



Equality Commission

FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

Statement on Key Inequalities in Education

SUMMARY



October 2017



Key Inequalities in Education

- 1.1 Research by Parsons and Bynner (2007) notes the impact that poor educational outcomes can have on a person's life trajectory. *“The problem does not recede with time but can continue to limit opportunities and diminish life chances and the quality of life in all the main domains of adult functioning: education, family, workplace and community”*.
- 1.2 The Commission both welcomes the progress made in advancing educational outcomes and recognises the role of educational, home and community environments in advancing outcomes. We are also aware of the pro-active steps taken by a range of bodies, including Government Departments across all the sectors, to promote equality in education across the equality grounds.
- 1.3 Whilst we both recognise and support this work, it is clear that significant challenges remain. Our ‘Statement on Key Inequalities in Education in Northern Ireland’, and this summary document, seeks to highlight the Commission’s assessment of the inequalities and educational experiences currently faced by different equality groups in Northern Ireland.
- 1.4 To assist the Commission in compiling this Statement, we contracted independent researchers from Queens University, Belfast - Burns et al. (2015) ‘Education Inequalities in Northern Ireland’. Our development of this Statement takes account of that research and has also been supported with reference to a wide range of additional sources as well as ongoing engagement with key stakeholders in Northern Ireland.
- 1.5 A key finding is that there remain significant and specific data gaps relating to pupils and students across a number of themes in relation to a number of equality grounds, specifically: gender identity; religion; political opinion; and sexual orientation. Additionally, there is lack of data disaggregation in relation to: ethnicity; disability status; marital status; and dependency status. While we recognise that, in some instances, small numbers will impact on how data is analysed and reported, this lack of data significantly impacts not only the degree to which overall inequalities in education can be assessed and monitored, but also impacts on the ability to monitor and evaluate individual actions taken by Government Departments and others to address these inequalities.
- 1.6 Inequalities were considered across four broad headings: *attitudes/bullying* in the education environment; *access* to education and attainment in formal examinations; *progression* through the different levels of education; and *destination* after leaving education.



- 1.7 Six *key inequalities* were identified. These are summarised below along with short explanations.
- 1.8 The full *Statement*, from which this summary is drawn, provides further information on each *key inequality* as well as on a number of other inequalities and differences. Where barriers to equality of opportunity have been identified, they are also considered in the full report.
- 1.9 The *Statement* does not consider or evaluate the effectiveness of Government strategies, policies or practices. Rather, it draws attention to persistent and/or emergent key inequalities so that actions can be developed, or improved to advance equality.
- 1.10 It is hoped that the *Statement* will be utilised to inform the ongoing development of policy positions and associated interventions not only across the relevant Departments and agencies, but by all those organisations who have responsibilities for, or an interest in, education.
- 1.11 **Further information**, including a 2 page 'Key Point Briefing' and the full version of the *Statement* can be downloaded from:
www.equalityni.org/KeyInequalities-Education



Key Inequality: Bullying, including prejudice-based bullying, in schools is a persistent problem.

- 1.12 A number of equality groups are more vulnerable to prejudice-based bullying, or more likely to be bullied, in schools. Research has identified that: over two fifths of minority ethnic students having been the victims of racist bullying and harassment¹; over six out of ten trans pupils, and students with same sex attraction have been called hurtful names related to their sexual or gender identity²; over two fifths of pupils with a disability being bullied³; and students with SEN also experience bullying.
- 1.13 The ‘Grasping the Nettle’ report⁴ (2013) found that transphobic bullying is a significant problem in school settings and “*such experiences left young people feeling profoundly isolated to the extent that they suffered depression, self-harmed and had suicidal thoughts*”.
- 1.14 In respect to racist bullying, NICEM⁵ (2011) suggested that a barrier to addressing bullying in schools is that schools tend to lack knowledge of how to effectively confront the issue of racist bullying and may in some cases have difficulty acknowledging that a problem exists.
- 1.15 Cara-Friend and The Rainbow Project⁶ (2011) found that many students who have experienced homophobic bullying do not report incidents of bullying and harassment to school authorities. The most frequently cited reason for this is that young people thought that the school would not take the incident(s) seriously. Research by Queen’s University⁷ (2013) highlights that there appears to be reluctance by schools in Northern Ireland generally to address homophobic bullying with the same rigour as other forms of bullying.
- 1.16 A report by Northern Ireland’s Education and Library Boards (2010) noted a clear link between the incidence of bullying and SEN⁸ - those with social,

¹ NCB, NI and ARK YLT (2010) Attitudes to Difference: Young people’s attitudes to, and experiences of contact with people from different minority ethnic and migrant communities in Northern Ireland. p.55. Table 16 - 42% of 16 year olds from a minority ethnic group stated that they had been victims of racist bullying and harassment in school.

² O’Hara M (2013) Through our Minds: Exploring the Emotional health and Wellbeing of lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender people in Northern Ireland. The Rainbow Project: Belfast - 61.2% had been called hurtful names related to their sexual or gender identity

³ RSM McClure Watters (2011) The nature and extent of pupil bullying in schools in the North of Ireland. DENI: Bangor, p 62, p96. - 44.3% of Year 6 and 44.9% of Year 9 pupils with a disability reported they had ‘been bullied at school in the past couple of months’ at least once or twice’.

⁴ McBride, R-S. (2013). [Grasping the Nettle: The Experiences of Gender Variant Children and Transgender Youth Living in Northern Ireland](#). Belfast: Institute for Conflict Research.

⁵ NICEM (2011) [Promoting racial equality in NI post primary schools](#),

⁶ Cara-Friend and The Rainbow Project (2011) [Left Out of the Equation, A report on the Experiences of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Young People at School](#)

⁷ Queen’s University Belfast (2013) [Education reform in Northern Ireland: A Human Rights Review](#)

⁸ Northern Ireland Education and Library Boards (2010) [It’s Good to Listen – Experiences of Pupils with Special Educational Needs](#)



emotional or behavioural difficulties were more likely to experience bullying. The protection against harassment and discrimination against pupils with a disability in primary and post-primary school is currently weaker than the protection offered to students in further or higher education.

Key Inequality: Males continue to have lower levels of attainment than females, beginning in primary school and continuing throughout schooling to GCSE and A Level. Fewer male school leavers enter higher education than do females.

- 1.17 Although there have been overall increases in the levels of attainment, in 2014/15 there were attainment gaps, to the detriment of males, of eight percentage points for those obtaining 5+ GCSEs and 16 percentage points for those obtaining 2 + A Levels⁹. Furthermore, just over a third of male school leavers went on to higher education, compared to just over a half of females¹⁰.
- 1.18 The attainment gap increases, to the detriment of males, as pupils progress through both primary and post-primary education. Although there have been increases in the levels of attainment, for both males and females, since 2007, this is a key inequality as the gap between male and female attainment remains an ongoing and persistent challenge.
- 1.19 Across a range of studies, an overarching consideration regarding education for males may be that elements of the school day structure and curriculum in Northern Ireland do not suit the specific needs of many male pupils such as: male pupil frustration with the formal nature of the classroom, some teachers having lower expectations of males, and a lack of connection between curriculum content and the lives of many males. Additional barriers impacting on male pupils include: a lack of male role models in primary schools; poor teacher-pupil relationships; and a lack of preparedness for transitional stages during adolescence. Some of these barriers may be more specific to males from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.
- 1.20 Male underachievement in primary and post-primary education may be a reason why there are fewer male school leavers entering higher education

⁹ - The attainment gap for those obtaining 5+ GCSEs (A*-C) was 13.9 percentage points in 2007/08 and 8.2 percentage points in 2014/15, to the detriment of males.

- The attainment gap for those obtaining 5+ GCSEs (incl. English and Maths) (A*-C) was 12.4 percentage points in 2007/08 and 8.9 percentage points in 2014/15, to the detriment of males.

¹⁰ The attainment gap for those obtaining 2+ A Levels was 17.5 percentage points in 2007/08 and 16.7 percentage points in 2014/15 to the detriment of males.



than females. In 2014/15, just over a third of male school leavers went on to higher education, compared to just over a half of females¹¹. This is likely to have an impact on the composition of the future graduate workforce in Northern Ireland.

Key Inequality: Protestants continue to have lower levels of attainment than Catholics at GCSE and A Level. Fewer Protestant school leavers enter higher education than do Catholics.

- 1.21 Despite overall increases in the attainment levels of all students, there is a persistent and overarching trend of higher proportions of Catholics achieving the education targets in all three areas (5+ GCSEs (A*-C), 5+ GCSEs (A*-C) including Maths and English and 2+ A Levels (A* - E), than both Protestants and 'Others'¹². This is a persistent inequality. The lower achievement of Protestants, as measured by an attainment gap, remained between 2007/08 and 2014/15 for those obtaining 5+ GCSEs at (A*-C)¹³, or 2+ A Levels Grades (A* - *-E)¹⁴, with a slight reduction in the gap for those obtaining 5+ GCSEs (A*-C) including Maths and English¹⁵.
- 1.22 The research undertaken to provide evidence for this *Statement* found that large differences are evident in respect to the destinations of school leavers. Catholics are persistently more likely to enter higher education than other groups. In 2014/15, of Catholic school leavers, 45 percent went on to higher education, compared with 39 percent of Protestant school leavers¹⁶. Protestants are persistently more likely to enter job training than the other groups.
- 1.23 Within higher education, there are more Catholics in comparison to their share of the Northern Ireland population, in both undergraduate and postgraduate enrolments. This gap in student enrolments in higher education has widened slightly as the share of Protestant enrolments has

¹¹ In 2014/15, 34.7% of male school leavers went on to higher education, compared with 50.2% of females. The gap between males and females entering higher education was 15.6 percentage points in 2014/15, to the detriment of males.

¹² 'Other' refers to those all those who do not identify as Protestant or Catholic and therefore could include those of other/unknown religions and those of no religion.

¹³ For those obtaining 5+ GCSEs (A*-C), in 2007/08 the attainment gap was 3.6 pp to the detriment of Protestants and in 2014/15 the attainment gap was 3.8 pp to the detriment of Protestants. A slight widening of the attainment gap by 0.2 pp.

¹⁴ For those obtaining 2+ A Levels (A*-E), in 2007/08 the attainment gap was 6.8 pp to the detriment of Protestants and in 2014/15 the attainment gap was 7.0 pp to the detriment of Protestants. A slight widening of the attainment gap by 0.2 pp.

¹⁵ For those obtaining 5+ GCSEs (A*-C) including Maths and English, in 2007/08 the attainment gap was 2.8 pp to the detriment of Protestants and in 2014/15 the attainment gap was 1.2 pp to the detriment of Protestants. A narrowing of the attainment gap by 1.6 pp.

¹⁶ 45.4% of Catholic school leavers, and 39.0% of Protestant school leavers went on to higher education.



remained stagnant while the Catholic share has slightly increased. This is a persistent inequality.

Key Inequality: There is persistent underachievement and lack of progression to further and higher education of school leavers entitled to free school meals, particularly Protestants, notably Protestant males¹⁷.

- 1.24 In 2014/15, just over a quarter¹⁸ of Protestant males entitled to free school meals attained 5+ GCSEs (incl. English and Maths)(A*-C) compared with over four in ten¹⁹ of all school leavers entitled to free school meals, and almost three quarters²⁰ of all school leavers not entitled to free school meals.
- 1.25 When looking across the gender and religious categories, and measures of social disadvantage, Protestant male pupils entitled to free school meals (a measure of social disadvantage²¹) have the lowest rates of attainment in respect to GCSE and A Level results.
- 1.26 They also have the lowest proportions of school leavers moving on to higher education. In 2011/12, just over half²² of Protestant males entitled to free school meals went on to further or higher education, compared to six out of ten²³ of all school leavers entitled to free school meals and eight out of ten²⁴ of all school leavers not entitled to free school meals.
- 1.27 The factors that appear to be most strongly associated with the greatest levels of inequality in respect to educational attainment, regardless of a pupil's gender or religion, are the socio-economic background of a child, as currently measured by free school meals entitlement, and their attendance, or not, at a grammar school. As iterated in the section on gender within this Statement, social disadvantage can also impact on type of school attended, with socially disadvantaged children less likely to attend grammar schools²⁵. The research commissioned to inform this Statement

¹⁷ This key inequality is primarily supported by Burns et al (2015) analyses of Department of Education (DE) data on free school meals entitlement. However, in this *Statement*, 'working class' is also used to refer to the discussion in literature around 'Protestant working class'.

¹⁸ 26.7% of Protestant males entitled to free school meals attained 5+ GCSEs (incl. English and Maths) (A*-C).

¹⁹ 41.3% of all school leavers entitled to free school meals attained 5+ GCSEs (incl. English and Maths) (A*-C).

²⁰ 73.7% of all school leavers not entitled to free school meals attained 5+ GCSEs (incl. English and Maths) (A*-C).

²¹ Entitlement is calculated based on parental receipt of income support or Jobseeker's Allowance, an annual taxable income of £16,190 or less, or receipt several other allowances or tax credits

²² 51.5% of Protestant males entitled to free school meals went on to further or higher education.

²³ 62.3% of all school leavers entitled to free school meals went on to further or higher education.

²⁴ 80.6% of all school leavers not entitled to free school meals went on to further or higher education

²⁵ See Atkinson A., Gregg, P. and McConnell, B. (2006). *The Result of 11+ Selection: An Investigation into Opportunities and Outcomes for Pupils in Selective LEAs*, CMPO Working Paper No. 06/150. Bristol: Centre for Market and Public Organisation, University of Bristol.



found that the type of school was a strong predictor of attainment, and destination after leaving school.

The particular barriers to educational equality for Protestant males entitled to free school meals must be considered and addressed, as their attainment is so far behind Catholic males and females or Protestant females who are entitled to free school meals. Some of the barriers for Protestant males include: intergenerational mistrust and negativity towards the benefits of education; the divided nature of the school system in Northern Ireland and lower post-16 provision in controlled schools; a lack of male working-class role models in schools; and weakened community infrastructure in urban Protestant areas in particular.

Key Inequality: Children from the Traveller community and Roma children have some of the lowest levels of attainment of all equality groups.

- 1.28 Over the 2007/08-2014/15 period, anywhere between a half to over eight in ten Irish Traveller children left school with no GCSEs²⁶. This is in stark contrast to the proportions of all school leavers with no GCSEs, which has reduced from 3.5 percent in 2007/08 to 0.5 percent in 2014/15²⁷.
- 1.29 This has been a persistent trend since the last Equality Commission statement on educational inequalities published in 2008. Qualitative data and other literature²⁸ gathered for these groups indicates that while steps have been taken to redress these inequalities by government departments, and the Education Authority, there are further ways that education equality could be enabled, such as: placing the rights and needs of children first; providing more support for parents; more engagement and consultation with the groups at hand; and more joined-up departmental working.

Key Inequality: Students with any SEN or a disability have lower attainment levels than students without any SEN or disability, and are less likely to go on to higher education.

²⁶ Commission analysis of DE bepoke tables 'Qualifications of school leavers by ethnic origin sub-categories' (2007/08-2014/15) – Proportion of Irish Travellers school leavers with no GCSEs in 2007/08 was 50.0%, in 2008/09 was 82.4%, in 2009/10 was 66.7%, in 2010/11 was N/A, in 2011/12 was 64.9%, in 2012/13 was 65.9%, in 2013/14 was 61.3% and in 2014/15 was 57.1%

²⁷ Commission analysis of DE bepoke tables 'Qualifications of school leavers by ethnic origin sub-categories' (2007/08-2014/15) - Proportion of All school leavers with no GCSEs in 2007/08 was 3.6%, in 2008/09 was 2.9%, in 2009/10 was 2.1%, in 2010/11 was 2.2%, in 2011/12 was 1.8%, in 2012/13 was 1.6%, in 2013/14 was 1.0% and in 2014/15 was 0.5%

²⁸ Burns, S., Leitch, R. and Hughes, J. (2015) *Education Inequalities in Northern Ireland*



- 1.30 Between 2007/08 and 2014/15, there have been increases in attainment levels for all SEN and/or pupils with a disability, and in particular for SEN 1-4 school leavers. The attainment gap, for those obtaining 5+ GCSEs Grades A*-C, between SEN 1-4 pupils and those with no SEN decreased from 46 to 23 percentage points²⁹. While SEN 5 pupils have also experienced increases in attainment, it has not been to the same extent as for SEN 1-4 pupils. The attainment gap between SEN 5 pupils and those with no SEN decreased from 59 to 48 percentage points³⁰.
- 1.31 The lower attainment of students with any SEN or a disability is a persistent inequality. Although there have been substantial increases in the proportions of school leavers with any SEN or a disability achieving 5+ GCSEs (A*-C) and 5+ GCSEs (A*-C) including Maths and English, the attainment proportions are still substantially below the attainment proportions for pupils who do not have a special educational need or a disability.
- 1.32 In all measures of attainment, and for each SEN group, females are outperforming their male counterparts. The under achievement of students with SEN or a disability may reflect concerns that the existing provisions in mainstreams schools, to meet the needs of pupils with disabilities, do not meet all their individual needs, and the needs of all children with SEN or a disability.
- 1.33 School leavers with any SEN or disability are more likely to enter further education or job training than school leavers without a disability. However, on several further education courses and job training programmes, the shares of enrolees with a self-reported disability are lower than the share of people in Northern Ireland with a self-reported disability or illness. In higher education, students with a disability represent the smallest share of enrolees in the subject area of 'Medicine, Dentistry, and Subjects Allied to Medicine', compared with all other subject areas in higher education.

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²⁹ The attainment gap between SEN 1-4 and those with no SEN, for those obtaining 5+ GCSEs Grades A*-C was 46.2 percentage points in 2007/08 and 22.9 percentage points in 2014/15, to the detriment of pupils with SEN 1-4.

³⁰ The attainment gap between SEN 5 and those with no SEN, for those obtaining 5+ GCSEs (A*-C), closed from 58.7 percentage points in 2007/08 to 47.5 percentage points in 2014/15, with pupils with SEN 5 at the bottom of the gap.