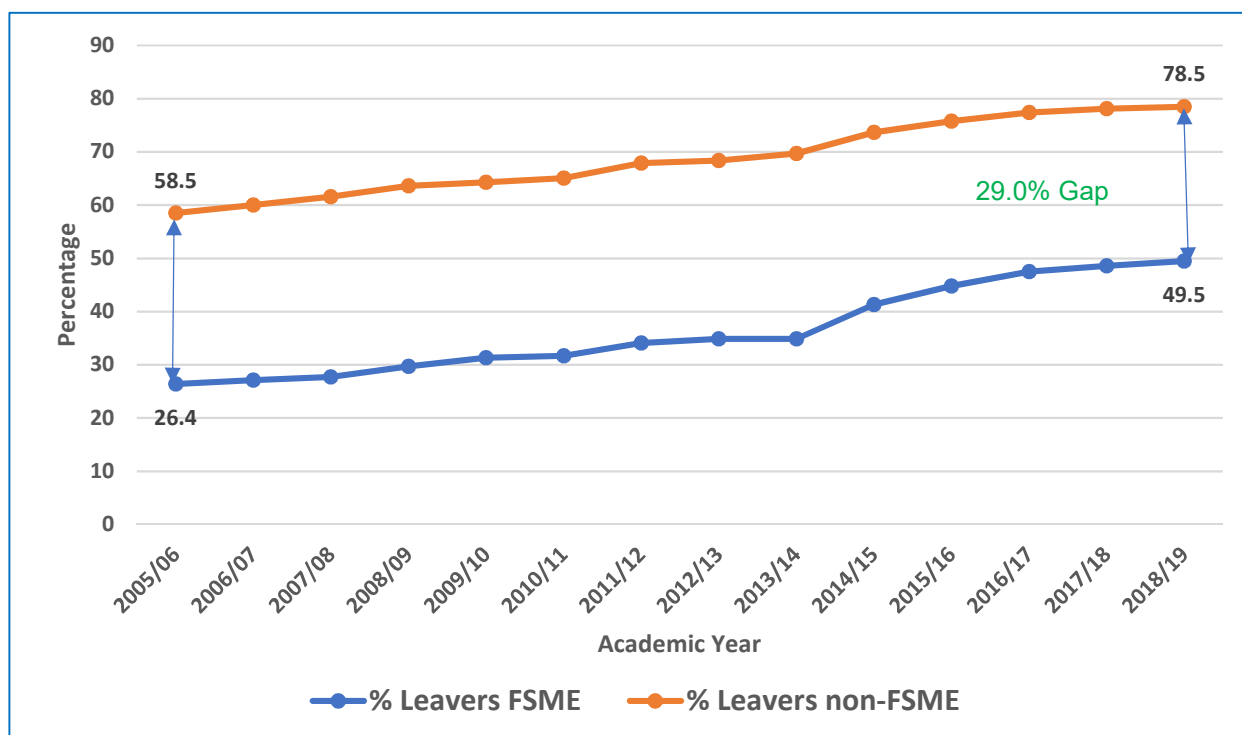
	Leavers FSME	Leavers non-FSME	Gap (percentage points)
2005/06	26.4	58.5	32.1
2006/07	27.1	60.0	32.9
2007/08	27.7	61.6	33.9
2008/09	29.7	63.6	33.9
2009/10	31.3	64.3	33.0
2010/11	31.7	65.1	33.4
2011/12	34.1	67.9	33.8
2012/13	34.9	68.4	33.6
2013/14	34.9	69.7	34.9
2014/15	41.3	73.7	32.4
2015/16	44.8	75.8	31.0
2016/17	47.5	77.4	30.0
2017/18	48.6	78.1	29.5
2018/19	49.5	78.5	29.0

Source: Department of Education (School Leavers Survey)

Notes:

1. Data excludes special and independent schools.
2. There was an increase in the number of FSME pupils from 2014/15, which coincided with an extension of the eligibility for free school meals under the Working Tax Credit free school meal criterion, which was extended to post-primary pupils from September 2014.
3. The percentage points (ppts) Gap is calculated based on unrounded figures. It is not the difference between the rounded FSME, and non-FSME figures presented.

Figure 5. Percentage of NI FSME school leavers and % of non-FSME school leavers achieving 5+ GCSE at Grade A* to C or above including English and Maths



Source: Department of Education (School Leavers Survey)

KS1

There are also some striking differences between the attainment of FSME and non-FSME pupils when examining boys and girls separately (see Table 11). At KS1, over the past two years (2017/18 and 2018/19), FSME boys made a bigger improvement (up five percentage points), than FSME girls (down 2.1 percentage points) at English. However, FSME boys were still the lowest attaining group overall with only 74.5% achieving level 2 or above, compared to the highest attaining group of non-FSME girls for whom 93.4% achieved the outcome, a gap of 18.9 percentage points.

At KS1, both FSME and non-FSME pupils made a net fall in attainment in English and also in maths over the last six years. Furthermore, for both subjects, the fall was much larger for FSME pupils than non-FSME pupils thus widening the attainment gap further. In 2014, 86.1% of FSME pupils met the expected standard in English, while 93.3% of their non-FSME peers did so. But by 2019, these figures were 76.7% and 91.2% respectively, an increase in the gap from 7.2 percentage points in 2014, up to 14.5 points in 2019. This pattern was also noted for maths. Breaking the data down further by gender, it can be seen that FSME girls made larger net losses than FSME boys, and this was true of both English and mathematics.

KS2

At KS2, overall results for English fluctuated over the period between 2014 and 2019 with an overall drop of 1.1 percentage points (Table 8). However, the only sub-group to make a net improvement over the six-year period was again FSME boys, up 2.9 percentage points. As at KS1, this FSME improvement was confined to boys, as again FSME girls' attainment declined over the period. The narrowing of the gap between FSME and non-FSME pupils was again down to the improvement of FSME boys. However, this group was still the lowest performing, and the gap between them and non-FSME girls was 29.6 percentage points in 2018/19. A similar pattern was noted for maths at KS2.

Overall, only FSME boys make a net improvement, while FSME girls fall back the most. The gap between the lowest and highest attaining subgroups in Maths was 25.9 percentage points in 2018/19, found when comparing FSME boys (62.7%) and non-FSME girls (88.6%).

KS1 and KS2

At both KS1 and KS2 a similar pattern emerges. Consistently FSME boys have made the most net improvement in both subjects, albeit from the lowest starting points. In contrast, at KS2 and for KS1 English, FSME girls have made the biggest net fall in attainment. Overall, girls do better than boys, and the gap is wider for English than for maths.

Table 11: FSME and Gender KS1 – KS3¹⁰

Key Stage 1	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	Change 14-19	Change 18-19
(English) FSME	86.1	81.4	78.7	80.7	75.2	76.7	-9.4	1.5
(English) FSME Boys	81.8	75.4	74.0	77.1	69.5	74.5	-7.3	5.0
(English) FSME Girls	90.5	87.8	83.7	84.3	81.1	79.0	-11.5	-2.1
(English) Non-FSME	93.3	92.1	91.6	91.3	91.5	91.2	-2.1	-0.3
(English) Non-FSME Boys	90.7	88.8	89.5	89.2	88.4	89.1	-1.6	0.7
(English) Non-FSME Girls	96.0	95.5	93.8	93.5	94.6	93.4	-2.6	-1.2
Using Maths FSME	87.2	82.7	79.8	82.5	77.4	79.0	-8.2	1.6
Using Maths FSME Boys	86.1	79.3	77.6	79.3	75.6	82.1	-4.0	6.5
Using Maths FSME Girls	88.2	86.3	82.2	85.4	79.2	80.1	-8.1	0.9

¹⁰ These results are based on "Best Estimates" since data returned by schools has been very limited due to industrial action during this period.

Key Stage 1	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	Change 14-19	Change 18-19
Using Maths Non-FSME	94.4	94.0	92.5	92.3	92.4	93.0	-1.4	0.6
Using Maths Non-FSME Boys	93.4	92.1	91.5	91.7	91.7	89.9	-3.5	-1.8
Using Maths Non-FSME Girls	95.3	96.0	93.6	92.7	93.1	92.9	-2.4	-0.2

Key Stage 2	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	Change 14-19	Change 18-19
(English) FSME	65.1	62.6	63.4	65.1	63.7	64.8	-0.3	1.1
(English) FSME Boys	56.4	57	54.3	57	59.2	59.3	2.9	0.1
(English) FSME Girls	74.2	68.5	72.9	73.2	68.3	70.5	-3.7	2.2
(English) Non-FSME	86.2	83.3	84.6	84.7	83.9	84.7	-1.5	0.8
(English) Non-FSME Boys	82.2	77.7	79.5	81.5	79.7	80.6	-1.6	0.9
(English) Non-FSME Girls	90.3	89.2	90	87.9	88.4	88.9	-1.4	0.5
Using Maths FSME	65.6	64.1	64.3	67.2	64.1	63.9	-1.7	-0.2
Using Maths FSME Boys	60.7	61.4	60.3	66.8	65.1	62.7	2	-2.4
Using Maths FSME Girls	70.7	67	68.5	67.6	63.1	65.3	-5.4	2.2
Using Maths Non-FSME	86.8	83.6	85.2	84.9	85	86.2	-0.6	1.2
Using Maths Non-FSME Boys	85.1	79.8	83	84	82.4	83.9	-1.2	1.5
Using Maths Non-FSME Girls	88.7	87.6	87.5	85.8	87.7	88.6	-0.1	0.9

Key Stage 3

(English) FSME All Pupils	52.6	55.2	63.2	58.5	59.2	60.6	8	1.4
(English) FSME Boys	40.9	45.3	53.5	48.3	49	51.5	10.6	2.5
(English) FSME Girls	65.6	65.4	72.6	68.6	69.3	70.2	4.6	0.9
(English) Non-FSME All Pupils	79.6	81.4	84.5	84.2	81.7	83.8	4.2	2.1
(English) Non-FSME Boys	70.9	75.5	78.3	77.5	73.9	78.9	8	5
(English) Non-FSME Girls	88.7	87.5	90.9	91.5	89.2	88.7	0	-0.5
(Using Maths) FSME All Pupils	55.3	58.1	63.7	59.2	60.2	63	7.7	2.8
(Using Maths) FSME Boys	51.3	55.8	60.5	54.8	58.1	59	7.7	0.9
(Using Maths) FSME Girls	59.6	60.1	66.8	63.6	62.4	67.3	7.7	4.9
(Using Maths) Non-FSME All Pupils	82.5	84.7	84.8	83.9	85.3	85.6	3.1	0.3
(Using Maths) Non-FSME Boys	78.2	82.8	82.2	81	81.8	84.1	5.9	2.3
(Using Maths) Non-FSME Girls	86.7	86.6	87.6	87.1	88.7	87.1	0.4	-1.6

Source: Department of Education (*School Development Planning and Target Setting*)

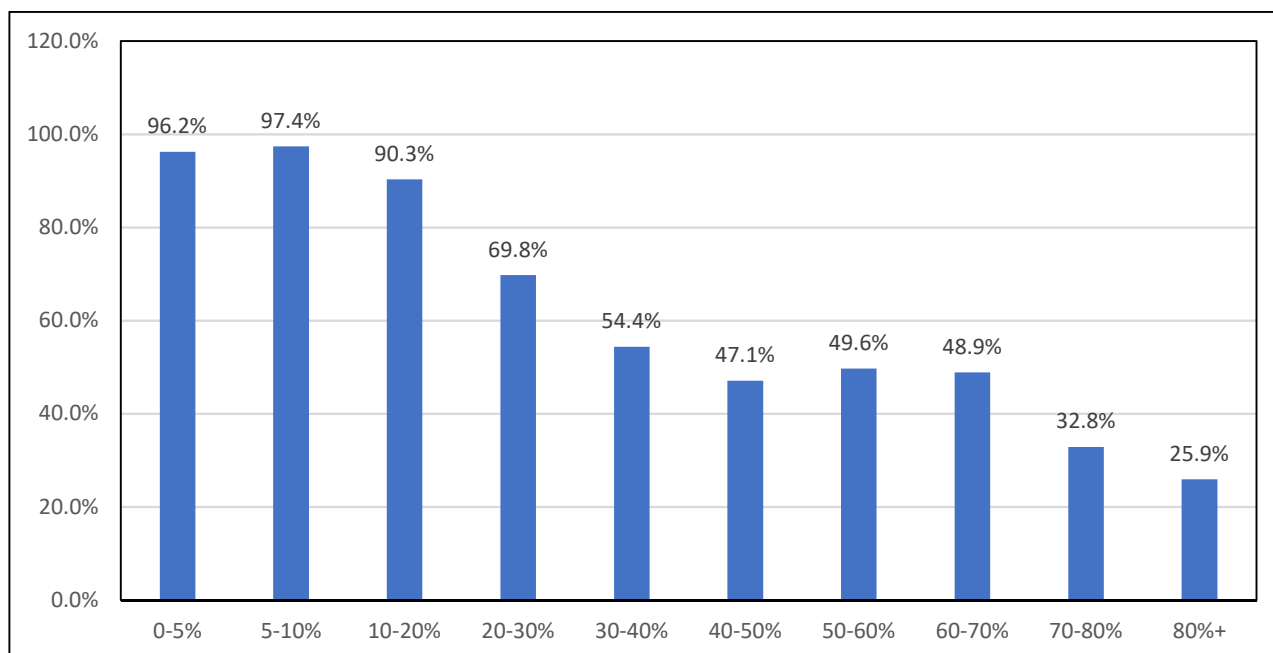
Table 12: 2018-19 GCSE performance by FSME band (5+A*-C including English and maths)

Year 12 FSME	Number of schools	Number of pupils	Number gaining 5+ A-C including EM	% gaining 5+ A*-C including EM
0-5%	8	1280	1231	96.2%
5-10%	13	1930	1879	97.4%
10-20%	42	5204	4699	90.3%
20-30%	35	3436	2397	69.8%
30-40%	39	3904	2123	54.4%
40-50%	17	1370	645	47.1%
50-60%	20	1692	840	49.6%
60-70%	9	896	438	48.9%
70-80%	4	201	66	32.8%
80%+	1	27	7	25.9%
All	188	19940	14325	71.8%

Source: Department of Education

Table 12 and Figure 6 clearly show the relationship between FSME levels and school attainment. The FSME percentage for each school has been calculated for the 2019 GCSE cohort, and placed in to one of several bands. It clearly shows schools with lower FSME rates have higher rates of attainment, with 96.2% of pupils in a school with a FSME rate of less than 5% met the expected standard. At the other end of the scale, only 32.8% of pupils in schools with a year 12 FSME rate of more than 70% got 5+ GCSEs (A*-C) including English and maths.

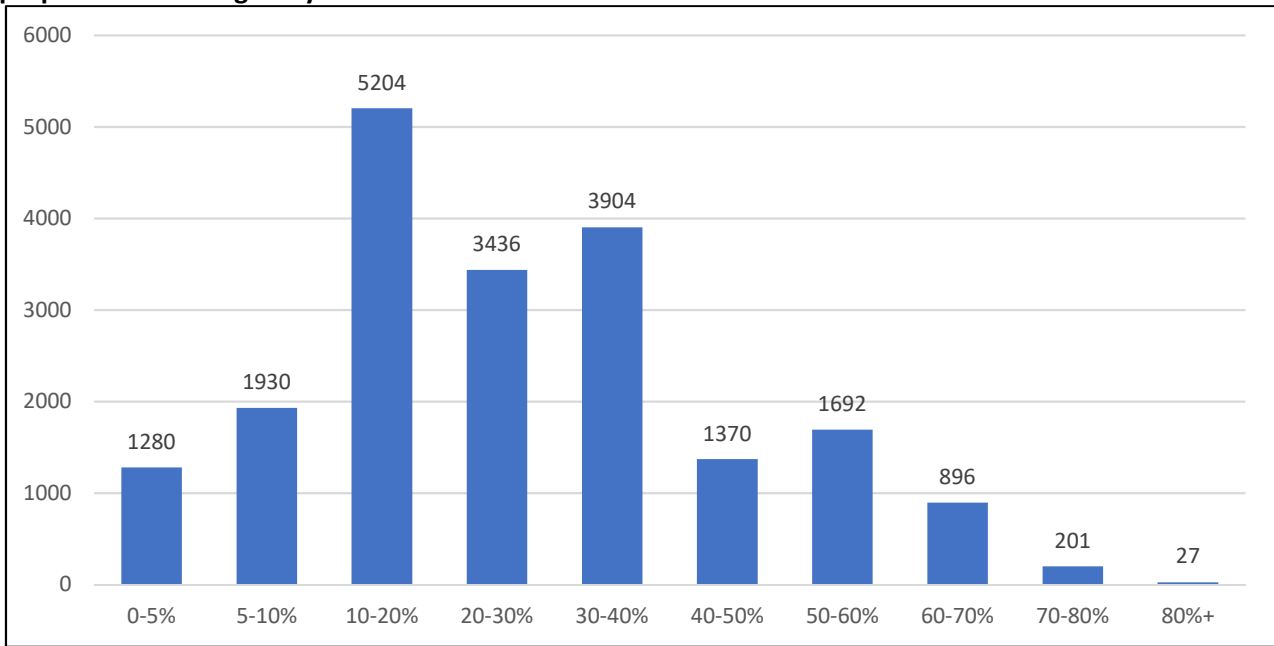
Figure 6: GCSE performance by FSME band 2019 (5+ A*-C including English and Maths)



Source: Department of Education

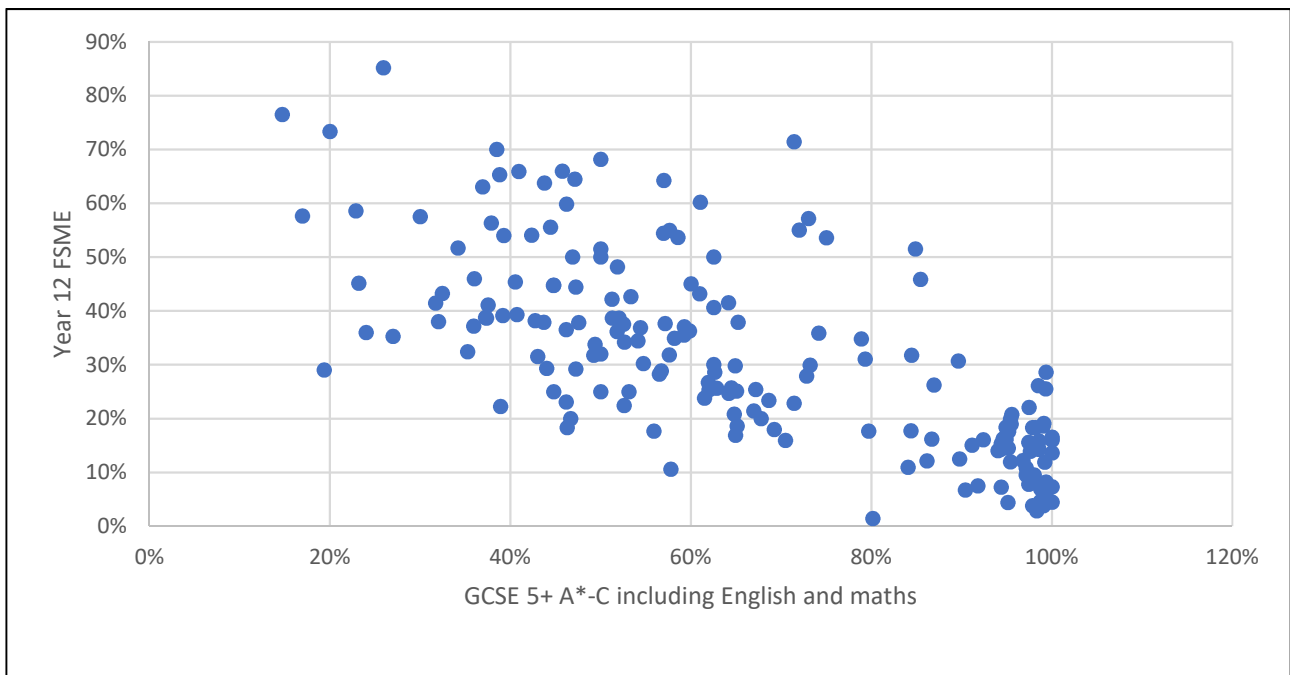
The data also shows stark variations in levels of attainment can be identified across the full range of free school meals bands in schools. In 2018/19, for example, there were 78 secondary schools where, overall, pupils attained at or above the national average for all pupil. (Figure 7)

Figure 7: Number of pupils in Year 12 secondary schools eligible for free school meals by average proportion meal eligibility within the schools attended- FSME bands



Source: Department of Education (Source: Summary of Annual Examination Results)?

Figure 8: GCSE attainment by Year 12 FSME 2018-19 (5+ A*-C including English and maths)



Source: Department of Education (Source: Summary of Annual Examination Results)?

Figure 8 shows the distribution of attainment by FSME levels in the year 12 GCSE cohort for 19,940 secondary school pupils in 188 schools. It shows that the attainment of pupils eligible for free school meals varies greatly between similar schools and too many achieve very little during their secondary education. It also clearly shows that there is a cluster of schools with less than 20% pupils FSME where over 90% of pupils gain 5+ GCSEs (A*-C) including English and maths. Generally, where the FSME rate is high, there are few schools with high levels of GCSE attainment. As FSME increases, GCSE attainment tends to decrease.

4.3 Type of school and attainment (Grammar and Non-Grammar)

Northern Ireland maintains a grammar school system, with many pupils being entered for academic selection in their final year or primary school (P7, aged 10-11). Table 13 below clearly shows that attainment in grammar schools is very high, with little room to improve. Over the last six years, attainment of non-grammar schools has increased and has slightly narrowed the gap, but in 2019, KS3 results showed that it still stood at 36.9 percentage points for English and 34.8 points for maths. This suggests that all of the overall improvement in English and maths at KS3 has come from non-grammar schools.

Table 13: Key stage 3 by type of school¹¹

Key Stage 3		2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	14 -19 change
Communication-English	All	74.1	74.0	78.2	75.8	74.5	77.0	2.9
	Grammar	98.6	98.4	97.6	96.5	98.4	98.0	-0.6
	Non-grammar	59.3	58.5	64.1	63.3	61.5	61.1	1.8
	Gap	39.3	39.9	33.5	33.2	36.9	36.9	
Using Maths	All	77.1	77.3	78.7	75.9	77.5	78.9	1.8
	Grammar	99.4	99.7	98.0	96.0	99.4	99.0	-0.4
	Non-grammar	62.1	63.5	63.6	64.2	63.2	64.2	2.1
	Gap	37.3	36.2	34.4	31.8	36.2	34.8	

Source: Department of Education (*School Development Planning and Target Setting*)

Table 14: Key stage 3 by type of school and gender¹²

Key Stage 3		2017/18				2018/19			
		All	Non-FSME	FSME	Gap	All	Non-FSME	FSME	Gap
Grammar	English – boys	96.7	96.9	95.7	1.2	97	96.5	100	-
	English - girls	100	100	100	0	99.2	98.9	100	-1.1
	English-all	98.4	98.6	97.3	1.3	98	97.7	100	-2.3
	Maths-Boys	99.8	100	97.7	2.3	99.1	99.4	98.1	1.3
	Maths-Girls	99.2	99.2	98.5	0.7	98.9	98.5	100	-1.5
	Maths- ALL	99.4	99.7	98.5	1.2	99	99.1	99	0.1
Non-Grammar	English – boys	50.7	58.2	39.4	18.8	50.6	60.1	36.9	23.2
	English - girls	72.9	79.7	63.7	16	71.7	77.9	62	15.9
	English-all	61.5	68.5	51.5	17	61.1	69.1	49.1	20
	Maths-Boys	59.3	66.4	48.9	17.5	59.8	68.2	47.3	20.9
	Maths-Girls	67.3	77.6	53.7	23.9	68.7	75.6	58.2	17.4
	Maths- ALL	63.2	71.7	51.3	20.4	64.2	71.9	52.7	19.2

Source: Department of Education

Table 14 illustrates that while overall factors such as gender and FSME status affect attainment, this is much less true in grammar schools, where typically about 98%+ of pupils met the expected standard in English and maths and gaps between different groups are measured in low single percentage figures. By contrast, there was much more variation in the non-grammar schools, where 36.9% of FSME boys met the expected standard in English, a gap of 23.2 percentage points with non-FSME boys (60.1%). The gap for girls was lower, but still 15.9 percentage points in favour of non-FSME girls (77.9%). In non-grammar

¹¹ These results are based on “Best Estimates” since data returned by schools has been very limited due to industrial action during this period.

¹² These results are based on “Best Estimates” since data returned by schools has been very limited due to industrial action during this period.

schools, 75.6% of non-FSME girls met the expected standard in maths, but this was only true of 47.3% of FSME boys, who were consistently the lowest performing group.

In terms of achievement gap upon leaving the school system, as might be expected, grammar school pupils displayed higher attainment than non-grammar school pupils. (Figure 9). This is as direct result of a number of factors including academic selection at 11, FSME% in non-selective schools of 39.2% compared with 14.1% in selective schools¹³ and [SEN (stages 1-5) % in non-selective schools of 30.8% compared with 10.9% in selective schools¹³]. It is also worth noting that many non-selective schools continue to demonstrate outstanding performance over many years despite the significant challenges their pupils might face. Factors that make a difference in overcoming these challenges are outlined in Section 5.

Figure 9: GCSE performance by school type 2008/9 -17/18 (5+ A*-C including English and maths) – School Leavers Survey

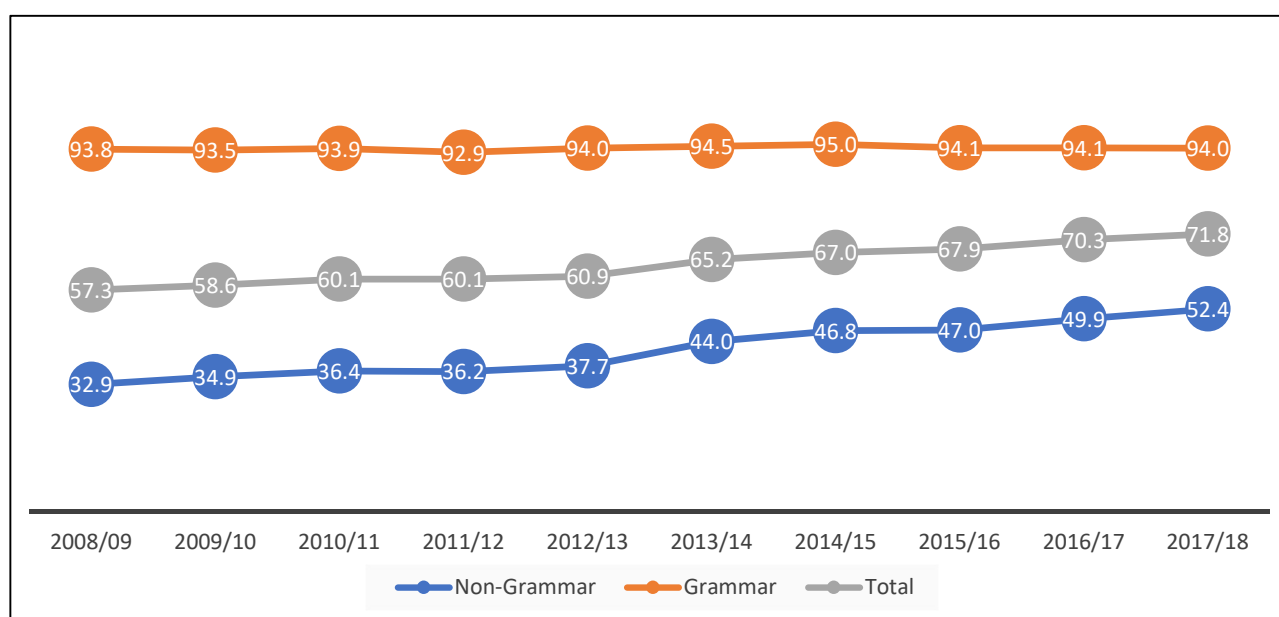


Table 15. School Leavers grammar and non-grammar school attainment at GCSE (5+A*-C inc English and Maths)

	Grammar				Non-Grammar			
	All	FSME	Non FSME	Gap	All	FSME	Non FSME	Gap
2005/6	89.5	83.7	89.9	6.2	29.4	17.3	33.6	16.3
2006/7	92.1	85.6	92.5	6.9	30.0	17.9	34.0	16.1
2007/8	92.9	85.5	93.3	7.8	32.6	19.0	36.5	17.5
2008/9	93.4	88.4	93.6	5.2	33.9	20.1	37.9	17.8
2009/10	94.0	87.8	94.4	6.6	35.3	21.3	39.4	18.1
2010/11	94.1	86.9	94.5	7.6	36.3	22.3	40.6	18.3
2011/12	94.1	85.6	94.7	9.1	38.5	24.6	43.2	18.6
2012/13	94.8	89.3	95.2	5.9	39.2	24.4	44.6	20.2
2013/14	94.2	85.4	94.8	9.4	41.5	26.1	47.0	20.9
2014/15	95.6	90.2	96.2	6.0	45.3	31.0	52.4	21.4
2015/16	94.5	85.6	95.8	10.2	47.5	34.6	55.1	20.5

¹³ Source: 2018/19 [School census statistical bulletin \(education-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/724242/school-census-statistical-bulletin-2018-19.pdf)

	Grammar				Non-Grammar			
	All	FSME	Non FSME	Gap	All	FSME	Non FSME	Gap
2016/17	94.7	86.3	95.9	9.6	49.6	37.4	56.9	19.5
2017/18	94.3	84.9	95.7	10.8	51.0	38.2	58.3	20.1
2018/19	94.5	86.2	95.8	9.6	52.1	39.2	59.7	20.5

Source: Department of Education (School Leavers Survey)

Table 15 illustrates how the impact of FSME is felt more severely in non-grammar schools, where the gap between disadvantaged pupils and their more affluent peers was twice as wide as in grammar schools in 2019. In non-grammar schools, 59.7% of non-FSME pupils and 39.2% of FSME pupils attained 5+ GCSEs (A*-C) including English and maths, a gap of 20.5 percentage points. In contrast, the respective figures for grammar school pupils was 95.8% and 86.2% respectively, a gap of 9.6 points. **It is widely acknowledged that this is a direct result of academic selection at age 11 resulting in less social mixing within grammar schools.**

However, in both grammar and non-grammar schools, the gap between FSME and non-FSME pupils has widened since 2014, suggesting that the effects of disadvantage are having an increasing impact on attainment.

4.4 Religious status and attainment (Protestant and Catholic)

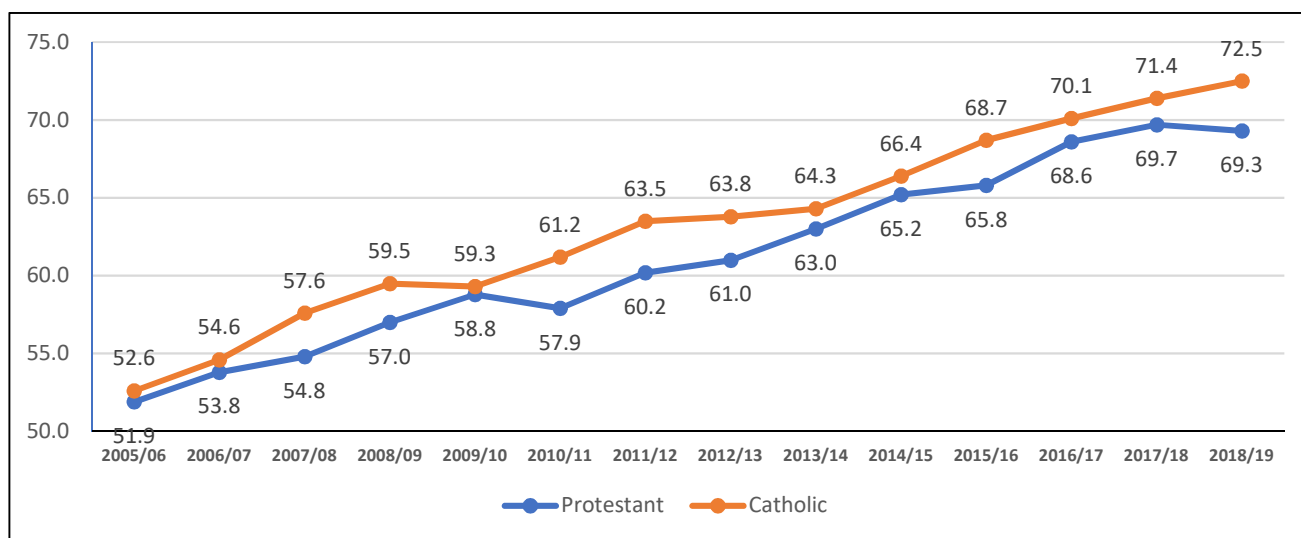
Table 16: Religious status difference and attainment of 5+ GCSEs (A*-C) in English and Maths

	Protestant	Catholic	Other	Gap b/w Protestants and Catholics
2005/06	51.9	52.6	55.9	0.7
2006/07	53.8	54.6	53.1	0.8
2007/08	54.8	57.6	56.4	2.8
2008/09	57.0	59.5	58.5	2.5
2009/10	58.8	59.3	58.5	0.5
2010/11	57.9	61.2	57.7	3.3
2011/12	60.2	63.5	61.5	3.3
2012/13	61.0	63.8	58.9	2.8
2013/14	63.0	64.3	61.8	1.3
2014/15	65.2	66.4	66.9	1.2
2015/16	65.8	68.7	69.1	2.9
2016/17	68.6	70.1	70.8	1.5
2017/18	69.7	71.4	70.0	1.7
2018/19	69.3	72.5	68.1	3.2

Source: Department of Education (School Leavers Survey)

Table 16 and Figure 10 shows that Catholic attainment was consistently higher than that found for Protestant pupils on the key 5+ GCSEs (A*-C) including English and maths outcome, albeit by a small margin. Both groups made strong gains between 2006 and 2019, with Catholic attainment improving by 19.9 percentage points, and Protestant attainment improving by 17.4 percentage points, thus the gap widened slightly over the period. In 2019, 72.5% of Catholic pupils, and 69.3% of Protestant pupils met the expected standard, a gap of 3.2 percentage points.

Figure 10: 5+ GCSEs (A*-C) including English and maths by Religion



Source: Department of Education (School Leavers Survey)

Table 17: School leavers achieving at least 5+ GCSEs⁽²⁾ A*-C including English and GCSE maths

		Boys			Girls		
		FSME	Non FSME	Gap	FSME	Non FSME	Gap
2015/16	Protestant	34	67.8	33.8	42.5	78.6	36.1
	Catholic	43.6	74.7	31.1	53.1	81.3	28.2
	Gap	9.6	6.9		10.6	2.7	
2016/17	Protestant	36.6	71.1	34.5	48.9	80.4	31.5
	Catholic	45	73.7	28.7	55.6	84.1	28.5
	Gap	8.4	2.6		6.7	3.7	
2017/18	Protestant	37.2	71.6	34.4	49.1	82.1	33
	Catholic	46.7	76.4	29.7	57	83.3	26.3
	Gap	9.5	4.8		7.9	1.2	
2018/19	Protestant	37.9	71.7	33.8	49.0	81.8	32.8
	Catholic	46.7	76.7	30.0	59.4	85.3	25.9
	Gap	8.8	5.0		10.4	3.5	

Source: Department of Education (School Leavers Survey)

Table 17 illustrated that Catholic pupils were slightly more likely than Protestant to get 5+ GCSEs (A*-C) including English and maths, but this masks the effect of multiple factors that can affect attainment. Table 17 breaks down the data by gender and FSME status and some more disturbing results emerge.

In each of the last three years, Protestant FSME boys had the lowest rates of attainment, less than half of that found for Catholic non-FSME girls. In 2019, just 37.9% of Protestant FSME boys gained 5+ GCSEs (A*-C) including English and maths, while 85.3% of Catholic non-FSME girls met this standard. In contrast, the gap between non-FSME Catholic girls and non-FSME Protestant girls was 3.5 percentage points.

The gap in attainment between Catholic and Protestant non-FSME boys was smaller (5.0 percentage points) than that of Catholic and Protestant FSME boys (8.8 percentage points).

Table 18: GCSE attainment gap by religion between % non-FSME school leavers and % FSME school leavers 5+A*-C including English and Maths

	Catholic			Protestant			Other		
	FSME	non-FSME	Gap	FSME	non-FSME	Gap	FSME	non-FSME	Gap
2005/06	28.9	60.4	31.6	20.9	56.2	35.3	23.0	59.9	36.8
2006/07	31.4	61.5	30.1	18.6	58.8	40.3	20.9	57.4	36.5
2007/08	31.8	64.2	32.4	18.9	59.1	40.2	24.8	60.4	35.6
2008/09	33.7	66.1	32.5	22.1	61.1	39.0	20.7	62.5	41.8
2009/10	35.0	65.7	30.7	23.5	63.1	39.6	26.7	62.5	35.8
2010/11	35.9	68.0	32.1	23.3	62.6	39.3	27.3	61.9	34.6
2011/12	38.5	70.6	32.1	25.9	65.2	39.3	28.3	66.7	38.4
2012/13	38.3	71.6	33.3	29.1	65.9	36.8	29.2	64.5	35.3
2013/14	38.7	71.5	32.8	27.2	68.3	41.1	32.0	67.5	35.4
2014/15	44.7	75.5	30.8	33.2	71.9	38.7	43.6	72.7	29.1
2015/16	48.4	78.0	29.6	37.9	73.1	35.2	43.8	76.3	32.5
2016/17	50.2	78.8	28.6	42.7	75.8	33.1	47.4	78.0	30.6
2017/18	51.6	79.7	28.2	42.8	76.8	34.0	48.9	76.1	27.1
2018/19	53.2	81.0	27.8	43.5	76.6	33.1	46.8	75.1	28.3
Change b/w 05/06 and 18/19	24.3	20.6		22.6	20.4		23.8	15.2	

Source: Department of Education (School Leavers Survey)

Notes:

1. Data excludes special and independent schools.
2. There was an increase in the number of FSME pupils from 2014/15, which coincided with an extension of the eligibility for free school meals under the Working Tax Credit free school meal criterion, which was extended to post-primary pupils from September 2014.
3. 'Other' includes Other Christian, No religion, and Non-Christian.
4. The percentage points (ppts) Gap is calculated based on unrounded figures. It is not the difference between the rounded FSME, and non-FSME figures presented.

There is also a substantial gap in attainment between FSME and non-FSME pupils when broken down by religious background. In 2019, the gap in attainment between FSME and non-FSME was 27.8 percentage points for Catholic pupils, and 33.1 points for Protestant pupils, although this gap had narrowed slightly over the last 14 years for both groups. In 2019, 43.5% of Protestant FSME pupils gained 5+A*-C including English and maths, while the figure for non-FSME pupils was 76.6%. For Catholic pupils, the figures were 53.2% and 81% respectively. (see table 18)

When FSME attainment was broken down by religion it can be seen that Catholic pupils consistently had higher rates of attainment than Protestant, with a gap of between 7.5 and 11.5 percentage points since 2014. This was also true of non-FSME pupils, although the gap was smaller each year, averaging about 4 percentage points. Protestant FSME pupils consistently had the lowest levels of attainment of these particular groups although ethnic minorities such as Traveller children are known to have lower levels of achievement.

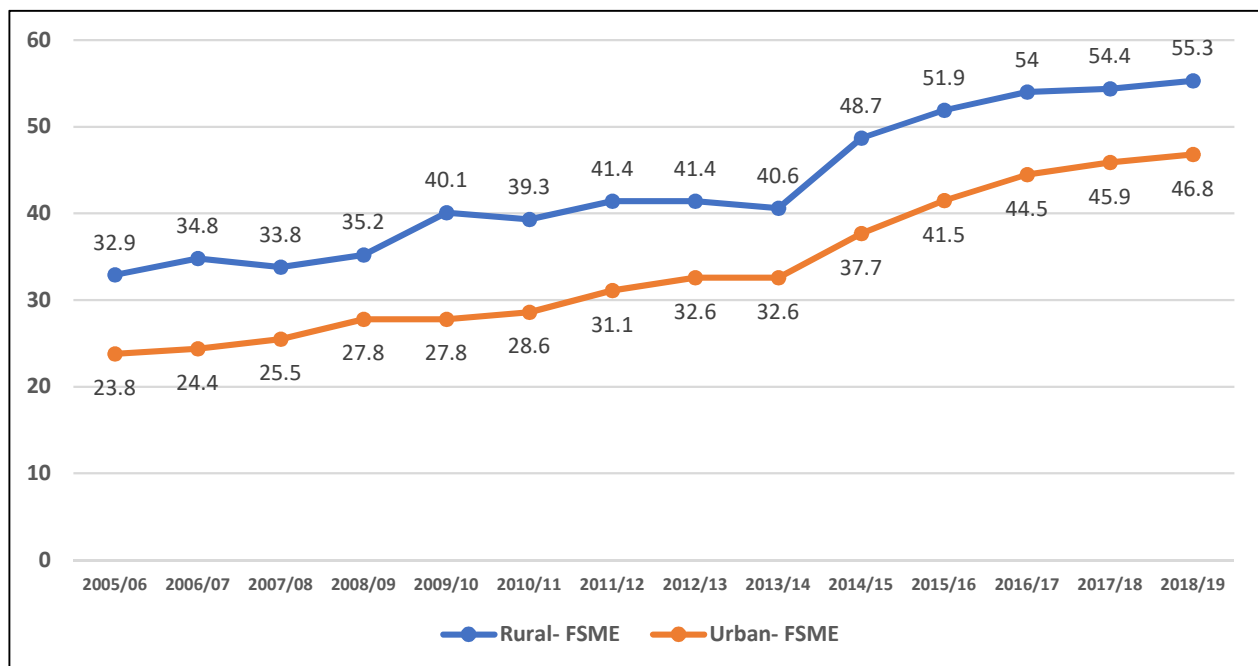
4.5 Area of residence and attainment (Rural and Urban)

Table 19: GCSE attainment by FSME status and location, 5+A*-C including English and maths

	Rural			Urban			Rural -urban gap	
	FSME	non-FSME	Gap	FSME	non-FSME	Gap	FSME	non-FSME
2005/06	32.9	61.7	28.8	23.8	56.5	32.7	9.1	5.2
2006/07	34.8	63.2	28.5	24.4	58.1	33.7	10.4	5.1
2007/08	33.8	65.6	31.8	25.5	59.3	33.8	8.3	6.3
2008/09	35.2	66.8	31.6	27.8	61.9	34.1	7.4	4.9
2009/10	40.1	68.5	28.5	27.8	61.5	33.6	12.3	7.0
2010/11	39.3	69.1	29.8	28.6	62.6	34.0	10.7	6.5
2011/12	41.4	70.4	29.0	31.1	66.2	35.2	10.3	4.2
2012/13	41.4	72.9	31.5	32.6	65.3	32.7	8.8	7.6
2013/14	40.6	73.2	32.6	32.6	67.3	34.8	8.0	5.9
2014/15	48.7	76.3	27.7	37.7	71.8	34.1	11.0	4.5
2015/16	51.9	77.9	26.1	41.5	74.3	32.8	10.4	3.6
2016/17	54.0	79.1	25.1	44.5	76.2	31.7	9.5	2.9
2017/18	54.4	80.0	25.6	45.9	76.8	31.0	8.5	3.2
2018/19	55.3	80.9	25.6	46.8	76.8	29.9	8.5	4.1

Source: Department of Education School Leavers Survey. Urban/rural data is found online here <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/indicators/gap-between-percentage-non-fsme-school-leavers-and-percentage-fsme-school-leavers-achieving-level-2>

Figure 11: GCSE attainment by area of residence and FSME (5+A*-C including English and maths)



In each of the last 14 years, rural pupils¹⁴ had higher levels of attainment at GCSE than urban pupils when broken down by FSME status, and in addition, the gap in attainment between FSME and non-FSME pupils was smaller for pupils in rural areas. In 2019, 55.3% of rural pupils who were FSME gained 5+A*-C including English and maths, compared with 46.8% of FSME pupils in urban areas, a gap of 8.5 percentage points. Of those who were non-FSME, 80.9% of rural pupils and 76.8% of urban pupils met the 5+ GCSEs (A*-C) including English and maths benchmark, a gap of 4.1 percentage points. It would suggest that FSME status has less of an impact in rural areas than urban areas. (see Table 19 and Figure 11)

4.6 Ethnic background and attainment

Table 20: GCSE 5+A*-C including English and maths

	White			Ethnic Minority			White - Minority gap	
	FSME	Non-FSME	Gap	FSME	Non-FSME	Gap	FSME	Non-FSME
2005/06	26.3	58.6	32.3	30.2	48.5	18.3	-3.9	10.1
2006/07	27.1	60.1	33.0	22.9	47.8	24.9	4.2	12.3
2007/08	27.6	61.7	34.0	36.1	57.9	21.8	-8.5	3.8
2008/09	29.7	63.7	34.0	27.0	55.6	28.6	2.7	8.1
2009/10	31.2	64.4	33.2	37.9	56.9	19.0	-6.7	7.5
2010/11	31.8	65.3	33.5	19.5	55.4	35.9	12.3	9.9
2011/12	34.3	68.1	33.8	24.0	58.9	34.9	10.3	9.2
2012/13	35.1	68.6	33.6	23.7	57.2	33.5	11.4	11.4
2013/14	35.0	69.9	34.9	28.9	62.6	33.6	6.1	7.3
2014/15	41.3	73.8	32.5	43.2	68.3	25.1	-1.9	5.5
2015/16	44.9	75.9	31.0	43.1	74.0	30.9	1.8	1.9
2016/17	47.6	77.5	29.9	42.7	74.2	31.4	4.9	3.3
2017/18	49.0	78.2	29.2	35.0	75.4	40.4	14.0	2.8
2018/19	49.9	78.8	28.9	35.8	70.8	35.0	14.1	8.0

Source: Department of Education (School Leavers Survey)

The gap in attainment for White pupils between those FSME and non-FSME was at least 29 percentage points in each of the last 14 years, although it has narrowed slightly over the period. In contrast, the gap for ethnic minority pupils has widened. In 2019, 49.9% of FSME White pupils and 78.8% of non-FSME white pupils gained 5+ GCSE passes including English and maths – a gap of 28.9 percentage points, down from 32.3 percentage points in 2006. For ethnic minority pupils, the gap in attainment between those eligible and not eligible has increased since 2006, from 18.3 percentage points to 35 percentage points. In the main this is due to FSME ethnic minority pupils not significantly improving their performance over the period, while non-FSME ethnic minority pupils did. Non-FSME ethnicity minority pupils were twice as likely as their FSME peers to get 5+ GCSEs (A*-C) including English and maths in 2019.

Of all four groups, White non-FSME pupils had the highest level of attainment each year showing a steady year on year improvement, while ethnicity minority pupils' attainment also showed an upward trend and they narrowed the gap slightly with their White peers. White FSME pupils made the most improvement of all over the 14 years, up 23.6 percentage points, vastly greater than the net 5.6 percentage point gain made by ethnicity minority FSME pupils.

¹⁴ Rural / urban is defined by the postcode of the pupil.

4.7 International Assessments

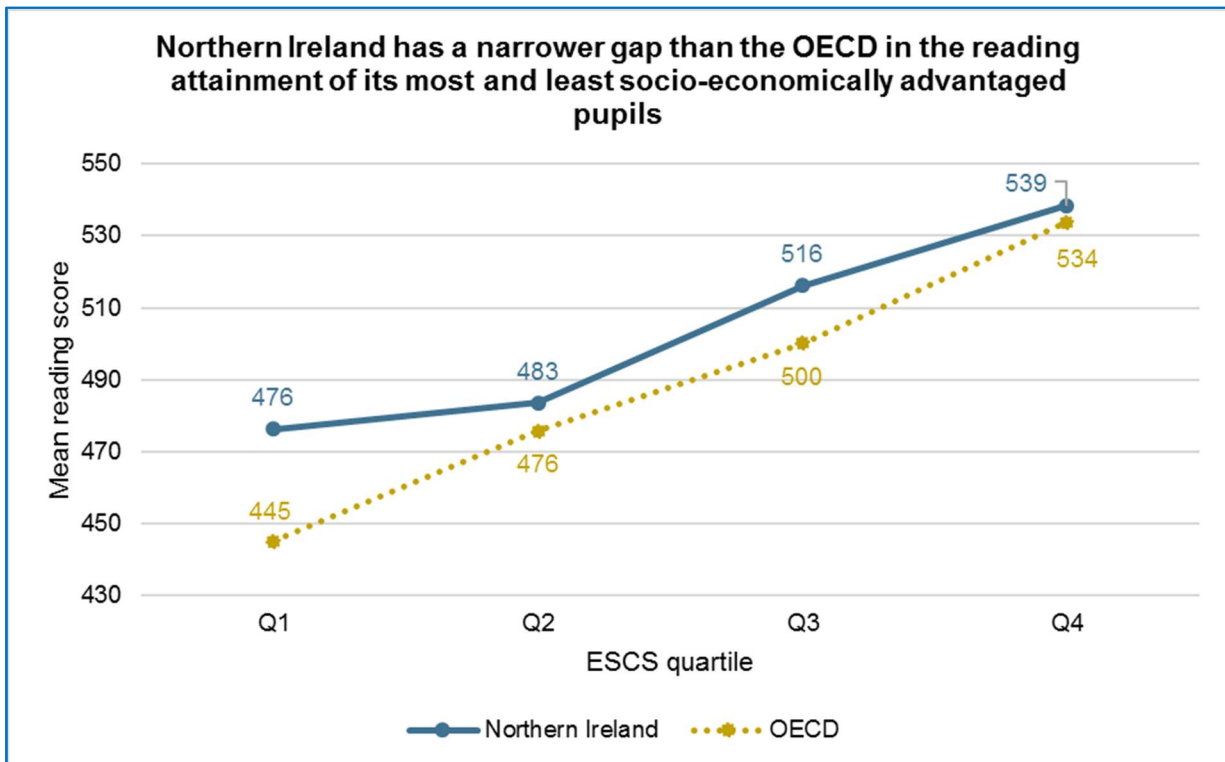
As part of this analysis, it is also worth bearing in mind Northern Ireland's performance internationally.

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a study of educational achievement organised by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Every 3 years PISA tests 15-year-old pupils from all over the world in reading, mathematics and science. The assessments are designed to gauge how well the pupils master these key subjects in order to be prepared for real-life situations in the adult world. Each round of PISA focuses on one of the three key subjects of mathematics, science and reading. In 2018, the major subject domain was reading, with science and mathematics as minor subject domains. Pupils and school principals also completed contextual questionnaires (See NFER 2019a)

Variation in reading by pupil scores: In common with all other countries, pupils from the most advantaged backgrounds in Northern Ireland had higher reading achievement than those from less socioeconomically advantaged homes. This gap in achievement was significantly smaller in Northern Ireland than the OECD average disadvantage gap, which was partly because of better performance of the most disadvantaged pupils in Northern Ireland but also partly accounted for by a narrower gap in the socio-economic status of the most and least disadvantaged pupils. (See NFER 2019a page 5)

The most disadvantaged pupils across the OECD countries scored lower than the most disadvantaged pupils in Northern Ireland, on average, whereas the least disadvantaged pupils scored similarly, on average. Therefore, the size of the effect of socio-economic status (ESCS) is smaller in Northern Ireland than across the OECD (see NFER 2019b: 60).

Figure 12: Reading performance by ESCS Index quartile



Source: PISA 2018 database

An interesting feature of Figure 12 is the mean reading score of the most disadvantaged quartile (Q1) of pupils in Northern Ireland compared with the OECD countries. While mean reading scores for quartiles 2, 3 and 4 are similar for Northern Ireland and the OECD, the reading attainment of the most disadvantaged pupils in Northern Ireland is higher than that of the most disadvantaged pupils in the OECD countries. This tells us that the most disadvantaged pupils in Northern Ireland perform better than would be expected and suggests that policies which target disadvantage in Northern Ireland may have had a positive impact in raising the attainment of disadvantaged pupils.

Key point: The gap in performance between the most and least disadvantaged pupils in Northern Ireland was relatively low. Pupils in Northern Ireland were relatively well able to overcome the disadvantages of their background, that is, for pupils in Northern Ireland, socio-economic background was a less good predictor of scores than for pupils across the OECD. (Page 62)

TIMSS 2019 :

- TIMSS is a study of mathematics and science at ages 9-10 (and ages 13-14, although Northern Ireland participated only at the younger age range). TIMSS has a four-yearly cycle. Northern Ireland took part in TIMSS for the third time in the 2019 cycle so comparisons can be made with 2015 where appropriate.
- Mathematics and science attainment for 9 and 10-year-olds in Northern Ireland remains high. Northern Ireland's mathematics and science scores in 2019 were not significantly different from scores in 2015 or 2011.
- Pupils in Northern Ireland performed very well in TIMSS 2019 mathematics. They significantly outperformed 51 of the 58 participating countries and were significantly outperformed by only five countries.
- The average score for science (518) was lower than for mathematics (566), although still above the TIMSS science International Average.
- For mathematics and science, the distribution of attainment across the international benchmarks has remained stable since 2015.
- Reflecting the high performance in mathematics overall in Northern Ireland, just over a quarter of pupils reached the Advanced International Benchmark, the sixth highest percentage internationally. This mirrors the findings from 2015.
- In terms of the lower performing pupils, in Northern Ireland, four per cent and six per cent of pupils did not reach the Low International Benchmarks for mathematics and science respectively. This compares with 8 per cent for both mathematics and science, on average internationally.

Source: [TIMSS 2019 in Northern Ireland: Executive summary \(education-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/timss-2019)

PIRLS 2016:

- PIRLS is a study of reading at ages 9-10 and has a five-yearly cycle. Northern Ireland took part in PIRLS for the first time in 2011 so comparisons can be made between cycles where appropriate.
- Pupils in Northern Ireland significantly outperformed 41 of the 49 other participating countries in reading and were significantly outperformed by two countries.
- The average score for reading (565) in Northern Ireland is statistically similar to six other countries, including two comparator countries (Republic of Ireland and Poland).
- Northern Ireland's performance in reading has remained stable from 2011 to 2016, with no significant difference in the overall average score. This was also the case for Singapore.
- In contrast, the Republic of Ireland and England have improved significantly since 2011, while Canada and New Zealand's scores have significantly decreased.
- Of the four countries that outperformed Northern Ireland in 2011, only the Russian Federation and Singapore outperformed Northern Ireland again in 2016.

- In Northern Ireland, and all comparator countries, there were significant gender differences in attainment in reading, favouring girls. This was in line with the gender differences seen internationally.
- The gap between boys and girls has increased slightly since 2011. Northern Ireland has shown an increase of two scale points, whereas the international average increased by three scale points.
- Compared to Northern Ireland and the other comparator countries, England has shown the largest reduction (eight scale points) in the difference between girls' and boys' average scale scores in reading since 2011.
- Over a fifth of pupils in Northern Ireland (22 per cent) reached the 'Advanced International Benchmark' in reading, the third highest percentage internationally.
- Only three per cent of pupils in Northern Ireland failed to reach the 'Low International Benchmark'. In comparison, the international average was four per cent.
- In Northern Ireland, there was a relatively wide spread of attainment for reading between the highest and the lowest attainers. Only one of the comparator countries, New Zealand, had a greater gap in mean scores between the highest and lowest attainers.

Source: [Microsoft Word - PIRLS 2016 in NI Executive summary - final \(education-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

5. Tackling the underachievement of disadvantage through targeted interventions: Lessons from research

5.1 Introduction

Closing the gap between the achievement of disadvantaged pupils and their peers is one of the biggest challenges faced by policy makers, teachers, and school leaders in Northern Ireland and elsewhere. It is unarguable from the research evidence available in this area that poverty is the biggest single indicator of low educational achievement (Gorard 2018; Demie 2020). Education researchers, policy makers and practitioners have debated the question of what and how much, schools can do to mitigate the effect of socioeconomic factors (in the context of school intake characteristics, family social background and the neighborhood where pupils live), on educational outcomes and raising achievement in schools (Demie 2019, Clifton and Cook 2012, Mongon and Chapman 2010, Ofsted 2009). The research findings also argue schools on their own cannot compensate for societal disadvantage and remind policy makers to acknowledge the importance of the relationship between social disadvantage and educational achievement.

School effectiveness research has shown that only about 8-15% of the attainment difference between schools is accounted for by what they actually do (Sammons 1999, Strand 2015). About 85% is attributed to pupil level factors such as the wider family environment, the neighbourhood where they live and the school attended (Strand 2014, Ofsted 2014; Rasbash et al 2010). This evidence confirms "Schools can make a difference, albeit with certain limits." Recent research has shown how schools succeeded against the odds (Demie and Mclean 2016, Mongon and Chapman 2010, Ofsted 2009) through effective use of targeted support and interventions (See Ofsted 2014 and EEF 2019). Other researchers (Demie and Mclean 2016, Mongon and Chapman 2010, Ofsted 2009) have also highlighted that the key success factors that have made a huge difference in effective schools were:

- Providing a strong and visionary headteacher
- Rigorous monitoring of data
- Ensuring access to high quality teaching
- Effective targeted support and intervention

Despite such success, stories in case studies schools, researchers have continued arguing the factors influencing low attainment are beyond the control of schools and it is impossible for them to overcome the problem of poverty and disadvantage alone. Overall research has shown that the gap is not caused by schools.

5.2 Lessons from Northern Ireland's research evidence

Schools in Northern Ireland work hard to raise standards among its pupils. However, this task is particularly challenging in schools with high numbers of disadvantaged pupils including those with Special Educational Needs. While disadvantaged pupils attain very well in some successful schools, the data shows that in other schools these pupils have been consistently under-achieving in relation to their peers. Levels of attainment, particularly by Protestant boys, have been consistently below average. Research carried out in schools with a track record of achievement by the Department of Education (DfE) in Northern Ireland highlights the factors that make a difference:

1. Strong, committed, and visible leadership
2. Committed teachers and staff
3. High expectations of and aspirations for all pupils
4. Effective pastoral care and positive behavioural management
5. Broad and balanced curriculum with a focus on literacy and numeracy
6. Skilled use of data to track pupil performance
7. Cross-phase links to support transition and to identify, apply and share best practice
8. Effective use of outside interventions
9. A well-informed and skilled Board of Governors committed to supporting the school
10. Good links with parents, communities, and employers (See DE 2020a:2).

The stories of how case study schools have succeeded in closing the achievement gap are discussed in detail in the Department of Education report "*Tackling educational disadvantage in 2020.*" The evidence from success stories in the report have of a local significance for all schools in Northern Ireland and offers evidence to policy makers and school practitioners to tackle disadvantage in schools. What is special about the case studies schools is that effective schools have a good link with parents, communities and employers and they use outside interventions effectively to support disadvantaged pupils. Schools in NI will want to learn from what has proven to work.

5.3 Lessons from England and elsewhere

To address the issue of underachievement of disadvantaged pupils, similar research has also been carried out in England's schools to examine the success factors driving school improvement and raising achievement for all groups of pupils (see Demie 2019, 2020; Demie and Mclean 2016; Baars et al 2016; Mongon and Chapman 2008, Ofsted 2009; Sammons et al 1995). The research in England has looked at examples of schools, which provide an environment where underachieving groups can flourish. A number of researchers used detailed case studies to illustrate how policy and practice help to raise the achievement of pupils, with a strong emphasis on what works. The lessons from England's schools confirm that attainment has risen much faster in successful case study schools for all pupils, including disadvantaged and ethnic minorities, than nationally. There was a huge improvement compared to a decade ago when some of the schools' performance was below the national average. There are a number of reasons why the schools are bucking the national trend. The research identified the following success factors that proved successful in school improvement and raising achievement in schools. These include:

1. Strong school leadership team
2. High quality teaching and learning
3. Effective governing bodies
4. Effective use of data to monitor performance and to identify underachieving groups
5. Effective parental and community engagement
6. Effective support for pupils who speak English as an additional language
7. Providing an inclusive curriculum that meets the needs of all pupils
8. Effective use of pupil voice and feedback.

9. Targeted interventions and support through one to one support, and booster classes, small groups tuition, Personal tutoring, booster class, pastoral care and enrichment programmes e.g. trip.” (see Demie 2019, 2020; Demie and Mclean 2016; Baars et al 2016; Mongon and Chapman 2008, Ofsted 2009; Sammons et al 1995).

Overall, the lessons from the case study schools study suggested that schools can make a difference, albeit within certain limits, in raising achievement and narrowing gaps in the localities they serve. It offers a worthwhile example of a success story that is worth learning by schools and central government.

England has had several major successful initiatives in recent years, such as the national strategies, The London Challenge, the Raising the Achievement of Ethnic Minorities Children, and pupil premium projects¹⁵. The main aims of these projects were to raise standards in the poorest performing schools, to narrow the attainment gap, and to create better and outstanding schools (Kidson and Norris 2015; DfE 2013). It also adopted “beyond the school gate” initiatives to tackle the achievement of disadvantage in the communities.

London Challenge recognised that “*many London schools serve very deprived communities. Some have over a long period found it hard to develop a strong culture of achievement. They are the front line in the attempt to break the link between deprivation and underperformance.*” (DfES 2013:4)

In all of these projects, disadvantaged pupils were supported with a range of targeted interventions including using successful headteachers to lead the strategy and share good practice, small groups tuition, personal tutoring, booster class, pastoral care, and enrichment programmes e.g. trip

The London Challenge initiatives also invested heavily in school leadership to support leaders of struggling schools and worked with key boroughs to ensure robust local planning and support for school improvement (London Councils 2015; Hutchings et al 2012; Ogden 2014; Husbands 2014). Data support formed a core part of the innovation and was used to determine where support was required and to monitor whether interventions were successful. As a result of the initiatives London schools improved rapidly over the past decade, with primary and secondary schools now outperforming the rest of the country. During the period, local authorities in inner London also went from the worst performing to some of the best performing nationally. All the evaluations confirm that it made a huge improvement to London schools.

The positive impact of the London Challenge and national strategies has been further explored in a number of research studies (See Hayes et al 2018, Hutchings et al 2012, Kidson and Norris 2015; Baars et al 2016). For example, Hutchings *et al.* (2012) and Baars et al (2016) also evaluated the Challenge programme and associated it with gains in attainment in London with a narrowing of the attainment gap between pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) and those not eligible. They also found that school to-school collaboration played a key role, alongside school leadership and a data-rich approach to the Challenge’s interventions, which represented ‘*a highly supportive and encouraging programme in which headteachers and teachers came to feel more valued, more confident and more effective*’ (Hutchings *et al.*, 2012: 58)

Similarly, the evaluation of the Aiming High: Raising the achievement of minority ethnic pupils project (DfES 2003, Tikly et al 2006) also confirmed schools which were successful in closing the gap of ethnic minorities were using similar approaches in the creation of genuinely inclusive school communities. Those schools in the project were strongly committed to the ethos that stressed high achievement, equal

¹⁵ Until 2010 it successfully implemented the London Challenge and the Raising the Achievement of Ethnic Minorities Children Project (EMAG). In the London Challenge it invested £80 million for 8 years and nationally used £210 million per year to raise the achievement of Ethnic Minority Achievement.

opportunities, the valuing of cultural diversity, partnership with parents and communities and effective use of assessment data for tracking and target setting for individual pupils and groups (Ofsted 2004a, b; Tikly et al 2007). What is particularly significant is that the successful schools were using effective interventions strategies such as effective feedback, one to one support, booster classes, providing small groups tuitions, effective support for English as an additional language pupils to improve English proficiency to access the curriculum and parental support. Overall, there were excellent systems for monitoring the work of the pupils, identifying those who needed additional or extra challenge and then providing them with additional support.

In addition, the research evaluation found that students' attainment had improved for Black Caribbean pupils attending Aiming High schools compared to those not attending Aiming High schools (see Tikly et al 2005). At national level there is also statistical evidence that showed the positive impact of the project. As a result of the initiatives, Black Caribbean pupils closed the achievement gap from 19 percentage points in 2004 to 9 points in 2011 at GCSE level (Demie 2019; Demie Mclean 2017:18). There is no doubt such intervention strategies enabled ethnic minorities and disadvantaged pupils to make faster progress to catch up with their peers and to close the gap.

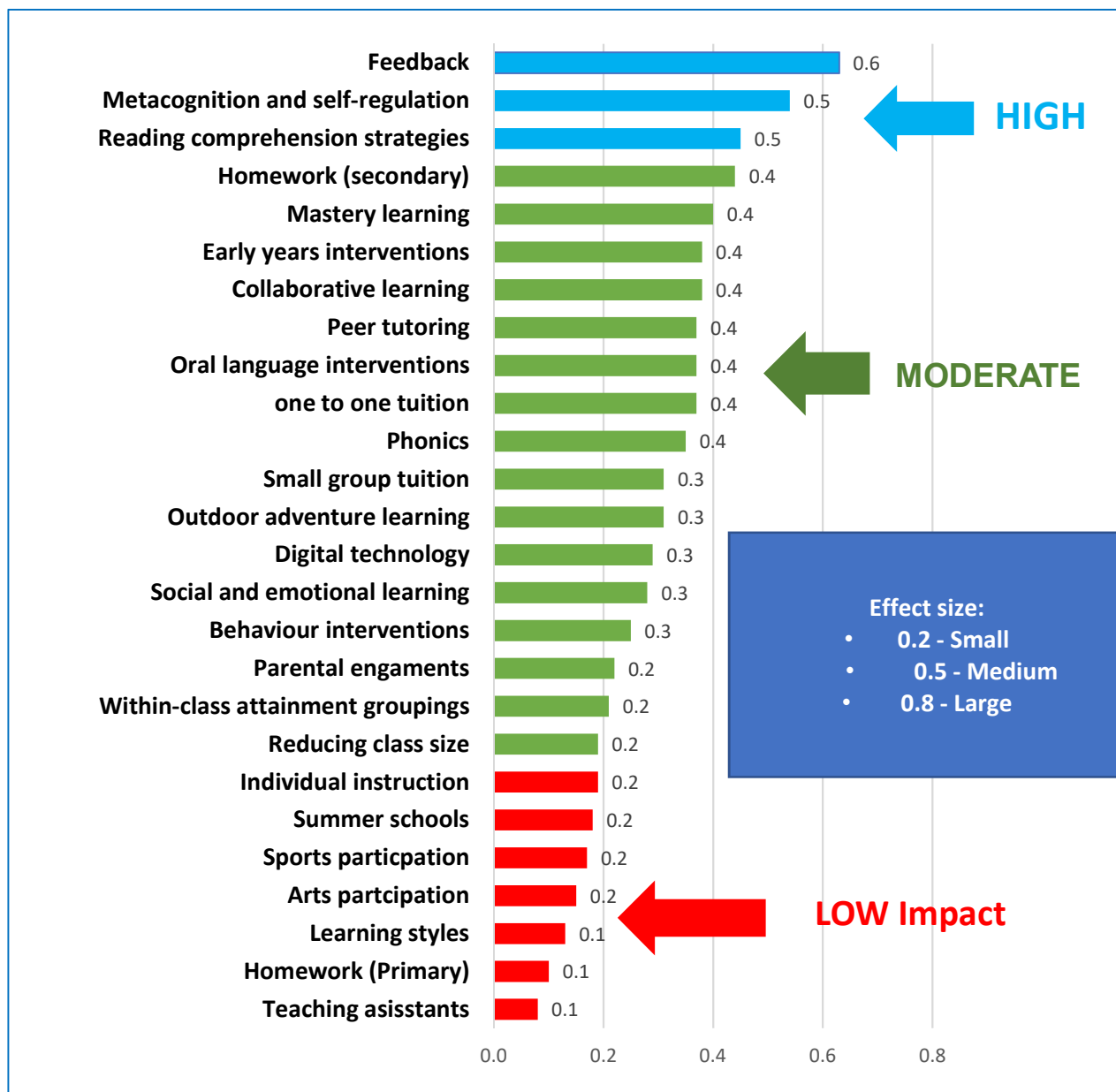
Overcoming socioeconomic disadvantage in education has been an important policy area in England. In 2010, the government implemented a nationwide school funding policy called Pupil Premium¹⁶, for improving the educational outcomes of pupils from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. This policy allocates additional funds to school by targeting individual pupils who have been identified to be in receipt of Free School Meal (FSM) at any point in the preceding six years. The funding is an incentive for schools to challenge the barriers in education faced by disadvantaged pupils. There is now evidence this has made a difference in tackling disadvantage in English schools by improving attainment in schools (Higgins et al., 2016).

Recently the Education Endowment Fund (EEF) research project into 'what worked and what failed' in school improvement in schools also revealed a number of effective interventions that have made an impact (EEF 2019).

There is evidence the use of effective feedback, meta-cognition & self- regulation and reading comprehension as intervention strategies will deliver an additional 6-8 months progress for disadvantaged children. For delivering an additional 4-5 months progress, the EEF research recommends to us small group additional teaching, peer tutoring, early intervention, one to one tutoring, homework (secondary), mastery learning, phonic and parental engagement and attendance and behaviour interventions in secondary, collaborative learning, oral language interventions and including EAL support and outdoor adventure (see Figure 13). The lessons learned in the EEF's first six years research also suggests that *"targeted small group and one-to-one interventions have the potential for the largest immediate impact on attainment (EEF 2020:1."*

¹⁶ The government is also currently investing £2.5 billion per year pupil premium fund to target disadvantaged pupils in schools and beyond.

Figure 13: Interventions strategies to close the achievement gap of disadvantaged pupils



Source: EEF 2019 and Demie (2020:6-7)

Similarly, a review and meta-analysis of 53 studies at International level also suggested targeted *‘interventions are moderately effective in improving achievement and outcomes’* for underachieving students (see Snyder et al 2019:1). The evidences from England (Demie 2019, 2020; Demie and Mclean 2016; Baars et al 2016; Mongon and Chapman 2008, Ofsted 2009; EEF 2019,2020) are based on what work research and has helped many schools to use targeted interventions to close the achievement gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers (DfE 2015).

There are many lessons Northern Ireland policy makers can learn from England’s initiatives to tackle disadvantage. The lessons from the national strategies in England and the national pupil premium initiatives to support disadvantaged pupils suggest that it is possible to tackle the link between poverty and underachievement in schools. This paper has highlighted several interventions and strategies that should be considered by Northern Ireland policy makers as part of an action plan to break the link between poverty and attainment.

6. Conclusions and policy implications

6.1 Conclusions

A number of points emerged from KS1, KS2, KS3 and GCSE trend data analyses by contextual factors that influence performance in schools in Northern Ireland. Overall, the performance at KS2, KS3 and GCSE shows an upwards trend over the last six years. The increase in overall attainment at GCSE is mainly due to an improvement in the non-grammar schools with a slight narrowing of achievement between grammar and non-grammar schools. The GCSE data also shows clearly that attainment in grammar schools is very high, with little room to improve.

The empirical evidence also shows the uniqueness of Northern Ireland's school system that takes account of religion (Protestant and Catholic) with academic selection starting at age of 11. It is, therefore, of little surprise that the data shows a clear link between religion and socio-economic background. This is a challenge for Northern Ireland policy makers and has been identified as a cause of concern.

A key finding from the analysis of the data is the underperformance of boys compared with girls at each stage of education. This is not unique to the NI education system, but there are some encouraging signs that the gap with girls is starting to close, most notably at KS1 to KS3. The picture is more mixed at GCSE.

Another variable that clearly affects performance is that of FSME status – used as a proxy for poverty. Again, there are clear differences in attainment between these two groups, but within this there are differences. FSME has little impact for those in grammar schools where the vast majority meet the expected standard, but for boys and Protestant boys in particular, it is a real issue.

The evidence from the data also suggest a significant challenge for policy makers for addressing Protestant boys' achievement. There has been a 10.5 percentage point improvement in FSME Protestant boys' 5+ GCSE (A*-C) (including English and maths) in the last 4 years (2015/16 to 2018/19) compared with a 3.9 percentage point improvement for all school leavers in the same period. What is a real concern is the gap between FSME Protestant, and non-FSME Protestant boys is 33.8 % which is very high (see Table 17).

It is also with bearing in mind the very positive performance of Northern Ireland in International assessments such as PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS as illustrated in Section 4.7.

I would argue, based on the data evidence that until the issue of disadvantaged pupils, particularly Protestant boys, has been addressed in Northern Ireland, you cannot have a world class education system that serve all pupils, whatever their background.

7. Recommendations and targeted interventions to tackle underachievement

Northern Ireland can learn from research to tackle the underachievement of disadvantaged pupils in schools. The lessons from the successful schools both here (England) and elsewhere suggest that it is possible to tackle the link between poverty and underachievement. The key strategies are ensuring access to high quality teaching for disadvantaged pupils, a strong and visionary headteacher committed to addressing inequality and diversity issues, and additional support for disadvantaged pupils through targeted intervention (DE 2020; Demie 2019, 2020; Baars et al 2016; Demie and Mclean 2016; Mongon and Chapman 2008, Ofsted 2009; Sammons et al 1995). A number of teachers and school leaders are now using 'what works?' research evidence to make decisions and to improve classroom practice both in Northern Ireland, England and elsewhere. The overall conclusion from the lessons learned from 'what works?' research on targeted

interventions has relevance for practice and offers a worthwhile example of a success story that is worth learning from by schools.

However, we would argue that the choice of which intervention strategies to use will depend on the context of the school. There is evidence the use of effective feedback, meta-cognition & self-regulation and reading comprehension as intervention strategies, use of small group additional teaching, peer tutoring, early intervention, one to one tutoring, homework (secondary), mastery learning, phonic and parental engagement and attendance and behaviour interventions in secondary, collaborative learning, oral language interventions and outdoor adventures will deliver additional progress for disadvantaged children. All these intervention strategies, whilst being highly effective for disadvantaged pupils, are likely to need strong leadership and effective use of data for tracking pupils attainment and progress, and whole school implementation rather than only using on disadvantaged pupils. Where these strategies are effectively implemented, disadvantaged children are likely to show gains in progress, leading to higher attainment and ultimately improved educational outcomes (Demie 2020; Morris and Dobson 2020; EEF 2019; Snyder et al 2019; London Councils 2015; Clifton and Cook 2012; Ofsted, 2006,2010).

The key challenge then is to find out what intervention strategies schools can use to make a difference to the achievement of disadvantaged pupils. The executive has now established an expert group to examine and propose an action plan to address the links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background. The recommendations that emerged from the lessons learned from Northern Ireland, England and elsewhere research are:

1. Educational inequalities of disadvantaged pupils should be tackled not only at school level but also beyond the school gates.
2. Building on the lessons learnt from research and evidences gathered by the expert panel, the Department of Education needs to establish a Northern Ireland wide project for raising the achievement of disadvantaged pupils, with a focus on the long-standing issues facing working class Protestant boys.
3. It is suggested that policy makers and the expert panel should design strategies and programmes which would tackle the underachievement of disadvantaged pupils in Northern Ireland. This should include an estimate of the cost of targeted interventions needed and the implementation of the action plan.
4. There should be additional ring-fenced funding given to schools to tackle the underachievement of disadvantaged pupils on free school meals and to close the achievement gap between them and their peers.
5. The targeted interventions and support proposed by the expert panel, to tackle underachievement, needs to be based on available proven research evidence that is effective in closing the achievement gap and delivering increased progress for disadvantaged children.
6. Central to this, is using successful headteachers to support the improvement of disadvantaged pupils in other schools in Northern Ireland. Lessons from the London Challenge in England, and elsewhere, suggests that this strategy makes a huge difference in transforming schools in challenging areas. This would need to be costed as part of the initiatives for targeted intervention and support.

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