Northern Ireland Assembly

Research and Information Service
Briefing Note

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Underachievement: a brief overview

1   Introduction

This briefing note considers underachievement in education in Northern Ireland. It provides a short overview of key issues in order to support the Committee for Education's consideration of potential areas for inquiry, and is not intended to be comprehensive.

2   There are some concerns around current measures of underachievement

At post-primary, the Department for Education (the Department) School Leavers Survey uses a number of measures to assess outcomes, particularly the key threshold measure of students achieving at least five GCSEs at grades A*-C, including English and maths (including equivalent qualifications).[1] This approach does not take account of the value the education system has added to student outcomes.

To measure disadvantage, the Department typically uses the proxy measure of free school meal entitlement (FSME). The literature indicates that this presents an imperfect

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[1] Department of Education *School Leavers* [online] Available at: https://www.deni.gov.uk/articles/school-leavers

approach to measuring deprivation,[2] although some argue that it is the best currently available.[3]

3   Causes of underachievement are complex, and most originate outside the school

Typically, a number of disadvantages and barriers combine to contribute to a student's underachievement at school, as opposed to any one risk factor.[4]

The majority of the differences in student progress at post-primary (78%) are thought to be attributable to student background and home learning environment. Most of the remainder of the variation relates to the impact of education.[5] Figure 1 below illustrates some of the main causes of underachievement.

Figure 1: Key factors influencing student outcomes

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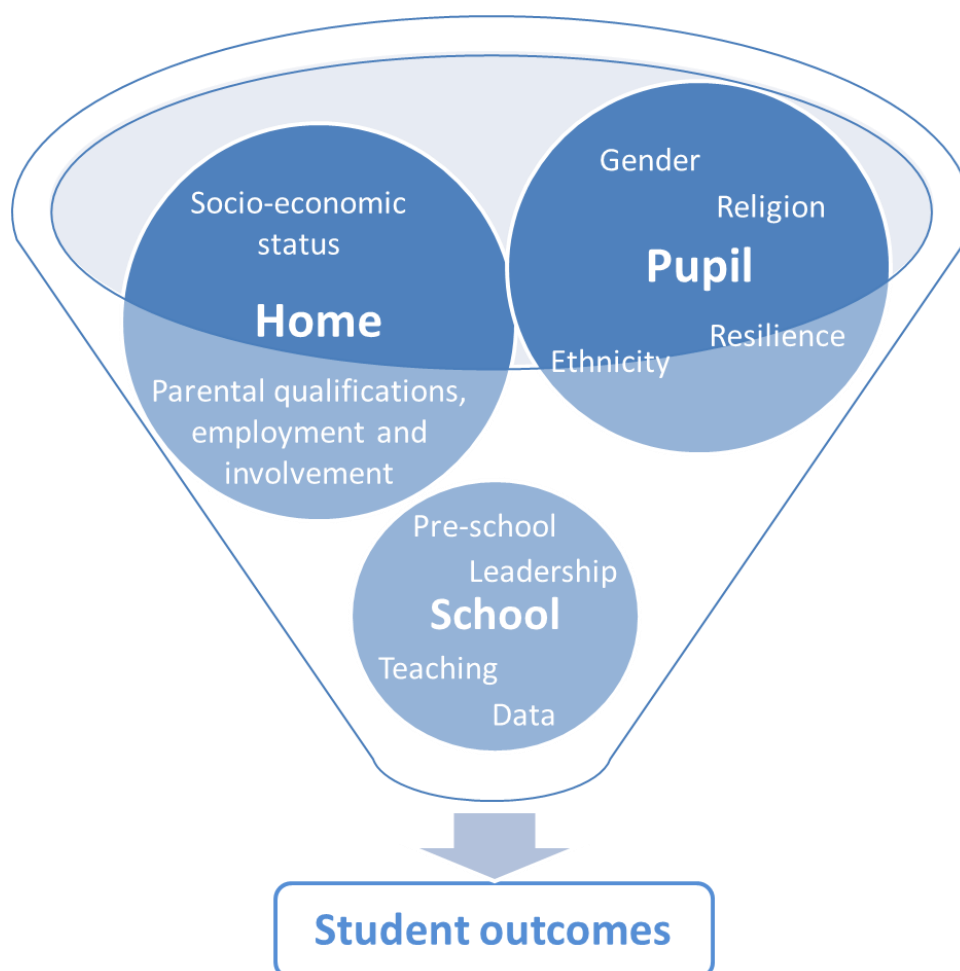
[2] Perry, C. (2010) *Free School Meal Entitlement as a measure of deprivation* Stormont: Northern Ireland Assembly

[3] Gorard, S. (2012) "Who is eligible for free school meals? Characterising free school meals as a measure of disadvantage in England" *British Educational Research Journal* Vol.38, No. 6, pp. 1003-1017

[4] OECD (2016) *Low Performing Students: Why They Fall Behind and How to Help Them Succeed, PISA* Paris: OECD Publishing

[5] Rasbash, J., Leckie, G., Pillinger, R., Jenkins, R. (2010) "Children's educational progress: partitioning family, school and area effects" *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, Vol. 173, No. 3, pp. 657-682

Internationally, socio-economic background is a key predictor of underachievement,[6] and in Northern Ireland it has a greater influence on achievement at post-primary than on average across OECD countries.[7] In Northern Ireland, Catholic students outperform their Protestant counterparts, regardless of FSME status, as illustrated in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Proportion of school leavers achieving at least five GCSEs at grades A*-C, including English and maths by FSM entitlement and religion[8]
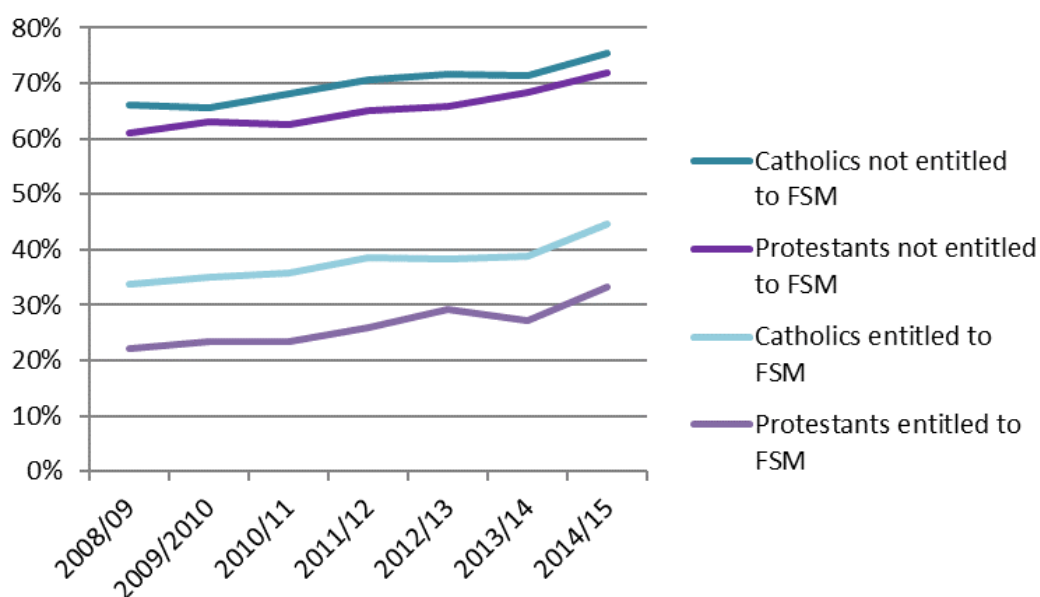
Factors within the control of the education system include classroom teaching, which has the greatest in-school influence on outcomes, followed by school leadership.[9] However in 2012-14, of post-primary learning provision inspected in Northern Ireland, 21% was deemed 'satisfactory'.[10]

There are regional inequalities in educational outcomes in Northern Ireland

The evidence also highlights regional inequalities in educational outcomes. Figure 3 overleaf provides an analysis conducted by RaISe illustrating levels of underachievement by parliamentary constituency.

It shows that Belfast West and Belfast North have the highest levels of underachievement, with almost half of students leaving school without achieving the GCSE threshold measure. Belfast South has the lowest proportion of school leavers failing to achieve the measure.

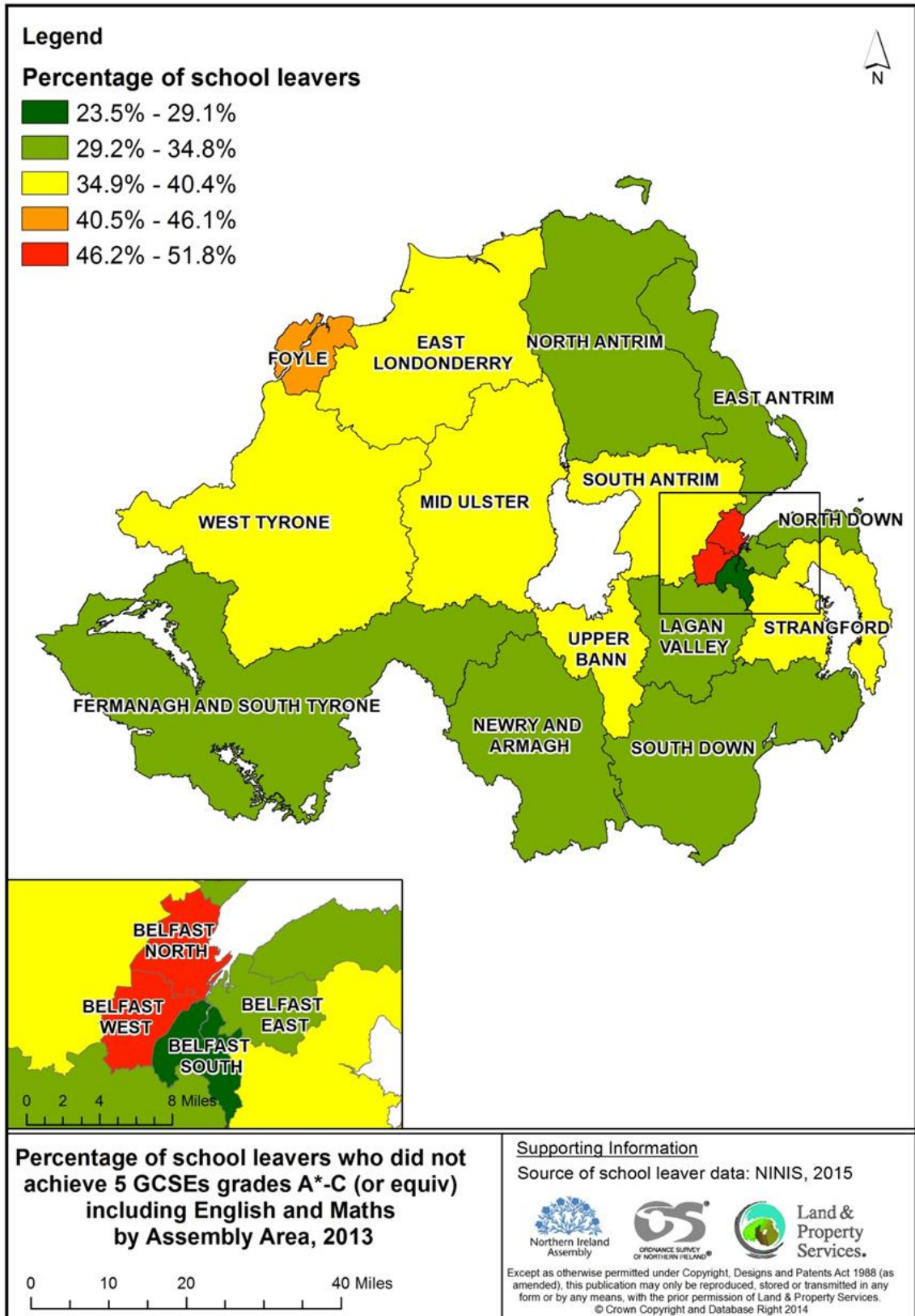[6] OECD (2011) *Against the Odds: Disadvantaged Students Who Succeed in School* Paris: OECD Publishing

[7] Shrewbridge, C., Hulshof, M., Nusche, D., Stenius Staehr, L. (2014) *OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Northern Ireland, United Kingdom* Paris: OECD Publishing

[8] Department of Education *School Leavers* [online] Available at: https://www.deni.gov.uk/articles/school-leavers

[9] McKinsey & Company (2007) *How The World's Best Performing School Systems Come Out On Top* McKinsey & Company

[10] Education and Training Inspectorate (2014) *Chief Inspector's Report 2012-14* Bangor: ETI

Figure 3: Regional underachievement in Northern Ireland

Percentage of school leavers who did not achieve 5 GCSEs grades A*-C (or equiv) including English and Maths by Assembly Area, 2013

Literacy and numeracy play a key role in educational success

In 2013 the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) reported increased levels of achievement in literacy and numeracy and Key Stages 2 and 3 and at GCSE, However, it noted the large number of young people failing to achieve the required standard by the time they leave education, particularly in regard to pupils with FSME. Its recommendations included:[11]

- Monitoring the performance of pupils in the controlled and maintained sectors;

- Requiring literacy and numeracy assessment of candidates for teaching; and

- Providing adequate training in data interpretation and analysis.

The Delivering Social Change Signature Programme on improving literacy and numeracy involved employing recently graduated teachers to provide tuition for children in primary and post-primary schools who were unlikely to achieve even basic educational standards.[12]

The EA Project Manager for the Programme prepared a report highlighting positive results. However, the report raises a number of questions in relation to the extent to which the improvements reported were attributable to the intervention, and how the programme compares to other interventions.[13]

Conclusion

Underachievement at school has many causes, the majority of which are outside the control of schools. Nonetheless, the education system can play an important role in mitigating against key factors in underachievement, such as deprivation. Areas for consideration could include:

- The measures used to assess underachievement, including the lack of a value-added approach, and measuring performance among disadvantaged students;

- The greater effect of socio-economic background at post-primary in Northern Ireland, in comparison to other countries;

- The role of early intervention in addressing the impact of socio-economic background and other parental factors on outcomes;

- The availability of high quality pre-school provision in Northern Ireland;

- Approaches to addressing underachievement among male students;

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[11] Northern Ireland Audit Office (2013) *Improving Literacy and Numeracy Achievement in Schools* Belfast: Corporate Document Services

[12] Northern Ireland Executive (2015) *Delivering Social Change Literacy & Numeracy Signature Programme: Year 1 Interim Report* Belfast: Northern Ireland Executive

[13] Northern Ireland Executive (2016) *Delivering Social Change Literacy and Numeracy Signature Programme: Year 2 Final Report* Bangor: Department of Education

- Differences in outcomes between Protestant and Catholic students and between controlled and maintained schools;

- The quality of classroom teaching and school leadership in Northern Ireland, and what actions are being taken for improvement;

- Regional inequalities in educational outcomes;

- The Delivering Social Change Literacy and Numeracy Programme, and the extent to which improvements were a result of value added; and

- The effectiveness of other Departmental policy and initiatives in addressing underachievement.