

Education for Enlightenment

Is Our Education System Failing Our Children?



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Northern Ireland Charity No.: 108563.

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Typeset by Jake Campbell.
Printed by Copy Cats.

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Is Our Education System Failing Our Children?



Proceedings of a Conference held in the Duncairn Centre
on 11 November 2023

Edited by Francis Kane and James Ward

Belfast; Reclaim the Enlightenment, 2004
ISBN 978 1 738560 608

We are grateful to all our funders



Arts and
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Research Council



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Anne Marrion, Conference Convenor

Introduction

Welcome to these proceedings, comprising texts of talks given at an extraordinary multiple-perspective conference on education held at The Duncairn Centre, Belfast, on Saturday 11 November 2023. The conference was organized by Reclaim the Enlightenment under the title ‘Education for Enlightenment – Is our education system failing our children?’ The date of the conference was significant, in that 11 November was also the date on which many children had the misfortune to sit the first SEAG test in the flawed selection process that still dogs our educational system. RtE believes selection is truly ‘the elephant in the room’, a core issue too frequently evaded in discussions of educational under-achievement.

RtE, a registered charity, was founded in 2017. It takes inspiration from Belfast’s progressive Enlightenment era in the late 18th century in seeking to achieve change in our own era. Those pioneers were deeply interested in education. They advocated ‘free and universal education’, especially for the poor. They believed in the innate goodness of children and a child-centred approach to teaching. They opposed corporal punishment and supported the co-education of girls and boys. They strongly believed that education should be provided on a non-sectarian basis.

Our current system has manifestly failed to live up to those still-relevant principles first enunciated more than 200 years ago. This conference explored the subsequent history of failure and examined the current situation that leads to poor outcomes for many pupils and our society. We addressed the baleful effects of academic selection at the age of 11. We also looked at the continued sectarian division of the education system, one that brings with it major cost burdens and one which means that children are largely denied the opportunity to interact on a cross-community basis. Above all, we explored possible reforms to the system and tried to set a radical agenda for the future.

We are publishing these proceedings as a tribute to the memory of Mary Ann McCracken, a pioneer of non-sectarian education for the poor, and to the memory of Eamon McMahon, the radical founder of Reclaim the Enlightenment.



John Gray

An Overview

I can have no complaints about my privileged education – private preparatory school, Campbell College, and Oxford. All my failures have been my own. Yet, within my family, there was a glaring example of the failures of the elite system. At that preparatory school, I got on well, but my younger brother was a slow learner and, unbeknown to me, was beaten almost every week. Our despairing parents concluded that he would need an entirely non-academic future and sent him to sea at the age of 15, where, in the event, he actually had a stellar career. Long subsequently, he became the only member of our family to get a first-class degree.

In telling this tale, I am in danger of falling into the trap so favoured by the advocates of our current education system who point to the occasional individuals who, coming from working-class backgrounds, defeat the system and succeed. This is the fig leaf that obscures failure on a massive scale. How in the land of so-called saints and scholars did we get here?

Once upon a time, there were royal schools for the male elite. There were the hedge schools for those less fortunate, but as enlightenment thinking gathered pace, new ideas took hold. Francis Hutcheson, the celebrated Presbyterian philosopher from Saintfield, was a pioneer advocate of children's innate goodness and a child centred approach to education.

In Belfast, the self-taught David Manson ran a remarkable new form of school, which was co-educational and where physical punishment was absent. Unsurprisingly his most celebrated pupils were the members of the McCracken family.

The nature of late 18th-century society in Ulster encouraged popular education. Certainly, Presbyterians were urged to read the bible, but once you could read it, you soon turned to the proliferation of popular printed literature. The culture of the handloom weavers was important. While the weavers worked, a reader was often on hand to ease their toil. They established reading societies with their little libraries, the only survivor of which is today's Linen Hall Library.

Those McCracken children were pioneers of education for the very poor. Henry Joy McCracken established a short-lived Sunday school in the Assembly Rooms. It was a Sunday school because its child pupils worked during the week, and it sought to teach reading and writing, but the town's Sovereign put a stop to it.

Mary Ann revived her brother's initiative at the Lancastrian School from 1813 onwards. One of the school's founders in 1811 was the United Irishman, Thomas McCabe, and no wonder because the school was inspired by the ideas of the Quaker, Joseph Lancaster, who 'knew nothing of the religion of those taught under his system.'

In her role as Secretary to the Women's Committee at the Poor House, Mary Ann introduced nursery education and thus can be described as a pioneer of what we now call 'sure start'. The major educational initiative she was involved in was the foundation of the Ragged School in 1847 based in the Lancastrian School premises. This soon provided for over a hundred children who were often on the verge of absolute destitution. Recognising that children could not learn if they were starving, they were fed breakfast and lunch.

Yet this would be an isolated example. The Church of Ireland and the Presbyterian Church raised far more funds to establish schools, especially in the starving west of Ireland, where children were indeed fed but as a means to conversion in what was a hoped-for Second Reformation. Such was soupierism.

The first systematic attempt to establish schools catering for the children of the poor had been made from 1811 onwards by the Kildare Place Society which promoted a specifically Protestant ethos although funded by the state. However, the creation of the National Schools by a Whig government from 1831 onwards offered new promise. They were intended to be strictly non-denominational, with religion excluded from the main curriculum. Initially, the initiative was supported by all the main churches.

But the Church of Ireland soon deserted, proclaiming their historic right to run and control schools, and Presbyterians were only kept on board when concessions were made concerning religious education. The Catholic Church was uneasily kept on board because it could nominate managers of schools, as was the case in most of them.

The upshot was that the original ambition to provide education on an integrated basis throughout the island failed. The schools ensured a great increase in literacy in English, though not Irish, during the century.

At a more elite level, another radical initiative's failed ambition warrants record. Inst, or as it later became, the Royal Belfast Academical Institution, was founded in 1814 by Presbyterian radicals, notably William Drennan, and aimed to provide a liberal education for Protestants and Catholics and, indeed, to provide a proto-university for those who were still excluded from the Anglican Trinity College in Dublin.

Their wings were first clipped in 1816 when board members enthusiastically celebrated St Patrick's Day with national and radical toasts. Many of them had to resign when, as a consequence, the government threatened to withdraw funding. The liberal theology taught at the college came under attack, and more orthodox Presbyterians founded Assembly's College in 1853 as a rival pole of attraction. Inst's university ambitions ended with the foundation of Queen's University in 1849.

Drennan's ambition that the college should provide for both Catholics and Protestants became increasingly nominal in practice as Catholics founded St Malachy's College in 1833, which was to become their leading grammar school in the city.

The same divisions were to afflict the development of higher education. The four Queen's Colleges founded in 1849 were denounced by the Pope as 'godless colleges' leading to the foundation of the Catholic University of Ireland, the future University College Dublin. That was a relatively remote destination for northern Catholics, and they came to terms with Queen's University in Belfast when a separate department of scholastic philosophy was established, enabling something of a separate life within the parent institution.

In Belfast, the huge growth in the population between 1880 and 1914 led to an educational crisis. The Conservative Corporation preferred to invest in our gigantic City Hall, which opened in 1905, rather than in additional schools. In 1906, the Commissioners of Education reported that, "the overcrowded state of some of the schools in Belfast is so aggravated as seriously to endanger the health of the pupils and teachers." Things were no better in 1913 when Chief Secretary for Ireland, Augustine Birrell, said, "No city in the empire was worse supplied with schools." 15,000 children could not find school places at all and only one child in sixty reached secondary education compared with one in eighteen in England.

Come partition, and an attempt was made to make a fresh start when the unlikely figure of Lord Londonderry introduced proposed reforms which would have led to a state system under secular control. The Church of Ireland in particular would not wear it and, with the backing of the Orange Order, torpedoed Londonderry's plans. He was not helped by the refusal of the Catholic Church to engage. A secular education system was anathema to them too. Thus our divided education system was fixed in stone for most of the next century. It infected teacher education, too, where we still have the wasteful duplication of St Mary's College and Stranmillis College.

It was a system divided by religion, but the churches were actually united in sustaining another division through selection at 11 plus, involving the maintenance of grammar schools for the haves and secondary and often second-rate schools for the have-nots.

Although the 1947 Education Act, driven by the Labour government in London rather than by any Unionist enthusiasm, increased access to higher education, it did not alter the basic framework.

It is worth reflecting on the extraordinary financial advantages our middle-class parents have when sending their children to grammar schools. When my son got into Belfast Royal Academy some 40 years ago, the principal addressed us parents and told us how remarkably lucky we were to be getting an education for our children for almost nothing, which would have cost at least £5,000 a year on the mainland. It is perhaps because of this extraordinary generosity that we have been spared the plague of elite public schools, with only two surviving at Campbell College and Portora.

In the subsequent half century, the one major new initiative was initially an entirely voluntary one, which led to the emergence of the integrated sector. Pioneered by the foundation of Lagan College in 1981, by 2017, there were 65 integrated schools. The sector did eventually grudgingly secure state funding but this has always fallen far short of actual demand.

Integrated education is not a panacea for all our troubles, but it does offer an enabling alternative to educational apartheid. Having said which there are different models within the sector. Some place an emphasis on religious ecumenicism, while others are more secular. Some adopt quasi-grammar school models, while others aspire to the comprehensive ideal. One reaction and a thoroughly reactionary one to the growth of the integrated sector has been the promotion of shared campuses where all the old divisions in fact remain.

Meanwhile the Irish language sector has emerged and again initially on an entirely voluntary basis. With the first school opened in 1971, there are now 30. It is wrong to dismiss this as just another expensive division. It involves the entirely valid recognition of historic language rights, and I am glad to see that the sector seems to have no aspiration to foster grammar schools.

Come the arrival of Sinn Féin in the corridors of power and Martin McGuinness, as Minister of Education, dramatically announced the abolition of the 11 plus in 2002. Yes, the Department of Education no longer runs the 11 plus, but now, more than twenty years later, the grammar schools continue to do so independently. The resistance comes equally from the Protestant and Catholic sectors – a new union in favour of vested interests. Remarkably, although the Catholic hierarchy has come out in favour of the abolition of selection, their more privileged adherents haven't taken a blind bit of notice!

Of course, an endless debate continues about the academic underachievement of working-class children, particularly by those from a Protestant background. How perverse it is that a recent Department of Education enquiry specifically excluded the issue of the 11 plus and selection from discussion. Truly they were ignoring the elephant in the room. As were the authorities at Ulster University when they withdrew recognition for an academic paper advocating reform though they were quickly forced to recant.

Episodes such as these reveal that those of us who demand change have a battle on our hands. Of course, I speak with a Reclaim the Enlightenment voice and am very much inspired by the ideas of our radical forebears. Thus these policies should be based on real equal opportunity for all. That means education at all levels should be free of charge. That has to mean the abolition of the 11 plus and selection at that age. The educational curriculum should be broadly based with a balance at all levels between the humanities and the sciences. It should not be unduly skewed by presumed commercial imperatives. We must seek the abolition of clerical involvement as of right in school management and the removal of the compulsory teaching of Christianity from the syllabus. Our teacher training colleges should be merged. We need university provision for a larger number of students and enhanced and more relevant technical education.

It is an agenda that one can keep adding to. After I had completed a draft of this talk, I happened to be in a small town in the South West of France in mid-afternoon. Hundreds of teenagers had just got out of school, and I was struck by the relaxed atmosphere. There they were, boys and girls, mixing in an entirely natural way and without those expensive identifiers of school uniforms. That snapshot confirmed in me my support of co-education and the abolition of school uniforms.

How do I suggest that reform should affect the various sectors in our existing system? Radical I profess to be, certainly, but I am sufficiently realistic to advocate a pragmatic approach recognising actual demand in the community. Clearly, more support should be given to integrated education, but only where demand for it can be established and as is now evidently the case. It may be particularly relevant in rural areas where existing maintained and state schools lack viability separately but could sustain a single school. Any growth in the integrated sector will be a transitional process. In the meantime, the position of existing maintained and state schools should be protected, provided that they remain viable. Irish language schools should be sustained with any increased provision dependent on demand. Existing grammar schools should provide various specialist resources to other schools and otherwise could be transformed into 6th-form colleges. All significant towns should provide appropriate school resources for all ages thus reducing excessive demand for free transport further afield.

These are my ideas, and hopefully, they provide fruit for discussion.



Alan Millar

Book Clubs, Bards, and Communitarian Education in Late 18th Century East Antrim

Writing for the *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* in 1902, in an article about the Four Towns Book Club, at Craigarogan, near Mallusk, the Antiquarian Francis Joseph Bigger stated: “The awakening of men’s minds by the French Revolution, and the stirring political events of that period, had much to do with this (interest in) self education 100 years ago.”

In fact, the thirst for self-improvement among the agricultural and labouring classes pre-dates this period, with education for both adults and children already well documented in the strongly Presbyterian areas of the Six Mile Valley of East Antrim.

The influence of Saintfield’s famed Francis Hutcheson, Chair of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow University (1729-1746), was filtering out into the Dissenting flocks of Ulster through the mouths of the many Ministers he had helped educate from the 1730s.

What is now called ‘Enlightenment thinking’ gained political power in the run-up to and during the American revolutionary period. This invigorated the polemical discourse in Ulster. Empathy with the American colonies was strong due to family ties; their cause was easily linkable to conditions at home; the campaign for reform of the terminally corrupt Irish Parliament was renewed.

Multiple sources in East Antrim corroborate the fact that children born during this period grew up in a community that nurtured learning. It is no coincidence that this was the generation who would later drive forward the United Irish political and, subsequently, revolutionary project.

United Irish revolutionary and Ulster-Scots weaver poet James Orr, of Ballycarry, who was born in 1770, was, according to his biographer, McDowell, educated at home by his father. The biography also states that schooling was available in the village.

Northern Star poetic contributor and Templepatrick schoolmaster Samuel Thomson, born in 1766, was undoubtedly another product of this culture. Though nothing is known of his childhood, the fact that he was teaching his own school at Carngranny by the late 1780s whilst still in his early 20s speaks for itself. I will do a brief sketch of his life later in this talk.

Famed revolutionary weaver, James Hope, born nearby in 1764 at Roughfort, near Templepatrick, had no less than three farmers he worked for as a child, helping him with his education. His memoir states that he started work in 1774, aged ten, with just 15 weeks of schooling under his belt. Hope in his memoir states that William Bell of Templepatrick, “took every opportunity of *improving my mind*.” Bell read classic history and the histories of Ireland, England, and Scotland to him. The father of his next employer, John Gibson, also of Templepatrick, started teaching him to read and write, with a third farmer, John Ritchy, also helping him with his writing.

In an age of immense inequalities and grotesque exploitation of the poor, with Catholics across Ireland still living under the yoke of the Penal Laws, the power of the communitarian ethos driving those three farmers to help a labouring boy, in all likelihood no kin of their own, paints an uplifting picture, albeit one in stark contrast to that oft-cited tragedy today that is the poor academic performance of working class protestant males.

Hope’s experience was not an isolated one. During Hope’s childhood, local initiatives building educational capacity for both adults and children were on the increase across the Six Mile Water Valley. Just a few miles away at Doagh, William Galt, had founded the first Sunday School in Ireland in 1770 – the source for this detail etched proudly on his headstone in Kilbride. To declare this in the brevity offered by the headstone again speaks for itself.

In 1768, two years earlier, a Book Club had been founded. They acquired a building around 1780 and used the ground floor as a schoolroom. Over the next 25 years, the library upstairs would grow to be the largest library in rural Ulster. It contained around 1,500 volumes by the time it was ransacked in 1798 by the Carrickfergus Fencibles. The building remains in use as a community facility to this day.

By the 1790s, Doagh Reading Room’s reputation had expanded beyond the district. Greyabbey Minister, Dr James Porter, hanged outside his church during the rebellion in 1798, had included Doagh on his circuit of venues for his lectures on natural philosophy.

In November 1795, an extract of a letter from the Giant’s Causeway appeared in the *Northern Star*. The writer, detained in Doagh because of the wet weather, said:

Whilst Europe is in convulsion and our native country exhibiting scenes of lawless depredation, they are here very differently employed: they have a Sunday School of above nine years standing, where above 100 children attend and receive instructions, not from any stated master, but from members of a Book Club, who cheerfully and laudably attend in rotation, six or seven at a time.

He added:

‘Tis astonishing what industry, sober manners and a thirst for knowledge will effect ... They have an excellent Library ... but what chiefly excited my astonishment and heightened my pleasure was the talk given on the principles of Geography by Dr Porter to 200 people!

Shortly after, in December, an advertisement in the *Northern Star*, indicated that as well as lectures on Natural Philosophy, Dr Porter also offered: “... a morning class for the benefit of young ladies who are desirous of acquiring a knowledge of the first principles of Astronomy, Geography and the use of the Globes.”

It wasn’t just boys, who were benefitting from education. Figures from slightly later, in 1824 in Ballymoney, indicated that 1,263 pupils in the Parish were being educated, 696 boys and 567 girls.

You’ll recall that the *Northern Star* letter writer records that Doagh Book Club members were doing the teaching. Perhaps they were between schoolmasters when he visited. For applicants for the position of schoolmaster were invited in an advert in the *Belfast News-letter*, in April 1791. Someone to teach: “Reading, Writing, Arithmetic ... if he could teach the Languages, it would be an additional recommendation.”

In February 1796, an advertisement for a “School Master wanted ... to teach at Doagh,” appears in the *Northern Star*:

It’s necessary that he be a good English scholar, writes in a good hand, and understands arithmetic perfectly and his character must be impeccable. Application may be made to Samuel Neilson, Belfast, or William Galt, Doagh.

John Hewitt suggests in his book *Rhyming Weavers*, that the quality of teachers often wasn’t high. Discussing the aforementioned Samuel Thomson of nearby Carngranny, he writes: “Thomson is of altogether a more literary cast of mind than many of the other schoolmasters of Antrim or Down, who were his contemporaries.”

In Ballynure, a few miles away, Rev Adam Hill also ran a school. His advert appeared in the *Star* on October 30, 1794, informing the public that his Ballynure Grammar School would open again on November 12. The advertisement stated:

Youth instructed to his care will be instructed in Latin and Greek Languages, English grammar and elements of Geography, if required. Vacations will not amount to more than three weeks a year. Terms, as usual, 11s 4d.

Interestingly, Rev. Hill, a product of the ‘Enlightenment’ thinking that he was, seemed to be providing a secular education with no religious studies mentioned. But his quarterly fees would have been far beyond labouring families, whose wages often did not amount to more than a shilling a day. Though communitarian educational provision, crossing classes and stations of people, was available, if fees were too costly, home education remained key for the poor person. Samuel Walker, of Shanes Hill, just a few townlands away from Thomson, left to posterity a handwritten manuscript of poetry composed in the early 1800s. One verse describes labouring class parents keeping an attentive eye on their children at their studies before church on Sunday:

Then a’ the young anes to their tasks attend
 In Bible, Question Beuk or A.B.C.
 The parents view, wi an attentive e’e
 And heartfelt joy, what now employs the weans
 Wha’ if hard work, or curious task they see,
 They at their sire inquire ay, what it means
 While he, as weel’s he can, their questions a’ explains.

Sketch of a country schoolmaster, Samuel Thomson of Carngranny

In her essay, ‘Constructing the Ulster Labouring-Class Poet: The Case of Samuel Thomson’, Dr. Jennifer Orr writes:

He was positioned slightly above his labouring peers as one of the most intellectual men in the neighbourhood who had the added responsibility of educating the sons of labourers who showed promise, affording them some degree of upward mobility.

Samuel Thomson (1766-1816), described by some as “Bard in Residence” at the *Northern Star*, taught from the late 1780s at his modest two-roomed cottage at Carngranny, just off the Coach Road connecting Carnmoney to Antrim. Thomson doesn’t often refer to his day job. But some excerpts from Rev. Robert Parke’s 1824 *Account of Schools in Ballymoney* perhaps offer us a glimpse. The teacher at Ballygabbin, James Riddles, Rev. Parke tells us, was: “... twenty years of age, of excellent moral character, qualified to teach reading, writing, arithmetic and English grammar.”

The teacher at Forttown, Thomas Quigg, was described as: “... a Presbyterian, requested to take charge of the school, upon trial; confirmed by the committee about 2.5 years hence.” The School House at Forttown, Parke continues: “... is built of stone and mortar; roof thatched; contains the school room, 14foot square, one large writing desk and form, tables, seats; (that) might accommodate 50 children.”

What schoolbooks might Thomson have used? Renowned Belfast educator David Manson died in March 1792, a month before Thomson, started his career of publishing at the *Northern Star*. Perhaps he was one of the multitudes attending Manson's torch lit funeral. He, in all likelihood, used Manson's *Spelling Book, Dictionary and Primer* and (John) Gough's *Practical Arithmetic*. Thomson, again, tells us very little. But, like Rev. Parke, James Orr's poem 'Elegy written in the Ruins of a Country School House', mentions both Manson and Gough:

As here are met; the starv'ling, keen to stray
With slate in hand, and turf beneath his arm.

Every pupil had brought their own bit of peat for the fire, indicating what a modest affair it was. Orr continues:

My rude coevals learn'd to read and write,
Concluded Gough, and went their bread to gain.
Our tasks were bounded by the Catechism,
The Youth's Companion, the Holy Word,
Ere Manson's vain improvements rent a schism
In ancient systems, soon to be restor'd.

Interesting verse, seeming to suggest that the little enlightened window, so positively opened in the late 18th Century, had been closed again, at least in Orr's eyes. The old systems of education had been restored. Letters written to Thomson by Belfast bookseller Robert Callwell suggest that Thomson was selling copies of "Bell's", which Dr. Orr suggests may be educational specialist Dr John Bell, who pioneered the Madras system of education, where brighter children tutor the weaker ones. If so, Thomson was familiar with this cutting-edge material. Thomson's frustration with weaker pupils is expressed in a poem: 'To a Blockhead, at School', in his 1799 edition of poems. In it, he advises the proverbial 'Blockhead':

Quit books altogether and strike up with labor,
Shake hands with a shovel, a dunghill you'll find
A subject congenial at once to your mind.

Or perhaps not frustration, just the articulation of the grim reality. At least a shovel could earn a person a living.

In 1806, a reply letter written to Thomson by David Boyd, a schoolmaster at the Belfast Poor House, suggests that Thomson had been inquiring about his teaching methods, and had asked Boyd to send a copy of Robert Telfair's: *Key to Gough's Practical Arithmetic* written by John Gough, mentioned earlier.

There were very obvious limits to the quality of education Thomson could provide, with two entries in the *Northern Star*, perhaps shedding light on this. On 22 June 1793, Miss McNeilly from Carngranny was listed as having a premium adjudged to her in the writing exams from Mr Ware's Boarding School in Belfast. On October 16 1794 it was noted that John McNeilly, of Carngranny, got a silver medal from Mr Telfair's class: "for exemplary conduct and writing."

These are probably the children of Thomson's good friend and next-door neighbour, John McNeilly. The McNeillys were decent-sized farmers rather than the gentry. That Sam had some advising hand in how his friend's children were schooled and that he facilitated this through his connections in Belfast are easy imaginative steps to take. The wooden floored school rooms of burgeoning bourgeois Belfast were, without doubt, a far cry from the clay floor and rickety forms of his own draughty school room. In 1811, five years before Thomson died, an Erasmus Smyth school opened in Craigarogan, just a few fields away from Carngranny. By this time Thomson was in declining health and spirits.

Rest of Ireland

The situation in East Antrim was quite different from much of the rest of Ireland. Up until the 1790s, Irish was the first language over most of the country, including practically all of Connaught and Munster. It remained the common medium of teaching, even after the enactment of the Penal Laws put severe restrictions on Catholic education. But the Hedge Schools that grew up after the collapse of the old Gaelic order were, due to oppression, but a faint ember of the Bardic Schools that previously taught literature, history and the Brehon Laws. Laurie O'Higgins, in her paper '(IN) FELIX PAUPERTAS Scholarship of the 18th Century Irish Poor', writes: "Irish poets devolved into teachers and compilers of manuscripts as the system collapsed around them."

James Egan of Killarney, in his letter, written in Latin in 1808 and subsequently quoted in a tract defending the Catholics of Ireland from "certain vulgar opinions", said:

... at this moment, 40 children attend my classes, born to the poorest farmers, of whom a large number display such talent and industry, that they might have filled any role in life. For it is certain that God did not grant talent only to the rich. In my class room you might hear the spirit of Caesar or Cicero beneath the garb of a peasant.

These sentiments could just as easily have been expressed in east Antrim. Though at opposite ends of the country, with differing circumstances, a thirst for learning was shared by all.

Conclusion

Thomson was a member and probably a founder member of the Four Towns Book Club. F.J. Bigger states that it was formed in 1802 from an amalgamation of Lowtown, formed in 1790, and Roughfort, formed in 1796. They had a Reading Room not far from Craigarogan Fort, which, at its height, had over 400 volumes in the library. James Orr's poem, 'The Reading Society', paints an atmospheric picture of labouring men making their way from their long hard labours on farms or in workshops to "attend the reading circle" and "sensibly converse away" their care. That Book Clubs were tangible manifestations of the communitarian thirst for education and knowledge also meant they were the mirror through which the decline of this thirst could be viewed.

The complete F.J. Bigger quote, from his *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* article that I began this short talk with, reads as follows:

The decay in these book clubs throughout the country shows a decided falling-off in the interest taken in Literature. The grandfathers of the present race were students of every new book that was printed, and read with avidity the magazines and poems as they appeared, many of them dabbling in the art of writing; now is all changed. Better houses, better food, freer education prevail; but the love for books and their authors has gone, leaving not a trace behind. I have seen, and I know many men who can scarce write and could never read, whose grandfathers lived in comparative culture. The awakening of men's minds by the French Revolution, and the stirring political events of that period, had much to do with this self-education 100 years ago; but how to account to account for its decadence at the present time, under what appears to be a more advantageous circumstances, is hard to explain.



Fergus Whelan

Education and the Slavish Mindset

My invitation to speak here today arose from an address I delivered to Reclaim the Enlightenment's Bastille Day celebration about the British and Irish Enlightenment. It is a daunting task for me to speak about education. I am not an education professional. My happiest personal experience in education was when I left O'Connell's Christian Brothers School at age sixteen without a Leaving Cert to pursue an apprenticeship in the Bricklaying trade.

Until maybe twenty years ago, in the South of Ireland, unlike Northern Ireland, there was little or no access for the sons and daughters of blue-collar workers to third-level education. In fact, had I been born two years earlier, I would not have got the little second-level education I received, as second-level fees were abolished only in 1968. When I finally attended university at the ripe old age of thirty-five, I had to attend a British college as no southern Irish university would have admitted me due to my not having a Leaving Cert. Although inequality of opportunity continues, accessibility to the third level for working-class children has become somewhat more democratic.

For the philosophers of the British/Irish Enlightenment, education was a vital aspect of social improvement and a pathway to human freedom. John Locke, Robert Molesworth, Francis Hutcheson, and Belfast's own William Drennan all had strong views on education that are worth discussing. The great female educator of the later Enlightenment was, of course, Mary Wollstonecraft, who denounced the denial of proper education available even to privileged aristocratic females. She advocated an education that would encourage girls and women to think. Her husband, William Godwin, specialised in children's literature in the hope of stimulating their imagination and creativity. He pioneered books and stories written for children so that they could develop their interests and knowledge of the world through reading.

John Locke (1632–1704)

Before discussing John Locke's ideas on education, a short synopsis of where he sits in the history of early modern Britain may be useful. He rejected the idea, orthodox in his time, that monarchs held their throne by Divine Right. The orthodox maintained that the crowned heads of Europe were God's anointed who should be obeyed, regardless of how tyrannical they proved to be. Locke had left England for Holland in the reign of Charles II as he was aligned with some of those involved in the recently founded Whig party. The Whigs had attempted to exclude James, Duke of York, from ascending the throne on account of his avowed Roman Catholicism. When the exclusionists failed, some of Locke's associates were connected to the Rye House Plot (1683), an attempt to assassinate the king and his brother. Locke felt safe in returning to England only after William of Orange succeeded James II.

Locke believed that children are born with their minds like a blank sheet of paper, a clean slate, a *tabula rasa*. He also maintained that children are potentially free and rational beings, and that the realization of these human qualities tends to be disillusioned through the imposition of the sort of prejudice that perpetuates oppression and fallacy. Locke believed it was the upbringing and education of that time that hindered the development of children's humanity.

He published *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* in 1693. This treatise on the education of gentlemen was the most important philosophical work on education in England for over a century.

For Locke the purpose of education was to produce an individual with a sound mind in a sound body so as to better serve his country. Note the word his. As to females, Locke was very much a man of his time in that when it came to the debate on education, it was as though women did not exist.

Another invalid aspect of his thought was that the content of education ought to depend upon one's station in life. The common man only required moral, social, and vocational knowledge. He could do quite well with the Bible and a highly developed vocational skill that would serve to support him in life and offer social service to others. However, the education of gentlemen ought to be of the very highest quality. The gentleman must serve his country in a position of leadership.

A more progressive aspect of his outlook was that he held that the content of the curriculum must serve some practical end. He recommended the introduction of contemporary foreign languages, history, geography, economics, maths, and science. Most of the philosophers and thinkers of the Enlightenment concurred with Locke that the classical education known as scholasticism, which stressed Greek and Latin, and rhetoric or the art of public speaking and debate, was not fit for purpose in the early modern world.

It has been suggested that at the end of the eighteenth century when William Blake asks, 'Was Jerusalem builded here among these dark Satanic Mills'? he was not referring to the sweatshops of the Industrial Revolution but to Oxford and Cambridge, where Fellows were required to take holy orders and be ordained as Anglican priests. To matriculate, students were required to accept Anglican theology. Oxford, Cambridge, and Trinity College Dublin were closed to Irish Presbyterians. Students for the Presbyterian ministry were obliged to attend Glasgow or Edinburgh.

It was the Dissenting Academies such as Warrington, founded by the Unitarian Dr. Joseph Priestley, and Hackney College, founded by his friend Dr. Richard Price, who followed a progressive Lockean curriculum and encouraged students to practice free inquiry rather than the acceptance of religious dogma. It should be noted that Priestley was offered honorary membership of the Dublin Society of United Irishmen and was a friend and advisor to Archibald Hamilton Rowan who was a founding member of the Society who had attended Warrington. Richard Price had advised the Volunteers of Ireland on the Catholic question and was a friend and mentor to Mary Wollstonecraft.

Robert Molesworth (1656–1725)

Robert Molesworth was born in Fishamble Street in Dublin. His father had died four days before he was born. Some sources say his father had made his fortune supplying Cromwell's army; others that he fought on the Royalist side in the English Civil War. The younger Molesworth was educated at Trinity College Dublin.

He sided with William of Orange against James II in 1688, and his land was seized (attainted) by James's Dublin Parliament. William appointed him as his envoy to Denmark. In 1694 Molesworth published 'An Account of Denmark as it was in the year 1692'. Professor Caroline Robbins of Harvard claims that with the appearance of this pamphlet, Molesworth began an agitation for a reform that went further than that offered by the Bill of Rights and the Toleration Act. Robbins identifies 'An Account of Denmark ...' as an important stimulant to new educational ideas in the period.

English Protestants tended to see their homeland as a beacon of liberty and believed that the tyranny, persecution, and absolutism of France, Spain, Austria, and other kingdoms arose from a slavish devotion to Popery that was supposed to be a feature of those societies. Molesworth observed that Denmark was a Protestant kingdom yet had recently lost its liberty and had fallen into tyranny. He had a very definite view as to why and how this had happened:

Whoever takes the pains to visit Protestant countries who have lost their liberty will be convinced that it is not Popery as such but the doctrine of blind obedience in any religion which leads to mental tyranny.

One reason for the lapse of Denmark into tyranny was the poor education system, the monopoly of clerical instructors and so severe a censorship that all speculations about religious and political questions were prevented. For Molesworth, the education of youth was a fundamental route to social progress. He declared: "the proper education of youth is the foundation of liberty. Education in the hands of priests, whether Lutheran, Anglican, or Roman Catholic, inculcated doctrines of slavish obedience and did little to stimulate the search for truth or the development of public spirit, courage, honour, and enterprise." The curriculum, with its false emphasis on dead languages, was designed for the cloister rather than the real world.

This may be read as a condemnation not alone of the Danish education system but of the English university system, which was at that time based on High-Church Anglican control of Oxford and Cambridge by 'University Monks'.

Molesworth wanted education to encourage active virtue and curiosity about the needs of one's country and suggested the teachers should be philosophers rather than priests.

He rejected Locke's argument for the provision of different knowledge based on social class. Ninety years after Molesworth's death, William Drennan, the United Irishman, quoted him but did not name him in his opening address to the Belfast Academical Institute in 1814. Drennan told his listeners that an aim of the new academy would be that "the mysterious veil that makes one knowledge for the learned and another for the vulgar would be torn down".

Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746)

Francis Hutcheson is remembered today as the Father of the Scottish Enlightenment. He is also recognised as one of Ulster and Ireland's great philosophers. Yet, for almost his entire life, he was a scholar and a working teacher. His studies began in a small but renowned philosophy school in Killyleagh and thereafter continued at Glasgow. In 1719, along with William Drennan's father, he was invited by the Protestant Dissenters of Dublin to open a Dissenting academy at Drumcondra Lane, Dorset Street today. During his decade in Dublin, he produced two philosophical works which showed his considerable abilities as a liberal thinker. He was appointed to the Chair of Moral Philosophy in Glasgow in 1730 and for the rest of his short life his time was mostly taken up with teaching duties there.

Hutcheson believed that the role of the teacher was to inspire the listener with a sense of virtue and to posit the possibility of a better life. He gained fame as the first teacher in the university to teach philosophy consistently in English, not the customary Latin. His best-known pupil, Adam Smith, the renowned father of economics, said Hutcheson "was undoubtedly and beyond all comparison the most acute, the most distinct, and the most philosophical of all my teachers".

In his work Hutcheson said that all children had vigour and benign character and an implanted instinct towards knowledge. He therefore held that education should be open to all. In his insightful account of Archibald Hamilton Rowan, published by Down County Museum in 1998, Reclaim the Enlightenment's own Philip Orr tells us of Rowan's generous donation of funds to help William Godwin publish children's literature. Orr tells us that this places Rowan with Francis Hutcheson and Scots Irish Dissenting culture at a key place in the evolution of the modern belief in widespread education. Orr goes on to tell us that this approach to learning was to be conducted largely through the encouragement of imagination and creativity rather than arid instruction.

William Drennan (1754–1820)

When Fitzwilliam was appointed Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in early 1795, William Drennan addressed an open letter to him outlining what he saw as the urgent reforms that were required if Ireland was to avoid a revolutionary upheaval. It is a wide-ranging well-crafted thesis running to forty-six pages. The first and perhaps the most important reform Drennan called for was the introduction of a universal system of education.

The common people need to be educated, as the people are daily becoming more sensible to their physical power education is vital to stop them roaming in the savagery of nature ... The most pernicious error that had ever poisoned the happiness of mankind has been the prejudice that there is one sort of knowledge fit for the learned and another adapted to the vulgar.

He went on to deplore the doctrine that vilifies the human race as a swinish multitude and a beggary of no value or estimation. He further deplored the doctrine which suggests that the multitude lacks the capacity to enjoy the rights of man. The letter was unlikely to make a good impression on Fitzwilliam, a member of William Pitt's administration. Pitt had banned Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* and hounded Paine out of the country. The term the swinish multitude had been coined by Fitzwilliam's close friend and mentor Edmund Burke to describe the common people. Burke suggested that the swinish multitude had no role in politics other than to do what they were told by their betters. Drennan's many open letters were never designed to convince the recipient. They were propaganda designed to boost the morale of the United Irishmen and their followers.

Almost two decades after he wrote to Fitzwilliam, Drennan embarked on his most successful and enduring project. In 1814, he was the main mover in the establishment of the Belfast Academical Institute, the first university in Ireland after Trinity College Dublin, which was established at the end of the sixteenth century. Drennan drafted a statement which hailed the 'Inst' as likely to be:

a centre from which the lessons of science may emanate, not only illuminating the scholar and speculative philosopher but enlightening the husbandman, the manufacturer, and the artisan and guiding their steps to new discoveries and improvements in every path of human knowledge.

It is important to realise the term manufacturer, as used by Drennan, meant a manual worker and not an employer as it is generally understood today.

Drennan was the principal speaker at the opening of the 'Inst' on 1 February 1814. He told his audience that the college would be a place where "liberal ingenious men uniting their labours without regard to nation, sect or party ... [where] the youth entrusted to their care will be stimulated to the pursuit of knowledge and the practice of virtue". Drennan promised that the fees would be as low as possible and that some students would be admitted free of charge. Most importantly, he said:

The admission of scholars would be perfectly unbiased by religious distinctions. Example rather than coercion would be the order of the day, as motives of the mind are better for education than pains inflicted on the body, that example should teach rather than manual correction or corporal punishment.

Drennan made these comments 168 years before corporal punishment was abolished in schools in the South of Ireland.

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797)

Mary Wollstonecraft's writings reveal a keen concern with education, especially the education of girls and women. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* begins as a plea for the equal education of women and includes an ambitious and farsighted proposal for a national school system. Wollstonecraft had been a teacher. She had run a school with her sisters Everina and Eliza for a time at Newington Green. In 1785, Mary returned from Portugal, where she had nursed her dear dying friend Fanny Blood. Following Fanny's death, the grief-stricken Mary hardly cared when she discovered that in her absence, the school had gone into what proved to be a terminal decline. When the school closed at the end of the year, Mary was left with very large debts and two dependent sisters. Her friend John Hewlett suggested that she write a book because he believed the world needed to hear her ideas about education.

Mary penned *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters: With Reflections on Female Conduct, in the More Important Duties of Life*. One chapter dealt with the situation where unmarried women like herself, her sisters, and the late Fanny found themselves. The chapter bore the title: [the] 'Unfortunate Situation of Females Fashionably Educated and left Without Fortune'.

What Mary meant by fashionable education was advocated by some, such as the often-progressive writer Mrs. Barbauld. She thought women were too delicate to be independent of men and that women were created for pleasure and delight alone. Girls must be content to know that a thing is so without understanding the proof.

The renowned religious writer Hannah More believed that parents and teachers should drive the bold, independent, enterprising spirit out of girls, a philosophy based on the principle that women should be subordinate to men and learn to obey, not lead.

Mary found such ideas intolerable. She objected to the idea that women should be educated to be subordinate and agreeable wives. Such an education encouraged women to internalize their subjugation. Mary asked, what is the ideal woman? Was she a fainting maiden easily fatigued and naive? No, she was a resourceful and intelligent human being. Education should not consist of women learning by rote. Women should learn to think. Education was critically important to Wollstonecraft both as a liberal reformer and as a radical theorist and proponent of women's rights. A broad spectrum of reformist writers and activists – from conservatives wishing to shore up the status quo to "Jacobins" wishing to overturn it – saw education as a, if not the key locus for promoting social stability or engineering social revolution.

Conclusion

Locke, Molesworth, Hutcheson, Drennan, and Wollstonecraft recognised education as a vital aspect of social improvement and a pathway to human freedom. The idea of universal education, which was much contested at the time and even regarded as revolutionary, appears to us today to be mainstream and part of a well-accepted social consensus. However, from the foundation of the National School system in the early nineteenth century, schooling on this island has been controlled by the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches. Church control continued after the foundation of the southern Irish State. I cannot speak with authority about the system in Northern Ireland, but common sense tells me that segregated education does nothing to heal divisions in a divided society.

When it came to educating our own two children, the choice of sending them to be educated along with the adherents of one or another religion was not acceptable to us. My partner, Sheila, was a prime mover in establishing Dublin 7 Educate Together some twenty years ago. The school is thriving and now has 25 teachers and 450 pupils.

My friend, the artist Robert Ballagh, looking back on his time at the elite Blackrock College fee-paying school, remembered how the president of the college reminded the boys that they were not Christian Brother boys destined to be “the hewers of wood and drawers of water” (think the vulgar swinish multitude). No, they were the future leaders of Irish society. Ballagh tells us he thought the president had gone completely fecking bonkers as most of his classmates were eejits and messers. Ballagh was wrong. Of course, most of the eejits and messers gained entrance to Ireland’s professional and political elite.

Yet even elite privilege does not protect children. At least 233 male graduates of Robert Ballagh and Eamon DeValera’s alma mater, Blackrock College, have made allegations of abuse against seventy-seven priest teachers, some of whom were serial abusers left with unchecked access to children in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Three hundred years ago, Robert Molesworth told us that priest teachers inculcate a slavish mindset in pupils. Sometimes that was not the worst of their crimes.



Fiona Pegrum

Some Personal Reflections on the 11 plus

I am inspired by the insights of other contributors to give you my tale of the 11 plus which commences in Belfast with my mum, a labourer's daughter and then moves to England with me, before finally coming back to Northern Ireland with my children, and this seems like an ideal time to speak of it. A kind of open therapy session.

My early education began in Bedfordshire in the three-tier system of lower, middle and upper schools. At the grand age of nine, I had started attending Leighton Middle School; it was previously known as Cedars House and was the former home of Mary Norton, the author of the Borrowers books: a beautiful Victorian property set in vast grounds. It was stunning. I cannot recall the lessons. I had only been there for a few months when we moved to Lincolnshire, and I entered yet another education system and returned to primary school. This was 11 plus land, not that I knew what that meant, and I took the exams without knowing what they were for – after all, every Friday, we had a spelling and numerical test, which was easy enough – it seemed Bedfordshire was ahead in terms of education.

And so I commenced my grammar school education – except it wasn't, for Stamford had no grammar schools, and the option was an Independent girl's school of the Victorian era. So I entered the oddest world where wealthy girls paid to be there, girls from armed forces families boarded – some weekly, some full time and then there was us, the Assisted Places Scheme girls, from the local housing estates. It was a them and us: they made ball gowns, held dinner parties and went skiing several times a year. The only thing I had in common with them was the home counties accent. I can't recall the idea that we were bright having passed the 11 plus; in fact it was a daily reminder of what money could buy without taking an exam that I remember. I do recall one of the girls being shocked that I didn't own a 'horsey' and I still don't.

I would like to say that I thoroughly enjoyed myself but that would be a lie. I left at 16, and after a few life bumps, I did a U-turn on English Literature and Psychology and instead headed to University to read Law, which I never used. I vowed never to send my children to grammar school, but of course, that did not make sense as I hadn't actually attended one.

So fast forward quite a few years, and I am in Northern Ireland with three sons. The first one joins the local grammar school at GCSEs after a rather unsuccessful attempt at the high school. At the Grammar, he remained until he completed his A levels, seeing a fair few of those transfer children having to leave after GCSEs for failing to get the required grades. He then left for America, where he had to do an extra year as they didn't rate A-levels.

The second son attended a Grammar school that does not use the transfer test. He completed his GCSEs during COVID-19 and is now training on the job as a security engineer.

The third son followed his middle brother and lasted six weeks. He then remained at home, educating himself and taking a GCSE at 14 to prove he had learnt something. He then declared that he wanted to go back into the education system and attend the local grammar school. He, like his brothers before, entered the system without the need for the transfer test. He came home the other day and said that there were rumours that one of the boy's parents had contributed money to get him into the school, just as he was handing me a form about a skiing trip he had decided that he was going on. How different things are for him.

So that is my story of success in my three sons not taking the transfer test but my failure in all three attending grammar schools.



Jim Curran

How the Education System Failed the Working Class

“The function of schooling is to preserve the class and select the elite”(Eliot 1965). Only one of my four grandparents could read or write, my maternal grandmother and I presume that she must have gone to school, though I can’t be sure. Neither grandparents on my paternal side could read or write, and as far as I am aware, never went to any type of school. During the Second World War, they had three sons in the armed forces; my father and a younger brother, Brendan, were in the RAF, and another brother, Willie, was in the Royal Navy. I remember my father saying that during the war if you had a son in the services, the family dreaded seeing the telegram boy because it could only mean bad news. My uncle Brendan was a rear gunner, and his plane was shot down on a bombing mission (to sink the Tirpitz) over Norway in 1942. My granny and granda lived out in the country, and one morning, the telegram boy arrived with the dreaded news that their son Brendan was missing in action, presumed dead. They couldn’t read the telegram, and one of their daughters, Mary, had to read it to them. Fortunately, that wasn’t the case; he was in a German prisoner-of-war camp and arrived home at the end of the war in 1945.

I used to think that the fact that my grandparents couldn’t read or write was unusual and that they were the exception but not so. Andy Green, in his survey of the rise of education systems in England, France, and the US, singles out England as the most blatant example of the use of schooling by a dominant class to secure control over subordinate groups. When the English state schooling system was set up in the late 19th century, the intention of the dominant classes was still to police and control the working classes rather than to educate them. Robert Lowe, writing in 1867, represented the views of the vast majority of the middle and upper classes when he argued: “If the lower classes must be educated ... they must be educated that they may appreciate and defer to a higher civilisation when they meet it.”

In his fascinating book *Outliers* author Malcolm Gladwell introduces us to Christopher Langan. Chris Langan had an IQ of 195; Einstein had an IQ of 150, and he was once described as the smartest man in America. Chris Langan spent most of his adult life working as a nightclub bouncer. Chris was one of four brothers, each with a different father; Chris was the eldest. The family were very poor.

After High School graduation Chris went to university at Reed College in Oregon. He lost his scholarship because his mother failed to fill out some forms, and he had to leave without taking any exams. As he points out, the university administration was less than helpful and seemed unconcerned by his situation. After two years working in construction, he was able to enroll at Montana State University to study mathematics and philosophy. He was living about 13 miles outside the town, and when his car broke down and he had no money to fix it, he needed to make a request to have some minor changes made to his timetable. A neighbour told him that he would be able to leave him in any morning for 11 am but Chris had two early morning classes. He went in to speak to his adviser of studies about changes to his timetable, but the adviser, after checking his record at Reed College and finding a list of F's for failed, even though he never sat any exams, decided that he was a bit of a waster. According to Christopher, the adviser said: "Well, son, after looking at your transcript at Reed College, I can see you have yet to learn that everybody has to make sacrifices to get an education. Request denied". So I went to the Dean; "same treatment."

In some important respects, the young Robert Oppenheimer was a lot like the young Chris Langan. They were both highly gifted, and both had very high IQs, but there the similarities end. As a young child, Robert Oppenheimer was raised in one of the wealthiest neighbourhoods in Manhattan, the son of an artist and successful garment manufacturer. The family travelled in a chauffeur-driven car, and his summers were spent in Europe with his grandfather. At the age of twelve, he was invited to give a talk to geologists at the New York Mineralogical Club. Robert went to Harvard and then to Cambridge to pursue a doctorate in physics. While at Cambridge, he had a disagreement with his tutor, Patrick Blackett, who would go on to win a Nobel prize in 1948, over what area of physics he should be studying.

Robert grew more and more depressed. One day he took some chemicals from the laboratory and tried to poison his tutor. His tutor became suspicious, and the university authorities called in the police. After much negotiation, it was agreed that Robert would be put on probation and have regular sessions with a prominent Harley Street psychiatrist. Robert Oppenheimer went on to head the Manhattan Project, the American effort to develop the nuclear bomb during World War II.

One student tries to get his timetable changed and ends up having his scholarship taken away. The other student tries to poison his tutor, is sent to see a psychiatrist, and is allowed to continue with his studies.

Diane Reay, Professor of Education at Cambridge, the oldest of eight children brought up in her own words on a "sink council estate" and who was a free school meals pupil throughout her schooling, recalls her first day at school:

I want you to picture a scene in a small-town primary school on the edge of the coalfields in Derbyshire in the mid-1950s. A little girl of barely five years has been gently pushed through the school gate by a harassed mother with a baby in a pram, a two-year-old plonked on top, and a crying three-year-old clutching the bar at the side of the pram. The mother rushes off. The little girl is already late and it is her first day at school. She cautiously makes her way to the front entrance, and a kindly secretary ushers her into the

reception classroom. Lingered at the door, the little girl immediately notices a number of things. First, Roy Machin and Raymond Wilson, two boys from her council estate, are sitting at a table, laboriously copying the letters on a sheet of paper. Doris and Edith, also from the estate, are sitting opposite them. Her eyes swivel to take in the classroom. At the other table, unknown children are reading. The little girl instantly recognises the very familiar Janet and John reading series. She and her mother have been reading the books since she was three and she had recently started to teach her younger sister to read Book 1. The teacher looks up, smiles, and asks her name, then walks over to the desk to check the register. “Sit over there”, she says, pointing to a seat between Roy and Doris. The little girl hesitates. She wants to read, and anyway, she can write the alphabet on her own. She doesn’t need to copy; the little girl’s father told her two things about school: “Be polite and put your hand up when you ask anything,” and “always speak out if things are unfair”. She puts her hand up. The teacher frowns, a twinge of irritation fleeting across her face. ‘yes’, she enquires. The little girl says very slowly and solemnly, ‘Please, Miss, I can read. Can I sit at one of the other tables?’ The teacher’s frown deepens. ‘You sit where you are told.’ The little girl reluctantly slides into her chair but refuses to pick up a pencil, stung by the unfairness of it all. She wrestles with herself and fidgets until the teacher comes across and, this time, raises her voice. ‘What on earth is the matter with you child?’ The little girl looks up and says, ‘But Miss, I can read’ – and is made to stand in the corner with her face to the wall for her insolence.

The 1944 Education Act, England and Wales (the Butler Act), which became law here via the Northern Ireland Act 1947, provided free education for all children aged five to 15. As in England and Wales, an academic selection test at age 11 determined whether a child could attend a grammar school with an academic focus, or a secondary school with a more vocational focus. The act renewed the promise to tackle working class underachievement, but it turned out to be very much of a false promise. As Halsey, Heath, and Ridge found in their research, which spanned the 1930s to the 1970s and assessed the progress made by grammar schools up to 1972;

School inequalities of opportunity have been remarkably stable over the forty years which our study covers. Throughout, the middle class has had roughly three times the chance of the working class of getting some kind of selective secondary schooling.

Even those working-class children who did get into grammar schools were frequently relegated to the bottom sets on the basis of their “ability”. So little had changed since the Education Act of 1870, where we had elementary schools for the poor, secondary schools for the middle classes and private schools for the upper classes. With the 1944 Education Act, we had secondary schools for the working classes, grammar schools for the middle classes, and private schools for the upper classes.

The 11 plus was introduced by the government of the day (Churchill's wartime government) and was done so in good faith, with the government believing that the research had been done and that it was based on good science. We now know that this was not the case. Sir Cyril Burt, an educational psychologist who at the time was the chief government statistician, was instrumental in the establishment of the test, which was largely based on his research involving identical twins reared apart. Burt believed that intelligence was inherited, that it was fixed, and that it could be measured. It's now widely accepted that Burt's beliefs were not matched by the research evidence.

Soon after Burt died in 1971, academics re-examined his work; results were too neat, researchers failed to replicate his findings, and suspicions multiplied. In 1976, Dr. Oliver Gillie, the medical correspondent of the *Sunday Times* who was also suspicious of Burt's work, began to investigate. He set out to find two of Burt's research assistants: Miss Margaret Howard and Miss Jane Conway. Despite a thorough search, he was unable to locate either and was forced to conclude that they were fictitious names. This fact, in conjunction with other findings, led Gillie to conclude that Burt had falsified his data. The article, which appeared on the front page of the *Times* on 24 October 1976, began with this line: "The most sensational charge of scientific fraud is being levelled against Sir Cyril Burt".

In the 1960s growing evidence of the negative impacts of academic selection at eleven, particularly about lower attainment in secondary schools, led to the introduction of comprehensive post-primary education in England in 1965. However, the abolition of grammar schools was strongly opposed in Northern Ireland, and so selection at eleven continued. As Pivotal pointed out in their literature review about the impacts of academic selection, "the troubles dominated this period of Northern Ireland's history", and the controversy surrounding academic selection was put on hold.

After the Good Friday (Belfast Agreement) in 1998 and the establishment of a new devolved Northern Ireland Assembly the debate surrounding academic selection again came into focus. The first Education Minister, Martin McGuinness (Sinn Féin 1999–2002), commissioned the Review Body on Post-Primary Education whose report became known as the Burns Report (2001). The report recommended that transfer tests should end as soon as possible. There was, however, no agreement among the political parties. There was also a public consultation, the results of which were mixed. By the time the consultation on the Burns Report was published, the Northern Ireland Assembly had gone into a period of suspension. During this time, a further review was commissioned by the direct rule minister called The Post Primary Review Working Group (Costello Report 2004); its aim was to look at how the recommendations of the Burns Report could be taken forward. The Costello Report recommended that the transfer test should be abolished immediately and replaced with a system of parent and pupil-based choice, informed by a pupil profile. Again, however, there was no subsequent agreement between the political parties about the way forward.

Despite the lack of local consensus, the direct rule minister accepted all the recommendations in the Costello Report and said that the last transfer tests would take place in 2008. The UK government introduced the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, which prohibited post-primary schools from using academic criteria to select pupils. On the return of the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly in 2007, the Education Minister, Catriona Ruane (Sinn Féin), said that academic selection should cease, although this was done without the explicit backing of the Executive or Assembly. In November 2008, the final government-run academic selection test took place.

Grammar schools and their supporters moved quickly to set up their own tests through two new consortia (called AQE and Post Primary Transfer Consortium (PPTC), which were largely used by state and Catholic schools respectively). As the tests were not run by the government, they were held on Saturday mornings in participating grammar schools. Depending on which grammar school they wanted to attend, some children did the AQE tests, some did the PPTC tests, and some did both tests.

In 2009–2010 the Department of Education issued guidance ‘to which schools must pay due regard’ saying that post-primary schools should not use academic criteria to select pupils and that primary schools should not spend their time preparing pupils for unregulated tests (Roulston and Milliken, 2021). However, as part of the political talks at St. Andrews to restore the devolved institutions in 2006, the DUP secured a concession in the negotiations that would allow grammar schools to use academic selection if they wished. This meant that grammar schools were not compelled to follow the DE guidance and so they were able to continue to use academic selection via the new unregulated tests (Gallagher, 2021). In 2015, the DE repeated the previous guidance to primary schools about not preparing children for the tests, but this was then reversed by the new Education Minister, Peter Weir (DUP), in 2016.

In 2017, AQE and PPTC held discussions, supported by the DE, about establishing a single transfer test, but negotiations broke down. They restarted later, and it was announced in Autumn 2021 that a single transfer test would be put in place from Autumn 2023.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, transfer tests were not held in the 2020–2021 academic year. Grammar schools used alternative criteria to select pupils, for example, having a sibling at the school, being the oldest child, or attending a feeder primary school. The transfer tests resumed for the next cohort of year 7 children in November 2021.

Parents choose whether their children sit the test, although this choice is made in the context of most grammar schools requiring children to sit one of the tests in order to gain admission. In November 2021, 8,280 children sat the AQE tests and 5,450 sat the PPTC tests, out of a total year 7 cohort of 25,000.

Whilst the transfer tests in Northern Ireland may enable children from less privileged backgrounds to attend selective schools, data shows that students from lower socio-economic status households are very under-represented in grammar schools. Northern Ireland Department of Education data consistently indicates that there are higher concentrations of disadvantaged children in non-selective schools than in grammar schools, using Free School Meals (FSM) as a measure of deprivation, 22% of year 8 pupils entitled to FSM attended a grammar, compared to 78% who attended a non-grammar (DE 2019–2020). Previous research has also highlighted the link between parental income and grammar school attendance (Jerrim & Simms, 2018) “and the odds of those entitled to free school meals securing a place at a grammar school are nearly five times lower than others” (Connolly *et al* 2013).

Advocates for academic selection claim that grammar schools offer significant social mobility opportunities to disadvantaged children that are not available in non-selective schools. The idea that there was a “golden age” when grammar schools enabled social mobility is a myth. The Crowther Report in 1959 showed that just 10% of grammar school pupils came from working-class backgrounds – and two-thirds of them left without getting three ‘O’ levels. The report noted that 81% of working class grammar school students left before age 17. Only 0.3% of working-class children achieved a two ‘A’ level benchmark. Grammar schools in other words, did very little to promote social mobility. What social mobility that did take place was attributable to the post-war expansion of white-collar jobs. The great gift Britain gave the children of the ‘50s, and ‘60s wasn’t some exam but an expansion of managerial and professional jobs that created more room at the top for everyone.

We have the most socially segregated education system in the developed world. The Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development’s 2012 benchmark placed us at 34th out of 34 developed countries. It is the most socially segregated education system in the developed world, bar none. Over fifty years ago, the Coleman Report (Equality of Educational Opportunity 1966) found that the most powerful predictor of academic achievement is the socio-economic status of a child’s family, and the second most important predictor is the socio-economic status of the classmates in their school. In other words, being born poor imposes a disadvantage; but attending a school with large numbers of low income classmates presents a second independent challenge.

The transfer test here acts as a filter for social selection, and what that means is that children from better-off families go to grammar school, and children from less advantaged backgrounds go to secondary schools. High-poverty schools consistently fail to provide students an equal opportunity for an adequate education. All students perform substantially worse in high-poverty schools.

Stefan Collini, professor of English Literature and Intellectual History at the University of Cambridge, when commenting on the latest international education statistics last year, explained that “Countries committed to high-quality comprehensives, such as Finland, yet again came out on top. A stratified and class segregated system is not the answer. It’s the problem.”

The emotional impact of the transfer test has been highlighted for over two decades in numerous academic reports. A report commissioned by the Department of Education and Save the Children (2001) found that the majority of transfer test students were anxious and fearful about the test. A recent small-scale study of the impact of the transfer tests in Northern Ireland found that 60% of 300 surveyed pupils felt that the test was bad for them and did not make them feel more confident or able. (Right To Education 2019).

Linda Hoddle, who failed the 11 plus in 1965, gained a BA (Hons) Degree in Sociology with History: First Class, in 2002. For her degree dissertation, she interviewed 14 men and women who had failed the 11 plus over 30 years ago with the aim of exploring the possible long-term impact on their life chances and self worth.

Lesley: My friend that I had grown up with since we were three, she 'passed' and I 'failed' and she went on to the grammar school, and I went to the secondary modern, and that was the beginning of really feeling something was different. We were like sisters being ripped apart.

Laura: So many of my friends went to the grammar school and I never saw them again. So, it broke up friendships because there was a looking down on – well, I've passed for grammar school, and you haven't.

Warren: I had some friends I used to catch the bus with to Junior school ... and it seemed strange that I'd always assumed that they were the same as me, really. And then it became clear that they weren't, they were cleverer than me.

Jane: I can remember thinking, you take the 11 plus ... and then in September, some of the girls have gone to grammar school and the rest of us didn't; when you meet up with them, you automatically assume that they are better than you. Even after a day or two that they have been chosen and they are above you, and you are below them.

Carol: Whilst it, as an event, in a sense is less immediate and it's gone away ... the waves spreading out from the ripples that it created are still very much there. This is an old wound, and most people tend to leave old wounds alone, they may walk with a limp, but they've got used to it, even though it has all sorts of ramifications in their present lives.

Laura: So passing an exam at eleven, you're being recognised by your parents, teachers, by your peers, and by the school that is going to take you. Somebody has actually recognised you, that okay, whatever the description is, you're brighter or ... but you're worth it and of course the folk that don't pass, that's the message that says, 'Sorry you're not worth us putting any more investment in.' That's what it says. Of course, you don't know that when you're eleven, but that's what it's saying: you're not worth investing in.

Micheal Morpurgo applied to go to his local grammar school when he was a boy but failed the 11 plus test. The award-winning children's author, famous for his book *War Horse* explains what effect this had on the rest of his schooling and subsequent career. Speaking the day after the Education Secretary, Justine Greening, told the House of Commons that more grammar schools would drive up the standards in England's schools, Morpurgo described the shame of public failure (1953) at such a young age and the damaging effect it has on children. Morpurgo told the Press Association:

Failure is the worst thing you can do to a child; it crushes their confidence. I condemned myself because of this failure; you were named and shamed, and you knew you had disappointed everyone. At home, there was silent disapproval and disappointment of the worst kind. This was my first public failure. There were many more to come. My early blithe confidence had been shattered. All schoolwork and all tests became fearful to me. When asked to read aloud or recite a poem, I stuttered. I longed only for playtime and for the bell at the end of school.

We really can't begin to fathom the damage that this very public failure has on children so young, and I'm absolutely convinced that some children never really recover from it. In 2004, World Bank economists Karla Hoff and Priyanka Pandey reported the results of a remarkable experiment. They took 321 high-caste and 321 low-caste 11- to 12-year-old boys from scattered rural villages in India and set them the task of solving mazes. First the boys did the puzzles without being aware of each other's caste. Under this condition, the low-caste boys did just as well with the mazes as the high-caste boys, indeed slightly better. Then the experiment was repeated, but this time each boy was asked to confirm an announcement of his name, village, father's and grandfather's names, and caste. After this public announcement of caste, the boys did more mazes, and this time there was a large caste gap in how well they did – the performance of the lower caste boys dropped significantly.

This is striking evidence that performance and behaviour in an educational task can be profoundly affected by the way we are seen and judged by others. When we expect to be viewed as inferior, our abilities seem to be diminished.

And what's all this pain, suffering, and humiliation for? Those who support the present system will point to the fact that Northern Ireland consistently has the best GCSE 'O' and 'A' level results in the UK but the price we pay in wastage is huge. At 30.5 %, Northern Ireland has by far the largest population share with basic or no qualifications. At the upper end of the spectrum, Northern Ireland has the lowest share of individuals holding post-secondary qualifications, and only the North East of England had a lower share of graduates (McGuinness & Bergin 2019). The National Education Union, in its initial submission to the Independent Review of Education, has highlighted the fact that "Of interest in our socially segregated post-primaries is that our 'high flyers,' the gifted and talented, do poorly by international comparison". As the educationalist Sir Robert Salisbury has rightly pointed out, the view that Northern Ireland has the best education system in Europe is an "enduring myth".

The tests that up to now have been used to decide the life chances of 10 and 11-year-olds have neither validity nor reliability. At the height of the grammar school system in England, it was estimated that some 70,000 children a year were inaccurately placed on the wrong side of the dividing line. Gardner and Cowan (2005) analysed 3,000 tests to find that the tests were technically unreliable and could only be trusted to differentiate pupils in the top 12% and the lowest 18% of performance. Their analysis showed that only 18 marks (out of 150) spanned the 5-grade boundaries that separated the top A band from the lowest D band. The candidate ranking system had the potential to misclassify up to two-thirds of the sample by up to three grades. The tests do not adhere to standardised conventions of other statutory tests in the UK. The tests are not underpinned by published standards of practice or technical fidelity.

Figures from 2021 indicate that around 50% of year 7 children sat either one or both of the transfer tests, AQE or PPTC. This year's P7 who will be sitting the test in November have already had their education hugely disrupted by the effects of Covid and have lost most of their P3 and P4 years with only the minimum of extra support and of course, we know that children from more disadvantaged backgrounds have suffered the greatest loss. These children are also the most likely to not sit the test, and again, they will be the biggest losers.

Evidence shows that the selection process may have a significant impact on curriculum delivery in the final two years of primary school. Teaching in the period before the tests had a narrow focus on test content and test technique (Purdy *et al* 2021). Post-primary teachers reported that the focus on preparing children for transfer tests in years 6 and 7 meant that some children arrived in year 8 ill-prepared for secondary school. Teachers reported having to start again in some areas because of this (Gallagher and Smith, 2000). Many of this year's P7s will be moving on to secondary school, having missed so much of their primary education through a combination of Covid and an emphasis on preparing the others for the test. As Frank Connolly has pointed out in the 2022 Vere Foster lecture "What Would an Island Education System Look Like", this type of educational apartheid that we practice here would "not be acceptable in any modern European democracy."



Matthew Milliken

The Cost of the Current System and the Parental Choice Myth

I'm drawing today on the research evidence presented in a series of papers that have been produced by the school of Education at Ulster University with support from the Integrated Education Fund. Each of these papers deals with a different dimension of the manifestation and impact of division in education here – from Initial Teacher Education to school Governance, from school travel to the teaching unions. I would strongly recommend that you check these out – although they've been written by academics, they are surprisingly readable ... Today, my focus is on Paper 18, *The Cost of Division in Northern Ireland*.

The division is endemic in the education system here – we separate pupils according to their age, their community identity, their gender, their dis/ability, their class and, to some extent, their language.

In mainstream schools, we separate them into classes aligned with their chronological age, and when they reach eleven, we send them to a different type of school (usually in a different location). Unlike many systems in Europe, there is a reluctance to “keep back” those children who may be struggling. In special schools classrooms of mixed ages are much more common. But by placing those with a physical or an intellectual disability into separate institutions, many pupils in mainstream schools have few opportunities to engage with those with a disability – and vice-versa.

We separate many children into single-sex schools – a pattern which is particularly prominent in post-primary education.

The state still supports a small number of fee-paying prep schools – these are portals to a grammar school system which predominantly serves pupils from wealthier families. In 2019–20 the Department of Education recorded that under 14% of those attending grammar schools were entitled to free school meals as compared with 38% of those at non-grammar schools.

But, given the context of inter-community conflict and ongoing tensions, arguably the most notable dimension of educational division is the religious segregation of schools. The Good Friday Agreement acknowledged that the enduring sectarian segregation of schools needed to be addressed in the long-term interests of building a shared and peaceful future in Northern Ireland. Twenty-five years after the Agreement, around 92% of pupils still attend schools that reflect the divided nature of Northern Irish society in the composition of their classrooms, their staffrooms and their boardrooms; a British or Irish ethos is embedded in the subjects that they are taught, the games that they play, the holidays that they celebrate and the perspectives that they are consciously or unconsciously exposed to on religion, culture and historical events.

There are, of course, a number of schools that, although they are not classified as integrated, do attract large numbers of pupils from across the community divide. Dominican College in Portstewart and St Columbanus' College, Bangor, are rare but notable exceptions on the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools side of the fence – they sit alongside a number of non-denominational grammar schools as having more than 30% of pupils who have crossed the community divide. Notwithstanding these exceptions, the vast majority of schools have very few pupils from the “other” community and around one-third of schools do not have any pupils at all from the other community.

This separation of schools along community-religious lines has costs – societal and environmental as well as financial. The inculcation through education of a vast swathe of future generations into the mindset of one side or the other – Catholic/Irish or Protestant/British – has a high social cost. In an era of austerity and high inflation, segregation is a costly luxury.

While one school may be oversubscribed with not enough space to accommodate their current enrolment, their neighbours (from the other community) may be struggling to fill all of their desks. Sectoral loyalty and a drive for community preservation can align with animosity and misunderstanding to create a situation where attending a school of equal quality, but a different tradition is, for many families, effectively unthinkable.

Drive through almost any village in Northern Ireland and you are almost guaranteed to see two schools – often only a few yards apart, often struggling to stay open. Ulster University research has identified at least 32 such instances.

Many parents fear the loss of a school that serves not merely as a place of education but as a focus for community activity. The threat of school closures has led some communities to try to come together to find a common solution, only to discover that the planning authorities appear to be operating in silos and that they are constrained by legislation, policy and convention that hinders the development of innovative, shared local solutions.

Global Warming is an issue that affects the whole planet. School segregation here is a contributor to greenhouse gases. Every bus and every family car that passes a perfectly adequate school to take children to a different school some miles further away adds to the environmental burden. Research conducted by Ulster University into travel to post-primary schools identified additional, unnecessary travel of 130 million miles each year in order for pupils to attend not their nearest post-primary school but another further away because of school choice, academic selection or community segregation. Even with modern and less polluting cars, this is estimated to cost personal car owners in excess of £20million each year and to create more than 9,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide.

The operation of education in Northern Ireland is often bewildering for those outside of the system (and possibly at times for many of those within it). This complexity lies at the heart of the high costs.

Segregation in education may be underpinned by legislation and policy, but it is sustained with public funding. The government effectively bankrolls school divisions by maintaining a range of siloed administrative organisations: The Education Authority looks after the administration of the state-controlled schools, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools manages schools under the auspices of the Catholic church, the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education caters for integrated schools, and Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta represents the interests of Irish medium education. The relatively recent Controlled Schools Support Council is a collective organization that represents controlled schools.

The government also provides money towards the operation of the Catholic Schools Trustee Service, which supports the management of Catholic schools, and the Governing Bodies Association, which looks after the interests of grammar schools.

There are also other costs. The segregated system is also served by two teaching colleges that have historically provided teachers for primary schools on either side of the community divide – Stranmillis and St Marys – both of these colleges fall under the umbrella of Queen’s University. Neither college is particularly large, and both are provided with additional funds in recognition of this.

At the same time, in a vain attempt to patch the cullender, the Government, the European Union and external philanthropists pump large sums of additional money into the educational system to create opportunities for schools from the two traditions to work together.

In short – it’s a fool’s game to try to come up with a definitive figure for the cost of educational segregation. I am that fool!

Drawing on figures from the European Union, the Northern Ireland Executive, Deloitte and other academically reliable and verifiable sources, my colleague Stephen Roulston and I have made an attempt to quantify the financial cost of maintaining educational segregation. Some of the research that we have drawn on provided an upper and a lower limit – for these, we have opted to take a median average figure. Most of the figures were calculated a few years ago (but not so long ago that they were no longer relevant). For these figures, we calculated an inflationary rise.

Thus, we reckoned that segregation in education costs over £220 million a year – or around £1million every school day.

Our figures are an informed estimate a best guess if you like – the actual figure may be different and we have been informed of one error in our calculations (the result of accepting at face-value misleading information provided by the Department of Education to the Northern Ireland Assembly) – but one thing is abundantly clear ... Funding which could be spent directly on educating children and young people is being wasted – and that at a time when those budgets are under extreme pressure. Change is not a cost-neutral option. It will require equipping teachers and pupils to engage with diversity and difference, monies for peace-building efforts will still be needed, and initial teacher education institutions will require reform, as will school structures and the reorganisation of how schools are governed. The current complex system of school administration will need to be dismantled and replaced – a warning, however, that a previous effort (that eventually produced the Education Authority) fell well short of its initial ambitions and wasted several million pounds in the process. The alternative, however – continued division, communal distrust, and all the social and economic impacts that may engender – may be more costly. The question is not, “Can we afford to address this?” Instead, it should be “Can we really afford not to?”



Niall Comer

The Irish Language

Over the past number of years, I have given a number of talks about the subject matter at hand – Irish and Education. These talks and subsequent articles have outlined the historic neglect of the language in our school system and the politically motivated efforts to eradicate the language in schools – as there is a common misconception that the language was “abandoned” by the public and was destined to fail. Before I move to the main subject of today’s talk, I would like to give a brief overview of the fortunes of the language.

The Irish Language in the Northern Counties – An historical context

It is clear from the 1851 census that the number of Irish speakers in the east of the country dropped significantly, with less than 10% of the population speaking Irish in the counties in which would become Northern Ireland. This pattern continued, and by 1911, Irish was spoken by less than 2% of the population in the Six Counties of Ulster, which would be known as Northern Ireland after Partition in 1922. Of the 2% of that census, only four of them were ‘registered’ as monolinguals.

A close analysis of the 1911 census shows that Irish was only spoken as a community language in three areas in the North. In these areas, bilingualism was practised by 30% of the community, namely in the Sperrins, in the Red Bay area in the Glens of Antrim and on Rathlin Island. There is very little information available after 1911 but it is clear that the decline in the speaking of Irish continued even in those areas where there was a relatively high percentage of speakers in the year 1911.

Efforts were made by Conradh na Gaeilge all over Ireland to stop this decline, but by the time the new state was established in 1922, the hostility of Unionists towards the Irish language grew instead of the indifference that existed before. It was clear that the Irish language would not be welcome in this new state.

It can be said, therefore, that there were additional factors related to the pressure on the Irish language in the Six Counties than in the rest of the country. Due to the reasons that provoked this “dynamic of decline”, now there was a government that was completely hostile towards the language. Unlike the 26 counties, the Irish language had no official status in the new state. The language was considered of no importance in terms of education. A memorandum from 1928 reflects the attitude of the Ministry of Education: “... we should carefully avoid any impression that we desire to encourage the teaching of the language”.

1920s and changes in the education system

In the years before Partition, and due to pressure from Conradh na Gaeilge, the government had given Irish a special status, and the teaching of Irish was available as an optional subject in the foundation of Catholic schools. Irish was taught as an examination subject in secondary schools and as a degree subject at Queen's University, and the government supported the language by paying training grants to independent Irish colleges run by Conradh na Gaeilge. In the years before Partition, therefore, the Irish language had some kind of position and status in the education system.

When the new state was established in the north, Unionists understood the importance of the Irish language for the nationalist community. It had a place, as a language, in the education system and academic life, and it was supported at the time by the Catholic Church. It was in this context that the first government of Northern Ireland began to give precedence and statutory power to the political and cultural priorities of Unionism.

On the first day of February 1922, the management of educational services relating to the Six Counties, which would make up Northern Ireland, was transferred from Dublin to Belfast. Two days later, the Minister of Education for the North, Lord Londonderry, announced that special attention should be given to the cultural characteristics of Northern Ireland. Regarding the Irish language, he said that it would be an optional subject in the curriculum as long as there were students who wanted it and there were teachers who would be able to teach it. On top of that, however, he said: "... I would not be prepared to countenance any proposal containing ... any element of compulsion".

On 10 August 1922, the Ministry began to develop other policy decisions relating to the Irish language in the school system in the North, and by April of the following year, some of these decisions had been made, some of which were published in Circular P.21:

- The post of 'Organiser of Irish Instruction' was abolished
- It was only allowed to teach Irish for 90 minutes per week
- Recognition and funding of independent Irish language colleges was removed.

In 1924, however, new rules were implemented regarding the teaching of Irish, and Irish became an optional subject in the upper classes of the primary school system. Of the compulsory subjects, two subjects had to be chosen from the A-list (history, science, nature study or horticulture) before a student would be allowed to choose Irish, but Irish had to be chosen from their list of subjects which included French, Latin, Algebra or Geometry. Between the years 1924 and 1927, therefore, the number of primary schools teaching Irish as an optional subject fell by 50% to 78. Because of this, teachers had no choice but to make Irish available as an additional school subject and with extra tuition fees. In 1926, however, the government blocked the teaching of Irish in the third and fourth standards and within a year, there was a drop of 70% in the number of pupils studying Irish. Therefore, between the years 1923

and 1926, the number of pupils studying Irish as an additional subject dropped from 5,531 to 1,290 and in 1934, the subsidy for Irish as an additional subject was withdrawn. The view of Dehra Chichester, a senior member of the Orange Order, shows that there were two arguments against the teaching of Irish in the curriculum: "... we must strongly object to the minds and brains of our children being burdened with such useless work; and we have still stronger objection to the teaching of that language being paid out of the public purse."

When the Comhaltas Uladh was founded in 1926, correspondence began with the Minister of Education, Lord Charlemount, and a special meeting was organized about the teaching of Irish. Despite the fact that the meeting was given a hearing, a letter from Wilson Hungerford in the *Northern Whig*, was the prevailing view: "Lord Charlemount is a Minister of firmness and backbone and the members of the Gaelic league have found he is neither to be cajoled nor threatened into doing something which would be subversive of the true educational interests of the Province."

The efforts of the Comhaltas Uladh continued, and by the end of the year, the Ministry decided that a new circular would be issued on the matter. If the members of the Comhaltas were of the opinion that it was a matter of hope, there was no justification for the hope since the position of the Ministry on the issue of the circular was clear: "In the drafting we should avoid carefully giving any impression that we desire to encourage the teaching of the language."

An Unsteady Equilibrium in the 1930s

Although the situation did not improve in the 1930s, an uneasy equilibrium was reached in relation to the issue of Irish in the education system. It was clear, however, that there was a widespread view that the Irish language was on its last legs in the North due to mass destruction in the education system in the 1920s because in response to the request of the Comhaltas Uladh for the Irish language to be heard more on the BBC radio, the local regional director, George Marshall, replied: "The number of Gaelic speakers in Northern Ireland is negligible, and, as far as schools are concerned, the proportion of these where the Irish language is taught is quite small and is practically confined to secondary schools."

As the 1930s progressed and in the 1940s as well, the teaching of Irish, and as it transpired, the future of Irish in the education system in the Six Counties, was very limited. It is difficult to find accurate statistics about the number of pupils or even the schools where Irish was taught during these years, but it is clear, especially from the publicity material of the Comhaltas Uladh in magazines such as *An tUltach* and in the awards to the winners in the Irish speaking competitions of Comhaltas Uladh (Sciath Mhic Giolla Bhríde and Sciath an Athar Uí Mhuirí), that the number of those schools was always very limited. It was in the schools that were maintained by the Catholic Church that the Irish language survived the most, and at the secondary school level, it was in the Catholic grammar schools that the teaching of the language particularly survived, without the support of any kind from the government. It should also be remembered that by 1947, there were only two secondary schools in the

North that were not grammar schools. A statement by Prime Minister J.M. Andrews in 1940 shows the attitude that was now embedded in the government's mind: "... you might point out that there are no Gaelic speakers in Northern Ireland, by which I assume is meant Erse or Irish ..."

Despite this, in 1942 there was a request from 106 students to establish an Irish language class at the Strabane School of Technology, a request that was quite uncommon at the time. Of course, the Strabane and Castlederg Education Committee were Unionists, and the application was refused, and the teacher sacked, but it shows, although the evidence is sparse, that there was still a demand for the language in other academic institutions.

It could be said that, for the next 40 years, there was a status quo in Irish and that Irish survived in English schools in the North, both primary and secondary schools, due to the goodwill of principals and teachers and the efforts of Comhaltas Uladh and Gael-Linn.

The main purpose of today's talk, however, is not to go back over well-walked ground. What I intend to do is to present the current scenario and to propose ways in which the Irish language can be developed within our education system to increase the number of daily speakers and, therefore, give them and our society all the benefits of bilingualism – benefits which are clear to all.

What is the Current State of Play with Irish in the Education System in the North?

I will begin on a positive note – the Irish Medium sector. Yesterday, Irish medium education in Ireland celebrated 50 years in official existence at an event in Cavan. This is a huge milestone and one that has been reached through the huge efforts of the Irish language sector and the bravery of parents to choose Irish medium education for their children. Much has been told about the growth of Irish medium education here in the North – from the radical movement on Shaw's Road in the 1970s, which not only planted the seeds of Irish medium education here but inspired a language revival which is the envy of minority language movements throughout the world – to the establishment of an Irish medium secondary sector. At present, there are approximately 7,000 pupils being educated through Irish in the North and this is expected to grow to 10,000 over the next 5–6 years. The impact of the Irish medium sector has been huge, not only regarding the educational attainment of the pupils but also the Irish language communities that have sprung up as a result. The Shaw's Road Gaeltacht is now in its 4th generation (possibly 5th), and it is very possible to spend one's working day in areas in Belfast solely through the medium of Irish due to the large number of speakers in the area. There are cafes, bars and sporting clubs in which Irish is the main spoken language, and the future of the language has been secured through the Irish medium sector in those areas. Similar Irish medium sectors have grown in Derry city and in Newry, and whilst not to the same extent, a community of speakers and, most importantly, a normalisation of the language in society has grown, and the Cultúrlann on Great James' Street in Derry and Gaeláras Mhic Ardghail in Newry are testament to that.

25 years ago, the rural area of Carn Tochair outside Maghera seemed to be in terminal decline. There were no facilities, no houses and certainly no job opportunities. The establishment initially of a Naíscoil and then a Bunscoil has breathed new life into the community, with the wonderful An Carn centre providing post office services, a shop, a café, a concert hall, a recording studio and many other micro-businesses. These Neo-Gaeltacht areas have grown from the seeds planted by Irish medium education.

There are signs of these seeds growing in other areas too. Dungannon and Coalisland have strong Irish medium schools and it is not unusual (in fact, it is becoming the norm) to meet speakers in these areas in every walk of life.

It is clear, therefore, that the Irish Medium Education sector has had a huge part to play in the growth of the Irish language. Children are exposed to the language from an early age, and it becomes part and parcel of their everyday lives – and, by extension, the lives of those they come in contact with in later years.

Can this be improved upon? Of course – the Irish medium sector still lags in terms of resources. Much more could be done to help and incentivise parents to learn Irish who have chosen this path for their children. Depending solely on the voluntary sector for this is not enough – much in the same way as people who work in local government in the south have opportunities to learn Irish enabling them to interact with the Irish-speaking public.

As is, unfortunately, the norm in our society, Irish medium education meets with considerable opposition from certain political viewpoints – politicians who seem to think that denying and hindering its development will strengthen their own identity and cultural aims (and, ultimately, votes) – when the opposite has been proven to be the case on many occasions. One only has to look at the development of the Irish medium sector in East Belfast (and, indeed, the progression of ‘new’ learners to third-level education due to their learning of the language in night classes) to realise that the language is indeed for all and provides opportunities and, if I may say, enlightenment to many aspects of our shared heritage which had previously been suppressed, denied and hidden.

What of Irish in the English Medium Sector?

When we speak about Irish in schools, it is usually within the context of the Secondary Sector – although schemes have been launched recently to integrate Irish into the Primary Sector, but I will come back to that later. There are 160 secondary schools that study the Northern Ireland Curriculum, and Irish is offered in 68 of these schools to various levels. Whilst many of the schools offer Irish to year 10, in a considerable number of cases, students have to choose their ‘language’ before coming into year 8 or have to make a choice between Irish, French, Spanish or German at some point between years 8 and 10. At present, there are approximately 1,600 students each year who choose to study Irish for GCSE – this is a significant drop since the early 2000s when the compulsion to study a language at GCSE was removed – it must be stated for the record that this has had a huge impact on other languages also.

Most of these schools offer Irish to A-Level, but this depends on the numbers who chose the language each year, and in many cases, students either have to opt for another subject or study Irish in Area Learning Partnerships – i.e., they travel to a host school to study the language. On average, 450 students per year study Irish to AS Level and this drops to around 300 at A2, with Irish the second most popular language choice at A-level, behind Spanish.

Whilst these numbers may seem ‘healthy’, they must be put into context. The Irish medium schools, Coláiste Feirste and Gaelcholáiste Dhoire, and the schools which have Irish medium streams – Coláiste Chaitríona in Armagh, St. Joseph’s Convent in Donaghmore and St. Malachy’s Castlewellan, account for roughly 100 of these A level students per year, so the actual picture is much bleaker in terms of students who have chosen to learn the language as a second language.

It is also a popular misconception that Irish is vigorously promoted in ‘Catholic/Nationalist’ schools. For many, it is an inconvenience, and the emphasis on STEM subjects has placed Irish (and indeed many other subjects) in a perilous position.

The bottom line is that within the English medium sector, our students are not choosing to study Irish in huge numbers, and there is a crisis on the horizon. The current GCSE syllabus is not fit for purpose, and many students perceive languages, in particularly Irish, to be too difficult – and they may have a point, as one only has to look at the Core Vocabulary list to realise that those who are currently responsible for monitoring language attainment and achievement at this level within the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment aren’t in touch with the reality of language learning – but that is a conversation for another day.

What can be done to address this? There seems to be no appetite to make languages compulsory again – and whether one agrees with compulsory languages or not, to pursue this path would be a waste of energy at this time. The key is to expose children to the language at a much early stage. This would be beneficial in a number of ways – children will learn a language much quicker the earlier they start and if the learning is integrated with fun and is normalised, they are more likely to continue with the language at Secondary Level. As I mentioned earlier, two new schemes have been launched by Gael-Linn and the GAA, respectively to address this – Scoil Spreagtha and Gaeilge sa Rang – these will both incorporate the teaching of Irish in English medium primary schools and, as was seen in a pilot scheme in Derry, this should have a positive effect on the uptake of the language.

The regional Primary Modern Languages Programme (PMLP) was established in 2007. The central aim was to ‘offer an enjoyable experience of languages for young pupils (Foundation/ Key Stage 1). This focused on Spanish, Irish and Polish and was based on a specialist peripatetic teaching model. 54% of the total number of primary schools in Northern Ireland took part, and the strengths highlighted included enthusiasm in schools, high levels of motivation and good Knowledge Exchange among the children. The PMLP ended in 2015 due to budgetary constraints within the Department of Education, and our current Minister for Education has indicated that there are no plans to re-introduce this. One would almost think that that particular portfolio is scared that this may actually improve the lot for Irish ... but forgive me for being cynical.

It has long been accepted that the Gaeltacht courses in the summer are key to helping pupils ‘fall in love with the language’ (and with each other if my own experience with my daughters in recent years has shown me anything.) Much more needs to be done to make these courses accessible for all – whether this be financial incentives like the ‘Líofa’ scheme or Comhaltas Uladh and Gael-Linn’s long running scholarship scheme, or creating bespoke courses for children who can’t, for various reasons, attend in the normal way.

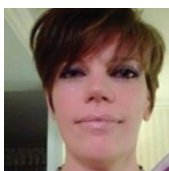
What of Third Level and Adult Education?

Irish is offered and studied in both our Third Level Institutions and continues to be popular, but requires constant work and recruitment. Many students opt for St. Mary’s Teacher Training College, which takes in around 30 students per year, and the various degree courses in QUB between 20 and 25. Ulster University is the largest provider of education in Irish at third level, with around 70–80 entries each year between its diploma, degree and post-graduate courses. The third level provision is adequate, I will admit, but like everything else, it could be improved upon. Irish, in combination with other subjects, is vital for sustaining and developing the Irish language community – and whilst some efforts have been made to introduce courses such as Law with Irish, the real need is for training teachers for specialist subjects who can deliver through Irish. There is also a significant need for Irish speakers in child-care settings, special needs, speech therapy and many other areas which would greatly enhance the Irish language in society.

There is, of course, a very healthy adult education sector, with thousands attending Irish language classes throughout the North. This is an area which is deserving of research and which, if “standardised and supported” well enough, will also add significantly to the whole.

To conclude, I hope I have given a clear overview of Irish within our education system and how it benefits society and have made proposals that would improve this.

If the limits of our language mean the limits of our world, then learning a new language should foster a richer, fuller and more balanced view of life. Learning a new language opens up new perspectives on the world and, in so doing, cultivates an enhanced degree of tolerance and cultural awareness – let education be the path to this.



Cath Lowther

My Story

My personal story of selection, and I believe many people have one, goes like this.

In the late 1950s, my mum returned to England from Canada where she had lived for a few years with her family. The timing of this return coincided with her transition to secondary phase education. As she was out of the country when her peers sat the 11plus exam, she was deemed to have “failed” it, even though she hadn’t sat it. Nevertheless, her opportunity to attend a grammar school disappeared on this basis. I suspect her gender didn’t help in this regard.

My grandma lobbied the education authority and managed to get my mum into a school where she was able to sit her O-Levels and subsequently go on to initially work in the civil service and then train as a physiotherapist. My dad did attend a grammar school, went on to do A-levels, attend university and obtained a doctorate in physics. As a career academic, he eventually became a professor. Although my mum’s story ended well, I wonder if her career trajectory may have been different had she sat the 11 plus and had different opportunities presented to her.

This story seems an outdated one, yet outside the supermarket where we do our weekly shop in South-East England, there are currently signs for tuition for the 11 plus exam. Segregated learning is still in operation around the UK and especially in Northern Ireland, potentially limiting the opportunities of thousands of children. A motion was brought to the recent Annual General Meeting of the Association of Educational Psychologists (AEP) calling for a reaffirmation of the AEP’s opposition to selection in secondary education in both England and Northern Ireland and for the AEP to call on the two governments to rule out any further expansion of grammars in their jurisdictions.

As the AEP promotes inclusion in all its forms, and selection processes are not inclusive ones, I was therefore honoured to represent the AEP at this conference.

On listening to the speakers, I further reflected on a separate issue that affects children’s education in Northern Ireland – that of non-integrated schools. The information presented made me mindful of my own adolescence and early adulthood. I grew up and attended school in Apartheid South Africa. My parents made the conscious, political decision to send me to a private school – which was for girls only but was not racially segregated like government schools were at that time.

I was still at school when Nelson Mandela was released from prison and was in my final year when all schools were to become desegregated. Local school children visited our school to see what it was like to attend a school that was not 'white only' (I lived in a 'white' area, and my black classmates had to travel some distance to attend). For us, this was pretty normal – but we understood the significance of the change for these other young people. Roll on four years, and I was a newly qualified teacher teaching in a fully racially integrated school. It was as if it had always been.

I share this story because speakers raised concern about the potential difficulties bringing integration to Northern Ireland's schools. Although there are still challenges facing South Africa as a country, and the dream of the "Rainbow Nation" is not yet fully realised, the integration of education was a success and a surprisingly smooth and rapid one. I put this down to the adaptability of youth and wonder if Northern Ireland's children may adapt as easily.



Angeline King

A Parent's Experience

Before the Easter holidays, and not long after the winter lockdown of 2021, my daughter came running out of school with news of the transfer test. My son was two years older and had quietly slipped out of the transfer procedure without a fuss; but here was a girl with fire in her belly and a need to be in the thick of it with her friends. If they were doing the transfer test, she was doing it too! She was nine and invincible. She was a child.

The first test came through with a note to complete corrections. It was going to take hours. We were lucky. Some schools were sending two tests home per week. My daughter was lucky — some parents were demanding their children work two hours per week on top of normal homework. Still, those corrections weren't easy. A degree, a master's and half a PhD didn't help. It sometimes took an hour just to get to the point of sitting down. You can understand why most parents opt for tutoring.

We both danced down the street the day she hit 27%. She was soon over the 30 mark — progress attributable to a teacher who was teaching the children the curriculum in class, in addition to marking two tests per child per week in her spare time. The summer holidays came. Very little work was done. I didn't mind. The children had been locked down on and off for two years. A summer running through the town parks independently was no bad thing.

Up and up she went in September, sometimes one point at a time, sometimes five points. She reached a peak of 76% in practice tests by November.

She needed one more month. (She wouldn't be eleven until May).

A percentage score of 70+ would ordinarily mean something — at university, for example, when students are assessed on their ability to meet the scoring rubric set. The same score, however, when measured against the mean average of those sitting the transfer test across the country, has little currency, particularly in a boom year when there are lots of children. The scores of the real tests are not given in percentages. They say to children, "You are xx points below your peers." Or, they build children up by saying, "You are xx points above your peers." Neither situation is helpful in the long run.

Results day is a weird day. People don't know what to do or what to say. I took my daughter out for pizza that evening. I didn't think about the fact that there would be balloons at tables marking exam success. This is not the type of exam, like GCSE or A Level, that allows for normal celebrations. The best you can do is get out of the house, congratulate the children who've done well, be at one with the children who opted out of the tests and think about the poor children on the threshold of the usual grammar school entry point, who have to wait for months to find out their fate. My brother described the day as bitter-sweet. His daughter did well, but he was heartbroken for his niece.

"Failing" was not the sole issue. What hurt us all was seeing the score. (I won't mention it here).

I was given a G in 1986 when the scores went G, M and A. It was a tough enough pill to swallow for a girl who was talented academically, but there was a softness to my G. Maybe it allowed me to believe that I could have been a point or two off an M, that I could have reached an A in better circumstances.

My daughter lay in bed in silence that Saturday morning. The country wasn't at war. No one had died. We had heat and food and all that we needed in this privileged world that we live in. She pretended not to be bothered, but after a few hours, she walked into the living room and threw a hairbrush at the floor. The brush bounced off the carpet and hit the corner of the brand, new TV, leaving a tiny hairline crack. Nothing could have been more metaphorical for marking the far-too-early fissure between childhood and something else. She was now distraught. She had broken the new TV. She brought down her Christmas money and flung it at me in tears, apologising. Then, she asked me why she was so stupid. In the weeks that followed, she stopped reading books, left piano lessons and pushed education away. She grew defiant.

I was encouraged to pursue private psychological testing. I feel guilty about the fact that I was able to do this when there is a backlog of children whose parents can't pay for answers to their questions. What I learned was that the fire in my daughter's belly is all the more remarkable given the disadvantages she has, for none of us could have guessed she had them. We left it at an initial assessment; however, she'll have the same time allocated to her in her exams as friends who couldn't afford a private psychologist.

The teachers at Larne High School must achieve a great deal. Exam results. Extra curricular success. Pastoral care. They must do all this while managing the most marginalised communities in the town. But they also have one big unique task to perform each year; they have to piece back together the confidence of the children who had an almighty gunk, aged ten or eleven.

There is a photograph of my daughter in November 2022, a year after the AQE, clasping prizes at an Irish dancing festival in Newtownards in a church hall surrounded by children of all Irish dancing abilities, all socio-economic backgrounds and all religions — a small and humble world in which children of average ability sit with champion dancers and with beginner dancers and know that they all belong together. I'll never forget that day when my daughter picked up a little bit of who she was before a hairline fracture put a chink in her childhood.



Ann Marrion

A Psychological Perspective

I have worked in education in the greater Belfast area, teaching in secondary schools and as an Educational Psychologist (EP). Our union and professional body is the Association of Education Psychologists (AEP). I have been a Local and Regional Representative for the AEP. In my long career, I have witnessed the detrimental effects of the 11 plus system in our society. However, there remains a widespread belief – a myth – that our education system here is “the best in the British Isles” – mainly due to the excellent exam results obtained by the small percentage of our pupils who attend selective “Good Schools”. We hear these good results every August and think we’re doing OK. As very many researchers and educational experts have pointed out this finding is at the expense of the very high numbers of pupils who leave school with little or no qualifications.

In 2016, the AEP passed a motion rejecting selective education almost unanimously at our AGM in Belfast. We are pleased to have support from our General Secretary, Dr Cath Lowther, at this conference.

Unfortunately, there is sparse research to show the psychological consequences caused by the transfer system. We all have anecdotal evidence about the shame and sense of failure experienced by those who do not “qualify”, and while many go on to have successful lives and careers, there are too many who do not, having been disillusioned and defeated by the process. Too many have disengaged with education and society. Almost half of pupils do not take part in the process and are likely to have disengaged from an early age – often leading to generational disadvantage. About 40% of those who take the test do not qualify for the “Good Schools”. At 30.5%, Northern Ireland has the largest population share with basic or no qualifications. The proportion of young people here who are NEETS, not in Education, Employment or Training, far outstrips that in Britain.

A recent report published by Professor Siobhan O Neill, Mental Health Champion for Northern Ireland (as reported in the *Irish News*, 26 August, 2023), stated that almost half of the 16-year-olds suffer mental ill health. The research from the Young Life and Times and Kids Life and Times Survey 2023 showed that high proportions of pupils were concerned over pressures at school. The well-being of eleven-year olds here has declined to its lowest scoring level since 2016. I am not suggesting that this is all due to our selection system, but I feel it can contribute to these findings.

The current 11 plus system came about largely on the recommendation of an Educational Psychologist, Sir Cyril Burt, in the 1940s. Burt recommended selection on the unsafe assumption that intelligence was a fixed entity and that a measure of IQ could be safely used to select pupils at eleven for different post-primary school systems. Burt's work was subsequently discredited and shown to be fraudulent. Meanwhile, the idea of intelligence as fixed and immutable has been shown to be an unintelligent and erroneous concept that ignores the evidence and simply does not do justice to what human intelligence is. However, the establishment of the grammar system across the United Kingdom in the late 1940s was based on such flawed notions. Research has shown that children continue to develop cognitively as teenagers, and so it makes no sense to categorize them intellectually at eleven.

In England and Wales, selection at eleven to Grammar Schools was soon shown to produce an unfair and unpopular system. Following parental and political pressure, comprehensive schools were introduced in England and Wales in the 1960s. There have been variations over the years, but comprehensives generally remain popular in most areas. Attempts to reintroduce grammar schools failed. Recent Ofsted reports show that the results of children in comprehensive schools are comparable with many grammar schools and also with academies in England (Ofsted Report, as featured in an article in the *Guardian*, 3 August, 2023, by Mabel Banfield-Nwachi). Another study reported in The Guardian's *Educational Review* on the 28 August 2023 suggested that the best pupils do better by avoiding grammar schools, a finding based on a study of half a million pupils in England and their results in GCSEs in 2016.

Northern Ireland kept the unfair and divisive 11 plus system, leading to perceived "Good Schools", and thereby generating the inevitable alternative of the "Less-Good Schools", which many parents and children strive to avoid.

What do parents here think of the transfer process? Parents generally want the best for their children. On this point, I wish to discuss findings from a recent doctoral thesis by local Educational Psychologist, Dr Clare Kidston. She interviewed a local group of "transfer" parents. The parents reported that their children had experienced chronic and debilitating distress throughout their final years of primary school. Unable to identify clear positives from engaging with the transfer system, the parents felt highly conflicted about continuing with the process due to their children's negative experiences. Parents perceived their options regarding transfer as limited at best, more of a burden than a choice. Parents want their children to go to a "Good School" and "good parenting" would require compliance with the transfer system. Many of the parents had paid for private tutors and entered both sets of tests, undermining notions that the process is seen as fair and objective.

These insights into the complexities of parents' perspectives regarding the transfer tests in Northern Ireland challenge political rhetoric conflating their engagement with free choice and demand. These parents really do not have a choice.

The reports of intense psychological and somatic distress during and after the tests suggest that academic selection is not a harmless process. However, the psychological and emotional consequences for individual children are not well known and to the extent that individual parents do not have reason to see the tests as harmful, they have no cause to push for core system change.

Clinical Psychologist Dr Tara Porter has worked in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services CAMHS in England for 25-plus years. She teaches and writes about mental health in schools. She highlighted that children and young people are reporting how stressed and unhappy they are with their schoolwork and the pressure they are experiencing. Data from the Children's Society as part of the Good Childhood Report 2022 consistently shows a low and decreasing level of happiness with school. Dr Porter suggests that in the context of increased competition for academic success, a higher level of unhappiness in children would not be unexpected with the transfer selection process.

Professor Siobhan O'Neill, Mental Health Champion (reported in the *Irish News* 14 June 2022), highlighted the compelling mental health arguments to end academic selection using transfer tests. In a 2018 survey, 92% of teachers described the tests as having a significant mental health impact. The tests discriminate against neurodiverse and disabled children. Teachers speak about the need to rebuild pupils' self-confidence when they arrive in non-grammar schools. The very basis of well-being and the potential for harm is immense. Professor O'Neill noted that in 2010, 83% of children said that they sat the tests "in order to get into a Good School".

It seems that parents, teachers and children are all impacted negatively by the transfer process here. Good parenting would dictate that parents should comply with a system which is highly stressful for all concerned. In a few local areas, transfer does not involve testing (Maghera, Ballycastle, Portadown), and I have heard that the experience is much more benign, but I have not been able to find concrete evidence to support this.

Parent Power may be needed to change the system. If all children transfer to their closest secondary school, the overall standards of education would be raised. The "Less Good Schools" should be funded to the level that all children receive a fair education.

I feel that the Educational Psychology Service and /or the Association of Educational Psychologists could convene a working group to contribute to ongoing debates with a psychological perspective and develop a position statement for the system in Northern Ireland. The mental health and wellbeing of pupils has to be at the forefront of the consideration for all including psychologists. Parents deserve to be informed about the consequences of the limited choices that the current transfer system brings.

All the arguments point to the need for change in the education system in Northern Ireland.

But if we don't have academic selection at eleven, what system could we have? One strategy is to identify an ideal future and then analyze what needs to be done to get there. I would like to outline what I see as an ideal starting point for post primary schools. This is easier than working out how to get there.

Ideally ...

The system of using unofficial academic transfer testing is stopped. This would be a win for families, pupils and teachers; parents will be free from the stress and expense of tutoring; pupils will be freed from the stress and anxiety of testing; schools will be freed from pressure "to deliver good 11 plus results" through the training of some pupils for the test. Furthermore, a wider curriculum can be followed for all pupils, including those who are often labelled or perceived as failures early in their primary school years. My friend taught Primary One for years and was often asked early in Primary One, "Do you think he/she will pass the transfer?" With the selection process gone, siblings and friends would not be separated at eleven; the practice of excluding pupils with lower intellectual ability and many of those with special educational needs would end.

Pupils should transfer to the closest post-primary school. This will be a win for pupils, families, the environment and the economy. Many could walk. There are several small rural towns where up to 20 buses leave each day, going past a local school which could accommodate them. This practice is at vast expense to the budgets, the environment and the time spent travelling.

Secondary schools could have mixed ability classes in a 'Junior High' School model (cf Dickson Plan, Portadown). At Key Stage 3, pupils could move towards local Vocational or Academic courses for Key Stage 4. After this, sixth form and vocational centres will follow to age 18/19. The educational outcomes for all pupils will be raised, and we will have a more educated workforce – a win for society and the economy and a better quality of life for all, especially our current large disaffected cohort.

This simple vision for secondary schools will need agreement from education systems, politicians, parents and churches. With current pressures from budgets and from climate change, it seems that arguments could easily be made to move away from our current position. We at Reclaim the Enlightenment feel that this is a model to deliver a just and equitable system for all children in Northern Ireland.



Stephen Roulston

The Ideal Future

I am a teacher, just retired, having worked in a number of schools across Northern Ireland. In my last 14 or 15 years of teaching, I had the privilege of preparing some of the teachers of the future. And these newly qualified teachers are going off into a fine profession. One where, in my experience, most people care deeply about the children and young people they are teaching and are fully aware of the enormity of what they are entrusted with. We have, by and large, a dedicated, skilled and very professional teaching workforce here.

However, that is not to say that things are as good as they can be, that everything is fine ... because everything is not fine. There are aspects, structural aspects, of our system of education that are not fit for purpose. We have an education system that is riddled with duplication, which is largely a result of community segregation ... and also a system that, as Ann has shown, is divided by social class dressed up as academic selection. Sometimes ... even today ... we separate children by gender. So ... we divide most of our children by gender (sometimes), community affiliation and social class. New Decade New Approach, to which all the parties signed up in 2020, makes a commitment to “support educating children and young people of different backgrounds together in the classroom”, and it calls out our current system of education as “unsustainable”.

Around 92% of children and young people in Northern Ireland are attending schools that are largely segregated along religious/community lines. These schools are essentially mono-religious/mono-cultural/mono-ethnic – but this is highly unlikely to be the experience that these children and young people will face in further education, higher education or in the workplace ... and in the world into which they will emerge after school. The segregation of our education system has multiple costs with duplication and multiplication. Supporting it is a complex configuration of representative bodies, arms-length bodies, support organisations and management authorities ... all paid for out of the public purse. And, every day, school buses carry thousands of children past perfectly good schools teaching an identical curriculum to attend other schools that serve their community or that offer supposedly a more or less academic approach to teaching the same curriculum. They are kept apart. And then, to top it all off, we continue to spend millions of pounds of philanthropic and public money – something we have been doing over many decades – to develop opportunities for divided young people to get together, trying to repair the damage that segregated education has caused in keeping them apart. As an academic might say: how daft is that?

Denominational influence is everywhere in education. All schools here must, by legislation, promote a specifically Christian worldview. Mainstream controlled schools are church-related in that they work within a Christian ethos, and Catholic maintained schools aim to produce a religious commitment to Catholicism. Even Integrated schools, established without church involvement, are required to be essentially Christian in character. Any teacher applying for work in a maintained primary school must have a Certificate in Religious Education, established by the Irish Catholic Bishops.

This denominational influence extends to the structure of the school day – there must be a daily act of Christian worship in every grant-aided school, and Religious Education – a very narrowly Christian-focused ‘Education’ – must be offered on the curriculum. The management of schools, and to some extent the education system itself, has on its managing bodies places reserved for nominees of the main churches. And yet, in the 2021 census nearly a quarter of the population here say that they are not connected to any of the four main churches which wield such influence on our schools and on the futures of our young people. And we can see that proportion growing with every census ...

And we divide our young people early. It has been argued that preschool provision in Northern Ireland offers a rare opportunity for mixed community provision for young children – and sometimes it does. However, recent research at Ulster University has shown that pre-schools are actually even more segregated than primary schools. In fact, 47% of pre-schools are entirely segregated, without one single individual in those settings coming from “the other side”. It is still entirely possible that children can be educated in publicly funded institutions and spend 15 years there without EVER encountering an individual from “the other” community. What sort of preparation is that for entering a diverse society ... one emerging from conflict, one in which we have a vision of people living peacefully together? The system needs to change ...

When the curriculum was reformed in 2007, Local and Global Citizenship was at its heart. The “local” part of Local and Global Citizenship was put there very deliberately. Of course, we do need young people to be global citizens – understanding the challenges of climate change, for instance, and refugees, racism and international conflict ... and some understanding of the political and commercial pressures which operate in the world, and a consideration of how to address these globally, but ... local controversies and societal divisions were also there to be explored, discussed and understood in Local and Global Citizenship, ideally on a cross-community basis in diverse classrooms. The new curriculum – well, new in 2007 – recognised that for this society to succeed, the civic and political literacy of young people had to be nurtured and developed. Unfortunately, Citizenship in the curriculum has been allowed to lose its way. It was the Cinderella of this new curriculum almost from the beginning and is now paid lip service to, at best. Meanwhile, teachers are not effectively prepared to take advantage of learning opportunities which might arise in the classroom, and so, like most of us in Northern Ireland, it’s “whatever you say, say nothing” – Don’t go there! As teachers we often retreat from controversy and from difference, but the result of that is that we miss opportunities to confront it, to shine a light on it, to address it and to help others to understand it.

Let's talk about one form of schooling we have only briefly mentioned – Integrated schools – schools that aim to educate children and young people from a range of backgrounds together, celebrating their differences and welcoming differences. Whatever your view of these schools, the development of integrated education in Northern Ireland is a remarkable story. It was and is unique in the world. Perhaps closest, but nowhere near the same scale, are the hand-in-hand schools in Israel educating Israeli Arabs and Jews together in bilingual, integrated schools – they borrowed enormously from our experience in Northern Ireland, but it is a tiny sector – I think it is seven fairly small schools with a couple of thousand children ... but it provides hope.

For our own integrated sector, remember that the parents in Northern Ireland setting up these structures for their children's education did this without any support from the state at that time. They rented a building, they employed and paid teachers, they had electricity and rates bills to pay ... and all without government help or even the prospect of such. They put the future of their children in the hands of this fledgling movement. Some might say that was foolhardy, others might call it courageous and audacious. Integrated education continues to grow, but slowly.

You hear of some schools in Northern Ireland being called “naturally integrated” or “truly integrated”, especially by politicians having a dig at integrated schools. When you examine these claims, the schools they are talking about generally have some mixing, they may have a proportion of their intake from another community. But they are generally NOT integrated schools. A prominent grammar school in Belfast has been quoted at me several times by a politician as “truly integrated”, and it does have around 20% from the other community, in this case from the Catholic community. However, this particular school, while well known in rugby circles, offers no Gaelic games. It has a resolutely British and largely Protestant ethos. Of course, it is very welcome that some of these schools have a mixed intake, but “Integrated”? No. An integrated school should be one which does not underplay identity, and does not ask some learners to leave their identity at the school gates. It does not expect minority pupils to “keep their heads down”. A proper integrated school should value the identity of every single pupil and celebrate those identities together. Doing that does not threaten anybody's identity, but it does give parity to the identity of others.

And yet, there are some who view integrated schools as competitors to their schools, who see them as getting preferential treatment, and who see Integrated schools as a threat. For them, the integrated brand is damaged, and they oppose integrated schools. For myself, I do not believe they get preferential treatment, but to be honest, I don't care what Northern Ireland schools of the future are called. They might not be termed ‘Integrated’ BUT, we need to educate our children and young people together; the intake of all schools needs to be mixed and needs to truly be welcoming to all communities. As New Decade New Approach said, we should be “educating children and young people of different backgrounds together in the classroom”.

To achieve that, we need root and branch reform of our education system.

We should not educate our teachers separately, as so often happens, preparing them for a segregated system of education. Professor Pasi Sahlberg highlighted the “fragmentation and duplication”, as he put it, of teacher education, and he recommended changes back in 2014 ... NONE were implemented.

We need Citizenship back at the heart of our curriculum – what is education for if not for preparing our young people for a complex and increasingly diverse world?

Initial Teacher Education has to prepare teachers of the future to raise controversial issues, to call out differences, to address those issues head-on, and to ensure that young people develop an understanding of differences, whether that be related to gender, sexual orientation, race, religion or anything else.

We must not divide our children and young people along community grounds from the age of three. Even if it is just to prepare them for a diverse society, we must ensure that schools are really properly inclusive of all in the community, of all backgrounds.

To conclude, in my view, we need to move to all-ability, fully diverse community schools serving all the people in their area. Some parts of the country and of our cities are, of course, highly segregated, and many of these local schools will tend to reflect that. And so, of course, we need other reform to happen also, including housing reform ... BUT ... we cannot wait for that.

It won't be easy. It won't be quick ... but the longer we delay in starting reform of education ... and real reform, not piecemeal changes ... the longer we delay, the longer we are condemning generations of children and young people to insular, unfulfilled lives with a lack of knowledge of and even a fear of the “other”. We will be continuing to replicate a society riven by community division and with the seeds of another conflict ready to germinate.

We owe it to these young people to work for change, to embrace change and, yes, to demand change. Our education system does not need some tinkering around the edges – it needs fundamental reform.

Speaker and Organiser Biographies

Niall Comer



Dr Niall Comer is the Director of the MA in Translation at Ulster University and spent five years as President of Conradh na Gaeilge. During this time, he was heavily involved in raising awareness for Irish language rights and promoting the language as a shared heritage. His main research interests are onomastics and Irish in the education system in Ireland. Niall has been continuously involved in a collaboration with Reclaim the Enlightenment celebrating the 1792 Harp Assembly.

Jim Curran



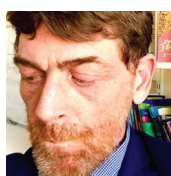
Jim Curran began his teaching career in De La Salle secondary school, Downpatrick, in 1974, spending the next forty years there until retirement. He trained as a history teacher and found that the biggest problem that many students faced was their inability to access the texts because of weak literacy skills. He completed an Open University Degree in Psychology, and an MSc. in Developmental and Educational Psychology. He is a member of the committee of the Reading Reform Foundation and sits on the advisory panel of the International Foundation for Effective Reading Instruction. He has campaigned for the abolition of academic selection for many years and writes regularly on this topic. In 2016, Het delivered the All Together Now Annual Lecture “Targeting Social Need – can high poverty schools help disadvantaged pupils?”

John Gray



John Gray is Chair of Reclaim the Enlightenment. He was the former long-standing Librarian of the Linen Hall Library. He has always supported integrated education and was a former Chair of the Board of Governors of Hazelwood College in North Belfast. He has a long-standing record as a social historian with numerous publications to his name and has had a particular interest in the fortunes of radical causes, many of which he continues to support.

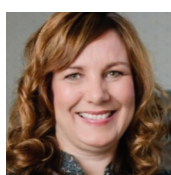
Francis Kane



edited this publication.

Francis Kane is currently an Ulster University academic, and formerly at University College Dublin and Queen's, University. He is a committee member of Reclaim the Enlightenment. He founded the experimental music group 'Otherish'. He made an audiovisual record of this conference available on Reclaim's YouTube channel. He co-

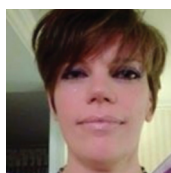
Angeline Kelly King



<https://sluggerotoole.com/2022/03/23/highschools-casualty-of-a-new-northern-ireland/>.

Angeline King recently finished a PhD in creative writing at Ulster University, where she was a writer in residence. Angeline writes novels and poetry. She has been inspired to speak out on the issue of reforming our education system by her own experience but particularly that of her daughter and did so at

Cath Lowther



Dr Cath Lowther is the current General Secretary of the Association of Educational Psychologists (AEP) which is resolute in its opposition to selection at eleven. She also spoke on the basis of her own experience and in particular of the integration of education in South Africa.

John Lyness



John Lyness is an independent researcher and consultant. Previously, he taught mechanics, structural analysis, structural design and hydraulics at Ulster University where he remains Reader Emeritus in Civil Engineering. He was also a researcher on the EU HORIZON programme on manmade and natural hazards. He worked for many years as part of the UK Flood Studies Research Group and on the development of numerical modelling methods for use in engineering analysis and design. His current interests include the use of physical models and prototyping in engineering analysis and design, the use of qualitative methods in engineering teaching and the appropriate uses of technology. He is a committee member of Reclaim the Enlightenment.

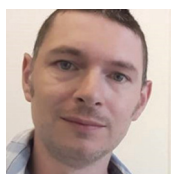
Ann Marrion



Enlightenment committee.

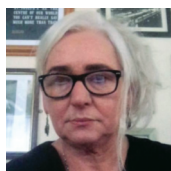
Ann Marrion served as coordinator for this conference. She is a retired Educational psychologist. She was Regional Representative for the Association of Educational Psychologists until 2020. She worked in all school sectors, and taught in non-grammar secondary schools for many years. She is a member of the Reclaim the

Stephen McCracken



Stephen McCracken helped project manage this conference. He is a graduate of Dundee University. He is a public historian who specialises in the 18th century with a number of publications to his name. He is Secretary of Reclaim the Enlightenment.

Terry McKeown



Terry McKeown who gave the opening remarks at one of our sessions is a former governor of Hazelwood Integrated Primary School. She is the treasurer of Reclaim the Enlightenment. She is Project Director of Sailortown Regeneration in the Belfast Docks area and one of the most deprived areas in the city. They have been tirelessly working to bring Belfast's Maritime Urban Village back to life. They have successfully re-opened St Joseph's Church as a community and cultural centre.

Alan Millar



Alan Millar is originally from Donegal and now based in Ballymoney, Co Antrim. He is a journalist with a Masters in Novel Writing. He is a writer and poet in Ulster-Scots and English. He has a particular interest in the literature, culture and historical context of the Ulster Scots poets of east Antrim. He is a winner of the Linen Hall Library Ulster-Scots short story competition. His first collection of poetry was published in 2023. He is a member of the committee of Reclaim the Enlightenment.

Matthew Milliken



Matthew Milliken has extensive experience working with young people in Northern Ireland and has a professional track record of developing innovative, award-winning educational approaches to support the building of relationships between divided communities in Ireland, the Caucasus, Southern Africa, the Basque region, Poland and Germany. His research into the systemic segregation of education in Northern Ireland has attracted wide attention and he is frequently called upon by the media to provide expert advice. Matthew is a founding member of the Coalition for Inclusive Education and has, since 2020, been a primary author of the Transforming Education series of briefing papers produced by Ulster University and the Integrated Education Fund. Matthew was awarded the Ulster University Impact Excellence award in 2019 and his research has been acknowledged as having contributed significantly to the 2022 reform to include teachers under the terms of Fair Employment legislation in Northern Ireland.

Fiona Pegrum



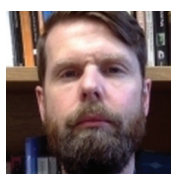
Fiona Pegrum who made the opening remarks at one of our sessions is an historic research consultant and genealogy tutor. She is Chair of Coleraine Historical Society, Treasurer of Roe Valley Historical Society, and co-manager of Limavady Area Ancestry. She has experienced education in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland and has pursued educational routes that suit her children, including homeschooling. She is a member of the committee of Reclaim the Enlightenment.

Stephen Roulston



Dr Stephen Roulston is an Honorary Research Fellow in the UNESCO Centre in the School of Education at Ulster University, and formerly Course Director for PGCE Geography and the MEd with Specialisms. After 20 years teaching, largely Geography and Geology, in a range of schools in Northern Ireland, he was an Educational Consultant in eLearning for a decade, joining Ulster University as a Lecturer in 2009. His research interests include the challenges of education in a divided society emerging from conflict, and he was the project lead for the Transforming Education series of Briefing Papers.

James Ward



James Ward introduced the first session of this conference and acted as co-editor of this publication. He lectures in eighteenth-century literature at Ulster University. His *Memory and Enlightenment* was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2018 and *Enlightenment Legacies*, a special issue of the journal *Estudios Irlandeses*, was published in 2023. His current project, Enlightenment for All, was awarded an AHRC/Ulster University Impact grant, which helped to fund this publication. He is a member of the committee of Reclaim the Enlightenment.

Fergus Whelan



Fergus Whelan is an author and historian living in Dublin. His area of special interest is the Irish Enlightenment and the radical politics of the eighteenth century. His third book *May Tyrants Tremble: The Life of William Drennan* was published to critical acclaim in 2020. He has contributed articles to *History Ireland*, *Look Left*, *The Irish Free Thinker* and *Oscailt*, the magazine of the Dublin Unitarian Church. He was involved with the group which founded the Dublin 7 Educate Together School where his children were educated. He is a member of the committee of Reclaim the Enlightenment.



Reclaim the Enlightenment, a charity founded in 2017, draws inspiration from the enlightenment era when Belfast saw itself at the forefront of human progress.

We are committed to recalling and celebrating that era, and as a trigger to progressive thinking and reform in the present.

Details of Reclaim's other publications, membership, and our forward programme can be found at www.reclaimtheenlightenment.net.

Education for Enlightenment

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