

# LOYALIST AND REPUBLICAN PERSPECTIVES ON EDUCATIONAL UNDERACHIEVEMENT IN NORTHERN IRELAND



Noel Purdy, Peter Finn, Barbara McDade,  
Jonathan Harris, Franka Winter



St Mary's  
University College  
Belfast  
A College of Queen's University



STRANMILLIS UNIVERSITY COLLEGE  
A College of Queen's University Belfast



Centre for  
Research in  
Educational  
Underachievement

# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>3</b>
1.1	ORIGINS OF THE PROJECT AND OVERVIEW.....	3
1.2	COMMUNITY DIVISION .....	4
1.3	LOYALIST AND REPUBLICAN IDENTITIES .....	5
1.4	EDUCATIONAL UNDERACHIEVEMENT .....	7
1.5	EXAMINING THE LINKS BETWEEN EDUCATIONAL UNDERACHIEVEMENT, SOCIAL DISADVANTAGE AND PARAMILITARISM .....	10
1.6	PIERRE BOURDIEU AND CULTURAL CAPITAL – A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK .....	12
<b>2</b>	<b>METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>15</b>
2.1	OBJECTIVES.....	15
2.2	ETHICS.....	15
2.3	RECRUITMENT .....	15
<b>3</b>	<b>PROJECT FINDINGS.....</b>	<b>17</b>
3.1	TO EXPLORE THE INDIVIDUAL PAST EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF LOYALIST AND REPUBLICAN FORMER PRISONERS AND COMMUNITY ACTIVISTS .....	17
3.2	TO EXAMINE THE CURRENT VALUE PLACED ON EDUCATION BY LOYALIST AND REPUBLICAN FORMER PRISONERS AND COMMUNITY ACTIVISTS .....	23
3.3	TO DETERMINE THE MAIN BARRIERS TO EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT IN THEIR OWN COMMUNITIES AS PERCEIVED BY LOYALIST AND REPUBLICAN FORMER PRISONERS AND COMMUNITY ACTIVISTS .....	25
3.4	TO DETERMINE THE MAIN SOLUTIONS TO EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT IN THEIR OWN COMMUNITIES AS PERCEIVED BY LOYALIST AND REPUBLICAN FORMER PRISONERS AND COMMUNITY ACTIVISTS .....	29
3.5	TO CONSIDER THE CURRENT AND POTENTIAL ROLE TO BE PLAYED BY LOYALIST AND REPUBLICAN FORMER PRISONERS AND COMMUNITY ACTIVISTS IN ADDRESSING EDUCATIONAL UNDERACHIEVEMENT IN THEIR COMMUNITIES .....	32
<b>4</b>	<b>DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>36</b>
4.1	CONCLUSION .....	40
<b>5</b>	<b>REFERENCES: .....</b>	<b>41</b>

## **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to thank the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) and the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) for jointly funding this work. We are also grateful to the loyalist community activists and the members of Coiste Na nIarchimí who gave so generously of their time to participate in the focus group interviews.

# **1 Introduction**

## **1.1 Origins of the Project and Overview**

This small-scale pilot project owes its origins to an informal conversation held between its Principal Investigator and the facilitator of a group of loyalist community activists including former prisoners. During the discussion, the facilitator made it clear that the members of his group felt strongly about issues of educational underachievement and would welcome a conversation about the challenges faced by the loyalist community and how those difficulties might best be addressed. An invitation was issued to come and meet the members of the group. During the ensuing meeting, it soon became clear that this group felt strongly that theirs was a story that needed to be told and that this was one of educational disadvantage which, they felt, was not being heard or listened to by government. Consequently, they believed, the educational achievement gap, which they fully acknowledged, between the working-class Protestant community and the respective working-class Catholic community was destined to continue and to widen still further.

Struck by the eagerness of the members of this loyalist group to talk and to seek to redress the imbalance of their community's educational outcomes, a project design was drawn up to explore individuals' educational journeys, and to consider how they felt educational underachievement could best be addressed. Increasingly, however, it became clear that there was a need to include the "other" story too, the story of working-class republicans, including former republican political prisoners, to provide perspective on the loyalist concerns, but also as a story of immense interest in its own right.

And so was born the design of the current project, jointly funded by the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) and the Republic of Ireland's Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), and involving loyalist community activists (including former prisoners) and members of *Coiste Na nIarchimí*, a coordinating body for groups and projects providing services to republican ex-prisoners and their families.

In the following sections, we set out first a brief introduction to the project which includes: an overview of the context of community division in Northern Ireland; a discussion of educational underachievement within working-class communities; an outline of the ongoing work to promote greater educational aspiration and to address the underlying causes of educational disadvantage including the Northern Ireland Executive's programme of 'tackling paramilitarism'; and the theoretical framework for the study grounded in the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Following this introduction, the Methodology sets out the research design, ethical considerations and procedures followed. The ensuing Results chapter presents an analysis of the qualitative findings, highlighting a number of emerging themes. The final chapter offers a critical discussion of the findings and offers tentative conclusions leading to the identification of key challenges and recommendations for further research in this important and under-researched area.

## 1.2 Community Division

The Belfast Agreement, also known as the Good Friday Agreement, of 10th April 1998 offered a new start for Northern Ireland after 30 years of violence (known as the 'Troubles'), during which it is estimated that 3,636 people died (McKittrick et al., 1999) with many thousands more seriously injured or traumatized as a result of the conflict. Today, Northern Ireland is still struggling to emerge from the dark shadows cast by 30 years of violence, leaving few in society untouched. The Commission for Victims and Survivors in Northern Ireland (CSVNI, 2010) estimate that around 500,000 people (out of a population of 1.9 million) consider their lives to have been profoundly impacted by the conflict.

For many children and young people growing up during the Troubles, violence became the norm, shaping their lives in ways that at the time they could not perceive or understand. Potentially the most enduring consequence of the Troubles is the impact on children and young people throughout 30 years of the conflict, allied to its perceived legacy on the lives of children and young people growing up in Northern Ireland today (CSVNI, 2010).

Research by O'Reilly and Stevenson (2003) identified that those who grew up during the conflict tend to present with a higher number of mental health problems in later life. For those who personally experienced violence during the Troubles, there is evidence to suggest that they also faced higher levels of economic deprivation (O'Neill et al., 2015).

For post-ceasefire children and young people their exposure to violence has decreased significantly from previous generations, however the experiences and trauma experienced by their parents and grandparents may still have a significant impact on their lives as a result of transgenerational trauma. Transgenerational trauma can be defined as "poor psychological functioning of children that seems to partially emanate from the consequences of the trauma experienced by parents, resulting in detrimental effects on the interaction of parents and children" (Hanna, Dempster, Dyer, Lyons & Devaney, 2012). Research conducted in Northern Ireland has shown that transgenerational trauma can limit the ability of parents to interact with their children and may increase the chances of the child developing emotional and behavioural problems (O'Neill et al., 2015), which in turn may result in poorer educational outcomes.

The impact of the Troubles has been felt differently throughout society. Fay and Smith (1998) found that men, younger age groups and those living in areas of economic deprivation were at the greatest risk of death. Children and young people not only lost parents or other family members to the violence but between 1969 and 1998, 257 children aged 0-18 lost their lives due to the conflict (McCrory, 2010). The collective hurt and pain experienced by those who lived through the Troubles has had a profound impact on every area of society.

Over twenty years since the signing of the Belfast Agreement, the Troubles continue to cast a shadow over communities in many different respects. The school system, for instance, remains largely denominational with most children attending either Catholic or (predominantly Protestant) Controlled schools and a small minority (almost 25,000 or 7% of the school population) attending integrated schools. The Irish medium sector

has experienced rapid growth over the past twenty years and now has over 7000 pupils or 2% of the school population (DE, 2021). Academic selection at 11 by means of transfer tests, which began as the 11+ following the 1947 Education Act, has been retained in most areas of Northern Ireland.

### **1.3 Loyalist and Republican Identities**

The nature of the current study brings into focus issues around the often complex identities of the two main communities in Northern Ireland, the Protestant/ Unionist/ Loyalist (PUL) community and the Catholic/Nationalist/Republican (CNR) community. In particular, there is a focus on contemporary working-class loyalist and republican identities that requires a brief exposition, though it is acknowledged at the outset that this report on a small-scale study does not offer sufficient scope to fully interrogate the complex and contested identities in question.

The term PUL itself, a “modern concoction” (Burgess and Mulvenna, 2015, p.1), is often used to describe what is mistakenly seen by some outsiders as a common cultural, religious and political bloc which in reality belies sharp divisions between mainstream, educated, comfortable, indifferent, middle-class Unionists, described by some as “the Prod in the garden centre” (Bew, cited in McDonald, 2015, p.30) and working-class, loyalists described as “the least fashionable community in Western Europe” (McDonald, cited by McVeigh, 2015, p.114). Some commentators have referred to the tendency within Ulster Protestants to schism and dislocation (McVeigh, 2015) and have highlighted how the identity is currently in crisis, leading McVeigh to invert the traditional Millwall football slogan of “No one likes us, we don’t care” to a representation of Protestant malaise in “No one cares about us – and we don’t like it” (2015, p.114), suggesting that Ulster Protestants and, in particular, working class loyalists are increasingly misunderstood, disliked and even parodied. This has in turn compounded a sense of “grievance” (O’Doherty, 2015, p.31) among the loyalist community that they have been “cheated” and that republicans are treated more favourably by the media, politicians and even comedians.

Such a perspective is shared by Shirlow (2012) who similarly notes the “lack of constructive exposure provided to transitional Loyalist activity” (p.136) by the media who fail to present a balanced picture of loyalism to include both those seeking to transition and those still linked to illegal activity. There is also a strong sense that mainstream unionist parties have left behind working-class loyalists, who have become disenfranchised through a political process which they initially supported wholeheartedly but from which they feel increasingly excluded. As a result, abandoned loyalists have been left to watch their republican counterparts move centre-stage to the very heart of government. As O’Doherty summarises:

“It may be that loyalists have been outflanked by the peace process. Having endorsed it they find that they have no role within it. All that is required of them is that they are silent. Republicans who, like themselves, killed and bombed to make themselves heard, and thereby indispensable to a process for ending killing and bombing, now have partnership with Unionists in the Northern Ireland Executive.” (O’Doherty, 2015, p.32)

The consequence of the fragmentation of loyalism, over-simplistic negative media portrayal and a sense of political disenfranchisement has led to a sense among working-class loyalists that they are excluded, even from others within their own PUL community. As Shirlow (2012) notes, there is a need to move beyond the common media portrayal of drug-dealing loyalist “thugs” and to open up a mature debate on loyalist identity as a way to move towards addressing and resolving their particular issues:

“...there is compelling evidence that many Loyalists have few places into which they can seamlessly integrate themselves, due to ‘criminal’ convictions and hostility to them...The life course of many [Loyalists] is dissimilar to the perspective generated by sections of the media and the ridiculous depiction of Loyalists as Mafioso living with and benefiting from criminal empires, driving BMWs and financing long holidays in the Caribbean sun.” (Shirlow, 2012, p.182)

Most recently, in the tense political post-Brexit context of recent months, there has been renewed public interest in working-class loyalism amid frustration about the implications of the Northern Ireland Protocol, introduced in January 2021, the terms of which have introduced checks on certain goods moving from Great Britain to Northern Ireland (which has remained within the European Union single market). Particular attention has focused on the articulated response of the Loyalist Communities Council (LCC) which was set up in 2015 by David Campbell, former chairman of the Ulster Unionist Party, and Jonathan Powell, chief of staff to former Prime Minister Tony Blair, to work towards an end to loyalist paramilitarism. The LCC represents the views of the UVF, UDA and Red Hand Commando. LCC meetings with the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) in January 2021 and the leadership of the DUP in February 2021 to express their opposition to the NI Protocol attracted media interest and some political criticism, but more significant was a letter in March 2021 to Prime Minister Boris Johnson in which the LCC withdrew its support for the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement and its institutions “until our rights under the agreement are restored” (BBC, 2021a). The letter further noted that the last time the “unionist family” was so united was in opposition to the Anglo Irish Agreement in 1985 (Irish News, 2021).

Assumptions about the identity of Ulster Catholics or the so-called Catholic/Nationalist/ Republican (CNR) community have also been challenged in recent years, revealing much more heterogeneity than the monolithic bloc that some observers might have assumed. Commentators such as Burgess (2018, p. x) have described the reality of *political* beliefs within the CNR community as a “profusion of radically different visions, interpretations, and aspirations” and “a swathe of attitudes and adherence not comfortably contained within the singular vision of Sinn Féin’s socialist Republic”. In terms of *religious* conviction too, there is considerable variety within the CNR community (as in the PUL community). Overall, however, there has been a decline in religious practice over recent decades (McKearney, 2018) which has led some to describe the more secular notion of ‘cultural Catholicism’ (O’Doherty, 2018). For some, it remains a deeply discontented community, whose confidence in the “six-county state” has been further eroded as a result of the Brexit process championed by British nationalist politicians (McKearney, 2018). Once again, as with the PUL community (see above), the consequences of the UK’s decision to leave the European Union has refocused attention on constitutional matters, borders, identity and north-south as well as east-west relations, leading some to seize the opportunity to call for

a border poll. For instance, in response to a Sunday Times poll which found that 51 per cent of people in Northern Ireland were in favour of a referendum on Irish unity in the next five years, Sinn Fein Deputy First Minister Michelle O'Neill recently called on the Irish government to "step up preparations" in light of "an unstoppable conversation underway on our constitutional future" (BBC, 2021b). In the centenary year of Northern Ireland, it is perhaps hardly surprising that there is little enthusiasm among the CNR community to "mark" let alone "celebrate" 100 years of partition (BBC, 2021c).

## 1.4 Educational Underachievement

Educational Underachievement has been described as "an imperfect descriptor" (Gorard and Smith, 2004), often misunderstood, the cause of much confusion and "a hindrance to good educational research" (Plewis, 1991, p.384). One key distinction outlined by Plewis (1991) is between a sociological approach (examining the relative performance of different groups) and a psychological approach (considering the difference between predicted and actual achievement), but although the term has been widely rejected in other jurisdictions of the UK, it is still very commonly used in Northern Ireland, albeit in many different contexts and with myriad potential meanings.

For some, educational underachievement refers to the identification of underperforming individual pupils, often measured by a discrepancy between cognitive ability test scores and attainment in standardised literacy and numeracy tests, and resulting in educational interventions to provide additional support; for others, educational underachievement refers to underperforming groups of learners such as (in Northern Ireland) the often cited relative underachievement of Protestant working-class boys (as denoted by Free School Meal entitlement), the stimulus for several recent reports (e.g. Purvis et al., 2011) and highlighted in the *New Decade, New Approach* political settlement of January 2020 (Smith and Coveney, 2020); for others still, educational underachievement refers to underperformance at a school level, where (most commonly) post-primary schools are judged according to the percentage of their year 12 pupils who have achieved the benchmark of 5 or more GCSE grades at A\*-C, irrespective of school type, levels of social disadvantage or percentage of children on the SEN register; and finally, educational underachievement can be viewed at a national level where entire countries are compared on their performance in a series of tests such as PISA, PIRLS and TIMSS leading to newspaper headlines and a regular frenzy of educational competition to emulate the perceived educational success stories of high achieving nations such as Finland, Singapore or Estonia in recent years.

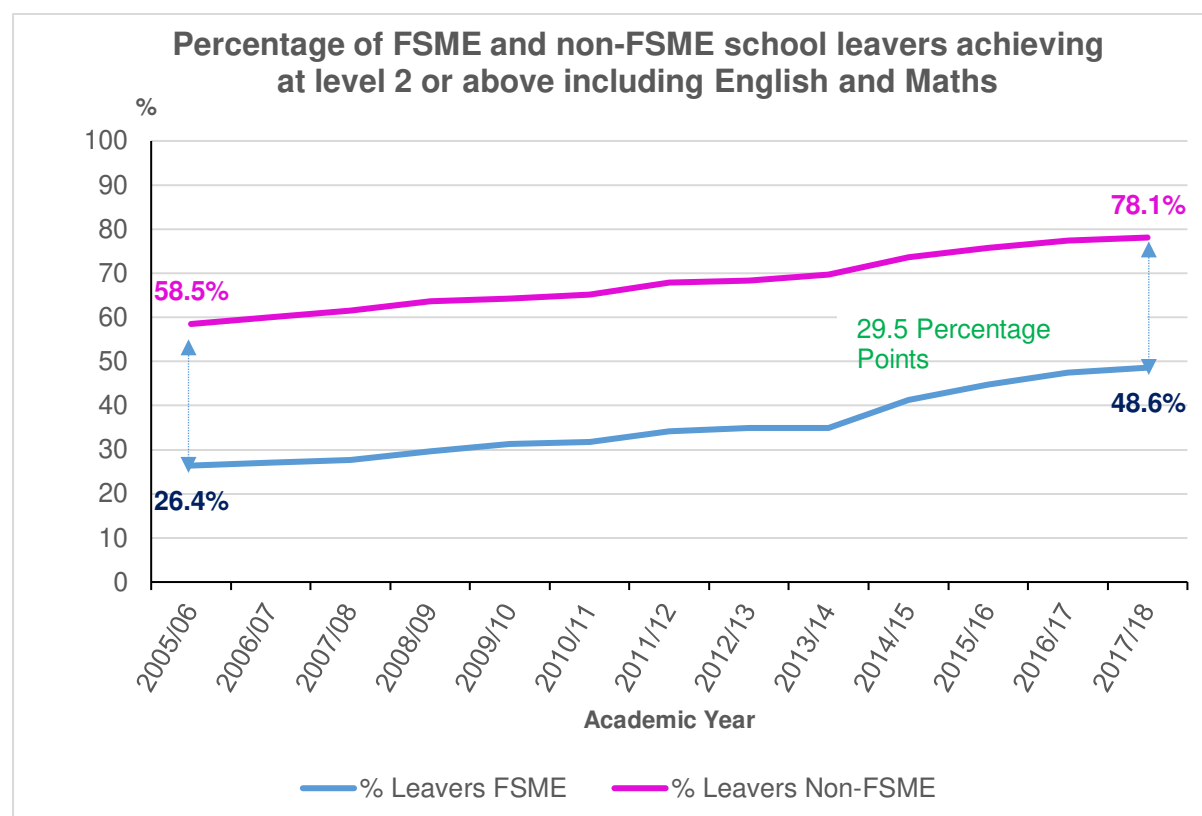
By way of definition and for the purposes of this study, we use the definition employed by the House of Commons Education Committee in their 2014 *Report on Underachievement in Education by White Working Class Children*:

"Underachievement" can be defined as relative to what a pupil could be predicted to achieve based on prior attainment, or could be thought of in terms of a comparison with another group, such as children from more prosperous homes, a different ethnic group, or a different part of the country. (§17)

As such, the focus is on educational inequality which further disadvantages *educationally* those who are already disadvantaged *socially*.



The extent of educational inequality related to community disadvantage, or, the educational attainment ‘gap’ between children entitled to Free School Meals (FSME) and those not entitled to Free School Meals (non-FSME) has remained stubbornly wide over many years in Northern Ireland, despite multiple reports and the combined though largely uncoordinated efforts of schools, the community and voluntary sectors, the Education Authority (formerly the Education and Library Boards) and the Department of Education. Previous reports have highlighted the underachievement of disadvantaged children and young people and in particular Protestant working class boys (e.g. Gallagher and Smith, 2000; Sutherland and Purdy, 2006; Purvis et al., 2011; Harland and McCready, 2012; Equality Commission, 2015; Martin, 2016; Leitch et al., 2017; ETI, 2018; Henderson et al., 2020).



*Figure 1: Percentage of FSME and non-FSME school leavers achieving at level 2 or above including English and Maths*

Further analysis (see Table 1) highlights that generally girls outperform boys, and Catholic pupils outperform Protestant pupils. The highest performing subgroup are Catholic non-FSME girls, of whom 85.3 per cent attain at least 5 GCSEs at A\*-C including English and Maths, while the lowest performing subgroup are Protestant FSME boys, of whom just over a third (37.9%) attain at least 5 GCSEs at A\*-C including English and Maths. What is most notable perhaps from the statistics in Table 1 is that the biggest ‘gaps’ or attainment differences each time are not between boys and girls, or even between Catholics and Protestants, but between FSME and non-FSME children.

2018-19	Female				Male			
	Protestant		Catholic		Protestant		Catholic	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
At least 5 GCSEs A*-C <sup>(2)</sup> inc English and maths (FSM)	445	49	1012	59.4	331	37.9	775	46.7
At least 5 GCSEs A*-C <sup>(2)</sup> inc English and maths (non-FSM)	2494	81.8	3255	85.3	2285	71.7	2936	76.7

*Table 1: Achievement at Level of Male and Female, Protestant and Catholic students in Northern Ireland 2018-19 (Source: DE)*

This is a pattern which is perpetuated into further and higher education as Table 2 illustrates. Non-FSME young people are more than twice as likely to go to university than those with FSME (49%: 22.9%), and non-FSME girls are more than three times more likely than FSME boys to go to university (56.8%: 16.8%).

#### Destination of school leavers by free school meal entitlement and gender 2018/2019<sup>(1)(2)</sup>

	BOYS		GIRLS		TOTAL	
	Numbers	%	Numbers	%	Numbers	%
<b>ENTITLED TO FSM</b>						
Institutions of Higher Education <sup>(3)</sup>	481	16.8	839	28.9	1320	22.9
Institutions of Further Education	1153	40.2	1213	41.8	2366	41.0
Employment	374	13.0	373	12.8	747	12.9
Training <sup>(4)</sup>	668	23.3	287	9.9	955	16.5
Unemployment	109	3.8	114	3.9	223	3.9
Destinations Unknown	86	3.0	79	2.7	165	2.9
<b>TOTAL ENTITLED TO FSM</b>	<b>2871</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>2905</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>5776</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>NOT ENTITLED TO FSM</b>						
Institutions of Higher Education <sup>(3)</sup>	3346	41.5	4401	56.8	7747	49.0
Institutions of Further Education	2593	32.1	2147	27.7	4740	30.0
Employment	841	10.4	645	8.3	1486	9.4
Training <sup>(4)</sup>	1010	12.5	332	4.3	1342	8.5
Unemployment	137	1.7	129	1.7	266	1.7
Destinations Unknown	143	1.8	101	1.3	244	1.5
<b>TOTAL NOT ENTITLED TO FSM</b>	<b>8070</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>7755</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>15825</b>	<b>100.0</b>

*Table 2: Destination of school leavers by FSME and gender 2018-19 (Source: DE)*

The 2018 report of the ETI Chief Inspector (ETI, 2018) highlighted how socio-economic background is related to academic achievement:

“Gaps in attainment between boys and girls and FSME and non-FSME pupils are chronic, and need to be addressed with much greater urgency and effectiveness” (p.24).

The *New Decade, New Approach* (Smith and Coveney, 2020) deal which led to the restoration of the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly following three years of political stalemate included a commitment to re-examine the “persistent” problem:

“The Executive will establish an expert group to examine and propose an action plan to address links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background, including the long-standing issues facing working-class, Protestant boys.” (p.7)

Following this commitment, an expert panel has been established by Minister Peter Weir MLA to examine educational underachievement with a report due to be submitted by end May 2021.

Most recently the *Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030* published by the NI Executive (January 2021) sets out among its 8 key outcomes that "Children and young people learn and achieve", but also that "Children and young people live in safety and stability", "Children and young people live in a society which respects their rights" and "Children and young people live in a society in which equality of opportunity and good relations are promoted". Two examples of key sections are outlined below:

First, under the outcome of "Children and young people learn and achieve" the NI Executive notes that evidence demonstrates that "social disadvantage has the greatest single impact on educational attainment" (p.55) and reaffirms its commitment to closing the attainment gap, especially in pockets of deprivation and working collaboratively across departments and agencies to achieve the outcome in the Child Poverty Strategy that "Children in poverty learn and achieve" (p.55).

Second, under the outcome of "Children and young people live in safety and stability", it is noted that children and young people living under the threat of paramilitary intimidation or recruitment is an "ongoing legacy of the Troubles" (p.66) which was consistently raised by young people during the co-design phase as an area of concern "in certain areas". Furthermore the consequences are outlined as follows:

"Organised crime and paramilitary intimidation will lead to feelings of instability and insecurity, causing the young person distress and leaving them isolated from family, friends and community." (p.66)

Consequently there is a commitment in the Strategy to work together to "prevent vulnerable young people from being drawn into organised crime and paramilitary activities" and to "seek to promote a shared future and shared spaces, and raise the aspirations of young people to avoid criminal activity." (NI Executive, 2021, p.66)

## **1.5 Examining the links between educational underachievement, social disadvantage and paramilitarism**

As outlined in section 1.3 above there is considerable heterogeneity of social background as well as political and religious perspectives within the PUL and CNR communities, and this also applies more specifically to the working-class loyalist and republican communities, often erroneously portrayed by the media and commentators as "monolithic blocs" (Burgess, 2018; Shirlow 2012).

Evidence does however suggest a strong link between levels of social disadvantage and the prevalence of a range of illegal paramilitary activity within both loyalist and republican communities. In the First Report of the Independent Reporting Commission (IRC, 2018) a ward-by-ward mapping exercise highlighted the close linkages between socio-economic deprivation and paramilitary activity. The analysis showed that 9 of the 10 most socially deprived wards also contained at least one paramilitary indicator (e.g. paramilitary assaults, shootings, bombings, murals etc.), while 8 of the 10 contained at least one indicator at a higher frequency:

"We accept that correspondence should not be assumed to demonstrate causation. However, it would appear from this analysis that social deprivation and paramilitary activity are related and that this is particularly strong in relation to Education and Skills and Health and Disability. This

reinforces the need for a truly joined up approach to tackling these issues and achieving societal transformation.” (IRC, 2018, p.25)

While other factors also exist, the IRC claims that “many of the communities where the paramilitaries exert greatest control have long suffered from deprivation and disadvantage, much of which was exacerbated by the Troubles” (IRC, 2020, p.21).

The further link between social deprivation, paramilitary activity and educational underachievement is confirmed in a detailed analysis using a multi-domain deprivation measure by Ferguson and Michaelsen (2015) which confirms a negative relationship between regional deprivation and education achievement, but also highlights the link between the spatial variation of historic levels of violence and educational outcomes:

...children meeting or exceeding the minimum expected Level 4 pass is significantly higher in low-violence than high-violence areas. High violence areas also exhibit certain demographic differences, typically having larger populations and higher levels of deprivation. (Ferguson and Michaelsen, 2015, p.134)

The most recent (third) Report of the Independent Reporting Commission (IRC) goes further and notes that the continued existence of paramilitarism in Northern Ireland represents a “clear and present danger” (IRC, 2020, p.8) for communities, and clearly identifies socio-economic deprivation as its “fuel” and “driver” (p.21). The IRC is clear that there is a need to tackle afresh the “residual, stubbornly difficult” (p.29) issue of ending paramilitarism which continues to have a negative impact on life in Northern Ireland. The most recent PSNI statistics (PSNI, February 2021) would seem to confirm, for instance, that although the number of deaths, shootings and bombings related to the security situation has declined over the past ten years, there has been a steady increase in the number of casualties as a result of paramilitary-style assaults, from 50 in 2010/11 to 67 in 2019/20, suggesting that the influence of paramilitaries in certain communities remains strong.

The IRC reports that the “momentum” following the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement has not been maintained and that there is now an “impasse” (p.17) in terms of the continued level of threat posed by continuing paramilitarism. The Commission’s understanding from the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) is that there remain thousands of signed up members of paramilitary organisations on both sides of the community, even if degrees of involvement and motivations for participation vary and the numbers of those directly involved in illegal activities is more limited. Within paramilitary-influenced communities, attitudes also differ: while some reject paramilitaries, others regard them as “part of us, part of who we are” (p.19) and in some cases they can be viewed as “go to” people, helping to police local areas and protect communities from anti-social behaviour including drugs.

In responding to the challenge of paramilitarism, the IRC has proposed a “Twin Track Approach” in which Track One prioritises policing and justice responses to tackle the criminality dimension of paramilitarism (e.g. the establishment of the Paramilitary Crime Task Force), and Track Two promotes a concerted programme to tackle the underlying socio-economic issues which are prevalent in communities where paramilitaries operate, issues such as educational underachievement, adverse childhood experiences, unemployment, poverty, lack of investment, mental health issues and drugs.

In its First Report the IRC had identified the need to prevent young people from being drawn into paramilitary activity and recommended that the Executive should

commission appropriate initiatives aimed at promoting “lawfulness” in schools and through youth work in communities. In its second report, the IRC acknowledges (2019, p.58) that following piloting of new curricular resources in schools, some interpreted the term ‘lawfulness’ as ‘patronising’. Nonetheless, in its most recent report, the IRC (2020) notes the progress made in a range of educational domains, including case studies of how educational underachievement has been successfully addressed in other areas, including Birmingham’s *Education Delivery and Improvement Plan*, Glasgow’s *Improvement Challenge* and Limerick’s Regeneration Framework Implementation Plan running alongside the Department of Education and Skills’ Developing Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme. The case study analysis confirms that only a multi-faceted approach that delivers interventions at multiple levels can be effective in addressing the underlying barriers to education, and confirming that there is no single solution to a highly complex issue.

The IRC Report (IRC, 2020) outlines the development of additional resources to promote active citizenship and lawfulness among young people developed by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), and also records progress across a range of initiatives carried out through the Education Authority’s Youth Service Capacity Building Programme which have begun to deliver significant results for vulnerable young people at risk from paramilitary groups, often through partnership with the PSNI. Examples include the Education Authority’s (EA) “Steer Teenagers Away from Recurrent Trouble” (START) programme which aims to build relationships with young people who do not engage with youth services and who are often at higher risk of being drawn into paramilitary activity. The programme has engaged 1425 young people to date and has demonstrated success with young people moving into mainstream youth service groups. A further example is the “Supporting Youth Through Engagement Programme” in which the EA and PSNI collaborate to promote values of lawfulness among young people at risk of exclusion.

Looking ahead, the IRC (2020) argue that there is a significant risk that any increase in socio-economic deprivation as a result of the current covid-19 pandemic has the potential to tighten the grip of paramilitary groups still further within communities. As the IRC concludes, “that has to be a major concern” (p.22).

## **1.6 Pierre Bourdieu and cultural capital – a theoretical framework**

The work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu serves as a useful theoretical framework for the current study. Bourdieu notes that the goal of sociological research is to uncover the hidden substructures of the various social worlds that make up the social universe, as well as the mechanisms that guarantee their reproduction or transformation (Bourdieu, 1996, p.1).

Of particular relevance is Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* which refers to “a system of durable, transposable dispositions which functions as the generative basis of structured, objectively unified practices” (Bourdieu, 1979, vii). In broad terms *habitus* therefore refers to the recurring patterns of behaviour – the values, beliefs, speech, dress, manners – that are absorbed through everyday experiences within family, school or social contexts. As Mills (2008) this suggests an “unthinking-ness” in actions as individuals behave in a certain way “without consciously obeying rules explicitly posed as such” (Bourdieu, 1990, p.76). As a result of *habitus*, individuals are thus disposed to behave in certain ways, even if they are not strictly determined to behave in those ways. Such dispositions that form the *habitus* are acquired through a long

process of 'inculcation' and are dependent on the individual's positioning within society. For instance it has been argued that children whose *habitus* is closer to that of the school are more likely to feel part of and succeed within that particular social context (Grenfell and James, 1998).

There is however a debate around just how much agency an individual has within their *habitus*, with some arguing that Bourdieu rejects any transformative, agentic potential within a world in which "things happen to people, rather than a world in which they can intervene in their individual and collective destinies" (Jenkins, 2002, p.91). Such a reading of Bourdieu reduces the individual to an object, powerless in a deterministic social context. Conversely, others adopt a more balanced perspective, arguing instead that while *habitus* determines the boundaries within which individuals can adopt different practices, and thus shapes the parameters of an individual's choices, the individual nonetheless retains the ability to determine their own life choices (Harker and May, 1993; Mills, 2008). Bourdieu's individual is therefore not truly agentic or free to act, as they are set within certain limits, but neither are the individual's choices all predetermined. As such, Bourdieu "sheds light on a theoretical notion of identity that does not foreclose action or agency, yet accepts that such notions can never be seen as unconstrained action... or as individual acts of liberal freedom (Dillabough, 2004, p.498).

By extension Bourdieu notes that the notion of schools being benignly meritocratic is illusory, and instead highlights how it is the culture of the dominant social group which is embodied within the ethos, values, behaviours and expectations of schools. For Bourdieu ability is determined less by individual talent and more by "the greater or lesser affinity between class cultural habits and the demands of the educational system or the criteria which define success within it" (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979, p.22). The practices of school can therefore be viewed as measures through which the dominant social hierarchy is protected and perpetuated. Schools are viewed as vehicles by which middle-class values are valorised, and where there is an expectation that all pupils, irrespective of background, would understand, relate to and embrace such social codes. The reality is of course often quite different, and while some children are born into social worlds closely aligned with the dominant educational context, for others it is entirely foreign, leaving them doubly disadvantaged: disadvantaged by virtue of the socio-economic background of their family and community, and disadvantaged again when the cultural capital they bring with them to the school is delegitimised (Bourdieu, 1974).

Within this framework, particular actions take place as a result of the complex interaction between the *habitus* (where the boundaries for agency are set) and specific social contexts or *fields*. Such fields are not to be considered as fenced areas but rather as "fields of forces" in which worlds interact and collide, and which constitute arenas of struggle. The outcome of such struggles is determined by the relative amounts of cultural capital possessed by different individuals who act according to their possession of capital to exert an influence, seeking to preserve or subvert the existing power dynamic of the social status quo. As Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p. 108-9) note, individual agents "have a propensity to orient themselves actively either toward the preservation of the distribution of capital or toward the subversion of this distribution". However, given the unequal distribution of cultural capital, the rules of engagement self-evidently favour the conservation of existing hierarchies and inevitably perpetuate the disenfranchisement and marginalisation of those who struggle to follow the rules or play the game.

Consequently the school is perceived by Bourdieu not as “*l’école libératrice*” (the school as a liberating force) which might promote social mobility, social transformation and educational aspiration, but instead as “*l’école conservatrice*” (the school as a conservative force) which serves to legitimate social inequalities, hindering social mobility, and reproducing the patterns of educational disaffection and underachievement which have been allowed to perpetuate for generations (Bourdieu, 1966). As Swartz notes, “Bourdieu sees the educational system as the principal institution controlling the allocation of status and privilege in contemporary societies” and schools as “the primary institutional setting for the production, transmission, and accumulation of the various forms of cultural capital” (Swartz, 1997, p.189).

Acceptance of the current inequitable educational and broader social context is however not an option for Bourdieu, for “to penalise the underprivileged and favour the most privileged, the school has only to neglect, in its teaching methods and techniques and its criteria when making academic judgements, to take into account the cultural inequalities between children of different social classes” (Bourdieu, 1966).

Therefore, rather than sanctioning existing inequalities, Bourdieu argues that there is the potential for schools and the education system more broadly to move beyond their traditional, and generally unquestioned ‘reproductive’ function in society, but it would require transformation *firstly* at the level of the classroom where teachers become agents of transformation rather than reproduction (Mills, 2008), supporting children from working-class backgrounds to acquire the cultural capital they lack, while at the same time refusing to denigrate or devalue the cultural practices they have developed from within their own communities. As Delpit (1992) notes, this is about *adding to* their cultural capital rather than *eliminating* the cultural capital that they bring with them to school, and involves providing children with the ‘discourse patterns, interactional styles, and spoken and written language codes that will allow them success in the larger society’ (Delpit, 1997, p.585). Transformation is also required, *secondly*, at the systemic level in order to identify and eliminate systemic barriers to educational aspiration and achievement and to facilitate economic, social and (arguably) political benefits. Where children are currently ‘doubly disadvantaged’ by cultural background and the effects of a reproductive nature of the school as a conservative force, which makes some children “better players than others in certain field games” (Grenfell and James, 1998, p.21), systemic change might involve the radical re-envisioning of educational structures, curricula and policies at the macro level, effectively changing the rules of the game.

## **2 Methodology**

This project was designed as an exploratory pilot and set out to provide initial, tentative answers to the following research questions:

### **2.1 Objectives**

- to explore the individual past educational experiences of loyalist and republican former prisoners and community activists
- to examine the current value placed on education by loyalist and republican former prisoners and community activists
- to determine the main barriers to educational achievement in their own communities as perceived by loyalist and republican former prisoners and community activists
- to consider the current and potential role to be played by loyalist and republican former prisoners and community activists in addressing educational underachievement in their communities

To this purpose, three focus groups and one individual interview were conducted in person in October and November 2020, including two focus groups with community activists and former prisoners from a Loyalist background and one focus group and one individual interview with former prisoners from a Republican background. The Loyalist focus groups initially consisted of two women and four men, although only three men and one woman returned for the second group. The first Republican group consisted of four men and one woman, and an individual interview was carried out with a fifth male participant who was unable to attend the main focus group.

### **2.2 Ethics**

Ethical permission to carry out the study was granted by the Research and Scholarship Committee of Stranmillis University College in March 2020. All participants received detailed information sheets and an outline of the questions in advance of the focus group interviews. Interviews were carried out in person in October and early November 2020, with full adherence to Public Health Authority guidance on social distancing measures applicable at the time. All participants were given the opportunity to ask questions about their involvement in the study in advance of being invited to read and sign voluntary consent forms. All names of individuals and schools have been anonymized and pseudonyms have been used so as not to identify the participants themselves in the quotations cited below.

### **2.3 Recruitment**

All focus groups were co-hosted by the two lead researchers, one each from St Mary's and Stranmillis University College respectively. The two Colleges provided the physical locations for the focus groups. This collaboration reflects the historical association of the two colleges with the unionist and nationalist communities and was key to creating rapport and trust among research participants.

The interviewers adhered loosely to an interview schedule comprising of questions on four major themes:



- Early experiences of education
- The value participants placed on education in the present
- Educational barriers in participants' communities
- Potential solutions for overcoming such barriers

The focus groups and interview were recorded, transcribed, and subsequently coded using the qualitative data analysis package MaxQDA. Our methodological approach to coding was informed by a constructivist version of Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006) and its related method of "Open Coding", which understands coding as a fundamentally subjective and interactive act of interpretation. Codes emerge from a "naming" process, whereby the researcher assigns labels to data (words, sentences, or paragraphs) and revises and refines these labels throughout the coding process. While this process is necessarily informed by the researcher's gaze and interest in a particular research question, it is "open" in the sense that codes are not defined in advance but "emerge" from the data. This approach gives research participants considerable influence over the range of themes that can arise from the data.

An initial round of coding was carried out by one researcher using open coding. The resulting preliminary codes, which included a large number of single-use codes, were synthesized by a second researcher to create a smaller, final code book. A small number of additional codes were also added by the second researcher to address gaps in the initial round of coding. The transcripts were then recoded by the initial coder using the new codes.

### **3 Project Findings**

Following coding, the interview data was examined to identify key areas of similarity and difference between the two groups in relation to the research questions. An extra area, the main solutions to educational underachievement as perceived by interviewees but beyond their active participation, is included.

Singular codes and themes where multiple focus group participants adopted the same or similar discourses are therefore highlighted, meaning that the reported findings can be understood to be reflective of the group and not just a given individual, and therefore might be more representative of the community beyond these groups. On the other hand, this also means that the full scope of the focus groups cannot be covered in this section and individual or isolated points, whether valid or not, are occluded.

The interview data is organised below in such a way as to most fully and accurately represent the views of focus group participants in their own words. Each individual has been given a pseudonym followed by (R) for Republican or (L) for Loyalist depending on their focus group, and the names of specific schools or institutions have been removed.

#### **3.1 to explore the individual past educational experiences of loyalist and republican former prisoners and community activists**

Focus group participants were each invited to share about their own educational experiences, both as children attending school and in adult life. Biographical information relating to individual experiences of education took up a significant proportion of the focus groups undertaken. Participants discussed the place of parental education and home environment, as well as working-class community values, key factors in social reproduction and the development of habitus. The majority of focus group participants were attending school at the height of the Troubles in the 1970s, and were greatly affected by it, albeit in different ways. Some shared about their experiences in prison as well as in statutory education. In relating these experiences, focus group participants also discussed how they came to form values and ideologies in relation to education.

A key point of similarity among most of the focus group participants was the experience of living as young children in mixed communities of Catholics and Protestants during the 1960s:

*Robert (L): "I was born in [...] a very vibrant community, mixed during the 50s and 60s when I was a child there.*

*Mary (R): "I can remember I had a lot of Protestant friends, you know, I was only like six, seven at that stage. And I remember they went to the State school and I was wanting to know why did I have to go and get a bus when I was a kid to go to my primary school which was in Glengormley, you know, why did I have to go to a different school than these'uns, you know, things like that was in my head but you know obviously, it wasn't something that was a big feature then."*

*Niall (R): "it was a rural community but a rural community where you very much were aware that you know, it was dominated by a certain sector which it was more unionist"*

*Barry (L): "it was very much like a mixed community at that time, we all got on together"*

By the time the majority of focus group participants were attending post-primary school, this appeared to have changed. Participants from both groups described instances of conflict in interface zones, in which many were active participants:

*Derek (L): "we moved to the Shankill [...] at the interface and the only mixing that I would have done with Catholics then was throwing stones at each other. [...] The Troubles hadn't even started yet, [...] but that was just growing up then, there was certainly no mixing with cross-community back then."*

*Mary (R): "We had green, very, very distinct green uniforms then and I was about, I remember the first year I was about 11 or 12 and getting stoned and spat at going through Mount Vernon."*

*Aidan (R): "Unfortunately for myself, my period of education coincided with the outbreak of the conflict so it was quite difficult to apply yourself academically. I mean, I would rather have been out rioting at night rather than going home and studying for an exam the next day, type of thing."*

All the focus group participants described coming from working class families. They described their parents as having little formal education, typically having left school aged 14 to start work. However, across both the groups the figure of the knowledgeable, self-taught parent, often but not exclusively the father, was evoked. The educational milieu of these parents was the workplace and the workers' movements as opposed to formal schooling:

*Sharon (L): I never, my father was an older father, he never attended school, his own step-father who was a great socialist, Jack McMullan taught him how to read and write at 11 years of age.*

*Barry (L): [Education] was pretty valued [...] I always looked on [my father] as a pretty intelligent man but always thought he had a resentment about where he finished up working in life, textile factories were big where I lived and he was what they called a "tenter".*

*Connor (R): My father and mother wouldn't have had education qualifications but my father was one of those working men who was dead smart, he just didn't have qualifications and he was a manual worker, he was a book man.*

*Niall (R): my mother and my father were very much into debating current affairs and my father had a very broad world view, [people] used to talk about my father being a very intelligent man who never got an education because he could read things and retain them, you know, very quickly.*

*Aidan (R): So in terms of his practical intelligence it was always something that was there. And the value of education was there. So, when I passed the 11+ and went to St. Colm's College [my dad] actually went out and bought me a Parker pen as an achievement.*

*Thomas (R): my father was very politicised and that had a big influence on me in terms of socialism, in terms of anti-sectarianism, secularism, republicanism, nationalism...*

Finally, both groups shared similar shared community limitations to educational aspirations, with many mentioning that few children they grew up with had passed the 11+ or gone to grammar schools or university, or even aspired to do so:

*Robert (L): So, [sports] were the aspirational things I had at the time. I had no notion, I didn't know anyone that passed the 11+. I didn't know anyone that went to university.*

*Derek (L): I'm the same as everyone else that's spoken round here so far, you know, nobody that I knew went to a grammar school – nobody.*

*Thomas (R): When I got the 11+ I'd say I was one of the few people, certainly one of the few people in my school that got the 11+*

For those that had passed the 11+, coming from a working class community or family was reported to have continued to make a difference to post-primary education, either in the interviewees' own choices and aspirations or in their treatment by their teachers.

*Barry (L): I did pretty well, passed my 11+, applied to go to [the local grammar school] but at that time education was very much class orientated. [The local grammar school] at that time was very much the preserve of the business class's children. [...] So people in my class, largely most of them didn't pass their 11+ and weren't able to go to the college but I didn't want to go anyway because I knew my parents couldn't have kept me into the type of thing that went with going to the college like you know, school trips and all that type of thing but there was a couple of other guys who had got a good enough grade to go to the Technical College, so with peer stuff and all at that time [going to the technical college] sounded more appealing to me so I went [there].*

*Aidan (R): our French teacher [at grammar school] went round everybody and asked everybody in the class what their father worked at. It was clear from the answers who was middle class, who was working class and there was a clear difference in treatment of each group, so to speak.*

The conflict, and interviewees' participation in it as young people, disrupted their education in ways that were markedly different between Republicans and Loyalists. Loyalists tended to frame the conflict, and the associated activism of their community, as a distraction from comparatively unimportant schoolwork:

*Laura (L): It wasn't of any importance to get an education then [...] being safe was more important in them particular years for me than attending school. The highlight of my weeks was... the super grass was going on in the 80s and I got off the school bus every day and went to court to listen to the super grass trials. [...] it had a big impact on my learning and my education, it took it away.*

*Robert (L): the best experience I had in secondary school was leading the walkout during the Ulster Workers Council strike when we all just went through the front gates and straight out into the community.*

*Derek (L): you were in school one day and there was a Paisley rally in the town and the next thing the whole school was out, you were down supporting Paisley though you had no idea who he was as a child.*

Loyalist interviewees described a disaffection with statutory education, which was devalued for most by the certainty of subsequent work in industry, without the need for any qualifications:

*Robert (L): So the only importance around school for me at the time was leaving it to get a job because my dad had it drummed into me "you need to get a job and you need to get a trade" and the first opportunity that I got I left school at 15 years of age and went straight onto a building site to take a job while I was waiting on an apprenticeship and then I got an apprenticeship into the shipyard. [...] I think within the PUL community that's...the opportunity during industrialisation, to get jobs in all the big engineering works and so on may have meant within our households our parents in particular had less of an emphasis on education.... I did get into the shipyard by an uncle speaking for me, so he had got me an application form, he had worked in the shipyard from he was 14, he brought me home an application form, he said, "here, fill that out and post it to the training school" and about four months later or whatever in the next intake in the Autumn I started as a trainee in the training centre on the Queen's Road.*

*Laura (L): Well, I came out at 15 or 16 and did the YTP then and everybody learned to do something then. I chose the hospitality and the catering end which I continued to do for 25 years after that but that's all young people did then.*

*Derek (L): I just couldn't be bothered because I didn't need to, you know, back then you always knew somebody who knew somebody who could get you a job, so my sights were set on going to the shipyard. My uncle knew somebody who knew somebody who was going to get me in. The same as William, you got an application form and the next day you got a date and you were told to start in September to training school and away you went. And that was my career for all my life up until about two months ago. You didn't need anything else.*

In contrast, several Republicans, particularly those from Belfast, described being displaced by the conflict and having to move home and school overnight. The full effects of this disruption during statutory education are unclear from the focus group data. However, it appears that for at least one participant such experiences played a key role in motivating such young people to take full advantage of the education they received through anger and frustration at their situation, as part of their politicisation and entry into the conflict:

*Thomas (R): We were put out of Mount Vernon and we moved to Twinbrook.*

*Mary (R): we were put out of the place we were living in then because we were Catholics and we just had to leave. [...] We literally had to put our stuff on a van, an open back van, whatever furniture and move, that was it, there was no discussion, just had to go. [...] But I had to change schools overnight and I never, ever settled in my other school in West Belfast. [...] that sort of was my sort of introduction, you know, why did I have to move school, I loved my school, why are people stoning me going to school, I mean what's this about? And then you started getting an interest in it and everything else and then starting to get, starting to get angry then. Then it was this is unjust, there's inequalities here and then sort of starting to get your education that way. Again, I still always had it in the back of my head, wanted to do well in formal education, I just had that in me but there always seemed to be barriers [like] we used to get arrested for screening every couple of weeks, you know, and you know at a quite young, I think I was 16 for the first time I was arrested [...] so I mean the whole politicisation of you was what you were experiencing, it was experience on the ground.*

For Republican interviewees, the strategic value of education as a means of resistance and identity formation was frequently articulated in the context of their time in prison. For many, education was a way of continuing and consolidating their political struggle – and most notably this involved learning the Irish language and radical political theory.

*Connor (R): We had no books, pen, paper – we had no anything. We used to be able to use little bits of metal on white wall to write, yeah. That's how I learned my Irish. [...] We held classes when the prison staff weren't about. [...] Most of the classes were Irish language, [and] you could have five or six people taking part with you as the tutor teacher at the door, shouting.*

*Interviewer: And why Irish?*

*Connor (R): Well Irish, one it was a hand-me-down from the people who had been previously in jail, traditionally Irish language was the language of prison. The prison staff in the main couldn't understand Irish so the sooner we learned the Irish we could converse with each other and the prison staff wouldn't know what we're talking about. The other thing was it was an identifier, cultural. So, if you're going to learn anything why not learn something related to your culture which ties subsequently into Irish history, to Irish lore. [...] there was only one*

*reason we were doing it and it was to better develop our personnel. [...] economics was big, social sciences was big in the broad terms of broad world politics to understand the running of politics. Capitalism was always under discussion. To a degree, primitive socialism, we practised primitive socialism in the same way that the staff were able to, to get across that the education system was to have people going out with better reasons, therefore better equipped for taking part in the struggle.*

*Aidan (R): we all learned Irish in jail and it become a big part of the...uhm, a big, big, part of the protest when we were on the blanket.*

Loyalists' accounts of education in prison, on the other hand, were not presented as part of any kind of collective movement or strategy, and were far more individual and incidental:

*Barry (L): I spent a considerable amount of time in prison where I took advantage, if you like, if that's the right word of prison to resume my education. I did an Open University Degree in Mathematics, I was quite successful at that there, I got a First Class Honours Degree.*

*Robert (L): I returned to education in my forties so I had the opportunity, like Barry to do something formally while I was in prison and I did some Open University short courses but I only did things that sort of I was interested in rather than for it being a means to an end, if that makes sense?*

Finally, although corporal punishment is likely to have been across all school settings at the time focus group participants were attending school, Loyalist interviewees frequently mentioned it whilst their Republican counterparts did not:

*Robert (L): and my earliest memory is being caned in primary two by a teacher [...] she had two wooden rulers taped together and she used to slap you, not on the hand, on the back of the knuckles and invariably when you went home and told your parents you got another slap because you must have done something wrong.*

*Derek (L): there were classes back then the way we talked about remedial, you know, my experience of that if I had been anywhere near there it would have put me off education for life. Where I saw some of the other ones getting beaten and beaten quite badly by some of the teachers that were brutal but that wasn't my experience.*

In summary, the Loyalists' educational experiences appear to have been characterised by violence within school as well as out in the community, which coupled with a shared assumption of stable employment upon leaving school regardless of qualifications achieved, served to fuel disinterest and disconnection with education and learning. In contrast, Republicans' educational experiences appear to have been characterised by struggle, from being displaced by the conflict to using learning as a means of resistance in prison. In this sense, whilst the politics of the *field* of education may have placed each group at a disadvantage due to a working class lack of cultural capital, the Republican group appeared to have used their learning to subvert this

distribution of capital whilst the Loyalist group's *habitus* appears to have been geared towards its preservation and social reproduction.

### **3.2 to examine the current value placed on education by loyalist and republican former prisoners and community activists**

In a very general sense, both groups placed a high value on education in the contemporary world. Phrases like “we need to value education more”, or “education has a high value” were frequent in the focus group data, however there were only a few coherent elaborations shared by several participants of what that value was. The clearest was in specifically linking education to subsequent skilled employment and economic prosperity.

*Aidan (R): And I found that the real challenge was actually trying to get [disadvantaged young people] to value education in a way that allowed them to obviously have prospects, you know, to go on into some kind of work.*

*Connor (R): Unless you've [economic] prospects why would you engage in a long [education] journey unless you thought there was something at the end of it. I get that with young people. Years ago, when I was a young person, there were prospects.*

*Sharon (L): I think we have to put a value on education because a lot of our young people coming through the education system now are third and fourth generation unemployed.*

Participants in both groups frequently described education as having been reduced to passing exams, and conversely argued that the value of education lies in a range of broader and less measurable outcomes such as well-being and self-esteem, critical thinking and creativity, and broadened horizons beyond the community or Northern Ireland context:

*Sharon (L): the schools worrying terribly about their pass rates, don't just concentrate on those achievers, look at those underachievers...*

*Aidan (R): it just seems to me it's producing cogs to fit into a wider machine and I think that's an ethos that needs to be challenged.*

*Mary (R): education isn't just about getting exams, education is about creating something inside somebody that makes them feel worthwhile and makes them want to contribute to the community as well and a lot of our kids out there don't feel it.*

*Connor (R): the delivery of stuff to me is education. It doesn't have to be a geography of education, it could be life stories, narratives, breaking down stereotypes, breaking down dominant narratives. You can't break down a dominant narrative if you don't have the wherewithal and the skills to examine and stuff.*

*Robert (L): The first thing is it widens [our children's] horizons beyond this place. What I had learnt from my time of being a child and a young*



*adult growing up is that we all had limited imaginations that were conditioned by the context of this place. [...] the world is a shining place and I think that should be encouraged, particularly within education.*

From a Bourdieusian perspective it could be argued that such a discourse reflects a recognition of the conservative role of the education system, which socially reproduces unequal class relations through constant structural reinforcement of cultural disadvantage. Focus group participants therefore appear to advocate more progressive values in education as a way of overcoming these conservative effects. One voice, in the Loyalist group, did provide an interesting qualifier to this argument, however:

*Robert (L): [there's a perception that] school is a place you go to do some exams but you don't necessarily learn. You're educated but the learning is related to a curriculum that for all the reasons we have mentioned around what's passed on from our fathers and forefathers, we don't have any affiliation to whatsoever. [And then] how are we judged: what's the going rate of 5 GCSEs A\* to C in Protestant working-class schools?*

Again, this discourse is critical of the perceived focus in many schools on passing exams rather than on what is perceived to be real learning. However, this time the problem of the social reproduction of the working class is turned on its head. The social reproduction of the working class through education is presented as a positive, something which is undermined by a curriculum that is too far removed from the *habitus* of the Loyalist working class community and therefore unable to win its 'affiliation'.

In some areas, the emphasis of the two groups showed some clear divergence. For example, Republicans articulated an awareness of the nuanced relationship between the value of education for individual livelihoods and the value of education for community benefit:

*Aidan (R): [what my experience of class inequality at school] taught me was that in some instances education was about career and job rather than the community. My Irish teacher at school didn't teach me as much Irish as I learned in prison. I later learned that he didn't pass the language on to his grandchild. For me it's an example of somebody who used the Irish language to further a career to have a job but the value of the language and the way that we, as Republicans, would view the language as part of culture, heritage, identity just wasn't part of that household and it summed up that kind of differentiation with class and the way in which education was used and the way we would see education needing to be used today.*

*Thomas (R): about the view in terms of why people go through education and the view out there is unless it's for money or self-gain, whereas some people it may just be about helping the community.*

Republican interviewees described a focus on providing educational opportunities for subsequent generations:

*Niall (R): when you went to the former prisoner and asked him, you know, do you want to take part in this scheme, this is what's available and all the rest, mostly it was all about, "listen, I don't need it but see if you could get my children something because that's what I want, I want my children to go through the education, I want my children to have this course to be done, get them into training because that's where...". So I think in terms of the broad Republican family in that sense, certainly the republican ex-prisoner family I notice that immediately, the focus was "see the next generation and the generation after that: get them into education..."*

In contrast, Loyalists appeared to place considerably more value on life-long learning:

*Sharon (L): I think we need to create a value and let people know the value of education not only to their children but to them, through lifelong learning. You know, you hear about houses now from the cradle to the grave, that's the way education should be*

*Laura (L): In my late 40s I wanted a bit more of an education, because I've three children and a grandchild and I see a lot more importance now in education. I wanted that for myself so I decided well, if I'm going to preach it to my kids I better try and practise it and try and learn, you know, I left school without even Maths or English so I decided maybe five years ago I'd try and do something about it*

*Robert (L): Bring in business interests, bring in other institutions, see learning as lifelong integrated with the Early Years, school starts at 3 but it shouldn't end at 18, you know, I'm still learning and I'm in my 60s, why can't that be an aspect of the regeneration of our communities?*

In summary, both groups clearly articulated educational outcomes with economic prosperity, and understood it to hold transformational potential for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, there was a shared anxiety that schools, and the curriculum taught in schools, were not progressive enough in their approach and rather constituted something far closer to what Bourdieu called a 'conservative force'. Key to this conservatism, in the eyes of the focus group participants, is the focus on exams, grades and league tables at the expense of creativity and cultural relevance. Interestingly, Loyalist interviewees agreed that lifelong learning should be valued and funded within their community, and emphasised its personal and community importance.

### **3.3 to determine the main barriers to educational achievement in their own communities as perceived by loyalist and republican former prisoners and community activists**

In the most socially and educationally disadvantaged communities, focus group participants highlighted that the cost and perceived cost of education remain the main barrier to progress for families:

*Sharon (L): I have to give the parents their dues, they want the best for their children but they don't have the money to pay for tutors.*

*Barry (L): a class issue would stop some kids going [to grammar school] that would pass the 11+ or whatever, their parents would say, "I can't send them there, I couldn't afford it for a start"*

*Robert (L): I know you know, families that [haven't] even got any money you know, to cook their dinners [...]. And then you're asking you know, would they print off stuff, they haven't a printer, they mightn't have wi-fi, they mightn't have a tablet at home so the socioeconomic factors I think are really important for the policy solution to this.*

*Niall (R): And there were people depending on [bursaries], people were actually depending on it. I mean that was the difference for some people whether or not they went on to do third level education, you know what I mean. [A] couple of hundred pound could be the difference between your child having a future going down this career path or not having a career path whatsoever.*

*Thomas (R): There's no way I'd have went to university if I hadn't got a grant. No way. Absolutely no way.*

As interviewees discussed the rising household costs associated with education, they also described an enduring class divide in education, a divide particularly entrenched within PUL community:

*Derek (L): I don't want to be too cruel but I don't think unionist politicians, they pay a lip service to it but I don't think it's in their interest to have an educated Protestant working-class because it threatens their political position.*

*Barry (L): It's my perception that people who professionalise themselves from the Protestant working classes don't put the same input back into the communities, they tend to pull the ladder up behind them and move on.*

*Robert (L): we still have this class distinction in our education. It's no coincidence that we're the worst achievers in the United Kingdom and the best achievers.*

*Thomas (R): So, there's a problem with the education system, there's a problem with inequalities in the education system. There's a problem with inequalities in society which allows some kids to get on well because their parents can afford grades and can invest money in them, and other kids who don't have that opportunity and it's wrong, you know, and anybody with a social conscience has to say it's wrong and it shouldn't be perpetuated as it is being perpetuated at the moment.*

To a significant extent, these class divides were linked to the system of academic selection by focus group participants. Pupils from working-class communities were

almost universally understood to be further disadvantaged by the system of selection at 11 years old, largely due to access to capital for extra tutoring and a perceived inequality of provision between non-selective and selective post-primary schools:

*Derek (L): Academic selection was a big barrier in working-class areas as well because if you accept academic selection then the middle classes are more equipped to get their children through that hurdle at 11 years of age so it presents a barrier immediately for access to what would be termed "the better schools" [...] So, I do see that academic selection is a big hindrance to the working class because of that very reason, you know, people can't afford tutors and what-not to get them through.*

*Connor (R): I think there's a certain amount to be said, it can be proven that the system probably doesn't work for the ones who don't get to the grammar school.*

*Thomas (R): most of my friends, working class kids like me they weren't going to [grammar school] and then they didn't go to university. And that was a big eye-opener to me about the fact of the difference that existed. The 11+ I think is a scandal.*

*Mary (R): A lot of our kids out there just don't feel it, they feel as if they've on a scrap heap and it's not their fault, it's our fault [laughs], I mean in general that those kids feel they're on a scrap heap. And if you're putting a child through an exam at 11 and they're failing that exam.*

Further to this, both Republican and Loyalists evoked the legacy of an imposed British education system in Ireland and in Northern Ireland specifically, though in different ways, with Republicans (but not Loyalists) explicitly referring to this as a feature of British "colonialism":

*Aidan (R): See for me actually, it's about looking at the whole education and society in terms of anti-colonialism because I mean, we're in a partition state and you know, you look at the history of the state, you look at where education fits in and how education has been used. [...] no child's stupid, you know, so why does a child not want to go to school in the morning? [...] in the north it's understanding where both unionist working class and where nationalist working class fits into the British strategy around colonialism and partition and stuff like that.*

*Interviewer: What positive contribution can you make to addressing the underachievement that we've acknowledged does exist in West Belfast [...]?*

*Connor (R): That's dead easy – get the Brits out of Ireland, I mean.... That was a joke [laughs]. Easy. [...] The Brits, it's their fault. I mean, how can you give an absolute answer to that?*

*Thomas (R): The other thing that we need to think about is what is the purpose of education. And a lot of people have said about it, if you*

*think about the first national schools that were set up in Ireland, I think it was 1833, they were set up for a particular purpose as all education is and that particular purpose was a colonial purpose, it was an imperial purpose.*

*Robert (L): And I think what has been inherited in those families in opposition to what we've inherited within our own is that this increased emphasis on education is because of a lack of job opportunities maybe other ways but also too as another means to rid Ireland of the British. [...] and we are trying to play catch up with our neighbours across interfaces and across the political divide. So, I think in a roundabout way this, how do we address this inheritance that we're all fighting to overcome day and daily? [This] leads to the Protestant psyche in some respects and loyalism in particular [...] the foot on our neck stays there and let's not oppose our masters. So let's not get above our station because we have enough things that by and large gets us by. In comparative terms you could say that's not the case which is why it filters down in a more rebellious form, in a more oppositional form because people are willing to oppose what others aren't.*

In describing education in this way, the Republican focus group participants constructed education as a key political terrain of anti-colonial struggle, which articulates the Republican political agenda to promote greater comparative achievement in education for Catholic pupils. In contrast, while there was some Loyalist frustration too at the British, this was more isolated and not framed using the language of colonialism. Moreover, as we will see later, Loyalist interviewees emphasised instead the dis-articulation of their political agenda and communities from the education system.

Drugs and drug dealing featured as a key barrier to educational achievement in the eyes of Loyalist interviewees. They described instances of drug dealing occurring inside schools, addict parents unable to provide for their children's basic needs, let alone support their learning, and explained how the apparent career success of drug dealers in pupils' environments led them to lose interest in education:

*Barry (L): a young fella with brains to burn is involved in the restorative justice programme in the Shankill area and one of the guys asked him what do you want to do when you're older [...] and he says, aye I don't need to go to school, I've got a job, my uncle's a drug dealer and I'm gonna get a job with him, he's got a jet ski, he's a caravan, he's got this, holidays and all the rest. And that kid could have done probably anything and what he wanted to be was a drug dealer because his uncle was a drug dealer. Now, our communities need help with that.*

*Jane (L): We have a big drug problem again in our community that's hampering their learning, it's fogging their brain, they don't have the capacity to learn because of their intake of drugs.*

*Alan (L): "what do you want to do when you leave school, son?" Very, very bright and very clever wee lad and he says, "oh I'm gonna be a*

*drug dealer, my uncle's a drug dealer and he can get me a start". Now that's terrible, absolutely terrible.*

Loyalists also underlined their perception of a disconnect between schools and PUL communities, fuelled by intergenerational underachievement and low expectations, as a key barrier to educational achievement for young people.

*Derek (L): I don't want to be cruel by saying this to the families but I think it's lack of interest from some of the parents. Perhaps not even lack of interest but being caught out because some of the parents themselves didn't have a very good education [...] Historically and because of the situation in the world [the loyalist working class is] not equipped with the skills to deal with [underachievement]. I know that others touched on it there about, take the example of the family unit, their parents, grandparents were uneducated, so they had difficulties in enhancing the opportunities for their offspring in the home.*

*Sharon (L): I think we're dealing with third and fourth generation unemployed. It doesn't give our kids any aspirations. I think there's a lot of neglect for a lot of those parents, you know, there is poverty.*

*Robert (L): [Underachievement] is inherited, it is intergenerational, it is passed on. I forget the terms, the sins of the father, so to speak. My grandfather was the same as my father, you know...*

### **3.4 to determine the main solutions to educational achievement in their own communities as perceived by loyalist and republican former prisoners and community activists**

Following on from the widely shared observation that academic selection worked to the disadvantage of the working class on both sides of the community, focus group participants frequently expressed the opinion that the education system would better serve disadvantaged communities were it to be abolished:

*Barry (L): I would be all for doing away with academic selection and that type of thing.*

*Robert (L): if you go right back to how we assess children at such a young age at ten when we put them through this, what formerly was the 11+ and now know what, it's not an exam in one day, it's five exams over five weekends and the sooner we get rid of that the better. [...] this all-ability concept I saw working at [post-primary school] when I worked there for a number of years. [Pupils there] have the opportunity in demonstrating their academic achievement by moving streams in an all-ability setting.*

*Thomas (R): The 11+ I think is a scandal, I think we need to get rid of it.*

*Mary (R): And I think that obviously you know, the academic selection, it has to go, it has to go because it's making kids feel failures at that age and I think that that is something that's a key thing to it.*

*Connor (R): once Martin McGuinness made that statement away back in time about doing away with selection. I've never understood how schools were able to not comply with that, you know. And it was a very strong political move by the middle classes, and I include the Catholic Church and all therein. Which is obviously very similar to the other churches who run the other schools. [...] Who says those exams are okay? Why not have a weightlifting competition among children to see who's more suitable to move onto another particular school [...], why not? It's as relevant to me about what a kid's gonna be as an adult as doing the 11+.*

Another key solution to underachievement in the eyes of many of the focus group participants was to open schools for community use, something that they did not see as happening effectively, even in the case of extended schools provision:

*Mary (R): I see schools there that had football pitches, that had sporting activities and they were closed at 3 o'clock when the schools finished and closed all weekend. And areas like West Belfast where kids had nowhere to go, do you know what I mean? And I think that to me, that's where we need to go, we need to create that culture in the formal educational places like schools, colleges and everything else to open up their premises.*

*Robert (L): I mean, even [post-primary school], tens of millions to rebuild it. Put this whole extended schools programme into it, brand new facility. Know what, see if you want to use it here's the going rate, can you pay it? It's £50 an hour, you know. I mean, sat on our doorstep for ten years and we never once used it because we couldn't afford it.*

*Sharon (L): the schools need to value the communities that work hard to maintain static populations and being able to offer after school activities with learning, you know, whatever, they do need to value it.*

Linked to this, interviewees who worked as community workers in their local areas suggested that community education initiatives including tutoring had been successful in the past and should be scaled up, continued, and receive more investment.

*Sharon (L): We knew the parents didn't have the money to pay for tutoring but the first restorative assistance panel we ever set up within the community we asked the two teachers would they do the training and would they work with a group of young people to assist them with their 11+ and that still happens every year, they do it as part of a week long summer scheme, they work two hours every week up until the first transfer test, the grades have gone up.*

*Mary (R): community education programmes are so important for our young people [...] I think you need to have more Easter schools, you need to have more summer schools right across the board and I think that that's the type of thing for me that's going to generate that.*

Similarly, community workers participating in the focus groups highlighted early years provision, both within and outside the home, as a key area for investment:

*Sharon (L): people shouldn't have to fight for nursery school places. We can't start in secondary, we need to start at the beginning. We need to be making sure that we have the spaces for those children.*

*Brendan (R): we need to bring support services in at a very, early age into houses where disadvantage and poverty exist.*

*Mary (R): there's no point in going to a young person when they're 10 or 11, you need to start from they're babies right up.*

Interviewees underlined that work to address educational underachievement could not be undertaken only within the schools, but required working closely with families and providing support to parents:

*Barry (L): work with families to give parents the skill and the assistance in order to assist their children to benefit fully from any education facilities that are available within those communities. And more importantly, probably from our perspective is for the powers that be to allow us to exert whatever influence we have in order to do this.*

*Joan (L): We offer a wrap-around service in [our restorative justice programme] because it's not just the child that you're working with, it's the family. [...] We call it now 'social connectors' locally. And if we have social connectors to place in that community that can assist the parents with any other problems that's coming up it's working for us but they can report back to the school.*

*Connor (R): So to make the Sure Start etc. is a brilliant idea as long as it's not in isolation, it has to be to a degree within the family unit and the support given, you know, how can you support a child if you don't have a background that knows what the support should be.*

*Brendan (R): we were working with families and where we identified issues, we were able to go in and either bring the children out and bring them to homework clubs or bring homework assistance into the house.*

Finally, participants from both groups highlighted the need to address intergenerational cycles of poverty and violence, and emphasised the wide-ranging impacts that ongoing community violence has:

*Robert (L): when conflict and violence is raging, particularly in areas where it's manifesting itself it's very difficult to get people to focus on education. And so, where there's less paramilitarism, where there's less violence, where there's less you know, crime and all of that then a better environment in which people will flourish in terms of education.*

*Brendan (R): if you look at working class areas like West Belfast, how can you talk about education and educational equality when you don't*



*talk about poverty because that's the root cause of educational inequality. [...] you can dress things up, you can do different things but unless you get into the houses where poverty exists then we're not changing anything at the real core of it.*

### **3.5 to consider the current and potential role to be played by loyalist and republican former prisoners and community activists in addressing educational underachievement in their communities**

Members of both groups had been participants in cross-community education and peace-building programmes such as Prison to Peace (Emerson et al., 2014), which had included visits to schools and universities as well as occurring elsewhere. They tended to see these programmes as extremely valuable, but undervalued by many of the schools and other settings that they are meant to serve.

*Connor (R): We do talks, we're available for talks, we normally have a loyalist, former British Military and maybe me or somebody from my background and we do talks and youth groups and stuff like that there [...] it's important people break down stereotypes, I think it's important we break down stereotypes.*

*Niall (R): those schools which actually had brought our people in along with former military, police military or loyalists, the response we've got back from the school children or those at the older level in terms of university has been "great, that's the sort of experience we want to hear" and stuff like that there. [...] West Belfast here in a sense has been using [this resource]. But to spread it further out, these people have got the experiences, they come in and speak directly to young people, directly into universities or wherever else, I think it's the resource people should be using because it's sitting there for them.*

*Robert (L): so when the former political prisoner has say, conducted an educational programme a number of years ago [Prison to Peace], I think out of 50 odd schools [...] only two of them were Protestant schools that bought into it.*

Beyond this collaborative work, the way in which the two groups described their role in addressing underachievement showed a marked difference in levels of empowerment. The Republican group reported far greater acceptability in the eyes of their community, easier access to politicians, and the ability to visit schools without causing much controversy. They explained that they saw their role as activists, standing up and making their voices heard, speaking on behalf of the disadvantaged in their community and influencing policymakers to make a difference:

*Connor (R): I'm an activist, I throw myself right into it and I remain a political activist, I'm out of jail over 20 years so.... People don't miss that. People see that. And loyalism has never proactively engaged in social development and part of social development is expressing views on the need for change and the change in attitudes and a good interest in their communities and we have that.*

*Mary (R): I think as ex-prisoners, I mean obviously we work in the community sector and all different aspects in all different ways but you also need to be influencers in policy making.*

*Brendan (R): we have a very strong connection to politicians. Our politicians are here, [...] most of our politicians are accessible, some of them are a bit funny on it like [laughs] [but] our politicians aren't elite so we have the chance to talk to them, to influence them, to create the agendas.*

*Niall (R): I mean, look at the assembly, the [large] amount of political ex-prisoners who are actually elected...*

The confident and self-assured discourse of Republican interviewees contrasted starkly with the discourse of their Loyalist counterparts, who frequently articulated a position of powerlessness and voicelessness within the key institutions that could make a difference regarding educational underachievement in their communities: schools, churches and government. Firstly, they described [majority Protestant] controlled schools as a 'closed shop' to them as ex-prisoners, including in the case of the Prison to Peace programme mentioned above. In particular, they argued that more 'people like them' should be sitting on school boards of governors in order that the needs of their communities might be recognised and better met:

*Sharon (L): Well, [the schools say] say they're part of the community but there's very few community people sitting on the board of governors, you know what I mean?*

*Robert (L): And we see that played out as you've heard on more than one occasion on the role people in these communities can have in the school. Miniscule, next to none! We only know one person that is on a board of governors that we know as friend or colleague that has our background but works in the same type of work we do.*

*Barry (L): the like of ourselves who, whether we like it or not, some of these head teachers may not like the idea of having an ex-prisoner about the place which is fine. So, what's the barrier in putting ordinary members of the community, and I would balk at that because I'm an ordinary member of the community, into the school doing the same thing as what we're saying we would like to be doing?*

Secondly, churches were described as 'cold houses', the preserve of middle classes who are judgemental of ex-prisoners and unwilling to engage with them.

*Robert (L): Churches are cold houses to us, and I don't just mean because of the perception about us and our role in the conflict but if we go back to this, you know, maybe this class distinction.*

*Derek (L): I think there's an even bigger disconnect with the Protestant people with their churches than there is the Protestant community and education.*

*Barry (L): if the churches were promoting it and saying look, we're open here on Sunday, Monday to Saturday this place is closed, why*

*don't we try and do something about setting something up where we could utilise the space, utilise the people that we have in here about doing something about education but they don't. [...] I think the unionist community, the loyalist community is much more secular, a lot of them don't go to church so they don't exert the same influence in churches in order to make any considerable difference around the education issue and other issues for that matter.*

Finally, they described how, in stark contrast to their Republican counterparts, they were cut off from the levers of power by Unionist politicians who actively seek to distance themselves from Loyalist activists:

*Barry (L): the same problems that exist in the nationalist areas that we have, we're doubly discriminated against, I feel because we haven't got influence at the heart of government in the same way as the nationalist community and Sinn Fein are respected. I mean, I'm diametrically opposed to them politically but I do accept that they work for the betterment of the communities and you have that access*

*Robert (L): When did those people stop being loyalist spokesmen and become unionist politicians? So, the answer is they've allowed loyalism to denote physical unionist activism. That's the simple answer to it. And because of it, as we know historically they've washed their hands of people like us.*

This distance was explained by some focus group participants as being due to a greater class divide within the PUL community:

*Derek (L): I don't want to be too cruel but I don't think unionist politicians, they pay a lip service to it but I don't think it's in their interest to have an educated Protestant working-class because it threatens their political position [...] And the other part of it is I think it's more difficult to get a social mix within the unionist Protestant communities where I see professionals among the nationalist communities seem more willing to contribute to the working classes.*

*Barry (L): it's my perception that people who professionalise themselves from the Protestant working classes don't put the same input back into the communities, they tend to pull the ladder up behind them, move on and forget their roots.*

As a result, there was a strong sense in which the loyalist participants felt that they were increasingly marginalised from the education system, from the churches, and from the mainstream Unionist political parties. Consequently, the loyalist voice is seen to be very much on the fringes of society, struggling to be heard and respected by anyone outside their own working-class loyalist communities:

*Sharon (L): There was a teacher I had said it to at the beginning of fifth year, I would love to do journalism because nobody writes good stories about us... The loyalist community never got good press... And there was a quote at one time that really resonated with me and it was they always labelled us "problem communities" but we weren't. And I remember a journalist coming into the school one time and he said, "and*

*what's the problem with that?" and I said, "because we're not problem communities, we're people with problems due to neglect."*

## 4 Discussion and Conclusion

This unique exploration of loyalist and republican community activists' and former prisoners' perspectives on educational underachievement, though small-scale, has nonetheless proved insightful. It confirms some previously reported similarities and differences between community viewpoints, but also extends and brings new light to the problems facing both communities as well as recommending possible solutions.

Despite obvious differences of political allegiance between the loyalist and republican focus group participants, there emerged some striking convergences of childhood educational experience within the respective working-class communities. In Bourdieusian terms, for each of the participants there was a strong sense in which, as children, their opportunities were severely limited as a result of their *habitus* and associated lack of social capital. Most grew up in families where education was valued, and there were several examples recounted of inspirational parents (especially fathers) whose lack of formal educational qualifications did not limit their practical intelligence or readiness to engage in often political discussion and debate. These were not homes that were devoid of books or reading, nor families that were unsupportive of education, but a clear picture emerges from both sets of interviews of an educational system which was exclusionary and elitist, favouring those from wealthier, middle-class backgrounds who were expected to pass the 11+ and to continue their educational journey to grammar school and to university. Participants recognised that access to grammar schools was a pathway to academic success leading to enhanced job prospects, but most never contemplated such an educational pathway and knew few if any other children from their communities who had even passed the 11+. In the small minority of cases where a participant spoke of passing the 11+, there remained a sense of inferiority, embarrassment and exclusion, highlighted in sometimes indirect ways such as through a grammar school teacher asking about his parents' occupations during a French lesson. Awareness of the class-based nature of this inequality of opportunity seems to have developed only later, reflecting the unquestioning nature of the traditional 'school as a conservative force' (*"l'école conservatrice"*) reproducing inequality, and perpetuating social hierarchies to the detriment of the working-class children whose educational trajectories had intractable limits placed upon them.

Nonetheless, significant differences began to emerge when discussion turned to the value and purpose of education at that time. Several of the loyalist participants spoke of how employment opportunities in Belfast's heavy industry sector depended on family or community connections, rather than educational qualifications, confirming often cited previous accounts (e.g. Purvis et al., 2011). For the loyalists, there seemed to be little extrinsic value to education, and so with the advent of the Troubles, the loyalist participants seemed to enjoy the opportunity provided to escape the irrelevance of school and to participate in, for instance, the Ulster Workers' Council strike or the chance to sit in on the "supergrass" trials. The republican experience is markedly different, as forced displacement during the early years of the Troubles and greater involvement in street protests led to a much stronger identification with a political struggle, in which education was perceived as a silent weapon in the struggle against the British. One republican recounted the story of his grandmother's influence, and although humorous, it reflects an underlying conviction that education could hold a transformative political power and could play an important role in the republican 'struggle':

*Brendan (R): "...my granny always used to say you need to educate yourself, you know, if you want to get the British Government out of Ireland, you need to become smarter than them. And for some reason my grandmother taught us all, all our, all my cousins and all my, eh, brothers and sisters to say the alphabet backwards and you know, we never really worked out why other than to think that maybe it was just, if they know it one way, we'll know it two ways. So that was my first thing about education."*

There is however a further significant distinction that emerges from the two sets of interviews, and that is the difference in how education was perceived in prison by the respective groups. While the loyalist former prisoners spoke of their realisation of the value of education and of their engagement with Open University courses (e.g. Maths), these were on an individual level, and were unrelated to the external circumstances of the Troubles.

For the republican prisoners, by contrast, education played a key role in developing greater cultural awareness and identity (e.g. learning the Irish language and Irish folklore: "it was an identifier, cultural"), but also provided an opportunity to instil political principles (including socialism) and to prepare for a longer anti-British political struggle following release from prison, a process which, it is claimed (below) led to the growth in electoral success of many former republican prisoners in the following years:

*Connor (R): "Now, we'll get to the core of why we were doing it, there was only one reason we were doing it and it was to better develop our personnel... That was to go out to know why they were going back out to take part in the struggle. You had to bear in mind why we were in jail, we were in jail but an awful lot of people were in jail with very flimsy reasons for participating in the conflict. ...So that was an underpinning ideological thing which we operated in the jail and the education system was crucial to that, constantly, constantly trying to get people's outlook of the world away from the natural outlook. The natural outlook in anything is look after yourself but we wanted people to look after our society...this was to have better people for the long struggle because we, in the 1970s made up our minds that this isn't going to be, they're definitely not getting in helicopters and flying out of Ireland, right. We have to have good reasons for wanting and replacing British rule in Ireland. I mean, I don't mean...I don't want that to sound as if I'm somebody special but that's the basis, we wanted better people out. And proof in the pudding...Do you see when the first big elections were held about '93, '93 over half of the elected representatives were Sinn Fein political ex-prisoners which included three MPs to Westminster, numerous TDs down the Free State, numerous, well we had councillors galore all over the North of Ireland and then the MLAs, we'd loads of MLAs..."*

This is highly significant as, in Bourdieusian terms, it demonstrates the transformative potential of education, once freed from the systemic and institutional strictures evident in the traditional school system, which had effectively prevented both sets of working-class interview participants from developing or realising their educational aspirations or from exerting any form of agentic liberating potential over their own futures.

Ironically, therefore, from within the confinement of the prison cell, education regained its liberating force which allowed the individuals to develop new forms of cultural capital.

In the ensuing discussions around the current challenges of addressing educational underachievement, there were once again many similarities of perspective, with both groups speaking of the importance of a relevant, engaging curriculum which aimed to prepare children and young people for employment but also to develop a broader set of skills for life within broader society. Once again, there was strong agreement around the need to abolish academic selection and transfer tests (Thomas (R): “The 11+, I think, is a scandal”), which were universally seen to favour middle-class children and discriminate against children from their working-class loyalist and republican communities. Those children who don’t succeed in gaining a grammar school place “feel as if they’re on a scrap heap and it’s not their fault” (Mary (R)), victims of a system which perpetuates class-based hierarchies of educational outcome. This *reproductive* function of education is interpreted in different ways, however, by the respective groups: for republicans, the educational system is viewed as another facet of a British “colonial” or “imperial” legacy, designed to oppress and subjugate. For loyalists, the main frustration seemed to be class-based, with references to the advantage held by middle-class children in accessing private tutoring and in being able to afford the additional costs of a grammar school education as well as feeling inadequate or socially inferior even as a parent from a working-class background whose child was able to achieve a grammar school place today:

*Derek (L): “I have a grandson who I’m very proud of who is at fourth year in [grammar school]. My daughter is a single parent, she’s got three boys so you know, and she drives a ten year old car. The first time my grandson was going to rugby training for [grammar school] there was Porches, you name it, just sitting there and she was rocking up in a ten year old Ford and she says, “I feel wick” so I had to end up taking him. My car is not much better than hers, but I didn’t feel wick! But there’s that class thing still going on: “I’m not welcome there, sure I only live in the Shankill. I shouldn’t be there.” There’s all that type of thing but what we need to do, my daughter wouldn’t dream of going to something in [grammar school] to be taught how to help her son with the homeworks.”*

There was nonetheless one loyalist reference to a mind-set within their community that they should not oppose their masters (though it is not entirely clear who is referred to) and so “the foot on our neck stays there” (Robert (L)). In any case, there was a conviction evident from both sets of interviews that the next generation of working-class children deserve better, and that they were committed to ensuring that their children and grand-children were able to avail of better educational opportunities than were available to them in the past.

Both groups were also clear that the problem of educational underachievement in their communities was complex and would require a range of solutions at different levels. In addition to the strong desire on both sides of the community to end academic selection, other solutions included tackling underlying problems such as poverty, housing and hunger, tackling the problem of drugs (mentioned solely by loyalists), investing in early years provision in their communities and developing more extensive opportunities for community education and life-long learning. Both groups felt that

there was a need for stronger links between schools and families/communities, but this seemed to be most acute among the loyalist participants, who spoke of a general disconnect between schools in their areas and the surrounding community. Participants spoke of the specific challenges they faced as community activists and former loyalist prisoners in playing any kind of positive role in their local schools, such as through membership of school boards of governors (from which they felt excluded) and through an unwillingness on the part of local school leaders to invite them in to work with their pupils in any capacity:

*Alan (L): I probably know like one person who is a board of governor member, like one person and I know lots of people [laughs], so there's something fundamentally not right with that. Schools have been very much I think closed shops.*

*Derek (L): People sit on these board of governors and they're just doing it for their CV or whatever, they've no interest in the school and they've no interest in trying to help out.*

*Robert (L): These are closed doors to us, churches, mainstream institutions including schools on occasion and higher education authorities have been closed shops to us.*

Finally, the interviews highlighted differences in the social capital of the respective groups. On the one hand, the former republican prisoners enjoyed greater levels of acceptability within their own communities, easier access to schools, and a clear line of communication to political leaders, many of whom had similar life experiences to themselves as former prisoners or relatives of former prisoners. While undoubtedly frustrated at the social inequality of the current education system, there was however no expression of political marginalisation from the republican participants and indeed many references to the “very strong connection to politicians” (Brendan (R)).

By contrast, the overriding impression from the loyalist participants was one of disconnection, marginalisation, disenfranchisement and abandonment by the education system, the churches and mainstream Unionist political leaders. Participants spoke repeatedly of “closed shops”, “closed doors” and a lack of opportunity to exert a positive influence on children and young people’s educational futures, despite their best efforts. Furthermore the loyalist interviewees were very conscious of their own negative portrayal in the media (Sharon (L): “nobody writes good stories about us”), a fact previously highlighted by Shirlow (2012) and O’Doherty (2015), and which undoubtedly led to a strong sense of grievance that republicans, who share a similar past, are now at the very heart of government in Northern Ireland. While the loyalists did speak of the problem of drugs within their community and acknowledged that it was a factor in educational underachievement, there was a sense that the media were too quick to view their community in a negative light, which compounded their difficulties in making a positive contribution within their own communities, and from being heard, listened to and respected by those in positions of power beyond their own communities. While the interviews were conducted in the autumn of 2020 before the heightening of post-Brexit tensions around the Northern Ireland Protocol, it is reasonable to suggest that the current loyalist resistance to the “Irish Sea border” and the withdrawal of support for the Good Friday Agreement by the Loyalist Communities Council will only serve to further isolate this working-class community and to generate further grievance and resentment.



## 4.1 Conclusion

Educational underachievement is a complex, multi-faceted problem with particular resonances for and impacts on working class communities in Northern Ireland. This small-scale qualitative project, while limited in scope, has nonetheless exposed important dissonances between the experiences and perspectives of loyalist and republican former prisoners and community activists. Moving forward we would recommend the following further research:

- More extensive research into the educational experiences and perspectives of loyalist and republican former prisoners and community activists, building on the insights gained from this pilot study.
- Additional research into the educational experiences and perspectives of those still actively involved in loyalist and republican paramilitarism.

Finally, the current study raises many serious challenges regarding the role of education within society and, in Bourdieusian terms, about to how to unleash the transformative 'liberating force of education' to create a truly equitable education system to benefit all our children and young people:

- How do we, as a society, address effectively the underlying causes of educational underachievement (e.g. income poverty, unemployment, poor housing, hunger), exacerbated by the current pandemic and within a resulting context of financial constraints?
- How do we create a more equitable education system in which no child is disadvantaged as a result of their social background?
- How do we address the increasing political, social and educational marginalisation of the loyalist working-class community?

## 5 References:

- BBC (2021a) 'NI Protocol: DUP meets Loyalist Communities Council'. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-56201532>
- BBC (2021b) 'Border poll would be 'absolutely reckless', says Arlene Foster (24<sup>th</sup> January). Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-55783805>
- BBC (2021c) 'NI 100: Northern Ireland centenary commemorations revealed'. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-56368091>
- Bourdieu, P. (1966) 'L'école conservatrice. Les inégalités devant l'école et devant la culture'. *Revue française de sociologie*, 7 (3): pp. 325-347
- Bourdieu, P. (1974) 'The school as a conservative force: Scholastic and cultural inequalities'. In *Contemporary research in the sociology of education* (Ed. J. Eggleston) London: Methuen [pp32–46.]
- Bourdieu, P. (1979) *Algeria 1960: The disenchantment of the world, the sense of honour, the Kabyle house or the world reversed*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1990) *In other words: Essays towards a reflexive sociology*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1996) *The Rules of Art*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, P., and J.-C. Passeron (1979) *The inheritors: French students and their relation to culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bourdieu, P., and L. Wacquant (1992) *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Burgess, T. and Mulvenna, G. (2015) 'Introduction'. In T. Burgess and G. Mulvenna (eds.) *The Contested Identities of Ulster Protestants*. London: Palgrave.
- Charmaz, K. (2006) *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*. London: SAGE
- Commission for Victims and Survivors Northern Ireland (CVSNI) (2010). *Comprehensive Needs Assessment First Interim Report*, September 2010. Belfast: CVS.
- Delpit, L. (1992) 'Acquisition of literate discourse: Bowing before the master?' *Theory into practice*, 31, 4: 296–302.
- Delpit, L. (1997) 'The silenced dialogue: Power and pedagogy in educating other people's children'. In A.H.Halsey, H. Lauder, P. Brown, and A.S. Wells, *Education: Culture, economy and society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. [582–94].
- Department of Education (2021) *School enrolments - Northern Ireland summary data*. Bangor: DE. Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-enrolments-northern-ireland-summary-data>
- Dillabough, J. (2004) 'Class, culture and the 'predicaments of masculine domination': Encountering Pierre Bourdieu'. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 25, 4, 489–506.

- Education and Training Inspectorate Northern Ireland (2018) *Chief Inspector's Report 2016-2018*. Belfast: ETI. Available at <https://www.etini.gov.uk/>
- Emerson, L., Orr, K. and Connolly, P. (2014) *Evaluation of the effectiveness of the 'prison to peace : learning from the experience of political ex-prisoners' educational programme*. Belfast: Centre for Effective Education, Queen's University Belfast.
- Equality Commission Northern Ireland (2015) *Key Inequalities in Education (Final Report)*. Belfast, ECNI.
- Fay, M., M. Morrissey and M. Smyth (1998). *Mapping Troubles-Related Deaths in Northern Ireland 1969-1998*, 2nd ed. Derry/Londonderry: INCORE.
- Ferguson, N. and Michaelsen, M. (2015) 'Money changes everything? Education and regional deprivation revisited'. *Economics of Education Review*. 48, pp. 129-147.
- Gallagher, T. and Smith, A. (2000) *The Effects of the Selective System of Secondary Education in Northern Ireland* (Department of Education Research Report). Bangor: DENI.
- Gorard, S. and Smith, E. (2004) "What is 'underachievement' at school?", *School Leadership and Management*, 24(2), pp.205–25.
- Grenfell, M., and D. James (1998) 'Theory, practice and pedagogic research'. In *Bourdieu and education: Acts of practical theory* (Ed. M. Grenfell and D. James) London: Falmer Press. [pp. 6–26.]
- Hanna, D., Dempster, M., Dyer, K., Lyons, E., & Devaney, L. (2012). *Young people's transgenerational issues in Northern Ireland*. (A Report for the CVSNI) Belfast: QUB, School of Psychology.
- Harker, R., and S.A. May (1993) 'Code and habitus: Comparing the accounts of Bernstein and Bourdieu'. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 14, 2, 169–78.
- Harland, K. and McCready, S. (2012) *Taking Boys Seriously: A Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Male School-Life Experiences in Northern Ireland*, Department of Education (DE) Research Report Series, (59).
- Henderson, L., Harris, J., Purdy, N. and Walsh, G. (2020) *Educational Underachievement in Northern Ireland: Evidence Summary*. Belfast: Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement.
- House of Commons Education Committee (2014) *Report on Underachievement in Education by White Working Class Children*. Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmeduc/142/142.pdf>
- Independent Reporting Commission (2018) *First Report - October 2018*. Available at [https://www.ircommission.org/sites/irc/files/media-files/IRC-%20First%20Report\\_1.pdf](https://www.ircommission.org/sites/irc/files/media-files/IRC-%20First%20Report_1.pdf)
- Independent Reporting Commission (2019) *Second Report – November 2019*. Available at: [https://www.ircommission.org/sites/irc/files/media-files/IRC%20-%202nd%20Report%202019\\_0.pdf](https://www.ircommission.org/sites/irc/files/media-files/IRC%20-%202nd%20Report%202019_0.pdf)
- Independent Reporting Commission (2020) *Third Report – November 2020*. Available at <https://www.ircommission.org/sites/irc/files/media-files/IRC%20Third%20Report.pdf>

Irish News (2021) 'Loyalist paramilitary groups withdraw support for Good Friday Agreement' (4<sup>th</sup> March). Available at:

<https://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2021/03/04/news/loyalist-paramilitary-groups-withdraw-support-for-good-friday-agreement-2243573/>

Jenkins, R. (2002) *Pierre Bourdieu*. London: Routledge.

Leitch, R., Hughes, J., Burns, S., Cownie, E., McManus, C., levers, M. and Shuttleworth, I. (2017) *Investigating Links in Achievement and Deprivation: Final Summary Report*. Belfast: The Executive Office.

Martin, P. (2016) *No Child Left Behind – a report on educational underachievement in Northern Ireland*. Available at

<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/education/cllr-peter-martin.pdf>

McCorry, M. (2010). "More than 250 Children Killed During Troubles." *Irish News*, August 16.

McDonald, H. (2015) 'Investigating the Protestant 'Kaleidoscope'' In T. Burgess and G. Mulvenna (eds.) *The Contested Identities of Ulster Protestants*. London: Palgrave.

McKearney, T. (2018) 'From Platitude to Realpolitik; Challenging Generic Designations'. in T. Burgess (ed.) *The Contested Identities of Ulster Catholics*. London: Palgrave.

McKittrick, D., S. Kelters, B. Feeney and C. Thornton (1999). *Lost Lives: The Stories of the Men, Women and Children Who Died as a Result of the Northern Ireland Troubles*. Edinburgh and London: Mainstream.

McVeigh, R. (2015) 'No One Likes Us, We Don't Care: What Is to Be (Un) Done about Ulster Protestant Identity?' In T. Burgess and G. Mulvenna (eds.) *The Contested Identities of Ulster Protestants*. London: Palgrave.

Mills, C. (2008) 'Reproduction and transformation of inequalities in schooling: the transformative potential of the theoretical constructs of Bourdieu', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 29,1, 79-89.

Northern Ireland Executive (2016) *Action Plan on Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime*. Available at <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/tackling-paramilitary-activity-criminality-and-organised-crime-action-plan>

Northern Ireland Executive (2021) *Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030*. Available at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/final-executive-children-and-young-people%27s-strategy-2020-2030.pdf>

O'Doherty, M. (2015) 'Lost in Translation: Loyalism and the Media'. In T. Burgess and G. Mulvenna (eds.) *The Contested Identities of Ulster Protestants*. London: Palgrave.

O'Doherty, M. (2018) "E pluribus unum; The Elusiveness of a Singular Community Identity' in T. Burgess (ed.) *The Contested Identities of Ulster Catholics*. London: Palgrave.

O'Neill, S., Armour, C., Bolton, D., Bunting, B., Corry, C., Devine, B., Ennis, E., Murphy, S. (2015). *Towards a better future: the trans-generational impact of the Troubles on mental health*. Northern Ireland Commission for Victims and Survivors. Belfast, University of Ulster.

O'Reilly, D., & Stevenson, M. (2003). Mental health in Northern Ireland: have "the Troubles" made it worse? *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 57(7), 488-492.

Police Service of Northern Ireland [PSNI] (2021) Police Recorded Security Situation Statistics 1 March 2020 to 28 February 2021. Belfast: PSNI. Available at <https://www.psni.police.uk/globalassets/inside-the-psni/our-statistics/security-situation-statistics/2021/february/security-situation-statistics-to-february-2021.pdf>

Plewis, I. (1991) "Underachievement: a case of conceptual confusion", *British Educational Research Journal*, 17(4), pp.377–385.

Purvis, D. and the Working Group on Educational Disadvantage and the Protestant Working Class (2011) *Educational disadvantage and the Protestant working Class - A Call to Action*. Available at [http://amazingbrains.co.uk/static/uploads/media/pdfs/A-Call-to-Action-FINAL-March2011\\_0.pdf](http://amazingbrains.co.uk/static/uploads/media/pdfs/A-Call-to-Action-FINAL-March2011_0.pdf)

Shirlow, P. (2012) *The End of Ulster Loyalism?* Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Smith, J. and Coveney, S. (2020) *New Decade, New Approach*. Belfast: Northern Ireland Office.

Sutherland, A. and Purdy, N. (2006) *Attitudes of the Socially Disadvantaged Towards Education in Northern Ireland*. Department of Education Research Report). Bangor: DENI.



**St Mary's  
University College  
Belfast**  
A College of Queen's University



**STRANMILLIS UNIVERSITY COLLEGE**  
A College of Queen's University Belfast



Centre for  
Research in  
Educational  
Underachievement