



The Labour Party in Northern Ireland

Annual General Meeting

10th March 2012

Report on the Education Session

Session 1:

Professor A Gallagher, Pro-Vice Chancellor, Queens University

Professor Gallagher started by outlining the efforts made to implement change in the Post-Primary Sector by successive Labour Party Direct-Rule Ministers. For example, in 1997, Mr Tony Worthington, the minister with responsibility for Education, had instituted a review of academic selection in which a large scale research project was undertaken followed by a review body, the Burns Review (2001). This was then followed by another post-primary review working group, the Costello Report (2003). Like the Burns Report, the Costello Review Report recommended the abolition of selection on grounds of ability and the introduction of pupil profiles to inform parents when they are deciding which schools their child should attend. This Report also recommended the introduction of an 'Entitlement Framework' which would guarantee children attending post-primary schools access to a range of academic and vocational courses.

In the immediate aftermath of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement there was a significant level of optimism in Northern Ireland at the possibility of constructing the architecture for a new society. Most attention focused on the arrangements for the new political institutions, but the Minister with responsibility for Education decided to establish a Working Group to consider ways in which the education system could work towards the promotion of tolerance in general and more integrated schools in particular. The membership of the Working Group included representatives from integrated education, the local authorities, higher education, the Protestant Churches and the Catholic authorities.

This working group represented one of the few forums at which representatives from across the range of educational interests came together to discuss a broader social goal related to the promotion of tolerance. For a time the group considered a range of innovative possibilities, but its energy and momentum became dissipated. A number of factors contributed to this, including the replacement of the Minister of Education and the faltering progress towards establishing the governance arrangements in the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement. The grand ambition at the genesis of the group had been significantly reduced by the time it met to consider a draft final report. However, one of the official outcomes was improved advice for those schools seeking to transform to integrated status. One of the unofficial outcomes was the beginnings of a shift in the position of the Catholic Authorities against academic selection and a redefined role for Catholic schools. The Church has since set out proposals for the future provision of post-primary education in the Catholic

sector but there is, as yet, no firm agreement on these proposals. Similarly the 5 Education & Boards have been reviewing their post-primary schools. This was all part of the Area-Based Planning Initiative set out by the Minister of Education.

There has been a complete review of the entire school curriculum and the implementation should be nearly complete by 2013. In particular, for the implementation of the Entitlement Framework, collaboration through the Area-based Learning Partnerships (ALP) is a necessary requirement. However, there are differences in the performance of the ALPs.

On the issue of academic selection at 11, the Department has withdrawn from providing an official test and wants the use of tests to be removed from the admissions criteria of all schools. However, such tests are still legal. Compromise solutions have been explored but there is no political consensus as to the way forward. As a result there are now two unofficial and unaccountable test systems being used by the grammar schools to select pupils for admission at 11.

The process of implementing the RPA has been beset by differences in the views of the 2 main parties and agreement of sorts has only recently been obtained. Similarly with the single education authority (ESA), some form of agreement has only recently been agreed and the final version is likely to be a significantly watered down version of the original proposals. This has meant that the ELBs have not been functioning as strongly as they should have been in the interim.

A snapshot of what has been happening in Education over the last decade would reveal the following: -

- (1) Stable or widening gender gap as girls' performance at both GCSE and A Level continues to outstrip that of boys;
- (2) The impact of falling rolls has been concentrated on non-grammar schools because the grammar sector is continuing to admit pupils up to their admissions number and hence taking a higher proportion of the overall intake;
- (3) A number of policies aimed at school improvement have been tried. However, patterns of performance, since the early 1960s show a steady improvement, regardless of the policy framework.
- (4) Collaboration has risen rapidly up the agenda.
 - (a) Burns Review suggested collegiates;
 - (b) Costello preferred a bottom up approach in which schools decided who they collaborated with;
 - (c) The Bain Report looked at access to the curriculum, economies of scale, and reconciliation through collaboration;
 - (d) Formation of Area Learning Communities – very similar to Burns' Collegiates;
 - (e) Shared Education Programme emphasised the promotion of an open access model of school collaboration.

There is at present a 'discourse of excellence' being used by some in the debate about the future of education in Northern Ireland. It has the following characteristics: -

- (a) Ascription of personal responsibility for low achievement;
- (b) There is a narrow focus of comparison of the NI system with the rest of the UK rather than on international comparisons;

- (c) The system uses a narrow range of performance indicators and does not take account of the social role of education;
- (d) There is a continued reliance by DETI and InvNI on educational excellence in the external marketing of Northern Ireland.

This discourse on excellence can be challenged on the following grounds: -

- (1) Northern Ireland has the least qualified workforce in any part of the UK (sometimes explained as a consequence of migration);
- (2) One of the main problems for the future is the low skills and low productivity of the workforce;
- (3) The evidence from PISA study is that NI has the most unequal patterns of performance;
- (4) The study initiated by Dawn Purvis gave recognition to the falling performance of Controlled schools and particularly in relation to the performance of working-class Protestant boys;
- (5) The recent 'viability audit' carried out by DENI in the light of the cuts in the Education budget revealed that:-
 - (a) 3/4s of grammar and secondary schools are deemed to provide an adequate educational environment;
 - (b) 1/3rd of all secondary schools are facing challenges related to their rolls;
 - (c) Almost 1/2 of the secondary schools are facing problems related to their funding levels.

What are the policy options for the Labour Party?

In terms of the post-primary system should the preferred option be a unitary system of non-selective, non denominational schools?

The work of the Dawn Purvis study revealed that:-

- 1/3rd of boys and 1/5th of girls leave school with less than 5 good GCSEs;
- Over 60% of boys entitled to free school meals leave school with less than 5 good GCSEs
- 44% of girls entitled to free school meals leave with less than 5 good GCSEs.

How can we use the study in making policy?

3/4 of school leavers stay on in some form of education but of those going into training, 78% have failed to achieve 5 good GCSEs.

The system is producing too many young teachers for the places available.

There are too many low achieving pupils with a consequent risk to social cohesion.

Of the school identified as most at risk in the 'viability audit', a large number were schools with a high proportion of pupils on free school meals. Who will speak for these children and their communities.

Session 2:

Patrick Yu, Executive Director of the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities.

'Education has a key role to play in eradicating racism and valuing diversity.' This was one of the conclusions announced by Sir William Macpherson in the wake of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry published in 1999. The Inquiry Report defined racism as *"The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people."*

The report acknowledged the key role that education had to play and recommended that the national curriculum should better reflect modern Britain. It also recommended race equality strategies being put in place in schools – the aim being that, by building on examples of good practice that already exist, schools could make the goal of challenging racism and valuing diversity central to their practice.

In Northern Ireland it is just like a blank sheet as the Northern Ireland government did not conduct any research on the needs of ethnic minority students (here it refers to settled ethnic minority and religious minority, migrants (EU and Non-EU, asylum seekers and refugees and other immigration status which is inclusive for all groups) nor collated any monitoring data to look at the specific issues and needs of ethnic minority students. As a result we could not see the department benchmark racial equality within the educational system in Northern Ireland as highlighted in the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report, despite the Devolved Government endorsing the 'Racial Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland'.

That is the reason why we embarked on the first piece of scoping research looking at current monitoring data within the Department; conducted a survey on ethnic minority students in 30 selected post-primary schools and a number of focus groups from various ethnic minority communities.

In any society, education is the only route to achieve social mobility. It is uncommon for the migrant community to out-perform the white community in Great Britain. Recently the Polish students in England and Wales have shown the same case. In Northern Ireland we follow the same trend as the rest of the United Kingdom. Ethnic Minorities are the tops of the top; but at the same time we are also the bottoms of the bottom. From the Department's statistics it shows the same case.

At GCSE, the results of ethnic minorities in Northern Ireland are 5-10% higher than the local average in achieving grades A*-C in 5 or more subjects. At A level the gap narrows to 3-5% higher than the local average in achieving grades A-C in 3 or more subjects.

At the bottom end, we are 10-15% higher than the local average without any qualification when leaving school, despite the two majority communities have narrowed the gap from 8% to 4% no qualification. These figures are from 2004 onwards. If you have no qualification and also you are ethnic minorities, what is your future and opportunity? You have no future at all. That is the reason why the failed children of the settled ethnic minority to going back to the parent's job. It is not uncommon to see them working in the catering or retailing industries. The so-called segregated economy in which these people are never integrated into our society.

At the bottom end it highlights the most underachieving group, the Black African and Black Caribbean, in Northern Ireland. It constituted 9% of ethnic minorities who received no qualification when leaving school. The rest of the ethnic minorities are Malaysian 3.8%, Pakistani 2.8%, mixed 3%, white 2.8% (those migrants from the former A8 and the current A2 EU countries) and others which constituted 18.2% from various ethnicity, including Irish Travelers). It is the same trend as the rest of the GB. The African and Caribbean groups do not have the language barrier. In UK this a group has high percentage of single parent family without a male figure. But we don't have similar research in Northern Ireland.

They started to run the Chinese takeaway and restaurant businesses in GB and have started their catering business since then. Our children didn't perform very well at the beginning as on the bottom end. But through one generation we are from the bottom end to the top end. The main reason is that the Chinese community doesn't want their children working 12 hours a day and some of them 7 days a week without any social life. The only way to change the under-dog situation is to give the second generation an opportunity through formal education system. The aspiration from the family value is the key factor of that successful story. The parents could not speak the language, they paid private tutor to assist their children to catching up the standards.

There is something that we could learn from the Chinese community in GB as well as in NI: the aspiration of the community and the family. In Northern Ireland the current underachievement of the working class Protestant have similar situation as the Chinese in the 60s (under-dog situation). What it misses in the Protestant community is the aspiration within the community and the family.

In a real politics when ethnic minority requests for special measures or positive action programme to alleviate the underachievement of ethnic minorities within the education system, the government response that ethnic minority is under mainstreaming provision, such as "Every School is a Good School" policy; the current PSA's 10 (Helping our children and young people to achieve through education) and 19 (Raising standards in our schools). The later is the minimum standard generally needed by school leavers in order to progress to further education, training or employment.

We would like to encourage the Department to benchmark racial equality to deal with the underachievement of ethnic minority students in Northern Ireland through evidence based research in order to identify the causes and solutions of under-achievement on one hand, address the issues through positive actions on the others. We would also like to ask the Labour Party in Northern Ireland support our idea to benchmark racial equality in education.

The introduction of 'Learning for Life and Work' (LLW) for K3 and K4 in part reflects an attempt to ensure that the curriculum adapts to a more diverse society. LLW includes a module on Local and global Citizenship with the key themes of Diversity and Inclusion, Equality and Social Justice, Democracy and Participation, and Human Rights and Social Responsibility. It is very important that diversity is not just seen as a separate subject but is integrated into mainstream subjects and in particular into Religious Education.

RE must be included in the curriculum of all schools in Northern Ireland. The law requires that the Core Syllabus for RE be "prepared by a group of persons ... appearing to the Department to be persons having an interest in the teaching of religious education". DENI has interpreted this to refer to the four Christian denominations (Church of Ireland, Presbyterian, Methodist and Roman Catholic). In response to criticisms of the exclusive focus on Christianity, DENI asked these four churches to review the Core Syllabus for RE, giving "particular consideration to including education about other world religions." The revised Core Syllabus came into effect in 2007. Only in KS3 is there a learning objective which is to provide "an introduction to two world religions other

than Christianity in order to develop knowledge of and sensitivity towards the religious beliefs, practices and lifestyles of peoples from other religions in Northern Ireland.”

The narrowness of content is sometimes aggravated by the doctrinal manner in which RE is communicated and the ETI can only exercise its functions regarding RE with the agreement of the Board of Governors of a school. The EQIA of the RE Core Syllabus acknowledged concerns that the proposals “did not make enough provision for religions other than Christianity” and could have adverse impacts on the grounds of race. Nevertheless, DENI has strongly defended its actions in that it argued that the Syllabus was “suited to the religious background of the vast majority of pupils” and that parents can withdraw their children from RE lessons. As well, schools can teach supplementary material, if they so wish.

As DENI has taken an extremely narrow interpretation of those with “an interest” in the teaching of religious education, I would like to strongly recommend that the RE syllabus be revised by a committee that includes representatives from a broad range of faith communities and those of no faith. In addition to content, the style of teaching is also important. Consequently the language used in the RE Syllabus should signal a shift from the doctrinal to a more scholarly approach. As well ETI should be empowered to carry out its functions in all subjects, including RE. More broadly, DENI and CCEA should commission a report examining how the curriculum can be adapted in the light of Northern Ireland’s growing diversity.

Last, but not the least, I would like to appeal to the National Executive of the Labour Party, the NI Shadow Team and the Executive Committee of the Labour Party in NI to pressurise the coalition Government to implement the Good Friday Agreement in full, in particular the Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland and the Legacy Commission. The two are the cornerstone for long-term peace in Northern Ireland, in particular to redress the economic, social and cultural rights through the Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland.

Gavin Boyd: Education Equality Officer of the Rainbow Project.

Gavin briefly set out the work of the Rainbow Project and in particular its work in schools and colleges. He raised some of the issues that LGBT pupils face in schools and the efforts which the Project made and would like to see school authorities take especially with regard to bullying but also about general issues with regard to attitudes, needs etc.

Paul Haslam: Labour Education Policy Group

First of all I would like to thank our three contributors. It was good to be reminded that the Labour Ministers working here under Direct Rule did try to put in place policies and changes that were required to improve the life chances of pupils and tried to make changes in the post-primary sector which would have benefitted all.

The Northern Ireland Branch of the Labour Party believes that its vision of Education and Learning must embrace: -

- The development of skills and knowledge which will enable our children to make sense of the social, physical and economic worlds in which they will live;
- The practical capabilities through which they will come to understand the world;
- The understanding of what it means to be human and to live a distinctively human form of life;
- The preparation for living in and contributing to the wider society of which they will all be part.

Our policies will:-

- Make it clear that the needs of the child are paramount and ensure that all schools embrace the UN Convention on the Rights of Children;
- Help to achieve social equity within a shared future;
- End academic selection at 11
- Treat education as a public service and not as a commodity to be “traded” in the market place;
- Be innovative and creative in the curriculum, pedagogy and structures.
- Make ways of aligning action within schools and the education system with broader social action.
- Make Area Learning Communities be part of reconfiguring major services for strategic purposes;
- Make the system collaborative rather than competitive.
- Make policy depend on evidence and research.

A key demand for promoting educational improvement is the creation of a more equal society

With regard to the issues raised in the presentations, the Party will seek to raise the issue of the revision of the present Religious Education syllabus as well as ask the Department of Education to undertake research on the performance of children from ethnic minorities and to benchmark racial equality as set out in the Stephen Lawrence Enquiry.

The Party will also work with the Rainbow Project to see how it can help both in their work with schools and pupils but also in getting change made in the policy and guidance of the Department.