



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE
FOR EDUCATION**

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

**Educational Disadvantage and the
Protestant Working Class:
A Call to Action**

14 December 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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A Call to Action**

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)
Mr Jonathan Craig
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr Phil Flanagan
Mr Trevor Lunn
Mr Conall McDevitt
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Daithí McKay

Witnesses:

Mr Jim Keith) Belfast Boys' Model School
Ms Dawn Purvis) Independent Reviewer
Dr Pete Shirlow) Queen's University Belfast

The Chairperson:

We have with us Dawn Purvis; Dr Peter Shirlow from Queen's University, who was involved in the drawing up of what became known as the Dawn Purvis report, 'A Call to Action'; and Jim Keith, the principal of Belfast Boys' Model School. You are welcome to this afternoon's session. Unfortunately, we have time constraints, but it is important that you heard the comments from the Department. With the permission of the Committee, we will supply you with a copy of the Department's response, if we have not done so already.

Jim, thank you for the work that you do. You are an example of the leadership that is being given. When the previous Committee went to visit the school, we were more than impressed. Thank you for the contribution you make to trying to address some of these issues.

Ms Dawn Purvis (Independent Reviewer):

Thank you for the opportunity to come to talk about our report and the Department's response to it. I will give a brief overview of how the group came together, Pete will give an overview of our findings and recommendations and Jim will talk generally about the Department's response to our recommendations.

Our group came together in late summer 2010. It is a group of educationalists, academics, representatives from the community and voluntary sector and early years providers. It was not our intention to obsess about the issue, and we did not want to exclude anyone from the group, but it was necessary to keep it tight. We had a strict six months' time frame, and we used that not to obsess over the issue but to come up with practical recommendations of what was a serious and growing problem. We had no statutory remit, but we set ourselves a remit to consider the existing research and evidence on the underperformance of Protestant working-class young people, particularly males. That was on the back of two previous reports by PricewaterhouseCoopers for the Office of the First and deputy First Minister and the Public Accounts Committee report on literacy and numeracy. We also wanted to seek views and short submissions from political parties and those interested in the issue on what needed to be done to tackle it. We also wanted to consider UK, European and international experience on tackling communal, ethnic or racial underperformance, and on international good practice. We set ourselves a target of reporting by March this year, which we did.

Although our focus was narrow, we believe that the outcome and the recommendations that we made will have universal benefit for all those who are underachieving in the education system. We were not setting out to promote any sort of zero-sum competition for scarce resources; it was to shine a light on the problem. I live with seeing the impact of educational underachievement on individuals who live in the community. I see their opportunities for economic advancement, getting jobs and being financially independent, and the impact that that has on families and the community. I suppose the focus for the Assembly is the impact that that has on budgets, as the outworkings of educational underachievement increasingly show up in Departments' crisis line budgets.

Throughout our deliberations, we considered the current economic context. We do not underestimate the role that education can play in rebuilding and rebalancing the economy by providing access and opportunities for all our children. We are clear that tackling educational disadvantage will require a long-term, strategic and sustainable focus.

Dr Pete Shirlow (Queen's University Belfast):

Thank you. I think that you will already know a lot of this stuff. I do not want to be patronising, but I want to go through some of the findings of the report as they are important as a matter of record. I also do not want to be patronising about the impact that poor education and qualifications has on communities.

It is quite clear that de-industrialisation has had a major impact on the Protestant working-class community. That impact is very similar to that seen in working-class communities in the north of England, which experienced the associated sense of loss of status and significance, and a strong sense of alienation. That was very much a product of generation following generation into established industries that have since gone. The difficulty in such communities is that, as economies turn more towards the service sector and the need for literacy and computer abilities, those communities are left with a redundant set of skills. That is not to undermine the fact that there are also problems in republican and nationalist communities.

One of the problems is the link between poor education and qualifications and poverty. It is a chicken and egg scenario: which came first? We know that they reproduce each other in many ways. There is also a change in the family structure in those communities. Lots of the teachers we spoke to told us that young males, in particular, lacked role models. In other societies, particularly the African-American community in New York, males from those communities who have been successful are brought in to provide positive male role models for younger men.

The conflict obviously had a big impact on both communities, and it also impacted on education. The Protestant working-class community was the first community to witness social mobility in the 1960s and 1970s. Very significant numbers of people went to the middle-class areas in the suburbs, and left behind a community that we might call, in academic terms, residualised. That community has higher levels of unemployment and family breakdown, and that has reinforced the social problems that you will all be aware of.

Ethos is another major problem in getting people to take education seriously. I sat on a group that was trying to put together a cross-sectional body for those types of schools that never went anywhere. The fact that there is no body to represent that sector is a major problem when trying to lobby, create cohesion or use and disseminate good models and practices between schools.

There is a fundamental problem as everyone knows, and we have known about it for a long time. However, the issue now is that the problem is reproducing itself. The problem became a problem, and the problem is now the problem itself. It has created the type of conditions and problems that we are now familiar with.

I want to go through some of the data in the report. Some of it may have changed, because the problem with doing research is that you are always a year behind. Someone may have the next year's set of data. A total of 75% of lower than expected schools were in the controlled sector, and most of those were clustered in Belfast. In each of those schools, 50-plus pupils were eligible for free school meals, which is a high sign of social deprivation, and one in five — 20% — were identified as having special educational needs.

This is not a sectarian point, but one interesting finding was that pupils who receive free school meals in Catholic secondary schools are twice as likely to go to university than pupils who receive free school meals in Protestant secondary schools. That is a major problem and a big gap, and we need to understand why that happens. Even in the deprived and marginalised communities there is a 2:1 capacity gap between those who go to university, and that has serious repercussions. I have taught in universities here for a significant amount of time, but I have very rarely taught Protestant males from the Shankill, the Shore Road, Nelson Drive or other such communities. Not having access to third-level education is an outcome of those problems.

At Key Stage 2 in maths and English, 11% of controlled schools were lower than expected, compared with 3% of maintained schools. Yet again, that is a very significant disparity. In 25% of maintained schools, performance in English was higher than expected, compared with none in the controlled, or what you might call Protestant, sector. Therefore, not only is there a disparity in the performance in the two secondary sectors by religion, there is also a disparity in those that are lower than expected and those that are higher than expected. So, significant gaps are being produced. At Key Stage 3 English, almost 25% of maintained schools were classified as

performing better than expected compared with 2% of controlled schools, and many of the reasons for that were discussed this morning, including issues of leadership and moving forward.

It is clear that there are very distinct outcomes for those in grammar and non-grammar schools. However, in the controlled non-grammar sector, roughly 25% to 28% gained five GCSEs from grades A to C, and in the maintained non-grammar sector, it was about 37%. So, that is roughly one quarter compared with nearly 40%. Yet again, that is very significant disparity.

An even more significant gap is apparent when we look at how many students obtain at least two A levels. In maintained non-grammar schools, around 33.2% of pupils gain two A levels — that is one in three — compared with around 17% in Protestant secondary schools. Again, that is a twofold difference: those in maintained schools are nearly twice as likely to gain two A levels. That has a big impact on whether students will go to university and gives rise to other issues.

Fewer than one in five boys on free school meals in the controlled sector — roughly 18% — gained five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C, compared with 32% — nearly one in three — in the maintained sector. So, there is a whole plethora of information and data showing very significant differences and that, in deprived communities, one community is faring less well in educational terms.

We wanted the report to outline certain things. In data terms, we are trying to draw a line in the sand. We have known about this for a long time, but we want to draw a line in the sand and start to think of ways to move this forward. Clearly, investment in early years is crucial, and we know that anecdotally. Any of us who know teachers in the primary sector will tell you that many kids are coming to school not educationally prepared. They have very poor language skills and very poor numeracy and literacy skills, and, in some cases, they cannot even look after themselves as they should be able to at that age. So, investment in early years is crucial, and there is a plethora of international information that tells us that that is important.

We can talk about communities, but key to all this and to the successes in other societies is getting parents involved in schools. One question that came out of the report very strongly was: how do you make parental involvement a community experience? Schools close at 3.00 pm or 4.00 pm: why? Jim might talk about his school, where he has got male adult parents involved in

education, whether through a qualification base or an interest base. Deprived communities in Northern Ireland have significant numbers of Irish language enthusiasts, Ulster Scots enthusiasts, local historians and so on. That is a way that schools can draw people in and get people involved in education, because the key to a child's success is how educated their parents are. So, we have to think of imaginative, inexpensive ways to get parents involved in their children's education. Jim might talk about that in more detail.

A culture of learning is crucial. We all know that. The old cliché about books in the house is important. In many ways, it is not a cliché; it is reality. How do we create that culture of learning? In many ways, we have to do that with the pupils and by getting the parents engaged in it.

Leadership is crucial, and part of our report was about how a bottom-up solution could be designed and how to tie the community sector and local residents into an educational culture. I suppose that, since many of those parents have had a poor educational experience, how we do that is very important. Leadership comes politically and also from policy, and that goes back to the point that I made earlier about the importance of the cross-sectoral body that was never created, which may have been a way to coalesce ideas and thinking.

Finally, the analogy of the line in the sand is very important. That is another measurement of the problems that exist. Clearly, how we monitor this problem is key, but, most of all, we need to think of new and flexible ways to engage with education. Of course, Jim is more experienced in this than I am, and he can talk us through some of those issues in a real-life sense, as opposed to from the point of view of an academic exercise of recording data.

Mr Jim Keith (Belfast Boys' Model School):

Thank you, Peter. We have created a world record here this morning: I have never sat for so long without opening my mouth. *[Laughter.]* It has to be said that there were times when I wanted to shout out. I am far more optimistic having sat and listened to the questions that were asked and the comments that were made this morning. Every head teacher should come along and sit through this, because it is enlightening.

However, my initial reaction to the Department of Education's response to 'A Call to Action' was one of disappointment. The call was for action, and I see very little of that in the response. As

John McGrath said, the problems that are highlighted in the report are not new. They did not just happen. What was being done to tackle them? Well, a number of projects were set up, but funding ran out and the projects fell apart, which was disappointing. Short-termism is not the answer to the problem.

What strategies are proposed to deal with disengagement? You have all read the Department of Education's response. What is the answer? Is it 'Every School a Good School' or 'Count, Read: Succeed'? Those are laudable documents, but they are not going to reach the parents in the communities that we need to reach to make a difference. We need action.

I think it was Plato who said that equality is about treating equals equally and unequals unequally. We live in a very unequal educational world. Take finance: I was really interested in the comments made this morning about finance and the support among the Committee for schools. The cuts will have a huge impact, particularly on those schools that have funded strategies to reduce barriers to learning and to improve levels of literacy and numeracy. Class sizes will increase, which is not a catastrophe for academic pupils, but, as the Chairperson said earlier, it is for those pupils with special needs.

The impact of the funding cuts is not uniform. Many grammar schools can supplement their funding through charging policies, but that is not an option for non-selective schools. Selective schools can filter their quotas in order to deal with falling rolls. That results in fewer pupils in non-selective schools, which not only has a greater impact on budgets but means that there are fewer student role models in non-selective schools.

A very worrying trend in the latest inspection reports is that they are not taking cognisance of a school's context. We mentioned free school meals this morning; it is a criterion that can be used, but it is not a perfect one. The latest reports, however, seem not to be using the free school meals criterion, nor are they looking at areas of disadvantage. They are comparing results with the Northern Ireland average, which is detrimental to schools that operate in disadvantaged areas. Why we cannot use value-added, I do not know. At every meeting, I ask departmental officials where we are on value-added, and they tell me that they are working on it. I do not know for how long that work is going to continue, but I would like to see something happening in that regard.

To me, the most crucial element of the report is contained in point 3, which Conall McDevitt

mentioned earlier. He and I were thinking along the same lines on the point about parents and local communities being encouraged to become more involved in education and schools. Looking at the response, my question was the same as Conall's: how? What is going to happen? How are they going to do it? I did not see anything in the report that highlighted how that would happen.

I will be more positive. We, along with the Belfast Model School for Girls and Corpus Christi College, are full-service extended schools. Through that, we have been able to make huge inroads into being the hub of the community. Our work has led not only to greater participation in learning and sporting activities, but to achieving higher pass rates at GCSE and A level, improving attendance, reducing suspensions and helping families in which there are alcohol and substance abuse problems, mental health concerns and bereavement issues.

We have introduced entrepreneurial skills programmes, study skills workshops, and family learning and family fitness programmes. We also have transition programmes at all of the local primary schools, and a Barnardo's parent support worker runs numerous evening classes for us.

Those are the kinds of things that need to be done to tackle educational disadvantage. It is not a problem that is found only in the Protestant community. Corpus Christi College is doing similar work in the west of the city, but I feel that there has been a lack of real leadership in the Protestant community, which has exacerbated the situation.

I congratulate Dawn and her team on drawing attention to the problem, which cannot and, I hope, will not, be ignored.

The Chairperson:

I remind members to be brief, because witnesses from Barnardo's are here as well. I thought that we had until 2.00 pm, but the Health Committee is coming here at 1.30 pm. We have to be out by 1.00 pm.

A sectoral group will be established for the controlled sector. I had a meeting with the Education Minister this week, and that has been agreed. We hope that it will be established in January. That is a step forward, and it is to be welcomed.

With regard to the points made by Jim and Conall, we need to get more information about the plan. The Minister referred to it in the House the other day, and it is in the paper to the Department. It relates to the engagement programme. I hope that it is not another DVD; it has to be more than that. We have seen this from the Department before. We will make efforts to see what it means and how it will be conveyed to communities.

Mr McDevitt:

I will be brief. Thank you for the report, Dawn. It is lovely to see you back in this place; it is, undoubtedly, a lesser place without you. I, for one, miss having you about. A couple of things strike me, and I want to move on to things that we have not covered. One of the recommendations in the report that struck me related to funding. I am a great believer in following the money. You made the obvious point that if you are serious about trying to iron out the social inequalities, you need to create an equality of funding throughout a child's life. In its response to us on that recommendation, the Department stated:

“However, to fund all pupils to, for example, the current average for post-primary (£4,191) would require additional funding of over £191m”.

You used a lovely Plato comment, Jim. I am reminded of the saying, if you think education is expensive, try ignorance. Where do you start when you get an answer that says that it is too expensive to fund every child equally? Jim, how does it feel to hear that on the front line?

Mr Keith:

I have copies for everyone of what we did in September, October and November, as a full service school. It will be interesting for you. Jonathan mentioned involvement with the health sector and so on. That is crucially important, and it is in there. Next year's cuts, for example, will be more than my funding for the full service schools programme. We need to be funded to do these things; they cannot be done without funding. My school is pared down to the absolute minimum number of teachers, and, to cope, I am still going to have to make people redundant next year. I do not know how I am going to do that. I am fortunate in having been just about in the black over the past 16 years. There are secondary schools in Belfast that are almost £700,000 in the red, and there primary schools that are £200,000 and £300,000 in the red. I do not know how they are going to cope.

Ms Purvis:

The full service schools programme is dealing with the lack of investment in early years. It is seeing what is happening. The problems are gathering until they get to post-primary stage. Keith and principals of other schools are dealing with the lack of investment in early years that I talked about. It shows up in crisis budget lines in other Departments as well. The Department fund that on a year-by-year basis. It is not long term; it is not sustainable. However, we know that it is having the greatest success at post-primary level. In the report, we also talk about invest to save, smart targeting and everything else. The Department needs to think about where it spreads its money. We talk about equalisation. Look at John Compton's report, which came out yesterday. You need to invest to move from acute to community. The Department needs to do the same. It needs to invest to move from back-loaded to front-loaded services, but that will save money in the long term.

Mr McDevitt:

Recommendation 1 of the group's report is about the eradication of child poverty. The draft Programme for Government states that the new target should be to implement the targets set out in the Child Poverty Act 2010. That is a step back from the last Programme for Government, which aimed for the eradication of child poverty. Do those things connect with educational outcomes?

Ms Purvis:

Absolutely. That is my biggest concern about the Department's response to both our report and your report and the departmental presentation today. There was always an emphasis on parents recognising the value of education. The campaign announced by the Minister may be a television or a poster campaign about parents recognising the value of children's education. However, the Department needs to recognise the link between poverty and disadvantage in educational outcomes.

Although the departmental officials talked about improving leadership and good teaching in schools, our report recognises that 80% of the factors that influence a child's educational achievement lie outside the classroom. The major one is poverty. You are dealing with children who are hungry, who do not have the coping mechanisms to deal with stresses and traumas and who are immature throughout their lives. The Department really has to look at programmes that start to tackle poverty and the impact that poverty has on children and their families.

Mr Craig:

I will ask only one question. Even before I ask it, I recognise that it will be difficult for Jim and Dr Shirlow to answer. I had a good look through your report. It has a lot of carrot stuff when it comes to how to improve management in schools. We had a discussion about how you deal with someone who is underperforming or just not performing, and how you deal with a major leadership problem in a school, where, for example, the principal is just not up to the job. I had a look through the procedures for that. Those took a year and a half to produce, and I now know why. There are three periods of retraining for principals and a three-month gap between each period. In other words, if there is no improvement, there is a complete year before you can deal effectively with bad leadership in a school. Quite frankly, leadership is critical to any school. Congratulations to the unions, because they have tied the Department up in knots; there is no question about that. Do you feel that this needs to be looked at again fundamentally?

Mr Keith:

I do; yes. The unsatisfactory teacher route is cumbersome, difficult and fraught with all sorts of difficulties. I visited a number of excellent schools in Manchester where I was told, “We do this, and we do that.” I said, “We do that.” There was nothing new. I asked how they had brought about such a big change. Simply put, if a new head comes in and does not like what people are delivering, he or she says, “Off you go.” We do not have that option. I am not saying that I want that option necessarily. However, there must be a simpler version of how we deal with unsatisfactory teachers.

Ms Purvis:

There is a case study in the report from Montgomery County. There needs to be autonomy for heads and districts to move teachers on when they are not performing. The process that is in place takes a year if the teacher or the head does not go off on the sick, and it still comes out of the school budget. There has to be a better process.

Mr Craig:

I fully understand that. I have seen a process take two and a half years.

Dr Shirlow:

The only other thing that you could have is what you have in the university system. New staff

have a three-year probation period in which they have to fulfil a set range of targets. If they do not fulfil those targets, they are either removed from their position or they have an extra year. That is another way. It is not always about teachers who have been there for a long time. Sometimes it is about ensuring that staff who come in do not have that attitude of, "I have got a job; this is easy." That type of probation also instils good practices. It creates stresses for the younger members of staff who goes through it, but, at the same time, it concentrates minds.

Miss M McIlveen:

Thank you for your presentation. You mentioned that you were talking about rewarding exceptional leadership. How do you propose to do that?

Ms Purvis:

Our recommendation was for additional remuneration or fast-tracking so that teachers who are performing particularly well could be fast-tracked towards leadership. We looked at the PSNI, where people who perform well are sent to leadership training and given extra support as a fast track to promotion.

Miss M McIlveen:

Surely they are just doing their job and are already getting remunerated for that?

Ms Purvis:

We were disappointed with the Department's response to that recommendation, because we were talking about teachers who are committed to children in disadvantaged areas. However, the Department did not even mention disadvantaged areas. We also made a number of recommendations such as an excellent teacher scheme; incentives for excellent principals, emerging school leaders and teachers; placements of two to four years in underachieving schools; and a school leadership scheme along the lines of the English Future Leaders programme, which works with teachers who are committed to improving the life chances of pupils in disadvantaged areas and offers accelerated passage to headship. So, the incentive is promotion if they work really well. The Department did not even mention the commitment to disadvantaged areas in its response.

Mr Craig:

Dawn, do you believe that we need to move beyond the pay scales for head teachers whereby

boards of governors have the autonomy to increase the number of increments that a teacher gets if they perform extremely well?

Ms Purvis:

No, we did not want to move beyond that.

Miss M McIlveen:

Who would do the assessment?

Ms Purvis:

It is part of the planned continuing-professional-development approach to principals and teachers. The Department has said that it will work with DEL and look at that as part of the outworking of the teacher education review. However, it was very vague, and the Department's answers about the school leadership scheme, the Future Leaders programme and the excellent teachers scheme were a bit woolly.

Miss M McIlveen:

As a model, how effective has the excellent teachers scheme been?

Ms Purvis:

We took evidence from Sir Iain Hall. The scheme was introduced in England and Wales, and it was suggested that it works well and is focused on teachers who are committed to improving educational outcomes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The Department said that good leadership and good teaching happens in the classroom, and, as the Department is saying that it is serious about improving good teachers and leadership, we thought that it should consider that scheme. Initially, it said that the scheme was not appropriate for Northern Ireland, but it is now saying that a proposal and the associated cost implications could be tabled for further consideration by the teachers negotiating committee.

Mr Lunn:

Thanks to all of you. Dawn, it is good to see you back. Recommendation 2b in your report is very short but it is big area. It says:

“Revise the manner in which areas of social need are identified.”

The Department's response is quite robust. It does not say, "We will have another look at it". It just states the current position. I just had a quick look at your report, and I do not see any concrete suggestions as to what type of revisions you have in mind.

Ms Purvis:

No; we did not have time to look into that in any great detail. Again, we recommended further areas of research because we had kept to a tight time frame. We mentioned that there seemed to be spatial difference between Protestant and Catholic areas of disadvantage, in that many of the Protestant areas of disadvantage are tiny pockets within larger, more affluent areas. Some of the measures used by the Department missed out those small pockets, although there is a greater recognition of that now, with the use of super output areas, and the Department for Social Development is looking at the smaller pockets of deprivation. However, we are concerned about the implications for those individual schools and how the resources are targeted.

Dr Shirlow:

Crime is an example of one of the issues. There is no really strong correlation between deprivation and crime. The Shankill ward has quite low levels of crime, whereas the nearby New Lodge ward has very high levels of crime. Depending on the weight that you give that, you could be deprived and have a low crime rate. You could also have a low crime ward with lots of deprivation but lots of imprisonment. You could have low crime/high imprisonment or high crime/low imprisonment. Factors such as those obviously have an impact on family structures and so on, which can be overestimated. I think that it depends how important you consider that variable to be.

Mr Lunn:

There are a lot of statistics in the report, and you gave us some more today. They sometimes do not seem to marry up, but they all indicate concern for the Protestant working class and Protestant boys in particular. It always puzzles me that, traditionally, as I think that you said, the Protestant ethic was that boys would follow their fathers into the same type of job — the shipyard scenario. However, are the social problems of working class Protestants really any different to those that affect working class Catholics?

Dr Shirlow:

I think that there are certain differences. The history of the schools was different, in that

Protestant schools were more likely to be science based and Catholic schools more likely to be liberal-arts based. One of the things about our economy was that when the service sector arrived, the liberal-arts base was actually better for the labour market than was the traditional skills base. So, there are some historical reasons that have been factored.

I think that cohesion is another problem. There is probably a stronger relationship between the Catholic middle class and the Catholic working class than there is between the Protestant middle class and the Protestant working class. There is probably a stronger sense of cohesion. In many ways, you have one church. I do not know how many people go to church in those areas, but you have one church anyway, whereas denominational differences can be a factor. I also think that, although social capital is improving, historically there has been greater community involvement between residents and community groups in nationalist/republican areas, for example credit unions came out of those communities. So those are slight differences.

As you said, however, probably 90% of what is happening is the same: low income, poor educational qualifications and limited access to work. Although it may be affected by the recession, one thing that probably is slightly different is that, in the past 20 years, there has been slightly more Catholic working class social mobility — people have gone up the economic ladder. A big part of that was the public sector. Some of the survey work that we did shows that Protestants are still more likely to work in the private sector and Catholics in the public sector. Therefore, the expansion of the public sector in the 1970s and 1980s may have paid dividends there. So, yes, there are strong similarities but some differences.

Mr Lunn:

The report makes extensive reference to the Protestant working class, but its recommendations do not. They are not specific, which I think is good and shows that you are prepared to approach the problem on a broad front.

Ms Purvis:

May I add that parental involvement — the attitudes of parents and the lack of value placed on education — has a big impact. That was among the things that disappointed me. We recommended to the Department that schools include parental and community engagement plans within their school development plans so that they could be inspected. Again, because the report says that 80% of the factors lie outside the classroom, if the Department is serious about tackling

the issue of educational underachievement it has to look at the 80% of factors that lie outside the classroom. The biggest one is parental and community engagement.

The Chairperson:

The difficulty is that they know that that issue is out there and they do not want to deal with it, because it is someone else's responsibility. That is the problem. I gave the example earlier of DSD. Let DSD do the nurture stuff. That is fine; it is paying for it, so we do not need to do it. That is the mentality, and it is right across the piece in most Departments. They get to the line, but if they are asked to go beyond it, they will not. They will say that they are not allowed to because the law does not let them. That mentality contributes to some of the problems too. That is frustrating, as I am sure you can pick up.

Mrs Dobson:

I also thank you for the extensive work and research that you have carried out on this issue. I will be brief, because I have already directed questions to John McGrath about your findings. I will make a suggestion, if I may, Chairperson. The Committee inquiry was, obviously, conducted under the previous mandate, and I, for one, was not here. If we are to heed your call to action, Dawn, it is very important to take it forward. Should we consider producing a report on the issues raised?

The Chairperson:

Sorry; that we do what?

Mrs Dobson:

Should we consider producing a report on the issues raised and whether they are going to be implemented and acted on?

Mr McNarry:

A revisit?

Mrs Dobson:

Yes, a revisit. The inquiry took place under the previous mandate. It would be useful.

The Chairperson:

I am not going to say that Departments are guilty of something and then allow us to do the same thing. I have no difficulty with pulling out the inquiry again and revisiting it. Over the past number of weeks we have tried to marry the two reports. It is important that we bring the two reports together, because one complements the other. That was unplanned, in a sense, but the way that they ended up was good. We now know what the Department is alleging it will do. Maybe we should try to amalgamate that into our report and, with Dawn's permission, bring the work together, in a way. We will ask the Committee Clerk to see how we could do that and bring back a recommendation.

Mrs Dobson:

That would be useful, with your agreement.

The Chairperson:

Yes.

Ms Purvis:

We are very pleased that you are continuing to look at this issue and that you are keeping it as part of your work programme. It is a very serious issue for all the children who are underachieving and for their families.

Mr McKay:

I want to make a couple of quick points, Chairperson. The first is about urban/rural differences. You talked about the industrial heartlands of Belfast. Is there more equilibrium in Fermanagh, for example, than there would be in Belfast or Derry?

Secondly, selection is mentioned in one of your recommendations. From my local perspective, the four wards in Ballymena that have the lowest incomes are the same four wards in which children are the least likely to attend a grammar school. There are clear correlations there. CCMS is moving away from academic selection; St Killian's College and Loreto College are phasing it out. CCMS is feeding that into the area plan next year and moving it forward. Is there a danger that selection will remain in Protestant schools while the Catholic sector moves away from it?

Ms Purvis:

To answer your first question, there is something that we call the Belfast effect. A lot of the statistics that we looked at tended to say that the lower levels of educational attainment were happening in urban centres. Some of the statistics that Pete cited are specific to Belfast. We recommended that the Department should undertake further research to see whether there are differences between urban schools and rural schools. We did not have time to go any deeper into that.

We say very clearly in the report that there were a range of views in our group about academic selection and grammar schools. We did not want to spend any time on it, because that is not what the report was about. We know that the issue of selection has dominated the discourse and narrative for some time. In a number of the research reports that we commissioned to inform our final report, it was quite clear that those from disadvantaged backgrounds were likely to attend the worst-performing schools and, where schools had the opportunity to select their pupils, that tended to be to the detriment of disadvantaged pupils. So, we are quite clear that, although selection did not cause the educational gap that exists, it accentuates it, and we have made a number of recommendations around socially balanced intakes and a cap on grammar school places.

Dr Shirlow:

The second set of data that I talked about — Catholic pupils in receipt of free schools meals being twice as likely to go to university — is from the school-leaver surveys. Surveys are a problem. If we follow though the logic that that is a survey of school leavers across the country, that indicates that the problem is Northern Ireland-wide.

Mr McNarry:

Apologies for being absent; I am sorry that I missed your presentation. I have pupils from five schools here, and they drink a lot of orange juice. Somebody else is looking after them now.

The Chairperson:

We will have to implement a more rigorous process for dealing with members who are not present.

Mr McNarry:

I did not have enough straws. More pupils turned up than I expected.

You have been at this a long time, and all power to you for sticking at it. I welcome Jo-Anne's suggestion that we should maybe stick with you on it, because it is a major issue that is not going away. Despite your working on it for a long time — I have heard Pete talk about it before — the same blooming issues arise time after time after time, and the people whom he talked about 15 years ago may be parents now. That is part of the problem. I know, as you probably do, that the similarities are now very evident in Londonderry, in the Waterside area, and that is why I welcome Jo-Anne's idea. More groups are breaking out to say, "Hang on a second; it is not just Belfast." I know that you are not claiming that though.

We need to bank the helpful marker that Mr Keith put down on the point about debt. That will cause enormous problems, and how it will be dealt with cuts in to what you are talking about but also raises enormous issues.

I am all for enabling children and young people to feel uplifted in their status, integrity and dignity, and when I have been in some of the areas in which you work, there is sometimes despair. I come from an area where we are not meant to have it, but we do have it, and there is a feeling that, "Sure it has always been like this; it does not matter." I am all for uplifting and changing that mindset and mentality.

Given that the standards are slipping, how good is intervention? Is that working? Does it work? Could we work better by accepting the evidence and telling the Department that it has to do something about this? It is about time that we started, at early years at least, to prevent the problem rather than keep on putting a sticking plaster over it. Is there even a small or minor blueprint that one could look at and say that we need to intervene at, for example, early years? I am not prepared to give up on the generations that may be at secondary level now, but I am afraid that, somebody must intervene very heavily at that level. We will not use it for further education colleges, because that is not open to them all.

I suppose I am putting you on the spot, but is there some sort of blueprint that would allow us to say that this needs to be done in early years. We need to stop the rot at early years, and we need to get that to society.

Ms Purvis:

There is a lot of international evidence. Some of the evidence that we examined looks at children from disadvantaged backgrounds and children from better-off backgrounds who start school together at the same age. Their aspirations and outlooks are exactly the same, but that dissipates quickly among children from disadvantaged backgrounds, and their aspirations start to go downhill. They have been failed by the system by the time they are nine or 10.

A longitudinal study has been going on in Norway for quite some time. There, they intervened with families before the children started school, and they have provided extra support and mentoring for those families through the children's education. Last year, they released an interim report on the first 10 years of that longitudinal study. Those children come from backgrounds in which there is a history of poverty, low educational attainment from parents and all the other impacts of disadvantage. The first report, after 10 years, has shown that they have broken that cycle of disadvantage with the extra support that is needed to raise the aspirations of those children when they are at school. Parental support, parenting skills and including the parents in the children's education, as well as looking at what happens in the classroom, have made the difference. Intervention has to be long-term, and it has to be sustainable over time.

Dr Shirlow:

You know some of the communities that I have worked with. Thank you for reminding me that I had a head of black hair when I started this. When you work with sections of society that feel alienated and marginalised, there is a self-fulfilling prophecy of, "This is terrible; this is rubbish; nobody cares about us." When people go in and ask them if that is actually the case or if there is a way out, you can turn them around quite quickly and encourage them to work towards something that is achievable. You know that, and other people who have engaged with those communities know that. It is important that more leadership is shown in that way and that people who say they are in the trenches realise that there is a way out. It helps if more people are doing that.

A point was made earlier about St Colm's in Twinbrook. It has turned the tables; Jim's school has turned the tables in many ways. Two schools in east Belfast, Ashfield Boys' High School and Ashfield Girls' High School, in the secondary Protestant sector, have turned a corner as well. It can be done; there is no doubt about that.

Mr Keith:

It also makes more economic sense to do it an early stage. When boys get to post-16 or post-primary education, it is more difficult to turn it all around. I know that; I am dealing with them. As a secondary school head teacher, I should not be arguing this, but early intervention is crucial and important.

The Chairperson:

I am going to have to conclude the meeting, because we have to be out of the Senate Chamber. Thank you for attending this morning, and, no doubt, we will come back to this.