

Equality Commission

FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

Educational Under-achievement in working-class children

*View from the Chair, Business Newsletter, 28 September 2010
Bob Collins, Chief Commissioner, The Equality Commission.*

I was pleased to see the announcement in the past few days of an investigation into educational under-achievement in working-class children. This initiative, launched by East Belfast MLA Dawn Purvis, will see a team of educationalists focus particularly on the underachievement of children from the Protestant working-class – an area of disadvantage to which I have drawn attention in this column and elsewhere over the past few years.

Educational under-attainment has impacts beyond the realm of education itself. It affects the whole life prospect. And it affects families and communities as well. It can isolate and exclude people from the possibility of improvement and growth. The inequality of opportunity which results reflects itself in a cascade of further inequality with long-lasting effects.

This is of particular importance just now, when the effects of the economic downturn have already had a negative impact on our community and when the imminent far-reaching public sector cutbacks will have their own consequences. Research now being published by the Equality Commission has shown that, to date, the chief losers in the recession have been young men. Unemployment among the 18-24 male age group has more than doubled between 2006 and 2009, increasing from 8.7% to 19%.

This is an issue that calls out for serious attention and sustained political engagement at the highest level. It is vital that, as we work our way out of the present economic difficulty, we shape a society that can deliver the prospect of steady, rewarding employment for people of all abilities and aptitudes.

If we are to avoid having a growing body of young people ill-equipped for the realities they will encounter, we may have to tackle our own presuppositions. There has developed, in recent years, an attitude which has often seemed overly focussed on the highest achievers in education as if to suggest that the quality of the many should be measured by the performance of the few. Similarly, there

has been a focus on a relatively narrow range of what are seen as high-end 'professional' jobs as if they alone offered the prospect of fulfilment at work.

An economy which has been heavily weighted towards public sector and service industry jobs may have created for many people a very limited view of what constitutes an appropriate or "respectable" occupation. The concept of the "dignity of labour" may seem like a rallying cry from another century, but a culture which does not place a high value on the development of practical skills and technical expertise, as well as on academic excellence, will ultimately be to the disadvantage of all our people.

This is not to say that the purpose of education is simply to prepare for work; that would be too simplistic. Education is for life. But for most people, work is an important part of life. We may well require a change in all our attitudes, including those of our young people and their families.