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Church-School collaborations addressing educational underachievement and social disadvantage

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Executive Summary

This study examined the evolving and often under-recognised role of churches in Northern Ireland as partners in addressing educational underachievement and social deprivation within disadvantaged communities. It arose against a complex backdrop of deepening educational inequalities, sustained budget constraints across the school system, and the ongoing social impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Alongside these pressures, the social and cultural position of churches has been shifting, with public discourse at times questioning or downplaying the legitimacy of faith-based engagement in education. Yet many congregations continue to support their local schools in consistent, practical and relational ways. This research, therefore, sought to highlight the extent, quality and impact of such partnerships, particularly those delivered by the three Transferor Churches (Presbyterian, Church of Ireland and Methodist) and to show how their Community Service had contributed meaningfully to the wellbeing and educational outcomes of children and families in disadvantaged areas.

The study was motivated by an observed disparity between public narratives and lived experience. Academics and practitioners involved in education and church-based community work frequently report that the depth of church–school engagement was neither fully understood nor accurately represented in wider conversations. Those on the ground (school leaders, congregations, volunteers and families) often describe faith-based involvement as essential, practical and motivated by a genuine desire to serve the community. This dissonance prompted an in-depth exploration of the types of support churches are providing, the needs they are addressing and the impact their interventions are having.

The policy and social environment in which this research had been conducted is marked by long-standing educational inequalities. Northern Ireland continues to face entrenched socio-economic disparities that significantly shape children's educational outcomes. Research has shown that pupils from low-income households begin school with lower levels of cognitive and language development and that these gaps only widen across primary and post-primary education. Additionally, after a decade of austerity and successive cuts to targeted programmes, the ability of schools to meet the needs of disadvantaged children has been severely compromised. Recently, initiatives addressing literacy, wellbeing, mental health and additional learning support have been reduced or discontinued due to ongoing financial pressures. The

context was undoubtedly shaped by the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic which has further exacerbated existing inequalities, widening the attainment gap and intensifying mental-health challenges for children and young people. Schools, particularly in areas of high deprivation, are currently facing rising demand and limited resources.

Within this context, the Transferor Churches have long maintained a historical connection with education, rooted partly in their governance role in the Controlled sector and partly in their broader mission to support the welfare of their local communities. However, the nature of church involvement has shifted significantly in recent decades. Church leaders and congregations have increasingly reframed their approach from seeing schools as potential sites for evangelising, to seeing them as places for service, community building and unconditional support. The research therefore took seriously both the legacy of church involvement and the contemporary expressions of practical partnership that reflect the current needs of pupils, families and schools.

The methodology consisted of two main components: a province-wide scoping survey completed by 110 ministers across the three denominations and five detailed case studies selected using deprivation indices, denominational representation and geographical diversity. These case studies involved 17 individual interviews with ministers, principals, volunteers and programme leaders, along with four focus groups involving parents and both children and young people. The combination of quantitative and qualitative data provided a rich understanding of both the breadth and depth of church–school engagement.

The scoping exercise revealed that 104 of the 110 participating ministers reported some form of active involvement with local schools. Only 12 churches were engaged in explicit educational achievement support, but the findings suggested that many more congregations contributed indirectly to educational outcomes through programmes focused on wellbeing, family support, food provision or community engagement. Many congregations also contributed through governance, with a significant number of members serving on Boards of Governors, often providing stability, professional expertise and safeguarding oversight to over-stretched schools.

The case study research identified several key themes that captured the multifaceted contributions of churches:

1. The first theme, *mentoring and educational support*, highlights how volunteers provided one-to-one or small-group assistance with reading, homework, language development and confidence-building. These interventions, although not specialist literacy programmes, aligned with evidence showing that targeted, relational support could significantly improve reading fluency, comprehension and overall academic attitudes, particularly for pupils who lacked consistent adult input at home. Principals consistently noted improved behaviour, greater homework completion and increased self-esteem among pupils participating in mentoring and homework club programmes. For some children, even the presence of a supportive adult who listened, encouraged and believed in their potential made a material difference to their engagement with learning.
2. The second theme relates to *emotional wellbeing*. Churches across several case studies facilitated Prayer Spaces, pastoral mentoring or wellbeing rooms within school buildings. These were not doctrinal activities; rather, they provided structured opportunities for children to express feelings, process grief, build friendships and develop coping strategies. In communities disproportionately affected by trauma, bereavement, poverty and post-Covid anxiety, such spaces offered quiet reflection, emotional regulation and pastoral care delivered by trusted adults. Schools reported that these initiatives often had immediate positive impacts, with pupils demonstrating better emotional awareness, reduced anxiety and greater readiness to learn.
3. A third key theme is *community engagement and volunteerism*. In many disadvantaged areas, churches remain one of the few stable institutions embedded within the community. They often provide premises, volunteers, funding and leadership for youth clubs, breakfast programmes, food banks, uniform swaps, gardening projects and parent support groups. These activities offer children safe spaces outside school hours, provided practical help to families facing economic hardship and build social cohesion across generations. Several participants highlighted that church-run youth clubs or community activities had existed for decades, creating continuity and trusted relationships. For families living with financial stress, isolation or unstable home circumstances, these community-based supports played an important preventative role, reducing the likelihood of disengagement from education or involvement in anti-social behaviour.
4. The fourth theme concerns *faith in action*. The research found that the driving motivation for involvement was overwhelmingly rooted in Christian values of

compassion, service and unconditional love. Congregations were not seeking membership growth or religious influence in schools; rather, they saw themselves as responding to the needs of their neighbours in a spirit of generosity. Many ministers expressed concern about public misconceptions that churches were reluctant, conditional or outdated in their approach to community support. In reality, the evidence shows that volunteers consistently offered time, resources and practical help without expectation of return. School principals often spoke with emotion about the difference such support made, whether through a handwritten note of appreciation to staff, a discreet gift card for a struggling family, or a volunteer turning up every week to encourage a child who lacked stability at home.

While the case studies highlight significant benefits, the research also acknowledges limitations. The case study approach naturally focused on examples of good practice and does not claim to represent all church–school relationships. The study includes programmes and projects run by only the three Transferor Churches, although many other denominations and Christian organisations are active in similar work. Furthermore, it does not examine the Maintained, Integrated or Irish-medium sectors, where church engagement might differ.

Nevertheless, the findings provide valuable insights into how faith-based community groups could contribute to tackling educational underachievement. The evidence suggests that churches are uniquely positioned within Bronfenbrenner's ecological model: they are part of the child's microsystem for families who attend, and part of the mesosystem of relationships between school, home and community. Their involvement often strengthens these systems and supports children holistically: emotionally, academically and socially.

The study concludes with several recommendations:

For churches, the report encourages congregations to assess their resources (people, skills, facilities and funding) and consider how these could be offered unconditionally to support local schools. Establishing small teams of trained volunteers, aligning with safeguarding best practice and partnering with established community organisations could significantly increase the quality and sustainability of support for schools and their pupils. Churches are also encouraged to take a relational approach from the start, beginning with simple questions to their local school: "What do you need? How can we help?"

For schools, the research encourages school leaders to recognise churches as valuable partners, not only in governance but also in pastoral and community support. Identifying pupils who would benefit from mentoring early in the school year and engaging congregation members in structured roles could maximise the impact of these partnerships.

For policymakers, the report highlights the importance of recognising the contribution of faith-based organisations as part of the wider ecosystem supporting disadvantaged families. Approaches could include better training for volunteers, shared safeguarding frameworks and increased cross-sector collaboration. Policymakers are encouraged to acknowledge that in many communities, churches have the trust, presence and volunteer capacity to deliver programmes that statutory bodies can not sustain alone.

Overall, this study demonstrates that church–school partnerships, rooted in service, trust and a desire to strengthen communities, have played a meaningful and often transformative role in addressing the complex challenges of educational underachievement in the communities around the case study schools. In a climate where schools face increasing needs and diminishing resources, the contribution of local congregations offers not only practical support but hope, stability and genuine care for the next generation.

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Introduction

This study came about partly due to a disparity between narratives experienced by those engaged both in the academic world of education and also in the work of churches that engage with schools on a daily or weekly basis, year in, year out, helping, supporting and resourcing pupils, especially those in disadvantaged areas and often filling gaps in provision for pupils at risk of educational underachievement. The study is set within the context of a challenging educational environment with budget deficits in schools and cuts to programmes targeting underachievement and deprivation by the Department of Education (DENI) and the Education Authority (EA), which is a context recently described by Fitzpatrick et al. (2023, p.7) as 'unremittingly bleak'. It is also set in a rapidly changing societal context where the churches' role in the education of children is being questioned and, in some cases, actively opposed (Milliken, 2019; 2022; National Secular Society, 2023).

The study is also taking place in what has been described as a 'post-Christian' age by the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, in 2014 (Ross & Moreton, 2014). The features of a post-Christian age have been slower to emerge in Northern Ireland, with rates of church identity, attendance and involvement still higher here than in other parts of the UK, and indeed Western Europe generally (NISRA, 2022; Ganiel, 2022; Evangelical Alliance, 2024); however, traditional denominational churches are nonetheless reporting declining numbers and ageing congregations in many areas. This decline, allied with a hesitancy caused by negative perceptions of the role and purpose of church-based organisations and volunteers in the online and social media, is anecdotally causing a loss of confidence among local church congregations and a reluctance to volunteer their service to the local school. The study looks at different forms of Community Service in which churches across Northern Ireland are engaged and how they are helping to reduce educational underachievement and support pupils' mental health and wellbeing. It uses the examples of five case studies and offers a toolkit to churches seeking to engage more confidently and proactively with their local school communities.

Chapter 1: Educational Underachievement

1.1. Multiple Roots and Various Forms of Educational Disadvantage

The evidence clearly highlights that children experiencing social and economic barriers do not enjoy the same school experience, nor do they attain as well academically. In fact, the 'disadvantage attainment gap' is widely reported (Farquarson, 2022; Goodman & Gregg, 2010; HM Government, 2014; Purdy et al., 2021; Demie, 2021; Education Endowment Foundation, 2018). Purdy et al. (2022, p.8) describe educational underachievement in Northern Ireland as a 'major persistent problem' and highlight that it goes *Beyond the Stereotype* of 'Protestant, working-class boys', affecting pupils not only in the Controlled (mainly Protestant) sector, but also pupils of both genders in rural as well as inner-city schools and in all school sectors.

The impact of social deprivation on educational underachievement is varied and takes many forms: children coming to school hungry and relying on their free school meal to provide the only hot meal in the day, pupils having no peace or space at home to do their homework, parents who are unable or unavailable to help with homework or read to their children. All of these factors have a negative impact, and all begin in the very early years of a child's life (Logan et al., 2019; Orr, 2023; Purdy et al., 2021) and continues to widen throughout a child's schooling experience (Oppenheim & Milton, 2021). In Northern Ireland, data from the Millennium Cohort Study suggest that at age five approximately half of the gap in cognitive and language development is accounted for by structural and socio-economic factors, such as income, deprivation and parental education (Moore & Campbell, 2017). Similarly, UK data from the Education Endowment Foundation (2018) highlights a 4.3- month gap at the start of school (age five), which progresses to 9.5 months by the end of primary school and increases to 19.3 months by the end of secondary school (age 16). This disparity at the age of 16 years is also evident in Northern Ireland, where despite overall rises in GCSE attainment rates, the attainment gap (measured by the proportion of young people leaving school with at least five GCSEs A*-C or equivalent including English and maths) between pupils who are and are not entitled to free school meals has reduced slightly from 2005/2006 when the gap sat at 32 percentage points, to the most recent data for 2023/24 which puts it at a still-concerning 25.2 percentage points (Demie, 2021; DENI, 2024). The *Fair Start report* and the subsequent Expert Panel *(*Purdy et al., 2021) brought forward 47 costed actions for targeted programmes and interventions which should be implemented by the Stormont Executive to address the inequality of educational attainment in our schools. It highlights the Early Years as crucial and

this focus was also a priority for the Independent Review of Education (DENI, 2023, Vol.1, p.13) which showed how a phased increase of nursery school provision should be prioritised for those 'in disadvantage before moving to more universal provision'.

1.2. Post-Covid impact on attainment and wellbeing

When outlining the context of this study on educational underachievement, it is also necessary to acknowledge the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the educational context in Northern Ireland and that its effects have coloured, and in some cases utterly transformed the educational landscape. Firstly, research by Walsh et al. (2020) and Purdy et al. (2021) showed that home-schooling during the pandemic's two extended periods of school closure was not experienced equally by all children and young people and that the closure of schools (for almost all pupils) had significantly widened the educational gap between rich and poor. There were many reasons for this inequality but the most immediate was the 'digital poverty' of some households who did not have good quality consistent access to the internet or access to an electronic device suitable for learning from home (Purdy, 2020; Cullinane & Montacute, 2020). The pandemic also had a much deeper impact on younger rather than older pupils (Walsh et al., 2021), and many of those pupils who were in the first few years of their educational journey during the 'Covid years' are now further up the school, or in the next phase of schooling and the effects are still disproportionately impacting children from disadvantaged backgrounds and affecting their life-choices or opportunities (Rose et al., 2024).

Not only did the Covid-19 pandemic have a detrimental and uneven effect on the educational achievement of pupils who lived through it, it also had a serious impact on their mental health and wellbeing (Purdy et al., 2021; Francis, 2022). As McMullen (2023, p.28) comments, 'lockdown exacerbated pre-existing mental ill health among individuals, families and communities' and these issues are still causing difficulties for children, young people and families today. The numbers of children refusing to attend school has also significantly increased since the pandemic and support services are simply not able to keep up with the demand in this area (Meredith, 2023).

1.3 Schools' budgetary 'black holes' and funding gaps

Sustained budgetary pressure has been widely recognised as one of the most significant challenges facing schools over the past decade, by principals, governors, teachers, support staff, parents and other education stakeholders alike (NIAO, 2018; Fitzpatrick et al., 2023). Even those with no regular contact with schools cannot fail to have been alarmed by a newspaper headline declaring that 'Over three-quarters of schools will face a budget deficit, EA Board warned' (Belfast Telegraph, 2024). At the recent House of Commons inquiry into the Funding of Public Services in Northern Ireland, Dr Graham Gault, Secretary of the National Association of Headteachers, in his oral evidence reported that without any additional allocation of money the percentage of schools operating in a deficit position would rise to 80%. He reiterated his observation that when he was a school principal, parents were supplying 'basic materials to keep schools running' (House of Commons, 2025). In addition to cuts to direct funding to schools, savings are also being made across all Departments in line with the Northern Ireland Budget announced in December 2024. Although the Department of Education receives the next largest amount from the £21bn budget allocation after the Department of Health, the increasing costs and pay rise agreements with teacher and support staff unions, on top of legacy deficits, mean that a tranche of programmes put in place to address inequality in educational attainment and engagement as well as Special Educational Needs and mental health and wellbeing programmes, have either been cut or are being maintained at current levels rather than expanding to meet increasing demands (Fitzpatrick et al., 2023). One example of this is the Engage Programme which was a programme designed to 'limit any long-term adverse impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on educational standards by supporting pupils' learning and engagement on their return to school/setting through provision of high quality one to one, small group or team-teaching support in every school/setting in Northern Ireland' (DENI, 2023). This programme was due to continue into its third year to try to alleviate the worst effects of the pandemic on educational attainment; however, it was cut at the end of March 2023 (Fitzpatrick, et al., 2023). The authors of this report, which outlines the devastating effects of the cuts for children and young people in Northern Ireland, list the many programmes and supports for pupils which had been cut including Happy Healthy Minds, the end to the 'Holiday Hunger' payments and Baby Book schemes, among others (p.14). They also note that families affected by poverty, disadvantage and already in need of the most support due to the cost-of-living crisis, will be most affected by these cuts. It is in providing for those in need, coming alongside their local school communities and advocating for more government care for the marginalised, that

churches can ‘play to their strengths’ and reconnect with their historical role as allies and champions of schooling for all, by resourcing and nurturing their local communities.

Chapter 2: Church Involvement in Schools and Disadvantage

2.1 Churches' History of engagement with education

Christians have been involved in education in Ireland since early Celtic times. While much of Western Europe was experiencing the 'Dark Ages' following the fall of the Roman Empire, education in Ireland survived due to the work of monks in religious centres such as Clonmacnoise (County Offaly) and Bangor Abbey (County Down). The teaching of Christian theology, Irish law and the classics in these monasteries led to the island earning a reputation as 'the land of saints and scholars' (Coolahan, 1981). The Protestant reformers in the 16th century extended the privilege of education beyond convents and monasteries with their basic assumption that everyone (girls as well as boys) should be educated. As early as 1530, a girls' school was opened in Wittenberg and in Calvin's Geneva both boys and girls were given free public elementary education (MuséeProtestant.org). With the Plantation of Ulster in the 17th Century, the provision of education was seen as an imperative. As part of this project, 'Royal Schools' were established in each of the Ulster counties involved in the official plantation project to ensure that the sons of the settlers would be educated in the English language in Protestant schools (Milne, 2009). Similarly in the Catholic tradition Leahy (2025, p.125) notes that 'Catholic Emancipation in 1829 opened the way for a new springtime in Catholic initiatives. Founders of new congregations of religious women and men, whose outreach was particularly to the poor and destitute, set about establishing schools'.

Education in English was a priority for the Protestant clergy who accompanied the English and Scottish settlers to Ireland. These men placed a strong emphasis on the importance of personal Bible reading and study as an element of the Protestant faith. However, the significance of being able to read the Bible in one's own language led to clergymen (such as the Anglican Bishop of Kilmore, County Cavan, William Bedell) playing a leading role in the publication of the scriptures in the Irish language in 1603 (BBC, 2025).

The 19th century saw the establishment of the National System of Education across the island of Ireland (1831). While the theory was that this system would be non-denominational and would avoid promoting any specific religion in schools, in practice the Protestant churches (especially the Church of Ireland) had considerable influence (Coolahan, 1981). The

Presbyterian Church in Ireland also had a significant role, particularly in Ulster. The Presbyterians set up their own schools with a focus on teaching literacy through the study of the Bible. They, along with the Methodist Church in Ireland, were also active in the formation of Sunday Schools and in promoting the education of the poor and orphans through church-based charities such as the Presbyterian Orphan Society, now the Presbyterian Children's Society (PCS, 2026).

In the decade following Partition in 1921, the vast majority of Protestant church-run schools in what became Northern Ireland were transferred to state control (hence, thereafter, their being referred to as 'Controlled' schools) (Akenson, 1973). Under the terms of this transfer, the newly established Northern Ireland government would take the responsibility for the maintenance of these schools (and the payment of the teachers' salaries), while the churches retained influence through, for example, having a role in the appointment of teachers. Protestant clergy and members of their churches would also have significant representation on school management bodies of the Controlled schools. In the late 1920s, the Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC) was formed to represent the interests of the three largest Protestant Churches in education in Northern Ireland (Presbyterian, Church of Ireland and Methodist).

2.2 Role of the Transferor Representatives' Council and Boards of Governors

In the course of the transfer to the state, the churches were very clear that while they were handing control of the schools' financing and the ownership of the estate, they were not relinquishing all interest in the school ethos, management or community links. Farren (1995) notes that in the 1930 Education Act many of the Protestant churches' demands were met with representatives from the Transferors retaining 'not less than one half of the places on school committees' (p.94) and guaranteeing 'up to a quarter' of the places on the local education committee would be filled by church representatives (p.95). In addition, the 1947 Education Act stipulated that an act of Christian Worship would be included as part of the school day and that only clergy would have the right to inspect Religious Education (Akenson, 1973; Murray, 1985) and clergy involvement in the life of the school nurtured a non-denominational Christian ethos across all areas of the schools' activities and relationships. This led both Donnelly (2012) and Murray (1985) to note that for much of the 20th Century, the schools [both Catholic and

Protestant] reflected the 'cultural aspirations of each religious group as a whole' (Murray, 1985, p.113).

While some have questioned whether controlled schools can still claim to be 'Protestant' (Hughes, 2011; Armstrong, 2016; Barnes, 2019), Gracie and Brown (2019, p.363) claimed that despite being more diverse in their makeup, Controlled schools see themselves as 'church-related' and over 90% have signed up to the Vision Statement of the CSSC, which holds at its centre 'the ethos of non-denominational Christian values' (CSSC, 2026). There are two main vehicles for this continuing contact with schools in the modern age and these are, first, the local ministers and/or youth workers who come to lead weekly assemblies on rotation throughout the year and, second, the members of local congregations who sit as Transferor Representatives on the schools' boards of governors.

These positions are divided between the three transferor churches: The Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI), the Church of Ireland (CoI) and the Methodist Church in Ireland (MCI) and normally make up about 40% of the board membership if all positions are filled. The role of a transferor governor extends beyond the remit of religious education and they are part of the general management body which influences all aspects of the school's care for their pupils including safeguarding, child-protection, provision for Special Educational Needs (SEN) and generally ensuring that all policies and procedures reflect the school's Christian ethos and meet the needs of everyone in the school community. These are voluntary positions but meetings, interviewing candidates for teaching positions and dealing with complaints or conflicts between parents or staff and the school management can be very demanding in terms of time and commitment. Nominations to school boards are jointly administered by the TRC and also the EA who support governors with online training when they take up the role (TRC, 2018).

2.3. Churches' Mission and Vision for Education – Community Service

Although it must be admitted that change has come about fairly slowly, the three TRC churches *have* profoundly changed their motivation and attitude towards their relationship with schools. Dr Andrew Brown (2022) describes this as the provision of 'tangible and unconditional support' to which the Presbyterian Church in Ireland is committed and the Methodist Church also looks to its roots in social provision for disadvantaged communities since its birth in the cities and mining towns of the industrial revolution. Whilst they were always concerned with the provision of high-quality education for all, churches for many decades also saw schools as a 'weekday pulpit' and a convenient 'pool' from which

to fish for members through the minister preaching at assembly in the morning and advertising the Bible Clubs held in the church hall.

The gradual evolution of this attitude is not always acknowledged in society, and some commentators prefer to paint churches as the enemies to progress and inclusion and only concerned with 'holding on for grim death to schools' (Sheerin, 2023). Even some teachers and school principals can be unaware of the new direction taken by churches and it was disappointing to read in Purdy et al. (2022, p.44) that a small number of respondents, talking about the support offered to disadvantaged children in schools, felt that the support of churches was 'not unconditional' and that the churches seemed 'stuffy' and 'reluctant to actually go and serve the community'.

2.4 Tiers of Engagement – a model for church collaboration in public education

In January 2022 the Presbyterian Church held a Conference in Belfast entitled 'PCI talks Education', where attendees were challenged to consider the future of the church's engagement with schools in Northern Ireland. One of the most challenging presentations was from Dr Irvin Scott from Harvard's LIFE (Leadership Institute for Faith in Education) Institute who outlined his conviction that 'communities of faith are untapped resources that can be of enormous value to our students, educators, and communities' (Scott, 2021). He rejects the two polarised extremes of thinking about church engagement – from the perspective whereby (usually Christian) faith has to imbue every part of what and how children learn, to the idea that faith communities should not interact at all with publicly funded schools. Instead, Scott advocates for a 'third way which involves prioritizing children, their wellbeing, and their learning above proselytizing and advancing adult agendas'.

To this end he outlines three tiers (or types) of engagement for Christians seeking to improve the lives of their local school communities. The first tier is what Scott calls 'basic direct assistance' which involves the provision of resources for the pupils or the school community such as books, stationery, gifts for the staff or sports equipment. The second tier is more relational with church members offering their experience, expertise and time to voluntarily help students in need of support – homework clubs, reading programmes, emotional support, mentoring, etc. (Scott calls this the social-educational capital exchange). Finally, the third tier

is that of advocating for local or national policy changes to address issues of social deprivation, inequality and barriers to educational achievement based on socio-economic background.

Although described by Scott as 'tiers' which denotes a hierarchy of engagement, perhaps in the context of Northern Ireland, the system might better be depicted as a Venn diagram of interlocking circles with the school at the centre. The three TRC churches have in recent years spoken out about cuts to educational budgets and provision for Special Educational Needs (Diocese of Connor, 2023; CoI Website, 2024), the cost-of-living crisis, the cost to parents of educational provision (MCI Website, 2022) and many other social issues. Through the Executive of the TRC they have had regular access to the Minister of Education and his department and have been active participants as educational stakeholders in policy consultations and systemic reviews of the educational landscape for many years (TRC Website, 2024).

Where they have not been so active, perhaps in the past, is in the first two tiers of Scott's model, which provides the focus of this current study. While relationships between the local school and the churches have often been quite strong, they have also been quite narrowly focused – often consisting of just the minister or youth worker leading occasionally at assemblies and the TRC representative on the Board of Governors (often the minister again), with few opportunities for other members of the congregation to get involved in Community Service. For church congregations this means asking, "What can we do to help?" and looking for ways in which they can serve the whole school community. Engaging with Scott's first two tiers could take the form of fundraising to equip a computer suite or sensory room, giving gifts of educational resources or for the renovation of school property/outside spaces to alleviate pressure on school budgets, or running 'uniform swap' or book bank days in the church hall.

Scott was part of a research project highlighting partnerships between faith communities and public schools (Fulgham et al., 2026) which illustrated the impact of the Educational Ecosystem and showcased the successes of partnership projects as varied as Rise2Read (reading support) to providing washers and dryers in schools and providing Wash Teams to clean, dry and fold pupils' laundry every week. This study provides many examples of faith communities engaging in projects which are:

> *'...advancing literacy, providing basic needs, increasing community involvement through positive role models, supporting care for the total*

school and advocating public policy that supports equitable education' (p.17).

Chapter 3: Caring about Children's Educational Achievement

3.1 Communities Raising the Next Generation

Purvis (2011) and several other studies (Goodall, 2017; Bond et al., 2025) point to the importance of family and parental engagement in 'helping to address the issues associated with educational underachievement' (Purdy et al., 2021, p.38) and that community solutions to these problems are often better than outside voluntary or governmental programmes which are 'helicoptered' in and then out of the communities again when the programme finishes or the funding dries up (Purdy & Orr, 2023). This is not just the case in Northern Ireland but globally, as Queenan et al. (2021, p.15) point out, 'It's that intimate knowledge of local needs that gives faith-inspired organizations a unique vantage point from which to see distinct challenges'. Churches are part of that community, and it is in their 'DNA' to care for the poorest and weakest members of that community (Purdy & Meneely, 2015; Evangelical Alliance, 2015).

3.2 Bronfenbrenner – Ecological Systems Theory

When exploring the importance of community involvement with and impact on children's development, the work of Bronfenbrenner and his ecological systems theory more recently redefined as the bio ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner,1986), provides a valuable framework (Gray & MacBlain, 2015). Bronfenbrenner's views on early childhood and child development have significantly influenced early education and curriculum design across the world (Hayes et al., 2017). He argues that development encompasses 'synergistic interactions' (Tudge et al., 2021) between the child and their life context with the differing layers of context being the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem[1]. He highlights the bidirectional influence of the microsystem (Gray & MacBlain, 2015) and advocates for childcare centres near schools to encourage multigenerational involvement to 'bring people and children into each other's lives' (Bronfenbrenner, 1976, p.24).

It has been widely noted that community partners will have a more positive impact on student development when operating within the microsystem level where direct relationship with pupils takes place (Leonard, 2011; Shuai Yang, 2025). Therefore, when families and schools

[1] Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory describes four key environmental layers influencing development: the **microsystem** (immediate settings like family, school, peers), the **mesosystem** (interactions between microsystems, e.g., parent–teacher relationships), the **exosystem** (indirect environments affecting the individual, such as a parent's workplace), and the **macrosystem** (broader cultural values, laws, and societal norms that shape all other systems).

create strong cooperative relationships alongside community support, the impact on children's academic achievement is positive. This interaction between education and community life can valuably supplement what is covered in school as well as enable high quality learning outside of school hours, further promoting the holistic development of the children involved (Shuai Yang, 2025). Despite unusual and complex microsystems, for pupil success, community support also needs to make authentic mesosystem connections which impact and strengthen microsystem links (Leonard, 2011).

It has been recognised that churches and church organisations sit within a child's microsystem if they attend or are actively involved (Crawford, 2020; Houston, 2017) although Crawford also notes that the relationship between parents and the church or the school the child attends and the church will make up part of the mesosystem of connections which supports the microsystem. Dr Irvin Scott extensively integrates Ecological Systems Theory into his work on educational leadership and teacher development (2024; 2026) and has developed his 'Seven Circles' Framework, a leadership model that mirrors Bronfenbrenner's layers, focusing on the intersecting roles of faith, family and school in the child's development. Scott (2024) also highlights the importance of cross-system partnerships (the mesosystem), specifically how churches and community groups support school success in the United States.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Aim of the Research

This project had two main aims: the first was to find out how many churches and congregations from the three constituent denominations of the TRC were actively engaged in programmes and projects, with the specific aim of alleviating educational underachievement and social deprivation in disadvantaged communities. The project also wanted to investigate whether there were differences in the forms of engagement with schools carried out by different denominations, different sizes of congregations, and rural as opposed to city-based churches. The research team wanted to get an idea of the range of different forms of community service provided by churches in different communities with different needs and to see what the factors were which led to successful community partnerships. Secondly, the researchers wanted to ascertain the barriers to engagement which prevented churches from getting involved with addressing educational underachievement in their local schools.

4.2 Data Collection – Scoping Exercise

The first part of the collection of data was a Scoping Exercise which was sent out, with the permission of church leaders, in the form of an online survey to all ministers in active ministry in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, the Church of Ireland and the Methodist Church in Ireland. Although these churches are all-island churches, the survey was sent only to those working in Northern Ireland due to the difference in the role of the church in the management and ownership of schools in the two jurisdictions, North and South. The focus on these three denominations reflects the study's commissioning context and practical parameters, as the research was conducted in partnership with the Transferor Representatives' Council which represents the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, the Church of Ireland, and the Methodist Church in Ireland. This scope necessarily excluded other traditions, including the Roman Catholic Church and smaller Protestant denominations, many of which also make significant contributions within their communities.

Information about the project was sent to the ministers with an online link through which they gave consent for their answers to be used and then answered a series of questions about their church context and about all aspects of their engagement with schools. Answers were sometimes in the form of a ticked-box and sometimes a text box was provided for ministers to

give longer and more detailed answers specific to their situation and engagement. This provided both quantitative and qualitative data which were analysed and outlined in the next chapter.

4.3. Case Study Selection and Objectives

At the end of the scoping survey, ministers were asked to indicate whether they would be prepared to engage with the research team in further discussions about their projects and links with local schools, and so the case studies were selected from among those who volunteered at this point. The final choice of five case studies was decided using a combination of the community's score on the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measures (NIMDM, 2017) which ranks areas in order of social deprivation measured using seven different domains of deprivation. There was also an effort made to ensure a spread of different geographical areas, different types of support or projects offered by the churches, and also, a spread across the three different denominations represented by the TRC. In the end, six churches were selected representing the three denominations and a mix of urban, suburban and rural congregations whose community location put them at the higher end of the scale for deprivation. Unfortunately, when contacted, one of the ministers was unwilling to participate any further in the research and the decision was made to go ahead with only five case studies.

In the case of each of these five case studies, an initial interview was carried out and the recording transcribed. This interview concentrated on establishing a more detailed account of the links between the church and the school than had been possible in the scoping survey. Each individual case study comprised a site visit and interviews in the setting. In the end a total of 17 individual interviews were conducted with school principals, ministers and volunteers and a further four focus group interviews were conducted – two with groups of parents and two with groups of children and young people engaging in the projects or programmes studied. A breakdown of the qualitative data collection is presented in the table below.

Table 1: Qualitative Data - Interviews carried out

Case Study: Denomination	**Initial Interview**	**Interview 2: School(s)**	**Interview 3: Leaders and volunteers**	**Interview 4: Children and young people**	**Interview 5: Parents**	**Interview 6: Project visit**
CS1: MCI & CoI	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
CS2: CoI	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
CS3: PCI	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
CS4: PCI	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
CS5: CoI	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No

The interviews sought to establish the types of support offered to the school community by the churches, the needs of the school community which were being addressed through the links with the churches, the challenges experienced in maintaining and developing the projects and links and the benefits experienced by the pupils in terms of their educational attainment and wellbeing and by members of the congregation in terms of community relationships, living out their faith and showing a positive Christian witness in their local area. The context of each case study was different from each other in certain respects, and each one was carried out by a different member of the team, but the questions asked and the objectives outlined above remained the same, which allowed for comparison of the interview transcripts and the development of key themes for analysis across the research project.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the British Educational Research Association's (BERA, 2024) *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* and Stranmillis University College's *Code of Ethics in Research* (2024). Ethical approval for the project was secured through the College's Research and Scholarship Committee prior to the commencement of data collection.

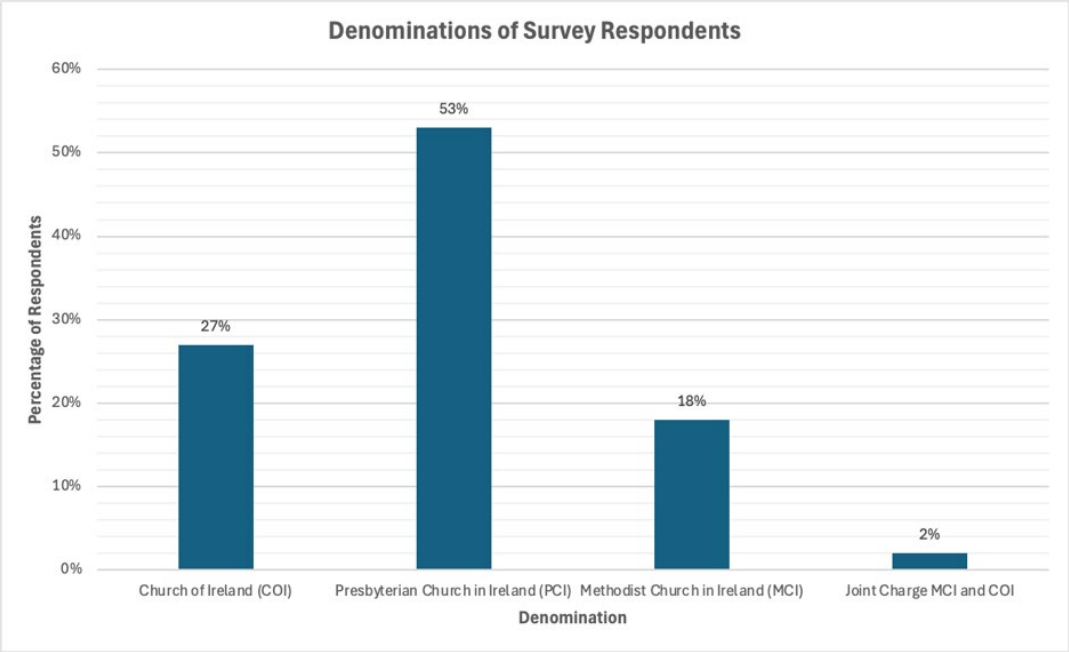
All participants were fully informed of the purpose, scope, and nature of the research prior to taking part. They were provided with information sheets outlining the aims of the project, the voluntary nature of participation, and the intended use of the data collected. Consent was obtained from all participants. All data were handled and stored in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, 2018) and institutional data protection policies.

Chapter 5: Scoping Exercise – Findings

5.1 Minister Demographic Overview

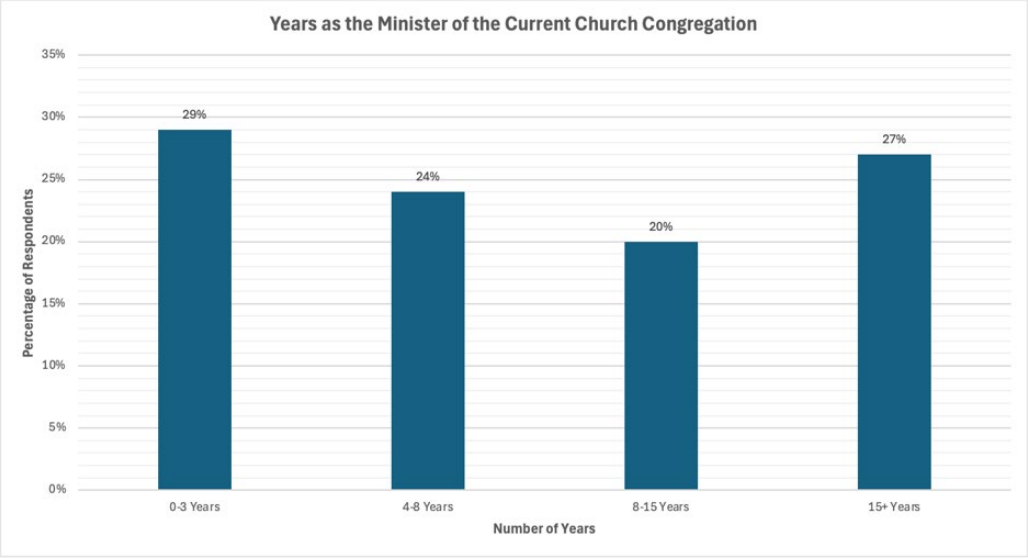
The survey went live on 14th June 2023, and the link was distributed to ministers via an email. The survey was closed on 18th September 2023, and by that stage 110 ministers had responded. Survey respondents were invited to identify which denomination they represented. Over half (53%, n=58) of respondents represented the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, while 27% (n=30) were from the Church of Ireland and 18% (n=20) were Methodist. Only two ministers represented a Joint Charge: in this instance, both ministers represented the Methodist Church and the Church of Ireland.

Figure 1: Graph reflecting the denominations of survey respondents in the Scoping Exercise Survey



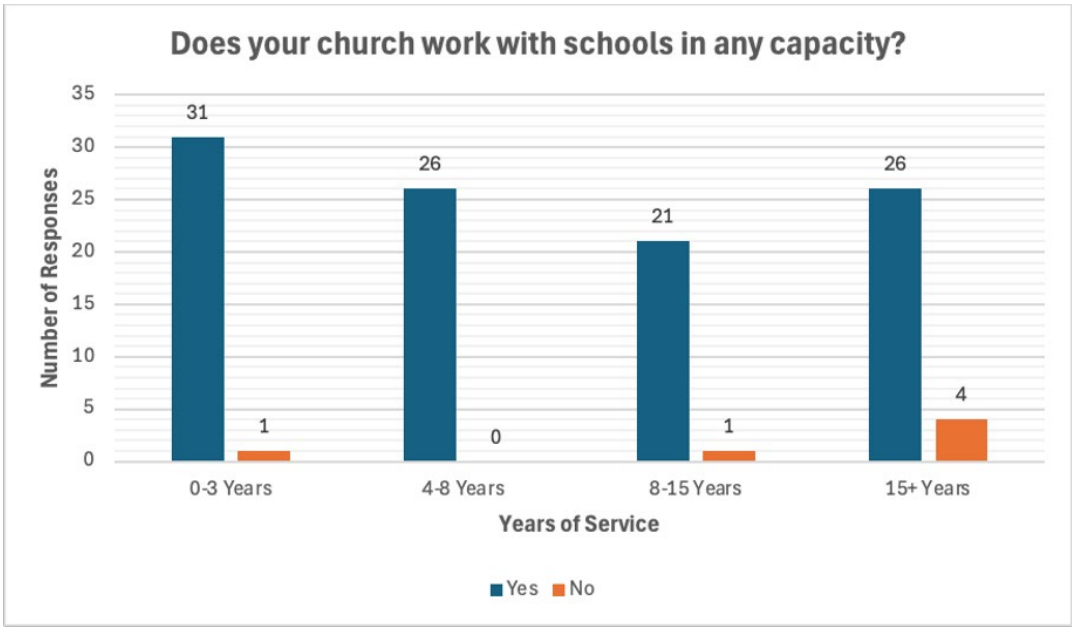
Respondents were subsequently asked to provide a set of demographic details to enable an overview of the sample characteristics. First, they were asked how long they had been the minister of their current church congregation. They were also asked to provide their role title in the church, and how many churches were in their charge.

Figure 2: Years as Minister of the current Church Congregation



These figures were analysed to examine whether the length of time a minister had been in charge of a particular church had any correlation with having links or partnerships with local churches and there was not found to be any significant correlation.

Figure 3: The correlation between the minister's length of service and whether they work with schools

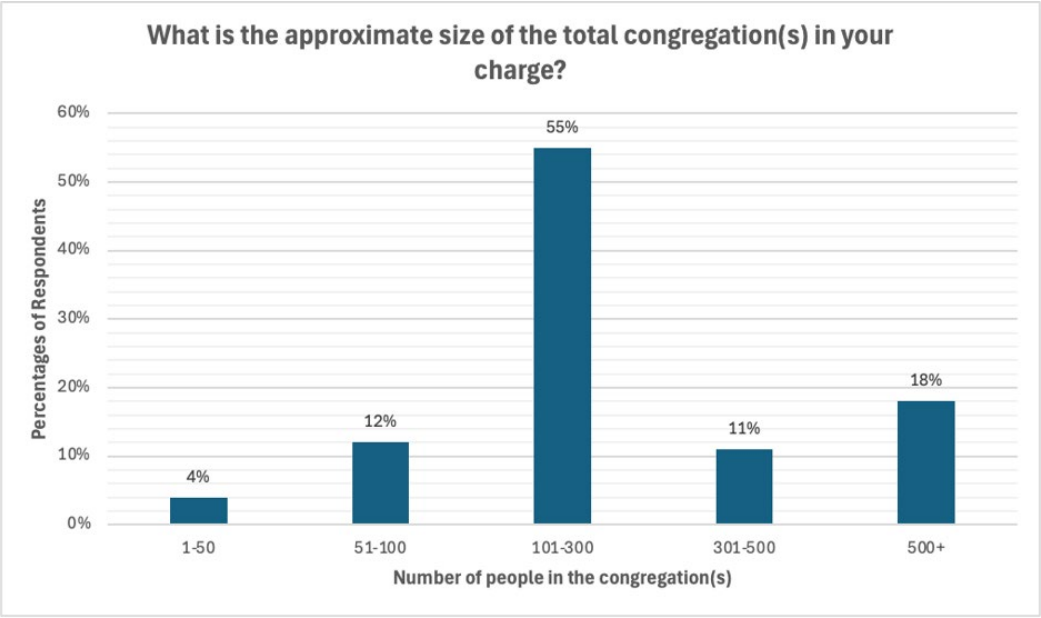


5.2 Church Congregation Overview

Ministers were invited to share a number of details about their church(es). They were also asked to share the postcode of the church(es) in their charge, but this was removed from the sample prior to analysis.

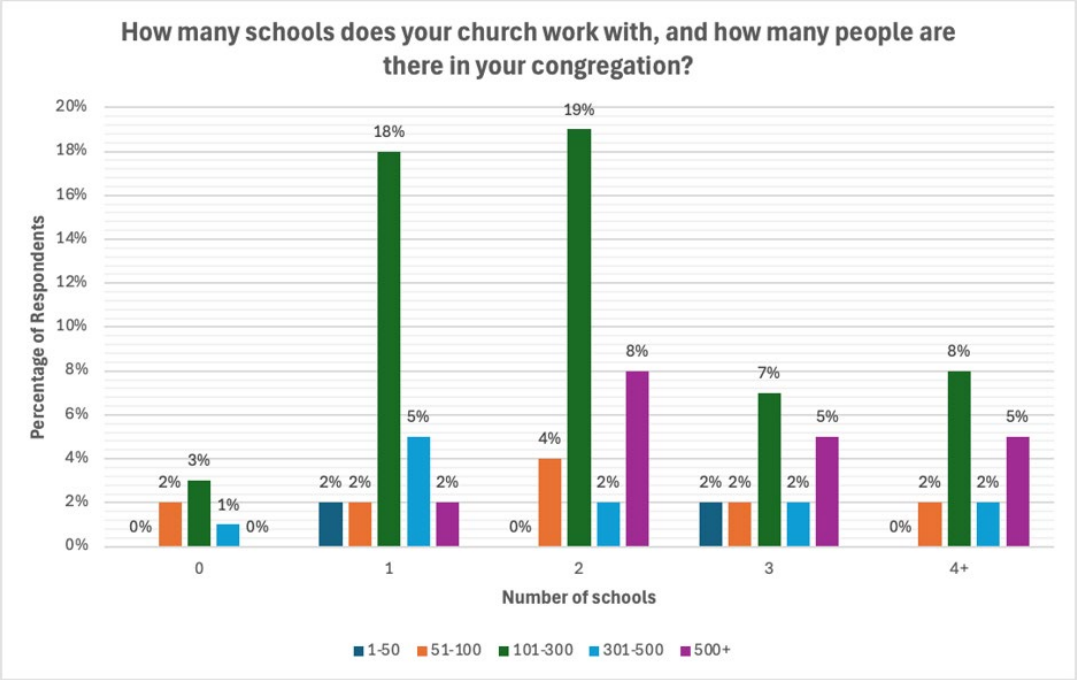
One of the questions posed invited ministers to share the approximate size of the total congregation(s) in their charge. Over half of the survey respondents (55%, n=61) estimated the total size of their congregation(s) to be between 101 and 300 people.

Figure 4: Approximate size of total congregation(s)



The size of the congregation was also considered as a potential factor influencing whether churches had partnerships with local schools and, if so, how many. Churches with the median size of congregation size (100–300 members) showed the greatest variation in responses, reporting partnerships ranging across the full spectrum from none to multiple schools. However, most of these churches tended to partner with either one school (19%, n=21) or two schools (20%, n=22), indicating that while engagement levels varied, the typical pattern was involvement with a small number of local schools.

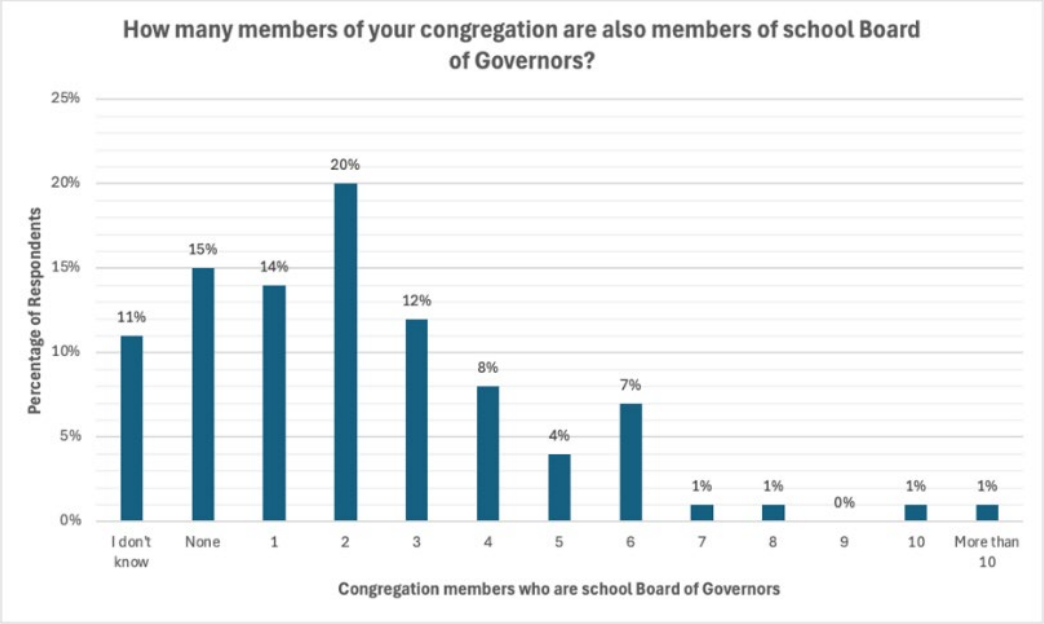
Figure 5: Correlation between size of congregation and number of schools worked with



5.3 Schools Work

Survey respondents were asked whether their church(es) worked with schools in any capacity, and only 6 respondents said that they did not. The 104 respondents (95%) who said that their church(es) did work with schools were subsequently asked how many members of their congregation(s) were members of a Board of Governors. Only 15% (n=17) of respondents said that none of their congregation members sat on a Board of Governors, and 15% (n=16) said that 5 or more of their congregation members were members of a Board of Governors.

Figure 6: Members of the church congregation who are also members of a school Board of Governors



5.4 Projects Relating to Educational Underachievement and Disadvantage

11% of participants (n=12) said that their church(es) were involved in a project or partnership with one or more local schools specifically in relation to educational underachievement / disadvantage. These 12 participants were subsequently asked what type of partnership their church(es) was involved with. Respondents could select as many options as they wanted. There were 16 options for respondents to choose from, and they were also able to input their own response in a text box. Six participants chose to enter their own responses. These were: "*shared education*"; "*numeracy support for KS2 children*"; "*we do messy church about 5 times a year*"; "*TLG – Mentoring Programme*"; "*collaborating to build a wellbeing garden for students*"; "*we provide space for a small school in* ******** (name of locality)".

Table 2: Involvement in projects/partnerships with a local school

Are any of your churches involved in a project or partnership with one or more local schools in relation to educational underachievement / disadvantage?	
Yes	12
No	98

Table 3: What type of project/partnership are you involved with your local school in providing?

Are any of your churches involved in a project or partnership with one or more local schools in relation to educational underachievement / disadvantage?	
Activity	**Frequency Cited**
Providing and staffing a Homework Club	1
English as an additional language classes for parents	1
Providing IT hardware or training to combat digital poverty	1
Providing and staffing a Breakfast Club	1
School Uniform and/or School Book Bank / Exchange	4
Wellbeing or mental health support	5
Reading recovery or literacy support in the school	4
Providing and/or staffing Parenting Skills courses	1
CAP/Money/Debt management courses	1
Foodbank	5
Other	6

5.5 Context of the Project

The 12 respondents who said that they were involved in a project or partnership with their local school were invited to provide further information, starting with how long the project had been running. Participants were also asked how the project was funded, and how it was managed and run. Respondents could provide more than one answer regarding how the project was funded and could also input their own responses. Inputted responses were: "*government grants*"; "*Some of our staff are funded through our Youth Work grant from EA, others are*

volunteers"; "*Working in support with a local community initiative [who] are the link people with TLG in England*".

Table 4: Context of the Project or Partnership

For how long has this project been running?		***How is the project funded?***		***Is this project managed and run by paid staff, volunteers, or a combination?***	
Less than 1 year	2	Central church funds	2	Paid staff	1
1-2 years	6	Local church funds	6	Combination	8
2-5 years	0	Community, social, charity or other grants	7	Volunteers	3
More than 5 years	4	Other	3		

5.6 Open-Ended Questions about the Project/Partnership

The 12 Ministers whose churches were involved in a project or partnership with their local school were invited to reflect on various aspects of that work. A total of 11 responded to the question of who the project specifically catered for. Their answers indicate that these initiatives often prioritise children experiencing disadvantage or educational vulnerability. Several ministers referred to supporting "*disadvantaged children and teens*," "*those that underachieve*," and pupils who had "*got behind during Covid*." Others described broader provision, serving "*primary students*," "*the children of both schools*," or "*a range of parents and children, depending on what the projects are*."

When asked to estimate the approximate annual cost of running these projects, five ministers reported that they were unsure of the financial details. Among the seven who did provide estimates, costs were generally modest. Some initiatives operated at minimal or no financial cost to the church, particularly where the primary contribution was volunteer time. One minister noted that "*the school covers photocopying*" and that the church spends around £100

per year on gifts for pupils, while another estimated approximately £100 for purchasing books. Other figures ranged from £500 to £1,200 annually. One project reported a higher initial set-up cost of £2,000 but described ongoing running costs as free.

Ministers were also asked what training they, their volunteers or staff had received in order to engage effectively in the project. One participant was unsure and could not comment, while three reported that no formal training had been provided. Safeguarding training emerged as a key area of preparation, delivered either through the church or, in one case, through the external organisation coordinating the programme (TLG). Other responses reflected a mixture of informal and context-based preparation. Some training was described as "*ongoing through schools*" or delivered "*through the school system*."

With regard to evaluation, approaches were similarly diverse. One minister did not provide an answer, and two projects were in their early stages and had not yet undergone evaluation, although plans were in place. Among the remaining responses, no single model of evaluation emerged. In some cases, evaluation was conducted annually by the school, or termly in collaboration with teachers and more formally on an annual basis. Others described less structured processes, such as reviewing progress each term, assessing volunteers and achievements yearly through [name of locality initiative] or considering the project at an annual church congregational meeting. Finally, one minister noted that the project was "*not formally evaluated but seems to be greatly appreciated by staff of the school*".

Ministers were asked how the project might be improved or extended in the future. One did not respond, two were unsure, and another indicated that they were not involved in decisions regarding future development. A recurring theme was capacity: four ministers stated that expansion would be possible if additional volunteers or staff were available. Two expressed an intention to extend the work to other schools in the area. Other suggestions were more specific and practical, such as making school uniforms available throughout the year rather than at limited points, or securing further funding to purchase additional resources, including plants for project activities.

Chapter 6: Case Study Research – Findings, Analysis & Discussion

6.1 Themes Identified

From reviewing the transcripts of all 17 individual interviews and the 4 focus group interviews, the key themes emerging were identified and an Excel spreadsheet was generated with all instances of mentions of these key themes. As new themes emerged, they were added to the spreadsheet, and a final check was made through previously analysed transcripts to see if there were any references to these newly emerging key themes. This resulted in a large spreadsheet of comments and quotations from interviewees which showed remarkable similarities across all five case studies despite their different contexts.

The main themes identified in order of frequency were: *Mentoring* which was used to address both academic support and emotional wellbeing needs; *Emotional Wellbeing* programmes and initiatives which benefitted the whole school community; *Community engagement* where the churches were playing a vital role as community anchors addressing needs in the community through funding, volunteering, and family support; *Social deprivation* where by meeting the needs of the community in terms of economic support, parental engagement and positive role-modelling, churches are raising the aspirations of the next generation and increasing positive attitudes towards education and qualifications. Additionally, church-run youth clubs provide *Safe Spaces* where Christian values challenge the prevailing narrative and keep young people off the streets rather than getting into trouble with the police or local 'gangs'. *Legacy and Continuity* was another theme which was mentioned in several of the interviews and the longevity of projects such as youth clubs which had been part of the community for generations, as was the willingness of church members to *volunteer* and provide services to the community seeing it as an expression of *faith in action.*

6.2 Mentoring and Educational Support

Several of the churches were directly involved in specifically educational support programmes which normally took the form of individual mentoring (Case Study 1[CS1], Case Study 3 [CS3], Case Study 5 [CS5]) of pupils identified by the schools as in need of help with their reading or their low self-confidence. Generally, these were not pupils who needed specialist support for a specific learning disability but as the principal in CS5 described:

"children who we feel would benefit from a bit of a confidence boost…who maybe aren't reading at home with and adult…you can see that they're building their confidence and their understanding".

This additional and free support from church congregations can leave the school more capacity within stretched budgets to cater for professional learning support for those with more specific educational needs.

In CS1, CS2 and CS4 the churches involved organised or supported (CS1) after-school homework clubs which offered pupils both academic and emotional support. In CS2 where the club runs on a Monday and begins with the children getting a healthy snack after school, the manager commented that,

''…the children aren't really getting their homework done any other time, bar the Mondays they are actually with us…we can see it in their books and we are helping them understand", and "It's not all about fun and games…… this is a homework support group".

She also pointed out that the routine of getting their homework done is good preparation in building a study routine for when they go into secondary school, *"…once they get into secondary school it's actually too late to help them…get into ways of doing their homework properly".* Pupils from CS2 confirmed that they found the club leaders to be very kind and helpful and helped them with their homework when they were stuck. The principal in the CS2 school mentioned two pupils in particular who attended the homework club – one whose parent struggled to assist the child with homework and this [club] allowed a more relaxed family time when the child returned home and another whose parent was in prison and exhibited improved academic outcomes with a reduction in anti-social behaviour outside the school. The same principal also commented that *"We definitely have seen improvements in behaviour as well as improvements in … actual homework outcomes".*

As well as supporting pupils' self-confidence, several interviewees mentioned that the contact with individual pupils often served to raise their aspirations by encouraging them to apply for grammar school entry or to broaden their career horizons simply through the conversations that happened naturally during mentoring, youth club or coaching sessions with volunteers (CS1 and CS5). A couple of the churches (CS3 and CS5) also organised English language lessons for parents while their children were at school, meaning that these parents, often of children

with English as an Additional Language (EAL) were better able to support their children's learning and their homework.

6.3 Support for Emotional Wellbeing

Some of the programmes and partnerships with which churches were involved also contributed to tackling educational underachievement through less overtly educational programmes. By supporting primary pupils' mental health and emotional wellbeing there are direct knock-on effects for educational attainment (Miller et al., 2013) and particularly for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds (Moore & Campbell, 2017). Schools in CS3 and CS5, for example, both noted the benefits for all pupils of the Prayer Spaces which had been set up and run by their local churches which helped pupils with anxiety and emotional regulation (CS5) and revealed their worries (CS3 and CS5) and fed into the schools' pastoral care system. These prayer spaces were run by church volunteers and addressed real life issues the children were dealing with. In one school (CS3) there were a number of children who had experienced parental bereavement in the previous year and so the volunteers brought an activity based on an empty chair where the children were able to write on a luggage tag the name of someone whom they missed and their memories of them.

Volunteers at the prayer spaces are able to feedback information on the issues children are experiencing to the relevant pastoral and support staff in the school so that they can be supported. The prayer space in this school led to the setting up of a permanent 'Mindfulness Room' in the school where pupils can go if they are feeling anxious or upset. In CS5 the minister also pointed out that rather than focusing on abstract or religious concepts, *"the theme [of the prayer space] each time is things like friendship, healthy friendships, dealing with worry, that sort of idea"*. The principal also (CS5) comments that the prayer spaces are about:

> *"helping the children with their thoughts and their feelings. What makes good friends? Friendship building. How do we calm down? Being accepting of others, which is inclusion and is a huge thing within our school".*

This all aligns with the research into Prayer Spaces in Schools carried out by Stern & Shilitoe (2017a, p.8-9) which found that they provided pupils with 'the opportunity to engage in internal conversations with themselves' and also to 'de-stress' (p.11). They also found that the next most frequently mentioned thing that children thought about within prayer spaces was their

relationships with dead relatives (p.15); 'In this way prayer spaces provide an opportunity for pupils to acknowledge and process the emotions of grief in a culture that rarely provides permission or time for this' (Stern & Shilitoe, 2017b).

6.4 Community Engagement and Volunteerism

Several of the churches involved in the study worked with or through community organisations or youth clubs which are open to all; they co-ordinated or provided volunteers for community programmes such as 'Safer Families' or local litter-picking events and often hosted community groups such as one case study parish centre (CS2) which was used by Alzheimer's groups, cross-community choirs and even as a venue for staff-training for a local hospital. Church grounds and premises were often used for events and community support groups such as Christmas fairs, Mother and Toddler groups, food banks, football coaching, community art/craft or gardening projects (CS5).

Many schools mentioned the role of churches in relationship-building where the willingness of church volunteers to engage with and support young people has helped with inter-generational relationships in the local area. For instance, one older volunteer mentioned that when he sees his 'mentee' outside school now, *"she smiles and waves…we're friends now"*. The relationship between the school and the church is based on trust which has been built up over many years and the continuity of care which a church provides within the community often contrasts with other projects and initiatives which fade away when the funding stream dries up after a couple of years. In some cases, church youth clubs are seen as a reliable source of support and many parents who attended them as children themselves now volunteer as leaders and/or send their own children to them as they are 'safe spaces' and "keep them out of trouble" and not "getting up to badness", while a child interviewed in CS2 mentioned that it "gave the mums a break". The value of the voluntary service provided by church members, sometimes coordinated by or alongside community, charity or EA workers, was frequently mentioned with parents and children making statements such as, *"sure, I spent most of my life at your youth club. In fact, you probably know more about me than my mum does…"(*CS2). There was also an acknowledgement of the role of the youth club in building the community, *"It's kept people close together… we still know each other"* (CS2). There was also a sense that the schools and community organisations could rely on the churches to supply experienced and capable (usually older) people who would freely invest their time and experience in the educational

attainment and wellbeing of the children in the community and also provide (usually younger) role models for children who had often been through the same clubs and programmes themselves and wanted to *"give something back"* to the community and help raise aspirations among the next generation. This links directly back to the role of the church within Bronfenbrenner's Micro and Mesosystems and Scott's Seven Circles of Support which surround and support the child.

6.5 Faith in Action

When the motivation for church-school partnerships was examined as part of this study there were three main factors which featured in the interviews with ministers and volunteers and these were: wanting to play a positive role in the local community, wanting to follow the teaching of Jesus and help those in need and wanting to show the Christian values of love and service to their local community. Purdy et al. (2022, p.44) reported that a minority of participants in their study found churches to be *"stuffy"* and unwilling to *"dip their toe in the water"* or that where they were prepared to engage, their service was not *"unconditional"*. In the current study, in all five case studies, the ministers and church volunteers reported that they just wanted to help and, in that sense, implied that their contribution was not conditional in any way:

> *"So, a lot of what we do is not directly Christian or even missional, but we would hope that we are being a good example…. or being good witnesses. We're serving. We're trying to bless the school, and we don't do it in order to get something; but we have a reputation for being the church that cares for the local community, which is a good reputation to have. And we have had people come to us for help"* (CS5).

In some cases, churches were actively concerned about the perception that they were not seen as relevant, *"We want them [the community] to be able to see that the church is not something sitting on the hill…we are approachable, we have something to offer"* (CS3). Another volunteer acknowledged that those who come to church sometimes don't have the same financial or social problems as others within the community, *"church is a bubble, and everybody's friendly with each other, but there's a big community out there that, that, that need,*

need help, really. And you know, if we can be good neighbours and help, well, it's certainly something that we need to be involved in" (CS5).

Seeking to respond to the needs of the community around it was something that exercised all of our case study churches; some reported that they found their motivation in Jeremiah 29:7 'Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have sent you….' and viewed their Community Service as a form of witness to their Christian beliefs. Interviewees shared their awareness of the basic economic needs of the school community and how they recognised that by alleviating these practical problems, they would address educational underachievement and therefore raise the aspirations and achievements of the next generation. The minister in CS4 recalled how he was able to give money from an emergency fund to a family who had not sent their daughter to school for two days because they did not have any food for her packed lunch. This church regularly supplies grants to families who are struggling to afford basic necessities such as home heating oil and medical prescriptions.

Similarly, the minister in CS5 has an arrangement with the school receptionist that when they know a family is struggling, she will give him a ring and he will supply a Tesco gift card so that the struggling family can buy food, school uniforms or whatever is required. The minister does not even know which family gets the gift card and in a similar way, the church keeps a stock of 'pre-owned' uniform items which they sell at a very low cost once or twice a year and can also supply free during the year when requested anonymously through the school. This provision for the basic material needs is very similar to that provided in the examples cited in Fulgham et al. (2026) which demonstrate how important it is to provide basic support for the pupil in order to raise academic attainment. Breakfast clubs and homework clubs are also an answer to food poverty for some families, and the volunteers in CS2 were very aware of their role in 'feeding the hungry'. Principals too were very aware that churches were meeting a community need through these clubs and that, as one said, *"If children are thinking about their empty stomachs, they can't really focus on fractions"* (CS3). This confirms research by Francis-Devine et al. (2025) which found that food poverty and use of food banks is increasing and that pupils who are entitled to free school meals achieve lower grades at GCSE level. A study by Gooseman et al. (2020) confirmed that hunger had a direct effect on pupils' focus, cognition and learning in the classroom. A research project carried out by Crawford et al. (2019) established that KS1 children enrolled in a breakfast club made the equivalent of two months' additional progress compared to children in the control group, and that pupil behaviour

improved in the school, 'which may improve outcomes for children who do not even attend breakfast club by improving classroom environments' (p.24).

Church representatives on boards of governors are often in a better position than most to appreciate just how difficult the job of a teacher is in the current economic and social climate. Moreover, the impact of a small gift from the church to all members of a school's staff in two of the case studies was a selfless way of supporting the school community (CS3 and CS5). The impact on the staff was telling in the account of one principal who recalled one occasion when the minister arrived at the staffroom with a bag of scones and cakes and a letter telling them how much they were appreciated:

> *"my staff sat and cried … because they'd never experienced what could be seen as a very simple act, but it meant so much that somebody had actually taken time to put in writing that they could read and refer back to, and it really made them feel worthwhile and valued and recognised by people outside of the management team of the school"* (CS3).

Church representatives are also well-placed to know what *"wee jobs"* need doing in or around the school or where the budgetary gaps are hitting hardest. One volunteer talked about their engagement with the school like this,

> *"when opportunities came to help with because of lack of funding with decorating or doing their clearing up and doing some gardening or whatever, yeah, I was keen…to go ahead with that…… It's surprising what can be done with a team of people turning up [on a] Saturday" (CS5).*

Roles managed or funded by churches such as that of school chaplain (CS4) or family liaison officer (CS3) can have a dual function of being able to visit the pupil's home and telling the school when conditions for learning are not good and what the needs of that pupil or family are, and also being able to check in with a pupil in an after-school club or activity if the school has concerns about disengagement or mental health. All of these connections help to surround a vulnerable pupil with support and concern and may make all the difference in helping them to avoid disengagement and escape from socio-economic factors which are detrimental to academic achievement. In addition, ministers and church volunteers are often members of the local community, living close to the school and church in contrast to teachers and principals who, particularly in disadvantaged areas, often commute to work from other more affluent areas of the city or other towns/villages. Recent research on effective school leadership in

disadvantaged communities (Purdy et al., 2025, p.67) shows the importance of ‘community connectedness’ or ‘contextual literacy’ and in many areas, the church and the school really are the heart of the community.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1 Summary of key findings

While not all of the Community Service examples identified in the case study partnerships were specifically focused on educational outcomes such as reading programmes, the study found clear evidence that by mentoring individual pupils, by facilitating programmes which aimed to improve children's and young people's mental health and wellbeing, and by providing safe-spaces such as youth clubs, after-school homework clubs and breakfast clubs, church volunteers are removing some of the recognised barriers to educational attainment and helping to raise aspirations among children and young people in their local communities.

In all cases there was some form of evaluation of the programmes which were run in the schools or through community organisations, but even where the support was through informal, after-schools settings or through individual pastoral care, research participants reported that there was a noticeable perceived positive effect on pupils' educational attainment, disposition and/or self-esteem. For instance, a Principal from CS3 commenting on the pupils who had received pastoral support from the school chaplain commented that, *"Those children overnight have completely changed…achievement has gone up".* Schools in socially disadvantaged areas can look to local church congregations to supply practical help for families in need, to provide spaces for events, to run extra-curricular events and clubs which children in more affluent areas pay to attend, and even to carry out basic maintenance around the school estate which frees up precious school funds which can then be used to meet the cost of staffing or learning resources.

The review of the research and policy literature above has highlighted that there is not a one-size-fits-all solution to addressing educational underachievement (e.g., Demie, 2019; Harris et al., 2021) and that just as different areas have different challenges to overcome, congregations often choose to support schools in their local areas in a wide variety of ways – from offering financial gifts to providing volunteers for mentoring or running Prayer Spaces in schools. This research has indeed shown that there are so many needs currently affecting children in areas of social deprivation that they are all needed and are gratefully received by the local schools.

7.2 Limitations of the Study

By choosing to use a case study methodology, this research has only highlighted examples of good practice in five particular schools and has not been able to show long-term educational outcomes which are generalisable across the whole of Northern Ireland. However, by using this method, a relatively small-scale piece of research was able to collect rich data on the partnerships between the churches and schools at the heart of the study. If fewer interviews had been conducted in each of the settings, many strands of the intricate web of connections between the churches and schools which supports and cares for the pupils and their families would have been missed. One principal commented that, *"there's just so many things that we wouldn't be able to do without him [the minister] helping us out"* (CS5).

Another limitation of the study was that it was confined to the three largest Protestant denominations who make up the TRC and who were the funding body for the current research. The researchers are aware of many other churches and also Christian organisations who are very active in supporting schools in their locality in many of the same ways outlined here and, no doubt, in other ways. Similarly, the schools studied were all from the Controlled sector and although two partnerships which were outside the greater Belfast area were included, it is regrettable that very rural churches and the country village situation were not examined in this small-scale study.

7.3 Recommendations from the Study

The research conducted in these five settings clearly highlights how churches in areas of social deprivation can partner with the school in providing for some of the physical needs of the families who attend the school and can have a role in overcoming some of the barriers to educational attainment faced by children and young people in their communities.

For Churches:

The example of the case studies examined in this research suggest that churches would be advised to examine their congregational resources in terms of personnel, skills, abilities, experience and time as well as what practical resources such as space, parking or tables and chairs they could offer for the service of the school. Our study has shown that the giving of any of these resources can be seen as an outworking of Christian faith in action, offered to all

without condition or expectation of reward or commitment and an exercise of true Community Service.

The study also showed that relationships are a key feature of successful partnerships and that school governors and ministers can be a very useful point of contact between the church and school. Asking the Principal – *"What can we do….? How can we help…?"* was often the starting point for church-school partnerships which have gone on to lead to programmes and initiatives which have been of real benefit to the community: *"The school was very much part of the church community… I just wanted to continue to build those relationships with the teachers there"* (Minister CS1). Churches could establish a dedicated group of volunteers who could co-ordinate teams for mentoring, reading support and school maintenance work parties: "*… if you have an hour, you're retired or you're a parent with a free hour — you can mentor a child"* (community group leader CS1).

If churches have concerns about not having enough active members who could mentor pupils, or they have concerns about training or safeguarding, our study has shown that there are several organisations and community groups who are available to organise and train volunteers or who can deliver their own wellbeing programmes and this can be funded by the church. Similarly, churches could fund community support roles such as chaplains or youth workers who have the experience and training to relate to and mentor struggling pupils or identify families who need extra help to ensure the educational attainment of their children.

For Schools:

This study has demonstrated a number of important ways in which churches can support schools. The findings would suggest that, should they wish to do so, schools should not be afraid to reach out to their local churches to ask for help in any number of ways as identified in this study. The inclusion of church representatives in governance roles, where they are not already in place, could help to strengthen strategic church-school partnerships. If the local minister or a lay member of their congregation is already on the Board of Governors, the principal could share with them the support needs of the school and ask if a volunteer team could be put together to address some of the needs identified. This could begin with practical or financial aid and then progress to mentoring, reading programmes or pastoral care and wellbeing initiatives.

It would be important for schools to identify pupils who would benefit from mentoring and emotional support as early as possible, so that the ongoing involvement of a caring adult

throughout the academic year will have maximum impact. These pupils may not be those who need specialist literacy, communication or psychological interventions or assessments but those 'in the middle' who *"just need a little boost……or who might not have a stable, caring adult at home"* (Volunteer CS1).

For Policymakers:

Evidence from this study would suggest that policymakers should recognise and fund faith-based community partnerships that support educational outcomes and should also be aware of the value that chaplaincy and church volunteers engaged in mentoring can have in disadvantaged areas.

Policymakers could perhaps provide training and safeguarding resources for volunteers involved in school programmes and use church-based organisations as a means of reaching the community with programmes to support positive child development such as online safety training, adolescent mental health awareness courses, paediatric first aid, Bookstart programmes, etc.

7.4 Concluding Remarks

This study has shown that, just as the factors causing social deprivation and educational underachievement are complex and various, efforts to address them may have to involve a complex web made up of different strands. Churches and church congregations have been shown by this research to be a valuable source of people willing to give their time freely in order to come alongside and serve the community, through what they see as a spirit of Agapé (selfless) love and as a living out of their Christian faith.

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