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Community Service

Church-School collaborations addressing educational underachievement and social disadvantage

Toolkit for Churches | June 2026







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https://www.stran.ac.uk/research-paper/gracie-et-al-2026/

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Introduction – Report Summary

The Report above is an account of research completed between 2023 and 2025 which examined how church–school partnerships in Northern Ireland have contributed to tackling educational underachievement and social deprivation, particularly within disadvantaged communities. The study focused on the three Transferor Churches—Presbyterian, Church of Ireland and Methodist—and explored how congregations supported pupils, families and schools through practical assistance, relational programmes and community-focused interventions.

The research took place against a challenging educational landscape. Northern Ireland faced (and still faces) persistent socio-economic inequality, widening attainment gaps, and long-term reductions in funding for literacy, mental-health support and targeted interventions. Post-Covid effects continue to disproportionately impact disadvantaged pupils, while schools experience rising demand with diminishing capacity. Alongside this, churches operate within an increasingly secular and sceptical social context, despite historically significant roles in education.

Data collection included a scoping survey of 110 ministers and five in-depth case studies involving 17 individual interviews and four focus groups. The survey revealed that 104 ministers reported active involvement with local schools, although only 12 churches were engaged in work explicitly targeting educational underachievement. Many more provided indirect support through pastoral care, governance roles, community programmes, food provision and family assistance.

Across the case studies, several consistent themes emerged. *Mentoring and educational support* helped build pupils' confidence, improve reading and homework completion, and raise aspirations, particularly for children lacking constructive adult engagement at home. *Emotional wellbeing programmes*, including Prayer Spaces and pastoral mentoring, offered safe opportunities for pupils to express anxieties, process bereavement and develop coping strategies, contributing to improved readiness to learn. *Community engagement* was another major strength: churches acted as stable anchors in areas where schools and families faced multiple pressures. Youth clubs, breakfast clubs, uniform banks, parent support groups and community activities helped reduce the effects of poverty, strengthen intergenerational relationships and prevent disengagement from education.

A strong theme throughout was *faith expressed through service*. Volunteers and clergy consistently described motivations grounded in compassion, community care and selfless support rather than Proselytism. Schools widely affirmed that church involvement filled critical gaps left by funding cuts and provided continuity where short-term programmes could not.

The study recommends that churches continue to audit their skills and resources, develop trained volunteer teams and build sustained relationships with local schools. Schools are encouraged to engage churches as strategic partners, especially for mentoring and wellbeing support.

To that end, this toolkit is offered by the research team to help church congregations and clergy who seek to develop closer and more productive relationships with their communities through local schools. It is designed for those who have a heart for tackling educational underachievement and showing the selfless love of Jesus for young people facing challenges.

How to use this Toolkit.

1. **Find a Case Study** which best reflects the community in which your congregation is located and also one which is closest to your own context in size and profile. Read through the short pen-picture of their projects in the following pages of the toolkit and learn from their example what has benefitted that community most.

2. **Build a relationship with the school** – find out from them what are the specific needs in the school community relating to educational underachievement and economic and social deprivation
   i. **Bless the whole school** first in practical ways to build the trust of and relationships with all members of the school community.
   ii. **Make your Objectives clear** – ensure that both the school community and your congregation are aware that this Community Service will entail purely Agapé love with no thought of numerical gain for the church or evangelistic motive.
   iii. **Assess your resources** to determine what form your Community Service can take. What have you got which could be shared: Time? Money? Space? People? Experience?
   iv. **Build in plans for continuity** - Don't let initial enthusiasm wane and numbers dwindle – actively find and train up the next generation of volunteers.

3. **Use the Directory of Organisations** below to contact groups/organisations which might be able to help train, support and resource volunteers from within your own congregation. These organisations were not all used by case study Community Service projects but all offer programmes, projects or resources to help address educational underachievement, issues of wellbeing or mental health for children or young people, and social or economic deprivation for local communities.

Outline of Case Studies.

Case Study 1: Church of the Good Shepherd, Monkstown, Newtownabbey, North Belfast - Hollybank Primary School - Abbey Community College.

Denomination	**Joint Charge – Methodist and Church of Ireland**
Size of Congregation	100 – 300 members
Urban / Rural	Suburban
School Type/s	Controlled Primary – Ages 4-11yrs
Project 1	**Youth Drop-in and Mentoring Programmes**
Organisation	Monkstown Village Initiative and Transforming Lives for Good
Numbers involved and level of commitment	Support for Mentoring and Youth Drop-In programmes provided by employed youth workers at MVI which is supported by all churches in the area.
Project 2	**Reading Support Programme in Primary School**
Organisation	Church Members
Numbers involved and level of commitment	5 or 6 volunteers – 1 hour per week
Challenges Encountered	• Timing of referrals to service and organisation of training/vetting for volunteers – coordinating with the school year. • More volunteers needed
Benefits for Participants	• Enhanced Reading Scores and confidence • Improved mental health and wellbeing • Increased aspiration for the future and resolve to stay out of trouble
Benefits for Volunteers	• Satisfaction of seeing pupils' reading and confidence improve • Better inter-generational relationships in the community • Christian witness of churches working together for the Community

The church of the Good Shepherd (COGS) is a covenant relationship church formed from two congregations, one Methodist and one Church of Ireland. It was originally established in 1968 in a joint church scheme and fully united to become one congregation in 2003. As their Facebook page puts it, 'Over fifty years ago it was the dream and hope of those first congregations to be a blessing to the people who lived in and who were coming to live in Monkstown…. Our hopes and dreams are just the same'. As this project was beginning, the Methodist minister was Rev. Ruth Patterson of the Methodist Church in Ireland, but during the course of the research, the Rev Nathan Ervine of the Church of Ireland took over as the minister in charge. These appointments are jointly made, so that both ministers, for the duration of their appointment, under the Covenant Agreement between the MCI and the Cof I, are ordained ministers of both churches.

The united church congregation numbers well over a hundred people with an average Sunday congregation of close to 90, including families with school-age children, some of whom attend Hollybank, the local Controlled primary school. It is situated in the outer fringes of North Belfast in the middle of two urban estate areas – Rathcoole and Monkstown which, as a Neighbourhood Renewal Area, is amongst the 10% of most disadvantaged communities in Northern Ireland (Thrive Report, 2023). The Monkstown community has been described by one young person as '*kind of a hard place to grow up in because of the like, but it's close-knit……*'[Focus group participant, CS1] and there are several initiatives and partnerships in which local churches have played a part seeking to raise aspirations, attainment and wellbeing among the area's young people.

Monkstown Village Initiative – Youth Drop-In

The Monkstown Village Initiative (formerly, the Care Centre) was set up in the early 1990s by a group of clergy and lay people from the churches in Monkstown who created 'an organisation that would show, in a practical way, the love Jesus Christ had for people' and their first initiative was to provide a centre where people could come and 'talk out their life challenges' (MVI website, 2025, n.p.). From its earliest beginnings, church members in the area wanted to provide somewhere for young people to be able to 'hang out' without the lure of alcohol or drugs and where local volunteers would be there to listen and provide non-judgemental support.

Now rebranded as the Monkstown Village Initiative, the Centre still proudly acknowledges its Christian Values on its website. Its Vision statement reflects that it is 'motivated by Christian principles and values particularly those that relate to social justice'. It has two employed youth workers who provide youth drop-in sessions after school, a girls-only group to support and empower teenage girls from the local area and a mentoring programme in the two local schools – Abbey Community College and Hollybank National School.

Links with School

This particular case study highlights the links between the Church of the Good Shepherd and the Hollybank Primary School, a Controlled School of over 400 pupils with a growing number of P1 applicants and recently added nursery and learning support units. Their strong links with the local community was acknowledged by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) in their last inspection in 2010. Hollybank is a very caring and nurturing school which caters for some families with a range of social and educational disadvantages including generational unemployment, low aspirations and some which suffer from food poverty. The Vice Principal commented that sometimes children came to school without having eaten breakfast and for that reason they had started offering a breakfast club for all, so that each child would at least have had a slice of toast in the morning before school began.

The links between the local churches and Hollybank primary school fall generally into three main strands – religious, governance and mentorship. Ministers from the churches come into the school in rotation on a weekly basis to speak in assemblies. Some local churches (including the Church of the Good Shepherd) have put on events connected with Christian festivals or life in Bible times, which combine fun and excitement with learning about particular aspects of the Gospel Story. They also give out books and gifts at Church holiday times such as Christmas and Easter to all the families in the school whether they attend church or not. There are church representatives as TRC governors on the School's Board of Governors and one of these volunteers as the school librarian.

Reading and Mentoring Scheme

One of the other links with the Church of the Good Shepherd comes in the form of the mentoring scheme which is administrated through the Monkstown Village Initiative. Volunteers come into the primary school on a weekly basis and mentor individual pupils who need a bit of extra help with their reading or communication skills or with their self-confidence and self-belief. Volunteers from the church are recruited and trained by the Village Initiative in the 'Transforming Lives for Good' (TLG) programme and undergo safeguarding training and Access NI clearance. The TLG organisation, which is UK wide, also develop and update materials for use in the mentoring sessions (Morfin, 2020).

Hollybank primary school identify pupils for the mentoring scheme by using the PASS (Pupil Attitude to Self and School) diagnostic test (GL Assessment, 2025, np) which is 'a digital survey that identifies non-academic barriers that may affect learning and engagement in the wider school community, including motivation and confidence'. The students selected do not necessarily have diagnosable reading or behavioural difficulties, such as dyslexia or ADHD, but are described by the VP in her interview as "*in need of a little extra boost*" to their self-esteem and self-regard in terms of how they see themselves as a learner. The PASS test is administered again at the end of the academic year and although the results of those tests were not made available to us for this study, the VP commented that the teachers were able to see an "*appreciable improvement*" in the pupils' self-esteem and confidence from engaging with the programme.

The school puts much of the success of the TLG down to the relationship which is built up between the children and their mentors and often the same mentor will follow the pupil into a second year which is often their final year in primary school. This individual attention and support gives them the confidence and self-belief which will provide a firm foundation for their progression into secondary school. For this reason, it is important that the volunteers commit to their one-hour a week throughout the school year, although some mentor more than one pupil, but many church volunteers see that as "*sharing God's love in the community*" as one volunteer put it. These devoted men and women comment on how great it is to see 'their' pupils' confidence growing throughout the year and how they can see the positive changes in

the pupils which their mentoring has brought. The primary school acknowledges that the need for this kind of voluntary mentoring is increasing every year and mentioned that they could "*do with as many mentors as we could possibly get*". This is a big challenge for the churches in Monkstown to supply, but a big opportunity for those who want to get involved in supporting the families and children in the community.

Support is also given to children of all ages through the Monkstown Village Initiative which offers tutoring for the transfer tests and gardening workshops for schools in the community garden. Youth Club and Drop-In at the centre are also offered for P5-Year 8 pupils and a newer initiative for girls from Year 8-Year 12, called 'Impact'. There is no doubt that the success of the TLG mentoring scheme and the other Village Centre initiatives is very much needed in the Monkstown area and that the trust and relationships built up between volunteers and families demonstrate the necessity of the whole community working together to build a better future for children growing up in this part of North Belfast. By working together with the schools and families, the churches are playing an important role in the lives of the young people and their reframing of themselves as being capable of educational achievement and thereby having a future which matches their potential unhindered by the socio-economic or geographical constraints of where they were born.

Case Study 2: Seagoe Parish Church - Edenderry PS – Seagoe Primary School - Seagoe Parish Centre – Seagoe Ministries Charitable Organisation

Denomination	**Church of Ireland**
Size of Congregation	Approximately 350 - 400 families
Urban / Rural	Rural
School Type/s	Seagoe PS – Church of Ireland Maintained Primary School Edenderry PS – Controlled Primary School (4-11) Killicomaine Junior High School (11-14)
Project 1	**After-school Homework Club**
Organisation	Edenderry PS
Numbers involved and level of commitment	Approximately 26 children from various classes (P4 – P7) Every Monday afternoon after school during term times 3 – 5pm approximately
Project 2	**Junior and Senior Youth Clubs**
Organisation	Education Authority and Church members
Numbers involved and level of commitment	2 paid EA leaders and one volunteer from the church. Other young church members also volunteer as junior leaders.
Challenges Encountered	• Lack of support from home. Behavioural issues influenced by social background. • Lack of access to technology and materials. • Not enough time for all the support required, further funded sessions would be helpful.
Benefits for Participants	• Small group support for homework and other activities. • Time and space to complete work. • Access to technology and other materials. • A healthy snack after school. • Emotional support. • A listening ear and supportive adult figure.
Benefits for Volunteers	• Forging friendships with children young people and families in the community. • Practical support for families. • Young volunteers completing Dof E award have gained experience through supporting others academically, physically and mentally. These experiences have also added to their CV.

The church in question is recognised as one of the oldest Christian settlements in Ireland. On the edge of one of the largest towns in Northern Ireland, the current church building dates back to 1814, on a site opposite the original building. With a parish centre opposite, a new suite of halls regularly used for community events and the largest Church of Ireland maintained primary school beside it, the church aims to be a 'visible presence' in the local community.

The church plant about five miles from the main parish church is close to a large loyalist housing estate. Started 60 years ago, it still hosts a Sunday service for local residents. At this time a large primary school relocated to its new site on the edge of the town, beside the church plant and adjacent to the large new housing estate also being built. When a member of the church was approached about purchasing land for the church plant, he said he would not sell but would donate it. Over the years from around a decade after its inception, the church plant evolved into a small church with an education centre and youth complex adjacent to the growing primary school; '*It was a dream to build this youth centre … and it suddenly meant youth work could be where the young people were'* (Interviewee 2). The two have been connected ever since.

The surrounding area has experienced a lot of deprivation. During the Troubles paramilitary activity emanated from the locality which currently houses many newcomer families, resulting in 17 different nationalities now attending the school. The current and past principals confirmed the unique combination of pupils attending the school; some from the large estate with single parent families and social challenges of drug and alcohol addiction; others from nearby private housing areas with professional parents. The school population comprised of some children with very high academic ability alongside children with significant SEN, thereby requiring additional support. The school has a strong Christian ethos and families, while not necessarily church goers, still have respect for the church and its values. Both principals also confirmed the school's strong links with neighbouring churches as well as the continuing link with their close neighbour, the youth centre.

Youth Centre

The youth centre, initiated by the church and originally funded from the International Fund for Ireland and other agencies, has been reaching out to the community through a number of ventures over the last 50 years. Currently the Centre has a Board of Trustees made up of 10 church members and including the recently appointed manager, the serving minister and assistant minister of the church as well as a diocesan Youth Development officer. They oversee the work of the manager and work closely to set the direction of the Centre's various work and activities, with monthly reports of all activities provided by the manager. The paid staff all come from education and youth work backgrounds, and the manager outlined the importance of training, highlighting ACES, conflict resolution and mediation training all to have been of value in running the setting.

The youth centre has charitable status and while funding comes from the church they can also apply for funding from the Education Authority (EA). The two supporting members of staff along with the manager are employed by the EA, assisted by other volunteer staff and Duke of Edinburgh volunteers who are usually past club members.

The youth centre activities are generally based around EA's six principles: life and work skills, health and well-being, enhanced personal capabilities, improving relationships, increasing participation and active citizenship (Interviewee 1). Over the years these have included a drop in centre, youth club for older teens to 'get them off the streets', children's and youth uniformed organisations, such as church girls and church lad's brigade, and a children's after school club with around 40 members; '*because we have a school next door…the obvious thing to do was to offer help with children's homework*' (Interviewee 2). The manager highlighted that '*the need was educational attainment…children fell in with the wrong crowd… there definitely was a need to combat that early on*' (Interviewee 1).

The Centre also houses a mum's and toddlers' group, as a way of keeping in touch with past members and new families as a natural progression back to the centre through the after school and youth club. One church member, a trained teacher and Centre manager from 1990 to 2011, continues to work part time and on a voluntary basis at the after-school club. This individual

successfully encourages the involvement of other church members. For example, when help was required with the tuck shop, ladies from the church women's group became involved.

The recently appointed centre manager, while not a member of the church, acts as a bridge between the church and local schools. The manager regularly visits, leads school assemblies and hosts RE classes, in an effort to encourage children and young people to access the activities at the centre. The current primary school principal also commented that the children see this manager regularly in the school, which serves to further build up trust and connection.

After-School Club

The Monday after-school club, with a consistent membership of up to 40 children, generally P4 to P7, provides many games and activities and from its inception saw the need to support children's education. '*It's not just all about fun and games, …but also a structure… this is a homework support group*' (Interviewee 2). '*I think the children enjoy it and it's also a lovely way for parents to realise that their child is safe. It's a safe environment and a friendly environment. They are all treated with respect*' (Interviewee 2).

Situated at the gates of the school, the club runs from 3 – 5 pm every Monday. The children receive a healthy snack before completing their homework and can then enjoy free play around an activity of their choice. The manager confirmed 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.' She went on to say, '*we have some kids who choose to do their week's homework with us on a Monday… I think we are meeting them at a really good age. Once they get into secondary school it's actually too late to help them…get into ways of doing their homework properly*' (Interviewee 1).

The manager also outlined other activities provided such as mental health workshops, fitness workshops, creative media craft, garden club, recycling projects and looking after their immediate area. She affirmed the importance of '*…giving the children different avenues and different experiences to learn from that feeds into other sessions in the club*.' Affirming *' …we*

are not here to teach we are here to support, and…be able to provide them with opportunities to learn new things' (Interviewee 1)

When asked, the children commented that they enjoyed coming, they felt the club gave their parents a break, they found the leaders to be very kind and helpful and assisted with homework when they were stuck. The children all mentioned completing homework willingly before engaging in games such as lego building, table tennis, the x box and outdoor football. The children commented on how enjoyable they found the outside play activities. When asked about possible improvements, some children felt no improvement was needed while others suggested more outside equipment and another X-Box.

Parents highlighted that although they were not church members, they lived close to the youth centre, attended as children and now sent their own children. The parents described the trips and activities that they enjoyed as children, namely the after-school club and the summer scheme. The parents mentioned how the club '*Gets kids off the streets, takes them on the right path, gives them something to do*'. Some parents also valued the club as a cost-effective form of childminding, which fitted with work patterns. The parents also recalled the Girl's Brigade company which they attended in the youth centre. One vital constant was the care of the manager who had led the centre for over twenty years.

When commenting on enjoyment, the parents affirmed that children would rather come to the after-school club than attend school. The current primary school principal noted one parent in particular who enrolled their child in the club specifically to assist with homework. He explained that this parent struggled to assist the child with homework and this allowed a more relaxed family time when the child returned home. The principal also added that a child whose parent was incarcerated, was supported by the after-school club; they exhibited improved academic outcomes with a reduction in anti-social behaviour outside of school. This was particularly noted during the 'bonfire' season at the end of the academic year.
The manager carries out termly evaluations with the children and has noted their comments such as:

'It's a place where I get to talk, it's a place where I learn how to manage my anger, it's a place where I just get to be quiet because there are too many kids at home and it's a place where I get to me myself…this is really powerful …to read' (Interviewee 1)

The principal viewed the Monday homework club as a valuable priority in assisting parents and highlighted '*We definitely have seen improvements in behaviour as well as improvements in … actual homework outcomes*.' The principal added that although not formally measured, improved consistency was also noted in children's reading, spelling and written homework. Finally, he affirmed that part of the success of the after-school club was the link between the manager, a local community worker and himself. They met regularly to discuss aspects of need in the area. He, and his predecessor, highlighted how they were able, through a local charity, to sensitively and discreetly assist families with practical support such as beds, furniture and even Christmas gifts and how important this was in improving children's lives in the area.

Breakfast club

The previous principal highlighted another venture whereby the church supported the school and this was through the form of a breakfast club. This ran for approximately 10 years before the Covid pandemic in 2019 and continued after 2020, then re-formed as a school led initiative. The breakfast club was instigated by a teacher in the school who was also a member of the church. Upon noticing a child from a difficult background consistently stealing and hoarding food, the breakfast club was born. With 60-80 regular attendees from 8.10am each weekday morning children were given '*a very wholesome breakfast*' (Interviewee 2) before going to class. Parents used it as a cost-effective method of child minding around work patterns but also affirmed how children enjoyed attending and were more likely to eat a better breakfast than at home. The church supplied the school with freezers, toasters, kettle, crockery, containers and other implements to facilitate the day to day running of the club. These were stored in a designated part of the school. Alongside a teacher from the school, retired members of the church, who had all received child protection training, were in school each morning from around 8am preparing breakfast. The team of volunteers then grew to include members from a neighbouring church who also wanted to assist. The school asked for a nominal charge of 20p

per attendee but this was not insisted upon, with the main desire to meet the needs of any child who attended. The past principal commented on how the club benefited children physically by providing breakfast, socially by enabling children to interact with one another in a relaxed atmosphere over food and academically, ensuring they were well fed and thereby ready to learn. He noted how some children's behaviour had improved which '*allowed them to work and be more effective in class*.' The principal also noted that some church volunteers contributed further to the school by assisting with one-to-one reading programmes, which again he said was very valuable.

The club was reviewed on an annual basis and improvements added where required.
Following Covid, due to incapacitation of church volunteers and not wishing to put elderly volunteers at risk, the school made the decision, with the church, to organise and run the club exclusively with school staff. What started as a church-initiated venture continues to support the children in this primary school at the time of writing.

Case Study 3: St. Andrews Presbyterian Church and Clandeboye Primary School, Bangor, County Down

Denomination	**Presbyterian Church in Ireland**
Congregation size	250-300
Urban / Rural	Rural – on the outskirts of a seaside town
School Type/s	Controlled Primary School (4-11)
Project 1	**Prayer Spaces – mental health and wellbeing support**
Organisation	Prayer Spaces in Schools
Numbers involved and level of commitment	Around 20 volunteers are involved in the set-up and manning on a rota basis of the Prayer Space which is run for one week every year allowing all pupils in the school to experience it.
Project 2	**English Classes and Breakfast Club**
Organisation	Congregation Members
Numbers involved and level of commitment	English Classes run weekly for an hour each week. Around 10 volunteers serve on a rota basis. It takes 3-4 volunteers to serve at each 'Early Birds' session.
Challenges Encountered	• Sometimes parents choose to opt their children out of the Prayer Spaces • Can be difficult to get volunteers with younger people working and older people not feeling like they have the training or the confidence to get involved
Benefits for Participants	• School made aware of mental health problems or difficult family situations • Children able to examine and express deep feelings and questions and to learn techniques to help with anxiety and sensory overload • School curriculum for PDMU supported • Parents better able to help children with homework and benefits to educational achievement of newcomer pupils. • Parents appreciating the link between the church and the school and making it an attractive factor in school choice
Benefits for Volunteers	• Growing relationships and deepening partnership with the school and developing among the congregation a 'deeper heart for the children families and staff of the school • Personal satisfaction at being able to continue using professional skills for the community and helping children to thrive

The African proverb ‘it takes a village to raise a child’ is now so oft-quoted as to have become a cliché. However, in the case of the collaboration between St. Andrews Presbyterian Church and Clandeboye Primary School in Bangor, County Down, it is evident that this is no mere soundbite from the principal’s address on Open Evening, but rather an everyday reality in this community. This case study sought to determine how collaboration between a church and the local primary school helps to address the issue of educational underachievement. This report will outline how various aims, attitudes and actions enable this partnership between two separate institutions to help young people fulfil their academic potential.

The most obvious means by which the members of a church might contribute to the work of the local school in addressing educational underachievement would be through the provision of direct curriculum support. Such provision occurs in this particular collaboration in the form of, for example, the minister of the church (Rev. Mark Johnston) being involved in the teaching of Religious Education (RE), both through whole-school assemblies, and RE lessons in classrooms. However, this is not the most significant form of support afforded by the church to the school vis-à-vis addressing educational underachievement. The Minister of the church himself commented,

> *‘I'm not a teaching expert. The teachers are the ones that are gifted and called to do what they do in the classes … Our role [as members of church who take an interest in the school] is just to love and care for the kids, give them every opportunity possible, and make sure that the staff are given whatever they need to teach the kids and pour into them so they don't need to be worried about [practicalities such as] finance…’*

What these comments indicate is that the members of the church do not seek to replace or supplement the direct teaching that happens in the classrooms of the local primary school. Rather, they take steps to ensure that the environment in which the teachers are teaching and the children are learning is at an optimum level. David, a member of the Congregation of St. Andrews who is on the Board of Governors, said ‘*we're trying to support, not to do the work*’. The Minister of the church summarised this stance by stating that the nature of the support

afforded by the church to the school is '*indirect and subtle*'. So how does this support manifest if not through teaching?

Contributing to the creation of a caring school ethos and learning environment

When asked if she could think of any anecdotal examples of where the collaboration had a positive impact on her school community, Julie (school principal) told the story of how members of the church had noticed that two children and their mum were all more poorly presented than usual. The members spoke to Mark (Minister) who spoke to Julie who confirmed that school staff already had a feeling that all was not well at these children's home. Mark and Darren (school-liaison) both visited the mother at her home. It subsequently became apparent that the mother was engaged in illegal activity. This eventually resulted in Social Services becoming involved to assign the care of the children to other members of the family. Julie said that the school and St. Andrews are still working to support the mother in question, but that the children are thriving educationally:

> *'those children overnight have completely changed. The P5 child has done his first homework in four years. I did a classroom observation last week, and he's fully involved in the Maths lesson, not at all in the lower group. He's up there holding his own. The little girl who's in P2 one of the first few days she came in, she'd drawn a picture of her classroom assistant, and she'd drawn the classroom assistant herself, and she was crying, and she said, it's happy tears, and she said it's just so good to know that people care, and it's so nice to be warm and it's so nice to be comfy, but she's participating in class and in the nurture room. Her achievement has gone up. So that's what tackling under achievement is about, because if the children had remained where they were, they wouldn't have come on leaps and bounds in a matter of four months, they really are completely different children'.*

David went on to discuss the idea of '*having some of our older people [who] are retired to go and help with reading classes - the school can avail at that*'. However, he went on to say:

'So [addressing] underachievement is part of it, but again, it's supporting the staff and little bits, if we can do it, to try and help them. But it's not just Literacy, Numeracy, [etc.], … one of the big things in Clandeboye is … that they come out as well-rounded pupils'. He concluded, 'I think we're sending out somebody, not [just someone who] could … do a transfer test, but who was actually well-rounded and I think that's the beauty of the school. There's such a mix of people from different backgrounds that people learn to live and to share. And yeah, that's what I love about the school.'

These comments perhaps indicate that for some of the members of St. Andrew's involved in the collaboration with Clandeboye PS, academic outcomes are, while important, not the sole priority.

Supporting the parents

St Andrew's is involved in supporting the whole family, and not just the school's pupils. They run 'parental equipping sessions' and also a course on addressing drug addiction. Church members facilitate a storeroom of 'preloved' school uniforms (while parents are invited to make a contribution to school funds if they avail of this, payment for these items is not mandatory) and buy stationary for children whose parents can't afford it.
St. Andrew's also runs English classes for the parents of Newcomer children in the afternoon while the children are still in school. The principal stated:

'We have had the sessions for parents, particularly the English classes, because then those children, those parents, will be more able to help their children with the homework that they're finding from school. And so whilst [STAPC hasn't] done anything, that's specifically an underachievement project, I think just all of those things coming together helps the underachievement because the children are more likely to come to school when they feel valued and cared about'.

David also made reference to this issue of 'educating the parents' when he talked about how St. Andrews Primary School ran an evening event for parents on how they can best support

their children re. English and Maths. He elaborated on this by stating that the purpose of the training was to try:

> *'[To] show them [the parents] how Maths was being done - because some of the parents probably felt that they shied away from trying to help the children if they felt they didn't have the ability, so it was trying to help them to understand how it is done in school, and give them the ability to do it'.*

This relates to another point made by the Principal who stated:

> *'you also go through education to help your own children become educated, because education starts at home … we need to look at how we need to support children from the day and hour they are born. I mean, homes have them for five years before we get our hands on them, and five years is a long time to be making a difference.'*

Supporting the school staff

Gestures of appreciation were sent into the school (for example, scones for the staffroom), church members pray for the school, minister provide pastoral support and encouragement to individual members of school staff who are going through difficult circumstances. DH talked about how the church provides a 'pastoral governor' who sits on the BoG and whose remit is to provide individual support to any member of staff going through difficult circumstances (he gave the example of a member of school staff whose mother had recently suffered a stroke a how the church pastoral team were supporting this teacher).

Practical provision

St. Andrew's also makes its buildings and car park available to the school. This is particularly useful for the home-school liaison teacher, Darren, who hosts some of his initiatives in the church. Julie spoke about how Darren:

> *'brought some single mums together, who we were particularly worried about, with their engagement in school, and he's created a little buddy group where he mentors*

them. So he's been working with those ladies. And again, he holds those sessions within the church so they don't feel they're being judged by school professionals, in the school building. So he will hold those and he has worked with those ladies on building up their confidence and resilience … [and then asking them] 'Would you think of doing this Essential English course?' So it's all about getting those layers in to help everybody, I suppose, go to the next step with what they can achieve'.

St. Andrew's provides financial support to the school and work on projects on the school grounds (for example, church members help tend school allotments as part of the school's application for Green Flag status).

The church connects the school to the Scripture Union local schools' worker (who provides resources to teach RE), support networks for Newcomer families, Love for Life and the Thrive Academy (to run courses about keeping children safe online), but also with government supports for families in need such as Social Services and the Housing Executive.

The provision of personnel

St. Andrew's members help at school events (for example, the summer fete), and the school benefits from the expertise of church members who are prepared to use their skills, knowledge and experience to support the school community.

St. Andrew's members also serve as members of the Board of Governors (including the Chair and Vice-Chair). The principal commented:

'… any issue I take to Governors, he [Mark] will look at it from a Governor's head, from a parent's head, but also as a minister of the church. And I know he goes back and discusses that with the church about what can we do to support … the school and how can we help?'

Case Study 4: Trinity Presbyterian Church + Greyabbey and Kirkstown Primary Schools + Glastry College.

Denomination	**Presbyterian**
Size of Congregation	500+
Urban / Rural	Rural Village
School Type/s	Controlled Primary and Controlled (non-selective) secondary school 11-18yrs
Project 1	**Provision of School Chaplain to Glastry College**
Organisation	Young Life
Numbers involved and level of commitment	• Part funded by church and part-funded by Young Life Organisation – 4 days a week • Church hoping to provide portacabin to serve as chaplaincy centre and drop-in
Project 2	**Monday Club – Primary School Pupils**
Organisation	Church Members
Numbers involved and level of commitment	• Members of the church congregation come in and do reading partnerships with the P3 and P4 pupils and also work together on Art projects. • Church available for primary school events.
Challenges Encountered	• Volunteers getting older and shortage of new volunteers • Not enough male volunteers at primary level • No financial buy-in from other local churches
Benefits for Participants	• Chaplain (former social worker) very positively involved with pastoral care of pupils • Young Life Summer Camp attended by pupils • Improved confidence in reading to/with adults • Improved inter-generational relationships in the community
Benefits for Volunteers	• Improved inter-generational relationships in the community

This Case Study is based on work undertaken by Trinity Presbyterian Church in Greyabbey with its neighbouring schools. Greyabbey is a small village located on the eastern shores of Strangford Lough, on the Ards Peninsula in County Down, Northern Ireland. It lies approximately 7 miles (11 km) south of Newtownards and is within the Ards and North Down Borough. The 2011 Census record shows that Greyabbey had a population of just under 1000 people.

Trinity Presbyterian Church is a single charge congregation, and has a working relationship with five schools, and the minister of the congregation (Rev Neil Stewart) serves on the Board of Governors of three of these schools. Two of these schools, Greyabbey and Kirkstown, are both Primary Schools and the other is Glastry College which is the local non-selective Post-primary School, where the Rev Stewart is the Chair of Governors. Trinity Presbyterian Church has a staff complement of three including the minister, an assistant, and an outreach worker, and together they seek to serve a congregation of 500+.

When asked about his journey into ministry, the Rev Neil Stewart reported that Trinity Presbyterian Church was his first charge and that he had been the minister there for around 10 years. He said God had led him from the building trade into ministerial study in 2006. He went on to say that one of the main differences between managing a building company and a church is that in the building company you are working with others who are paid employees whereas within church life you are working with people who are volunteers, and this really involves a different mindset and a different way of working. Whilst Trinity Presbyterian Church has one Session and one Committee it operates across two separate venues in what the minister referred to as a revitalization mission. The other venue is a church in another village which had about 20 people meeting six years ago and now has a regular attendance of about 80 people. The Rev Stewart spoke passionately about the growth of this church and what God is doing in the area.

Rev Neil Stewart went onto describe the demographics; most people in both villages, Greyabbey and Cloughey, are either at work or have retired from work, and there are very few people in the area who are in receipt of social benefits. He did report that several of those who are on state benefits have been eligible for means tested funding from the Presbyterian Children's Society. The Rev Stewart talked about his involvement in the life of the community

and with the community association, for example he talked about his role as chaplain of the local village football club and how this had helped him to become known and more fully engage with the community. Such engagement requires trust and the establishment and building of meaningful relationships. So, as a result, there is a lot going on in the church at Greyabbey, men's breakfasts and Chaplaincy, and a food bank. However, the Rev Stewart issued a significant note of caution when he referenced the number of ministers who have become burnt out or who are exhausted due to the demands placed upon them.

School Chaplain Provided

Trinity Presbyterian Church are involved in the delivery of a few school-based initiatives and one which was talked about by both the Principal of Glastry College, and the Rev Stewart relates to the provision of Christian Chaplain in the school. This project is delivered in collaboration with Young Life, a church organisation like Youth for Christ, and they work with the young people on the development of their skills. The project delivery is funded partly by the church and partly by the Young Life workers themselves. It is part of the contract of the Young Life Worker that they will partially self-fund their own salary through gifts, donations, and money raising activities. This project in Glastry College is still very much in its infancy, to date it has been running for about 10 months, including the summer period. In this case the person who is currently fulfilling the role is a qualified social worker and prior to him commencing his work with Young Life he had worked for Youth for Christ. Consequently, the Young Life employee is particularly good at working with underachieving pupils and their families. There are a number of geographical areas that feed into the school population in Glastry College such as Ballywalter, and Portavogie, and within these areas there will be some social deprivation and family breakdown situations. As a result, significant support is needed in the classroom for the young people involved.

The Rev Stewart suggested that the pastoral care offered in Glastry College was "*absolutely phenomenal, the teacher, the VP for pastoral care, is a Christian*". The job of the Young Life worker is "*to work alongside and draw alongside, particularly young boys who are struggling, playing up, and to help to try and get to the bottom of why they're playing up and help them just to achieve some better grades but also have a Christian input as well*."

As a result of the Young Life workers engagement "*they can talk about how God has created them and how He sent Jesus for them and with the Holy Spirit within your life*." The minister suggested that the Young Life worker "*brings an unashamed Christian ethos to everything that he does there*." The Rev Stewart suggested that it "*was phenomenal to get off the ground.*" The Young Life worker is onsite four days a week. Currently, the Rev Stewart is seeking to find a space for him, potentially a portacabin that can become a designated chaplaincy centre.

After-School Clubs and Events

Young Life work with the young people in the school, and they will have specific time either after school or during the school day. The Rev Stewart commented that there was a good SU (Scripture Union) in Glastry College, and that he had spoken at it on a number of occasions, as had his Assistant Minister. The Rev Stewart mentioned that Young Life would like to have a place off campus, and that the church was currently attempting to make that provision for them, and that that should be supportive to them.

The Rev Stewart talked about the young people going to a summer camp, a Young Life summer camp, and that it had been very fruitful. The Church and the Young Life Worker have started to meet with the young people, "*where they're at, with whatever their needs are, whether their emotional, educational, and those things are all linked up*." There was a clear recognition that if things are not good at home, then things are not going to be good at school either and so if the church can help to bolster that then hopefully that would lead to better outcomes for them and their educational achievement. Furthermore, there is the hope that for some there they will at least have fewer 'run ins' with the law or even get into trouble at school as the behaviour of some of the young people, particularly the boys, can be quite challenging. The Rev Stewart suggested that as the project is very much in its infancy there is no tangible evidence of how fruitful it has been. However, he did report that a similar sort of venture is in operation in Strangford College, a local integrated school, albeit with a slightly different ethos, and that the model seems to work for them. As Chair of the Governors the Minister in Greyabbey Presbyterian Church reckons there is quite a bit of overlap between the school, his church, and the community.

However, when asked to think about the potential measure of success of the project in 12 months' time and what it would be, the Rev Stewart suggested that:

> *"from an educational point of view, you know, students now have a tracker that shows all their actual grades, and projected grades, and therefore it is extremely easy to look at a student and see how they are doing. For example, if some of those young people who would be drawing alongside the chaplain, and you were able to see that their trackers were improving, and they were getting better projected grades. There is a need to ensure that through their education, they are better equipped for their education and school, and behaviour then that their behavioural record improves. You know, this is not going to be across the whole school, this would be like on an individual basis, specifically, many of these kids, because they are not all going to respond. But most of the kids engaged with that can see that marked improvement".*

The church also provides volunteers for a reading partnership for P3 and P4 pupils in Greyabbey Primary school which also involves the children participating in Creative Arts activities alongside the older volunteers from the church. This has "*helped break down some of the barriers between the generations*" [interview with Principal CS4] as the children completed artwork such as mosaics which now decorate the school.

Case Study 5: Knocknagoney Parish Church + Knocknagoney Primary School.

Denomination	**Church of Ireland**
Size of Congregation	51-100
Urban / Rural	Suburban
School Type/s	Controlled Primary school
Project 1	**Prayer Spaces in Schools and Fist-Pump 5**
Organisation	Prayer Spaces in Schools Scripture Union Northern Ireland
Numbers involved and level of commitment	Prayer Space is run twice a year for 2 or 3 days each time. Around 18 volunteers are needed to on a rota basis to set up and man the prayer space each time Fist Pump Five and Its Your move programmes run over 6-8 weeks in the classroom facilitated by SUNI workers and church volunteers.
Project 2	**Reading Partnership Programme**
Organisation	Church volunteers
Numbers involved and level of commitment	4 – 6 volunteers: one or two hours per week for the school year (each child gets one hour per week)
Challenges Encountered	• Not enough volunteers to meet number of children who would benefit from the programme
Benefits for Participants	• Support with reading for pupils who do not have a specific learning difficulty, but who just need a bit of help and one-to-one attention to improve their reading ability • Increased self-esteem and better engagement with learning when they return to the classroom • Good trusting relationships built with adults within the community who care about them
Benefits for Volunteers	• Satisfaction at seeing improvement in the pupils' reading and self-confidence • Better inter-generational relationships within the community
Additional Service	Gardening and decorating projects, shared car parking, financial support for struggling families.

Knocknagoney Parish Church is situated on the outskirts of Belfast, close to the affluent suburb of Hollywood but mostly serving a mixed working and middle-class suburb and a local authority estate which traditionally has had problems of socio-economic deprivation and underachievement. It is also close to the Palace Barracks which is one of the largest British Army Bases in Northern Ireland, housing almost a thousand single soldiers and family units during their (normally two year) tour of duty.

The Parish Church is part of the Church of Ireland Diocese of Down and Dromore and has a mixed demographic and spread of ages attending Sunday Worship regularly. The church is very clear that part of its mission is to be 'outwardly devoted by serving our local community as we share the love of Jesus' (Knocknagoney Parish Website, 2025). The Minister in charge of the church is the Rev Andrew Frame who has been working in the church in Knocknagoney since 2021, first as a deacon and since his ordination as a minister. Andrew who trained as a teacher has a real heart for education and has given a lot of his time and directed the efforts of his congregation to serving the community specifically through connection with the local school. He takes his direction and inspiration from the passage in the Old Testament book of Jeremiah (29:7) where the people of Israel in exile are told to seek the prosperity of the city (community) in which they are living and to pray for it. The Parish Church is situated very close to Knocknagoney Primary School and so the church congregation is keen to play their part in seeking the prosperity of the school community and to pray for it.

Knocknagoney Primary School is a Controlled school with children from a wide range backgrounds and families from private homes, rented accommodation and social housing. 37% of the school pupils receive Free School Meals (FSM) which makes the school eligible for the Extended Schools' Programme which provides targeted funding to disadvantaged schools for extended services. In recent years the numbers of FSM pupils have fallen as housing in the area has increased in value, and recent school management has made academic achievement a priority for the school encouraging all their pupils to '*Strive – Believe – Achieve*'. The Extended Schools' cluster to which Knocknagoney PS belongs puts a lot of effort into providing services for the community such as classes to develop parents' literacy and numeracy skills so that they can in turn better support their children with their homework. While historically very few P7 pupils would

have sat the transfer test to get into a grammar school and had little interest in earning qualifications, the school now supports and encourages pupils to take the test and helps families with filling in the application forms, if that is something outside their own previous experience.

The links between the church and the school are many and multi-faceted – from providing carparking spaces for school events to setting up prayer spaces and regular voluntary mentoring for individual pupils. Rev Andrew is a Transferor Representative and is currently Vice-Chair of the school's Board of Governors which helps him to be aware of the funding and educational needs of the school community and particular issues which may arise from time to time. This regular contact is a key feature of the close ties between the church and the school. It also helps that Andrew is chaplain to the military on the local army base and many pupils from there attend the primary school as it is the closest one to the base. Military families move around a lot, and it helps to build trust and security for them to see someone they trust involved in the school as well as the church – it helps to build community.

Prayer Spaces and PDMU Programmes

Due to the needs of children from all backgrounds, especially post-Covid, being most acute in terms of mental health and wellbeing as well as a lack of confidence and anxiety around new situations, self-belief and body-image, Andrew organised volunteers from the church to set up a Prayer Space in the school where the library was temporarily re-purposed with several 'stations' for sensory activities. These activities could be done prayerfully or just done by anyone of any faith, or none, just as a sensory and confidence-building activity. The themes of the 'stations' included: Feelings, Friendship-building, How do we calm down? Accepting others and other themes linked with the school's PDMU curriculum. Similarly, the SUNI also presents a programme of teaching in P5 (Fist Pump 5) which is based on the NHS key guidance of five principles for healthy living and in P7 (It's your Move) which helps pupils prepare for the transition to secondary school. As the principal commented, "*it's preparing the children and making sure that they're feeling confident moving forward*". Many of the programmes Andrew facilitates within the school are part of the PDMU curriculum and contribute to personal development as well as to positive friendships, dealing with disagreement and identifying negative influences which can lead to poor choices. The principal of the school believes that the inclusive and non-judgemental way

in which these programmes are taught allow pupils to open up with their teachers and look for advice or support when they are facing difficulties outside the school environment.

It is not only the minister of Knocknagoney parish church who gets involved in the life of the school, as a volunteer recounted how he and a number of other members of the congregation would go to the school on a Saturday morning and do any repainting or repair work and gardening that needed to be done around the school grounds. Schools in disadvantaged areas often need to use any funds available for essential maintenance and teaching resources rather than spending it on refreshing and repainting outside areas. In Knocknagowney, the church steps in to provide a volunteer labour force which allows pupils to have a beautiful environment in which to learn and play and which increases their pride in and feelings of ownership of their school premises. This is real authentic community service which is not seeking to increase numbers attending worship on a Sunday morning, but just as the volunteer put it, "*that we want to be seen as good neighbours, and we want to help, and the school is probably the pillar of the community*".

Reading / Mentoring Scheme

The same volunteer is also part of the reading scheme which is probably the church's most direct contribution to tackling educational disadvantage. Volunteers from the church congregation come down to the school for an hour each week to listen to individual pupils reading and chat to them about their week. This regular contact and individual attention over the course of a school year leads to a relationship of trust and friendship growing despite the difference in ages. The volunteer mentioned that while the girl he mentored was initially quite shy of him, by the end of the second term she was waving and smiling at him when he saw her outside school with her friends and family – "*I would say we are friends now*". He also recounted that just that week, the P6 boy he mentored was waiting for him to arrive and immediately said, "*I am so glad you are here, I need to ask your advice about something*….". Now, as it happens, the advice requested was about football coaching, but it speaks to the strength of the bond which has grown between the two and perhaps to the possibility that the mentor was filling the role of trusted male adult for that child, which might have been missing from his life.

There is no doubt that the volunteers do get a sense of wellbeing and achievement from this programme as they can see the children's confidence growing through the year and their reading skills improving too and this improvement is also apparent to the school where they test the children's reading age at the end of the year and can see a real difference has been made. The children who have noted difficulties with reading are supported by the school through the literacy support programme; however, pupils in the church volunteer programme are just lacking in confidence and might not have an adult at home who is able to give the one-to-one attention which would benefit and support this child and give them the confidence in themselves. Self-confidence is a vital element of academic achievement in secondary education.

The benefits of these close ties between church and school on so many levels are obvious to the school, not only with volunteers helping to improve academic achievement of the children they are working with, but through the wellbeing and personal development programmes helping to increase self-confidence and aspirations for the future and reframe the narrative of negative educational experience into ambition and positivity. The church helps to plug funding gaps through selfless community service and as the principal notes:

> "*there are a lot of resources that schools can't access because of budget constraints, and I think the fact that you can work together…….the church is offering a different kind of support, a different kind of service……. In our case, I think absolutely, there are so many things we just could not do without the link with the church*".

Directory of Organisations:

Please note that this list is not confined to organisations directly involved with the particular case study schools involved in this study. Some organisations listed below supply evangelical programmes as well as the programmes listed below which are those with application for addressing educational underachievement and/or social deprivation.

Organisation	For more information contact	Programme Name
Equipping for Life	Website: https://equippingforlife.org.uk/ Contacts: Mrs Pat Hutchinson or Ms Audrey Curry Phone: 07889 572800 Email: pat@equippingforlife.org.uk audrey@equippingforlife.org.uk	*Reading in Schools* *Tennis in Schools* *Inspire Programme*
Scripture Union NI	Website: https://www.suni.co.uk/what-we-do/schools/introduction Contact: Mark Moorehead Email: mark@suni.co.uk or info@suni.co.uk	*Fist Pump Five* – P5 Programme for Healthy Living (resource provided for teachers to teach) *It's Your Move* – Transition to Secondary school programme for P7 pupils
Love for Life	Website: https://www.loveforlife.org.uk/ Contacts: Sheena McCartney or Heather-Joy Wallace Phone: 028 38820555 Email: sheena@loveforlife.org.uk ; heather-joy@loveforlife.org.uk or info@loveforlife.org.uk	Relationships and Sexuality Education for pupils from P1-Yr 12 Parent Workshops on supporting their children with RSE and Internet safety
Transforming Lives for Good	Website: https://www.tlg.org.uk/connect/stories-of-transformation/tlg-early-intervention-in-northern-ireland Contact: Colin Barr Email: colin@monkstownvillageinitiatives.com	*Early Intervention* Reading/Mentoring programme

Reach Mentoring	Website: https://www.reachmentoring.co.uk/ Contact: Johnny Hampton Phone: 07900512979 Email: info@reachmentoring.co.uk	*Mentoring* – social, emotional, behavioural and wellbeing support for pupils in primary and secondary schools.
Young Life	Website:https://ylinternational.org Contact: Gareth Mornin Phone: 07796920359 Email:gmornin@ylinternational.org	*School Chaplaincy*
Prayer Spaces in Schools	Website: https://prayerspacesinschools.org/ Contact: Emma Scott Email: emma.scott@prayerspacesinschools.com	*Prayer Spaces* Inclusive activities for emotional and sensory engagement with deep issues and questions.
Play it by Ear	Website: www.playitbyeardrama.com Contacts: Ross Jonas or Chris Neilands Phone: 028 90767969 Email: playitbyeardrama@gmail.com	*Drama-based PDMU* programme for P5 'What's Going On?' focusing on Emotions and Wellbeing 'The Monster' drama show and workshops based on the concept of Forgiveness and the power of words to bring people together or push them apart.
Thrive Academy	Website: https://www.thriveac.org/ Dr Deborah Webster Phone: 07817239259 Email: deborah@thriveac.org	*Digital Resilience* Student Masterclasses Parent Workshops Teacher and Youth Leader Training
Made for More	Website: https://www.madeformoreni.co.uk/schools	*Schools' Programmes* Mental Health and wellbeing programmes for primary and secondary school pupils



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