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# Attitudes of the Socially Disadvantaged Towards Education in Northern Ireland

by Anne Sutherland and Noel Purdy

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**Attitudes of the socially disadvantaged towards education in  
Northern Ireland**

**Anne Sutherland & Noel Purdy**

**Graduate School of Education  
Queen's University Belfast  
Northern Ireland**

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## **Introduction**

This report is a review of recent studies of the attitudes of the socially disadvantaged in Northern Ireland towards education. The report comprises seven chapters and is followed by a conclusion.

Chapter One deals with early motherhood. It begins with a look at the wider perspective of teenage motherhood and the frequent link to social deprivation as investigated by national and international studies. It then provides a summary of five Northern Ireland studies, all carried out in the last ten years: Davies, Downey and Murphy (1996) The CROW Study; Muston (1997) The Gingerbread Study; Dale and Warm (c1997); Horgan (2001); and Bunting (2003). Each of the studies was carried out by different agencies for different purposes and had contrasting samples, methodologies and findings. In each case, however, data concerning the young mothers' attitudes towards education are highlighted, and some tentative conclusions drawn.

The next three chapters consider disadvantaged children's and parents' attitudes to education at the various stages of schooling and beyond. The main focus is on the Northern Ireland evidence but this is again set in a wider context.

Chapter Two considers both the pre-school/nursery years and also the primary years. The chapter begins by considering a number of American studies of preschool projects in disadvantaged areas which report attitudinal benefits of preschool education. Attention then focuses on a number of Northern Ireland studies, such as Sheehy *et al.* (2000) Quiery *et al.* (2001) and McShane (1999), each of which draws its evidence from one particular preschool initiative, the Greater Shankill Early Years Project (EYP), undertaken as part of a wider Regeneration Strategy for that area of Belfast. Two further studies, Coopers and Lybrand (1997) and Gallagher *et al* (1998) report on small numbers of nursery units in disadvantaged areas. In terms of primary education in Northern Ireland, there is a lack of direct evidence from children in primary schools analysed by degree of social disadvantage. The studies cited focus instead largely on the opinions of primary principals as is the case in Gallagher *et al* (1998) and Quiery *et al* (2001). Nonetheless Kilpatrick *et al* (1997) does report on 95 upper primary children in disadvantaged areas of Belfast in a survey of their attitudes towards education.

Chapter Three looks firstly at research on how Northern Ireland parents from different social backgrounds approach the application process for post-primary schools for their children. It

also considers what they deemed the most important characteristics of post-primary schools. Pupils' views on the Transfer Procedure are also presented, although this could be done only with regard to the FSME indices of the schools rather than of the individual speakers. The chapter then looks at studies which focused on pupils who had recently made the transition to second-level education and then at studies focusing on those nearing the end of compulsory schooling. Some secondary analyses are carried out on data from Year 12 pupils, collected as part of the recent Selective System research (Gallagher and Smith, 2000a). The final section of the chapter collates findings from research that looked rather more broadly at the years of compulsory secondary education, the MBW *Scoping* study and the CATER project.

Chapter Four *Attitudes regarding the post-compulsory years* begins by considering research on the extent to which remaining in full-time education beyond the minimum leaving age – an important gateway to high status occupations – is related to home circumstances, attitudes to education and local opportunities for employment. The Northern Ireland evidence is set in a context of findings from Great Britain and the USA. The next section looks at the opposite end of the spectrum, at some of the most marginalized young people in the age group whose post-compulsory lives are likely to have got off to a bad start, namely, those not in education, work or training in the first two post-compulsory years. When aged 16-18 years, these young people are sometimes referred to, following research in South Wales, as being in 'Status 0'. Matters examined here include the extent to which those in Status 0 in Northern Ireland come from disadvantaged backgrounds, their attitudes to schooling and training and their future ambitions. Evidence from the MBW 'Scoping' study on the 16-24 age group is also summarised. Many of the informants here, unlike those in Status 0, were on training schemes. The chapter ends with an examination of some American research on early leaving.

Chapters Five, Six and Seven concentrate on the attitudes of three groups of young people whose behaviours directly threatened their education. These are (i) pupils frequently absent for reasons unacceptable to the school; (ii) excluded pupils and (iii) pupils whose in-school behaviour caused their schools serious concern, leading eventually in a number of these cases to the provision of alternative forms of education. These three groups do, however, partially overlap, with a number of pupils belonging to more than one group and some to all three. Although some frequent absentees behave impeccably when they do attend, others are so disruptive in class that they may be excluded, at least temporarily, or alternative educational provision be sought for them. In the course of the three chapters exploring young people who show signs of disaffection from the education system, three main issues are considered: firstly, the level of disadvantage of these young people compared to their peers; secondly, the attitudes of these young people and their parents towards education; and, thirdly, the question

of whether the negative attitudes of young people alienated from education can be ameliorated.

## **Chapter One: Early Motherhood**

### **1. The Wider Perspective**

#### **1.1 Introduction:**

There is a substantial international research literature on young women who become mothers at an age when it is normal or at least quite commonplace to be in full-time education and much of it explores educational issues to a greater or lesser extent. The exact nature of the target sample varies and should always be borne in mind by the reader since this will affect the likely findings. Some studies are specifically of 'schoolgirl mothers'. Such research may concentrate on girls who become pregnant when still of compulsory school age (e.g. Schofield, 1994, in Ipswich) or, alternatively, also include any sixth formers, (e.g. Horgan, 2001, and Davies *et. al.*, 1996, both in Northern Ireland). However there is another large group of studies which contains some material relevant to this review that has looked more generally at 'teenage mothers', perhaps aged 15-19 or 16-19 (e.g. Bunting, 2003). The majority of these mothers would have been 18 or 19 years old at the birth of their first child, although only studies that included at least some respondents under age 18 are discussed in this review.

Now that the Government is seeking to maximise the numbers continuing their education well beyond the minimum leaving age and has ambitious targets for attendance in higher education in the belief that a well-educated and well-trained workforce is essential for the country's future (SEU, 1999), there would seem to be little official approval for *any* births to teenagers in modern western society, even if it is admitted that many do manage to bring up healthy happy children. One of the specific targets of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Health's Action Plan (DHSSPS, 2002) is to reduce the rate of births to mothers under 20 years of age by 20% by 2007. Teenage motherhood is, however, likely to be a vastly different experience for a 19-year-old who planned her pregnancy within the context of marriage or a stable relationship and for a 15-year-old whose pregnancy was the unintended and unwelcome consequence of unguarded behaviour at a party. There has been a considerable debate in the literature about the extent to which motherhood at age 18 or 19 should be considered a social problem. Phoenix (1991) argued that most of her sample would have fared little better if they had delayed childbearing, that poverty rather than early childbearing was their main problem and that most of them were making a good job of child-rearing in difficult circumstances. Macintyre and Cunningham-Burley (1993) make the point that to see the present rates of teenage childbearing in the UK and USA as problematic is "a

highly culture-bound perception". It does nevertheless make extended study and training – the activities favoured by western society for the later teenage years – more difficult and for this reason it is worth considering the relevant evidence in this review.

## **1.2 Early Motherhood and Social Disadvantage**

Although any of the very substantial percentage of young women who have sexual intercourse, especially if unprotected by contraception, may become pregnant, international evidence consistently shows that, at least in western societies, the risk of teenage pregnancy is highest for those who have grown up in disadvantaged circumstances and/or have poor educational attainment. The Social Exclusion Unit's report, *Teenage Pregnancy*, (SEU, 1999) and the DHSSPS (2002) report, *Myths and Reality*, present very similar lists of risk factors, which can be combined to comprise the following: (a) growing up in poverty; (b) being taken into local authority or (in Northern Ireland) HSS Trust care; (c) being the child of a teenage mother; (d) low or declining educational attainment; (e) school alienation, absenteeism and/or having been excluded from school; (f) sexual or physical abuse in childhood; (g) mental health problems, especially conduct disorders; (h) poor self-esteem; (h) being 'Status 0' as a teenager; (i) a history of offending behaviour or having a criminal record.

The SEU (1999) report gives illustrative examples of and references to research involving the risk factors on its list, one of the most striking being the finding from the Office of National Statistics (ONS) Longitudinal Study of a one per cent sample from the 1971 Census that the odds of becoming a teenage mother was nearly ten times as high for girls whose family was in social class V as social class I (Botting *et al.*, 1998). Indeed in this ONS research, teenage pregnancy rates were markedly higher for the daughters of all categories of manual workers than for any of the non-manual groups. Many of the factors in the SEU and DHSSPS lists, including deteriorating attainment scores, emerged in Kiernan's (1997) analysis of the National Child Development Study (NCDS) cohort, born in 1958.

Some of the well-established concomitants of growing up in poverty, which were not specifically mentioned in the SEU and DHSSPS lists, also frequently recur in the research literature, notably being part of a large family with three or more siblings, family breakdown and being brought up in a single parent home; the last mentioned group overlaps with but does not coincide with being the child of a teenage mother. Lower career ambitions and early



age of first sexual intercourse have also been significant predictors of early pregnancies in large-scale statistical surveys.<sup>1</sup>

Other international research suggests that in addition to 'sexual or physical abuse' one might include 'emotional abuse' and poor relationships within the family of origin. Wellings *et al.* (1996) found poor communication about sexual matters in the family to be the most robust predictor of teenage parenthood of all their family-based variables. The DHSSPS (2002) *Action Plan* cites other research by the World Health Organisation and the US National Longitudinal Study of Teenage Health which also pointed to the importance of family communication and the DHSSPS included in its list of planned actions the further development of community-based programmes on parent/ child communication.

Demographic trends have also emerged in studies that assessed socio-economic disadvantage through measures of the locality of the young women's homes rather than of themselves or their families. Botting and her colleagues found that in the period 1994-96 on the Carstairs index of deprivation, 12% of all births in the most deprived districts of England and Wales but only 2% in the least deprived were to teenagers. In the country as a whole, 7% of the births were to women aged under 20 years. Research in Scotland by Smith (1993) in Tayside and by Boulton-Jones *et al.* (1995), who analysed Scottish population data, showed similar trends on the Carstairs index. More recently, McLeod (2001), who also used the Carstairs Index in Scotland, reported a widening of the gap between teenage pregnancy rates in affluent areas, where they remained stable, and in disadvantaged areas, where they increased. Some American research (Hogan and Kitagawa, 1985; Brewster *et al.*, 1993) suggests that locality-based measures are more than just a useful proxy for individual and family data in large-scale investigations, since local social norms, including those of the peer group, can help to shape behaviour.

In Northern Ireland, as elsewhere, demographic figures have consistently demonstrated that areas in which an unusually high percentage of the total births have been to teenage mothers are also areas of high social deprivation. Scally (1992) presented data from the Child Health surveillance system showing that within the Eastern Health and Social Services Board (EHSSB) – which as a whole had a higher percentage of its births to teenagers than the Northern Ireland average – the percentage of births to mothers under 20 was only 4% in the more affluent Castlereagh and North Down areas but just under 10% in North Belfast and nearly 11% in West Belfast. Using the most recent figures available to them at the time of

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<sup>1</sup> More detailed referencing could be provided if wanted.

writing, Dale and Warm (c1997) and Bunting (2003) both reported that the North and West Belfast Trust (NWBT) area had a higher percentage of its births to teenage mothers than any other of the EHSSB trust areas. Both Dale & Warm and Bunting also cited evidence about the very high levels of social disadvantage in the NWBT area. Bunting (2003) stressed the high percentages for male unemployment (32.8%) and income support (85.7% above the national average) while Dale & Warm (c1997) included more medical evidence when they reported that, compared with other areas in Belfast, the North and West Belfast Trust area had, *inter alia*, the highest mortality rate, the highest percentage of low birthweights, the highest percentage of mothers of low SES status and a higher percentage of babies born to young parents. The reviews of individual investigations in Northern Ireland in Part II of this chapter include any recorded evidence of the sample members' socio-economic status and of any potentially damaging emotional experiences within their families.

Disadvantaged home circumstances appear to increase the risk of teenage parenthood to such an extent that statistical comparisons of the later life outcomes of teenage parents and their contemporaries should, if possible, take their family backgrounds into account, as, indeed, many studies have done. The secondary analysis of data from the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (NSSL) by Wellings *et al.* (1996), however, also indicated that, although teenage births result to some extent from hardship and deprivation, they also contribute to such outcomes. Even after controlling for the effects of the educational level attained and social class, Wellings and her colleagues found that women who had given birth in their teens were more likely than those who had not become teenage mothers to live in a poor area of the country, and were also less likely to own their home or to be in paid work. Similarly, Hobcraft and Kiernan's (2001) analysis of data from the 1958 national cohort study (the NCDS) found that even after controlling for childhood poverty (which was directly related to both the age of first birth and the adult outcome variables), the age at first birth was a significant predictor of such outcomes at age 33 as living on benefits or in social housing, low income, self-ratings of physical health as 'fair' or 'poor', emotional well-being scores and dissatisfaction with the way their lives had turned out so far.

### **1.3 Teenage Parenthood, Disadvantage and Outcomes: some further factors**

Acknowledgement of the link between disadvantaged home circumstances and an increased likelihood of teenage pregnancy is one important safeguard against assuming that associations between teenage childbearing and later adverse outcomes for either mother or child are simply the result of the mother's young age. Some of the adverse outcomes associated with very early motherhood can be at least partly explained by poverty, as in Wellings *et al.*

(1996). Some adverse medical outcomes can, in fact, be entirely explained this way (Williams *et al.*, 1987, in Glasgow).

When a significant association is found between early parenthood and poor educational outcomes or negative attitudes towards education, it is important to try to discover, if possible, the temporal sequence. Does teenage motherhood lead to a declining interest in education, lowered ambitions and poor academic performance, perhaps because of the overriding demands of the child, or have performance and interest usually already deteriorated even before conception. Some studies suggest the latter is more often the case. Schofield (1994) cites research in Aberdeen by Wilson (1980) which found that, in comparison with girls from similar socio-economic backgrounds, a group of 44 girls who became pregnant before age 16 were more likely to have been academic underachievers in their final primary school year, to have appeared before a juvenile court and to have attended a child guidance clinic. Breakwell's (1993) analysis of data from the 16-19 Initiative surveys of young people living in four British towns in the 1980s found that those who were already parents or were expecting a child had poorer results at 16+ than the others. This was not because the child had interrupted their education, since their examination failure preceded their parenthood. In New Zealand Fergusson & Woodward's (2000) analysis of a cohort of 520 young women from birth to age 21 found that most of the 42 subjects who became pregnant by age 18 years had already left school, typically with few or no qualifications, before they conceived. Even at age 13, before any had become pregnant, they had poorer scores on tests of reading, maths and general ability.

One limitation of long-term studies – including the analyses of data gathered in their twenties and thirties of data from the national cohort studies of 1946 and 1958 (Kiernan, 1980,<sup>2</sup> 1997) – is that the social climate and school practices may well have changed between the time of the teenage births and the follow-up surveys in mature adulthood. While such research provides a necessary corrective to total reliance on data gathered shortly after the birth, the implications for the contemporary situation may be not always be entirely clear. Once conception has taken place, there is more acceptance of births outside marriage and of unmarried parents nowadays, even while steps are being taken to try to reduce the numbers of teenage pregnancies. More efforts are being made to encourage pregnant and parenting schoolgirls to continue with their education in Northern Ireland as elsewhere (DHSSPS, 2000, par. 3.2.10 and DHSSPS, 2002, Action Plans 15-18).

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<sup>2</sup> Cited in Breakwell (1993)

Attitudes towards childbearing in the later teenage years and to such childbearing inside and outside marriage has not only varied over time but varies among the sub-cultures of a country, let alone between countries. Comparative literature has to be read with caution.

Although large-scale statistical surveys consistently show a significant association between disadvantage in the family of origin and the chances of becoming a teenage mother, more qualitative research, especially where the author or authors have actually met some or all of their sample, reveals the diversity of women involved. Although this may be particularly the case if the sample includes women who first gave birth when aged 18 or 19, after varying educational and employment histories (Phoenix, 1991; Allen and Bourke-Dowling, 1998<sup>3</sup>) even a sample restricted to girls who became pregnant while at school will differ on many dimensions. The 'identikit' picture that emerges from the SEU (1998) and DHSSPS (2000) associations listed above is by no means descriptive of all teenage or even all schoolgirl mothers.

There is a growing corpus of longitudinal research in the United States that suggests that a substantial proportion of teenage mothers eventually recover much or all of the educational or employment 'ground' that they lost because of the interruption of early parenthood (Furstenberg *et al.*, 1987; Upchurch and McCarthy, 1990; Horwitz *et al.*, 1991; Rich and Kim, 1999). By no means all do so and such achievements may in some respects be more possible in the United States where there may be more of a 'can do' culture and where it may be more usual for adults to 'go back to school' (i.e. usually college) for additional qualifications in their twenties, thirties or forties. This area does not seem to have been researched in Northern Ireland.

#### **1.4 Some Facts, Myths and Stereotypes**

A number of facts and beliefs about school-age mothers help to contextualise the individual studies in Northern Ireland.

There are certain legal differences between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom that affect teenage (and sometimes other) pregnancies. The age of sexual consent is 17 years, a year older than elsewhere in the UK. There is no equivalent to the Abortion Act of

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<sup>3</sup> Allen and Bourke-Dowling's sample of young women in Leeds, Solihull and Hackney (London) who became pregnant when aged 16-19 may have had a relatively low average level of educational achievement, a relatively high unemployment rate at the time they became pregnant but it included sixth-form girls whose study and career plans were ruined by unexpected pregnancies and young married Asian women whose childbearing was planned.

1967 so that those seeking an abortion for 'social' or economic reasons usually go to Great Britain. The full number doing so is unknown since some give a false address and estimates may well be underestimates.<sup>4</sup>

In recent years there have been approximately 1700 births per annum to teenage mothers in Northern Ireland (Horgan, 2001; DHSSPS, 2000), though this figure would include young women up to 19 years of age. Though no higher than in other jurisdictions in the United Kingdom, and considerably lower than in the United States and much of Eastern Europe, the rate is much higher than in Western Europe generally (Singh and Darroch, 2000). There was some concern that after declining in the early 1990s, the birth rate to women under twenty began to creep upwards in the later part of the decade.<sup>5</sup>

There was also some disquieting evidence of the number of births to *younger* teenagers (aged 15 and under) increasing. Dale and Warm (c1997) point out that despite a generally downward trend between 1990 and 1995 in the total number of teenage births in the Northern Ireland from 1958 to 1434, the number of births to 14-year-olds increased from not more than 5 in 1990-93 to 10 and 12 in 1994 and 1995. McGuigan (2000) reported that in the Ulster Community and Hospital Trust area there was only one birth to a mother under 16 in 1978 but 26 in 1998.

Northern Ireland is believed to adhere more firmly than most other parts of the UK to traditional family values in ways that increase the likelihood of very young mothers being made to feel social outcasts. If such values are displayed by school staff (and in some of the studies in Part II such attitudes were not uncommon) this would add to the difficulties facing a pregnant or parenting schoolgirl who wished to continue with her education.

Most of the above facts and beliefs may put additional pressures on a girl of school age who finds herself pregnant in Northern Ireland as compared with one who finds herself in that situation in another part of the United Kingdom.

Some mention might also be made of the 'moral panic' which perhaps reached its peak in the early 1990s that many teenage girls get themselves pregnant in order to live as parasites on benefits in accommodation provided though the social services (or equivalent) rather than

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<sup>4</sup> Official figures moreover tend to state the number who go 'to England' with no mentions of any seeking abortions in Scotland, which would seem a viable alternative. One trusts that the official figures are not equating 'England' and 'Great Britain'!

<sup>5</sup> Really up to date figures would be desirable if there is to be any sort of wider publication/distribution.

fulfilling society's expectations that they should be childless and either studying, training or in employment. That such views were voiced cruelly, if sometimes amusingly, by several Conservative ministers (including Peter Lilley and Michael Portillo) and the media (see *Save the Children*, 1996) gave them increased force. Empirical evidence for such motivations to become pregnant is sparse (Phoenix, 1991) and the idea is often vigorously refuted by teenage mothers, at least as regards their own life histories even if they think it may be true of certain others.

### **1.5 Introduction: Methodology of Studies in this Area**

Research findings on the attitudes to education of young women who became mothers when still at school or still in their teens are likely to vary, not just according to the exact nature of the target sample but also according to the strategy for approaching the sample, the response rate and how important educational issues were in the overall design of the investigation. The Northern Ireland studies to be reviewed here vary on such dimensions.

Locating an approach sample can be a problem for researchers, especially if it is hoped to include young mothers who gave birth some years previously. Usually some kind of organisation or agency is used as an intermediary. However, the attitudes to education of young women on lists of names supplied by those providing educational services for them are likely to be more favourable than those identified through other means, such as the health or social services or voluntary or community organisations. The latter are more likely to include any young women who effectively dropped out of education on learning they were pregnant, or even earlier. As in all social research, the higher the response rate, the more confidence there can be that the findings are representative of the target population and in many of the studies the response rate was much lower than is desirable.

Early motherhood has, of course, important implications other than educational ones and many studies have dealt primarily with such topics as the support the young women received from their child's father or their own families, their experiences of health, welfare and social services, their living arrangements, or how they coped financially. In qualitative studies with very open-ended questions, young mothers may have had most to say about matters of immediate concern, such as their child's development or financial problems. In a single wide-ranging interview, there would often not have been time to explore educational issues fully and the reviewer should be aware that more evidence might have been available had there been time for further follow-up questions or if the research priorities had been different.

## **2. Five Northern Ireland Studies**

The five Northern Ireland studies to be considered in detail had sample sizes ranging from 16 to 163 and were based on interview or questionnaire evidence rather than just demographic information. The studies are presented, as far as possible, in order of publication.

### **2.1: THE CROW STUDY IN THE MID-1990S: DAVIES, DOWNEY AND MURPHY (1996)**

The research by a team from the Centre for Research on Women (CROW) at the University of Ulster (Davies, Downey and Murphy, 1996) gave fuller attention to educational matters than any other study located about young motherhood in Northern Ireland and was the first major study to seek the young women's own opinions on the matter. However, since the field work was carried out nearly a decade ago, well before the DHSSPS policy papers of 2000 and 2002, the report might perhaps be better thought of as setting a benchmark for intended future improvements than necessarily an account of the present situation.

The Save the Children Fund (SCF) which commissioned the research, was concerned that school-age mothers, even if of compulsory education age, could have difficulty in accessing education, both during pregnancy and after the birth of the child. To the SCF, one of whose aims is the end of child poverty, denying these young women the opportunity to gain academic and vocational qualifications could help to lock both them and their children into a cycle of deprivation.

#### **2.1.1 Methodology**

The original target sample comprised young women throughout Northern Ireland who, whether above or below the minimum leaving age at the time, had during the previous five years become pregnant when at school. Since the SCF wanted evidence from a large sample of young women within a limited time frame, a postal questionnaire was the obvious methodology. Pains were taken to make it user-friendly, including a focus group and individual interviews with young people in order to shape and refine the questionnaire.

The researchers located their sample through the Education and Library Board's records of pregnant schoolgirls who had received home tuition. ELB clerical staff administered numbered questionnaires to the young women who were requested to return the completed questionnaires, which did not ask for their names unless they were willing to have a follow-up

individual interview, directly to the CROW team. In order to preserve anonymity, the researchers had otherwise at no point access to the names and addresses of their informants. Although all five Boards initially agreed to take part, one withdrew on the grounds of the workload involved, one negotiated for a time-frame of only the previous three and not five years and a third insisted on first sending out a filter letter to get consent before sending the actual questionnaire. From 274 approaches made to young mothers, 91 completed questionnaires were returned. This 33% response ranged from 55% in the WELB to only 18% in the Board which employed the filter.

The possibility of using health visitors to locate the sample was rejected on the grounds that, since the survey was not about health issues, health visitors might not be much interested or well motivated. Davies and her colleagues were, however, fully aware that any young women who had been over the minimum leaving age when they became pregnant, or who had left at the end of Year 12 without their early pregnancies being known to the school, or who had dropped out of school on becoming pregnant or even before, or who had made no effort to ensure home tuition were quite likely – and in some of these situations almost certainly – missing from the ELB lists. Accordingly, the researchers tried to supplement the main sample obtained through the ELB by contacting voluntary groups (including Gingerbread, Barnardo's and local groups) known to help teenage parents and/or single parents. Direct appeals were also made for participants in newspapers and on local and regional radio. All these extra efforts, disappointingly, brought in only two useable questionnaires and only those obtained through the ELBs were used.

### **2.1.2 The Young Mothers in the CROW Study**

At the birth of their first child, 39.6% (36) of the sample were aged 15 or less (with 8% aged 13-14), another 39.6% were aged 16 and the remaining 20.9% (19) were aged 17-18 years. While those aged 15 or under would certainly have been of compulsory school age and the fifth aged 17-18 would have had their babies after deciding to stay on for sixth form, the status of those aged 16 at the birth is not obviously clear and would have depended on their exact date of birth in relation to the school year. The age range at the time of the survey was 15-20, with a mean of 17.5 years. Though most had still only the one child, eleven had two children and one informant, by then aged 20 had three children. Over half (51 or 56%) were still single and living at home or, in three cases with other relatives or friends. About a quarter (23 or 26%) were single and living alone with their children. An eighth (12 or 13%) were cohabiting and four (4%) were married.



As for their current occupation, the largest single group (39 or 43%) were occupied as full-time mothers when they participated in the survey. However, almost as many (37 or 41%) were in some kind of education, whether at school, in further or higher education or on a training scheme. Only ten (11%) were in actual paid employment though five others classed themselves as 'unemployed and looking for work'. As would be expected, those in work tended to be older and those at school to be younger. Some of the employment must have been only part-time or very poorly paid<sup>6</sup> because of disparities between the numbers who gave their own earnings or those of a partner as their main source of income and those who reported being in employment or living with a partner. Nearly three-quarters (73%) of the informants relied mainly or entirely on social security payments and another 8% – presumably those too young to claim Income Support on their own behalf – were being supported by their parents. Only an eighth of the sample (13%) had a net weekly income of over £100 and nearly a third (30%) had less than £50 a week. Even in 1995, incomes of these sizes would have left many of the sample severely constrained financially.

### **2.1.3 Attitudes to Education**

When asked to indicate on a 5-point scale on the importance of education to them both before and after the birth, the great majority replied that they had thought education either 'very important' or 'important' both before and after the birth of their child: (85% had thought so before and 82% afterwards.) Only four of the 91 young mothers recalled thinking that education was 'not important' or 'fairly unimportant' before the birth and only seven remembered thinking that way afterwards.

This professed importance given to education was backed both by the number still in education or training (37, of whom at least 24 were beyond the minimum leaving age) and by the qualifications which many of them had obtained. Fewer than a quarter (19 or 23.5%) of the 81 who were aged 16 or over had no formal qualifications. Of the fifteen 16-year olds, whose KS3 or KS4 studies would have been interrupted by their pregnancy, nine had GCSE or GNVQ qualifications, although the number of subjects passed and the grades obtained are not reported. At least some of the other seven 16-year olds may well have been in Year 12 and not yet had a chance to sit their examinations. (This is the sort of point that it is easier to clarify in an interview than a questionnaire.) Of the 37 respondents aged 17 or 18 at the time of the survey, 28 (75.7%) had qualifications at least at GCSE/ GNVQ level. Of the 29 oldest respondents aged 19 or 20, who were above normal school age and whose pregnancies may

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<sup>6</sup> The survey took place before there was a Minimum Wage.

have been either during the years of compulsory education or in sixth form, 13 (44.8%) had passed either 'A' level or BTEC examinations, one had obtained a university degree and only 4 (13.8%) lacked any qualifications.

Nevertheless, more than half (49 or 55%) of the 89 who answered the question felt that they had missed out on opportunities to take examinations at school or college because of their pregnancy. The majority of these had actually successfully taken examinations but they may have meant that they had to reduce the number of subjects taken, as is known sometimes to have been the case, or perhaps postpone their entry. The overall levels of qualifications obtained by the young mothers should be interpreted in the light of the fact that only 25% of the sample had attended grammar schools, whereas a *DENI Information Brief* published the same year gave a figure of about 40% for Northern Ireland as a whole.

Three questionnaire items can be regarded as dealing with the young mothers' past (though post-natal), present and future participation in education. Half the respondents said they had gone back to some form of education or training at some point since the birth. The largest single group here were girls who had gone back to school to complete examination courses or, in some cases, gone to a further education college to study for GCSEs or 'A' levels.

At the time of the survey, 37 (40.7%) of the young mothers were in full-time or part-time education or training, of whom at least 24, being aged 17 or more, were beyond the age of compulsory education. 11 were at school, 18 on full-time or part-time courses in further education, six at university and two on YTP or ACE training courses. Several were currently on vocationally-oriented courses in business administration, secretarial or word-processing, nursery nursing or such traditional 'women's work' as stitching.

The future plans of as many as 70% of the 84 who responded to the item included some further study or training. Of the 25 who had no such plans 'only a minority' were reported to be entirely uninterested in more education. The more usual answer from the 25 was that motherhood was now their priority, whether from choice or necessity. It was evident that a number might return to education (or seek employment) if they could afford child care or if there was a family member free to look after the child or perhaps when the child was no longer at home all day:

"At the present time I have to look after my child full-time and would not have time to study as well as running the household. Later on in life, as he grows up, I will give it a good deal of thought."

It was calculated that about a third of the sample (32%) had left school completely round the time of the pregnancy or birth. Some, who either disliked school or saw no need to continue their education, would probably have left even had they not been pregnant. The majority who had left are, however, described by Davies and her colleagues as writing regretfully or 'wistfully' about lost opportunities but believing that they would not have been welcomed back to school.

#### **2.1.4 Relevant Educational Experiences**

Experiences inevitably help to shape attitudes, although many informants in the course of this review were clearly distinguishing between an ideal vision of education and what they or their children had personally experienced. In the case of these very young mothers, one would imagine that the treatment received from school and any other educational services round the time of the pregnancy and birth could colour their attitudes about returning to formal study.

##### *School Reactions to the Pregnancy*

Once their pregnancy was known to the school, nearly half the respondents (46%) said they were treated much as before by school staff. Perhaps surprisingly, fully a third (35%) replied that they were treated 'better' or 'much better' but a fifth (20%) felt they were treated 'worse' or 'much worse'. Understandably, despite the percentages endorsing the pre-coded options, there were more volunteered comments from those who felt badly treated than from those whose teachers had been more encouraging. While positive treatment was usually described quite briefly, e.g. "understanding and helpful", descriptions of negative treatment could be quite circumstantial:

"My headmistress was horrible to me, to put it mildly. She was not understanding at all. It was because of her that I dropped out of lower 6th. I had to fight to get back into the school after my child was born. There was no co-operation from her at all."

"School was very unhelpful towards assisting me with work. In fact I was not even informed of tutoring service. The headmaster told my parents that it would be very expensive to have me tutored when they discussed it with him."

"When I told the Head Nun ... she sent me a letter and told me not to come back even although I was not showing. She treated me like a leper ..."

Reactions from other pupils also differed. While friends could be very supportive and just over half the respondents (54%) said their treatment by classmates was much as before, 22% experienced worse treatment from other pupils. This might include stares, name-calling, 'snide' remarks and, in one case, graffiti in the school toilets.

### **2.1.5 Home Tuition**

The 43-item questionnaire included 13 items about home tuition. A fifth of the respondents (19 or 20.9%) said, however, that they had received none. Full details were not always available but for five of these 19 young mothers, this was no problem. Three had dropped out of education before the birth. Another girl was allowed to stay on at school and sit her GCSEs when seven months pregnant while the fifth had a 'special arrangement' including library study periods for which she had high praise. The other 12 who received no home tuition felt badly let down, especially those who had been promised tuition which never materialised. One of the 12 reported visiting the school several times in vain to try to get work from them or home tuition organised.

Most of the young women who had received home tuition reported having a good relationship with their home tutor or tutors. More saw their tutor like a friend than like a teacher (47% vs 38%), with several of the remainder seeing their tutor as both friend and teacher. Two-thirds (68%) felt that the tutor had got to know them as a person and 71% of them had acknowledged and discussed the pregnancy. Most tutors (81%) had encouraged the young mothers to return to school. A few of the young mothers, however, felt pressurized by being expected to keep up with their examination work and just wanted to tend their new babies.

Opinions were more divided about the content and quality of the home tuition. While two-thirds had some choice of subjects, a third had none. Fully four fifths (80.7%) of those who responded to the question thought that the curriculum offered to them through home tuition was not relevant to their particular situation. A number of others pointed to a reduction in the number of school subjects studied and examinations entered, in one case from ten GCSE subjects to just five. The quality of the teaching also varied considerably in the opinion of the young mothers. On the positive side, some of the sample appreciated the individual nature of the tuition, which had enabled them to understand certain things better than in class and 15 wrote that their home tuition had helped them to go forward to their examinations. A few had been helped by visits from some of their normal subject teachers.

The questionnaire replies can be set against interview evidence from the Chief Education Officers (CEOs) of the five ELBs, who all stated that pregnant girls were encouraged to stay at school as far into the pregnancy as possible and to return after the birth. One added, however, that voluntary grammar schools had the right to expel a pregnant schoolgirl. The CEOs all also described an allocation of home tuition for up to 8-10 hours a week, although they explained that the number of weeks of home tuition would depend on such individual circumstances as the date of the expected confinement in relation to the school year and difficulties in arranging childcare.

The report's main recommendations regarding home tuition were that the tutors should visit the school more to keep in touch with the class work and that, as many were already doing, they should all encourage the girls to return to their education.

### **2.1.6 The Final Comments**

Replies to a final open-ended question on the level of support from the school showed only ten of the young mothers to be fully satisfied and 50 making critical comments. Three themes predominated in replies here. First, some expanded on the unsympathetic treatment received from at least some of their teachers and thought teachers should be less judgemental and more supportive. Secondly there was criticism of the inadequacy of sex education in school, especially in Catholic schools. Thirdly, there were suggestions for improving home tuition or other alternatives to normal school attendance. Some wanted a wider range of subjects, while others suggested being set regular work from class and continuing contact with the school.

Davies and her colleagues concluded that, although the popular view is that girls who become pregnant while at school have little interest in education and are already underachievers, only a minority of the present sample were like that and a number had achieved a good deal academically. Although many of the respondents were quite critical, at least in reply to some of the questions, most of the criticism could be considered as constructive.

However, with an approach strategy through the home tuition service, a postal questionnaire as the research method, a response rate of 33% (perhaps not too discouraging for a postal questionnaire but leaving the views of two-thirds of the approach sample unknown) and a questionnaire entitled 'School Age Mothers and the Right to Education', it would seem quite likely that the response sample might have been more interested than school age mothers generally in their education. Their findings will be compared with others from studies that used rather different methodologies. Even if their sample was not fully representative,

however, Davies and her colleagues demonstrated that a substantial number of young women who become mothers during their school were seriously interested in education and qualifications and also deserving of better support than some of them had received from their schools and ELBs.

## **2.2: THE GINGERBREAD STUDY (1997): AUTHOR JENA MUSTON**

Concerned about the problems likely to be faced by many of the increasing number of unmarried young mothers, Gingerbread Northern Ireland, a self-help community development organisation for all one-parent families regardless of age, carried out a survey (Muston, 1997)<sup>7</sup>. The aim was to find out more about young mothers, their circumstances and the services they need and want. In the light of this information Gingerbread hoped to improve the services available to these young women from itself, other voluntary agencies and the statutory agencies.

In keeping with the organisation's remit, the Gingerbread study was deliberately restricted to lone parents under 25 at the time of the survey, who were neither cohabiting nor married. They need not necessarily have been lone parents when they first gave birth but one chapter of the report focuses on those who became pregnant while at school

### **2.2.1 Methodology**

It was decided to conduct the survey in an urban and a rural area since the service needed might differ and in two areas with different rates of young lone parenthood. Belfast, an urban area with a high rate, and Newry and Mourne, a more rural area with a low rate, were chosen.

Since Gingerbread wanted evidence within a year from a fairly large sample, a postal questionnaire was an obvious method. The target was 100 usable questionnaires from Belfast and 30 from Newry and Mourne, representing 6% and 28% respectively of the young lone parent population in the 1991 Census. There being no comprehensive register of young lone parents to form a sampling frame, Gingerbread used three different approaches to recruit a sample. First, they enlisted the support of relevant community, voluntary and women's organisations in the two areas and asked them to distribute questionnaires to individuals and

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<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, although this is quite an important report in the Northern Ireland literature, there are a number of errors in it, mainly of a statistical nature.

at any meetings of local support groups or courses for young parents. Since many lone parents do not use such organisations, a second approach was made through health visitors, who see every child born in Northern Ireland. Wanting to ensure that parents under 18 were included, Gingerbread also secured the co-operation of the two Education and Library Boards, which are expected to offer home tuition to all young women who become pregnant while still of compulsory school age.

To give young parents more scope to express their ideas, a focus group was held in Belfast with eight of the respondents. In the more scattered Newry and Mourne area, where many young parents faced travel problems, three individual interviews were held instead.

The overall response rate to the questionnaire was 30%. The rate was higher in Belfast (34%) than in Newry and Mourne (21%). Suggested reasons why the rate was not higher included the sensitivity of the topic, the timing (mid-June) when many of the organisations' activities would have ended for the summer and some questionnaires being distributed to young people who were outside the age range or cohabiting. Obviously ELB staff would not usually know about changes in the domestic situations of girls to whom they had offered home tuition some years before.

### **2.2.2 The Young Mothers in the Gingerbread Study**

Questionnaires were returned by a total of 163 young lone parents, 139 in Belfast and 24 in Newry and Mourne. All respondents were female. Only a minority of the respondents had become pregnant while at school: 34 (24.5%) of those in Belfast and 5 (20.8%) of those in Newry and Mourne. Two of these in Belfast and one in Newry and Mourne did not complete the section on their experiences as pregnant schoolgirls and so information on that topic comes from 32 respondents in Belfast and only 4 in Newry and Mourne.

Calculating on the basis that any pupil aged 14-15 is definitely under the minimum leaving age and one aged 16 may or may not be, then at least 10.1% (14) of the Belfast respondents were certainly of compulsory school age when they had their first child<sup>8</sup> and up to 23.7% (33) may have been. In Newry and Mourne, only one pupil (4.2%) certainly and only 2 (8.4%) possibly gave birth when under the minimum leaving age. Some respondents would have been sixth formers.

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<sup>8</sup> From Table 7 in Muston (1997)

At the other end of the age range, 33 (23.7%) of the Belfast respondents and 7 (29.2%) of those in Newry and Mourne were aged 20-24 at the birth of their first child and so rather older than most informants in the studies reviewed in this section. The remaining 73 (52.5%) respondents in Belfast and 15 (62.5%) first gave birth in their later teenage years (17-19).

### **2.2.3 The Schoolgirl Mothers**

The section of the questionnaire for those who became pregnant while at school focused on just three topics: (i) the attitudes and treatment they had experienced, (ii) home tuition and (iii) support for pregnant schoolgirls.

#### ***Attitudes and Treatment on Learning the Respondent was Pregnant***

Three of the four young mothers from the Newry and Mourne area who described being pregnant while at school said that staff attitudes towards them were better than usual when their pregnancies became known. However, just over half (53.3%) of the Belfast group reported that staff attitudes were either 'a little worse' or 'much worse' than usual while most of the others said teachers treated them 'the same as usual'. Among the 16 who volunteered additional comments, one was glad she was at a further education college where attitudes were "that little bit more open". Two others reported varying treatment, for example, a judgemental headmaster but mainly sympathetic teachers. Among the complaints were being treated with disrespect, being made to feel ostracised and humiliated, not getting enough support with schoolwork and, in one case, being forced to leave the school:

"Headmistress really rude and only worried about school's reputation"

"The staff at school made me feel like I was carrying a disease not a baby."

In Belfast, fellow-pupils were more sympathetic than staff. A third (32.3%) reported that pupils' attitudes were 'better' or 'much better' than usual and half (51.6%) that they were the same as usual. In Newry and Mourne, one informant reported worse than usual attitudes from pupils, but the other three said that pupils' attitudes were the same or better than before.

#### ***Home Tuition***

Levels of home tuition were considerably lower than in the CROW study (Davies *et al.*, 1996). One likely reason is that the whole CROW sample but only a minority (9.8%) of the present sample was recruited from ELB records of home tuition applications. Over half



(56.3%) the respondents from Belfast and exactly half (2) from Newry and Mourne received no home tuition before the birth. After the birth, three-quarters of the informants in both areas received no tuition.<sup>9</sup> Twelve young mothers in Belfast and two in Newry and Mourne received no home tuition either before or after the birth, though the latter (and possibly a few in Belfast) were over the minimum leaving age and so the Boards were not obliged to provide them with home tuition.

Some may have received no tuition because they did not ask for it. Six of the 12 respondents in Belfast who received no home tuition indicated that they would have accepted it, had it been offered. The six included the young woman forced to leave school, though she was sent work home and sat her examinations.

Both young mothers who had received home tuition in Newry and Mourne and 65% of those who received it in Belfast had found it 'useful'. Reasons volunteered for its usefulness included a feeling of making progress, help with examination preparation, the one-to-one tuition and the non-judgemental atmosphere. The main criticism (heard only from Belfast) was the limited length. This was often only between one and four hours a week and in one case a single visit of about an hour. Three other Belfast respondents thought the tuition provided was unsuitable for their needs.

*Did they think they had missed out on opportunities to take examinations?*

None of the four who had been pregnant while at school in Newry and Mourne but nearly two-thirds of those in Belfast felt they had missed out on examination opportunities. More of those who received no home tuition than of those who were tutored felt that their examination opportunities had been reduced (70% vs 37.5%) but because of the small numbers involved the difference was not statistically significant.

### ***Support***

In keeping with previous answers, three of the four respondents from Newry and Mourne thought their school had given them 'a lot of support' but fully half (51.6%) those in Belfast thought they had received 'no support'. Complaints about a lack of support and complaints of missing opportunities to take examinations were significantly linked

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<sup>9</sup> It seems that six Belfast pupils received home tuition *after but* not before the birth. This may be related to the time of year of the birth.

Asked what they would do to help pregnant schoolgirls if they were school principals, two-thirds (68.8%) of the group in Belfast and two young women in Newry and Mourne responded, all positively. Specific suggestions included providing more homework, arranging home tuition, letting girls sit their examinations and talking to them personally but not judgementally. Three said they would provide childcare.

If given a choice of where to finish their education after giving birth, all four respondents in Newry and Mourne would have chosen to stay at their schools but rather over half those who responded in Belfast (54%) would have preferred to be educated elsewhere, either at a school for young mothers or with a Home Tutor. (The possibilities of a different school or a FE college do not seem to have been offered.)

One cannot but wonder, however, whether the minority who did not reply to this and the previous question might have had little interest in continuing their education. Understandably, given the survey's brief, the questionnaire seems altogether more concerned with eliciting the help respondents wanted than in clinically analysing their attitudes to education.

Two main conclusions seem to emerge from this chapter of the report. First, the pregnant schoolgirls received very different amounts of support and encouragement to continue their education. The very small group in Newry and Mourne fared better than the Belfast group but the important differences may be between schools rather than between ELBs. Secondly, at its best, Home Tuition was both beneficial and appreciated but was too often either non-existent or limited. Many would share Jena Muston's concerns that some pregnant girls of compulsory school age slipped through the home tuition net and rather older ones, who had shown enough commitment to return for a sixth form, received no help from the Board when they become pregnant.

#### **2.2.4 Present Situation and Future Plans**

The questions on topics other than education during pregnancy were put to the whole sample of 164 respondents. All respondents in Newry and Mourne and at least 95% in Belfast were over the minimum leaving age by the time of interview and many in their early twenties.

As in the CROW study, most respondents had low incomes, usually from benefits. Nearly 90% were living on £100 per week or less, including some with two or more children. Debt

was frequently a major worry. Most participants in this study were, by any standards, living in seriously socio-economically disadvantaged circumstances.

Nearly a fifth (19%) of the whole sample (17% in Belfast and 30% in Newry and Mourne) were in education or training at the time of interview. In Newry and Mourne, two young lone mothers were at school, another two in further education and one each in higher education, on a 'professional training course' and on an 'employment training scheme'. Exact numbers are less easily deducible for the Belfast sample but there the largest single group were on employment training schemes. Smaller similar numbers were in school and in further education with a few (3) in higher education.

Just over an eighth of the respondents (21 or 12.9%) were in employment, 14 full-time and seven part-time. All but one of these was in Belfast, where an additional 16 lone mothers described themselves as 'looking for work'. In addition, four of the focus group in Belfast spoke of doing voluntary work.

Over half of the sample were currently full-time mothers. However, only 5% in Belfast and 9.1% in Newry and Mourne did not ever want a job, though many wished to wait until their children were older, believing that it was better to care for very young children themselves.

When those who did not want to work in the very near future were asked if there was anything else they would like to do, rather over half spoke of additional education and/ or training. Focus group and interview protocols showed several young lone mothers perceiving further qualifications as necessary both to increase their earnings potential and to give them access to more desirable forms of employment:

"I'd like to have more NVQs under my belt so that it pays me to go to work and so I can get a choice of what I want to do."

As in other studies of young parents, help with childcare (mentioned by 61%) was seen as the most necessary form of support in order to get into employment. Substantial numbers (27% to 40%) also wanted help with work-related skills that might be taught on a training course, such as filling in application forms, writing CVs and interview skills. Childcare in this research was studied (understandably) mainly from the viewpoints of affordability, availability and trustworthiness rather than exploring the young mothers' ambitions for their children. Nearly two-thirds of the sample used only the extended family and friends to help. About one in

seven used a local crèche but pre-school playgroups and nursery schools, for which many of the children would have been too young, were each used by fewer than a tenth of the sample.

### **2.3: PREGNANT AND PARENTING SCHOOLGIRLS IN NORTH AND WEST BELFAST: DALE & WARM (C1997)**

Ann Dale and David Warm (c1997) conducted their investigation with the aim of finding out how services might be improved for teenage mothers, one of the specially vulnerable groups in society identified in Targeting Social Needs (TSN) The location of their study in the North and West Belfast Trust (NWBT) area was likely to show these social needs in particularly clear form. Dale and Warm's research is unusual for the width of perspectives obtained since their informants included, in addition to young mothers, 15 of the teenagers' mothers, school nurses, teachers, home tutors, health visitors, social workers and educational welfare officers (EWOs).

The 26 young mothers in the study, who had all become pregnant when at school, were identified by individual health visitors in the Trust area. The authors admit they had to abandon 'grand previous plans' for sampling when they learned that the EHSSB had no list from which a sample could be drawn and that it was going to be quite difficult to get a sample at all, even a convenience sample. The idea of using school-based sources was rejected on the grounds that it would be more biased. The EWOs would know about girls who had asked for home tuition but not necessarily about the others and the schools themselves would not necessarily know about girls whose pregnancy was not obvious when they left school at the end of Year 12.

#### **2.3.1 Evidence mainly from the young mothers**

##### *Family backgrounds*

All 26 young mothers were from working class families although "unemployment was often a key feature of family life". In at least 16 of the 26 families there was no main breadwinner and only eight families where anyone had a full-time job. The majority of the boyfriends (21) were unemployed, two in low-paid employment, two on YTP and one still at school; the amount of financial help they could give was therefore very limited. Just over half the young women's parents were married. Most of the pregnancies took place in the GCSE year (Year 12), although the full range was from Years 10 to 13, or ages 13 to 17. "Some" of the sample

had sisters who had become teenage parents and 'some' of their mothers had also been. Of the three young women about whom there are fuller case studies, one had a history of sexual abuse. Another of the three came from an unstable family with a violent father and had often lived away from them, often with various relatives and at one point in a Salvation Army hostel; she herself had a drink problem.

### *Post-Primary Schooling*

All but one of the schools attended by the 26 young mothers were single-sex secondary schools but one informant had attended a coeducational grammar school. Most of the 26 said they had enjoyed school but only half claimed to have been 'good attenders'. When at school most had envisaged becoming hairdressers, childcare workers, shop assistants or following other occupations that would not demand high academic qualifications. Only two had been more ambitious; one had hoped to work in a bank and the other to go to university.

The young women varied in the stage at which they told their schools that they were pregnant and indeed some left school without mentioning it. In this, as in other matters such as the provision of home tuition, much may depend on the time of year at which the baby is due. On hearing the news, school staff were more often described as positive (i.e. non-judgemental) than negative. Most of the girls were, however, asked to leave their school at some point, usually when the pregnancy became obvious. The reasons for this tended to be couched in such phrases as "for insurance purposes", "in case you get knocked over" and "for your own sake". The young women and their families accepted the school's authority on such matters and they seemed to assume that they had no right to influence or challenge the school.

There was great variation in the amount of schooling missed because of the birth, ranging from two months to a whole year. Typically they left when about six months pregnant and did not return until six months post-natally, if at all. If the baby was due in the summer holidays, they usually left at Easter, perhaps coming in just to take examinations.

Those who received home tuition were quite positive about certain aspects of it<sup>10</sup> but did not think it was enough to keep them up to date with school work, especially if they had GCSE examinations that year. Education and Library Boards are not obliged to provide the full curriculum for those unable to attend school. The consequence was that those who returned to schools found that they were behind their classmates in their studies. Pregnant schoolgirls on

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<sup>10</sup> This is not explained but may often refer to a congenial working relationship with the tutor.

home tuition could also feel isolated and most of them indicated that they would really have preferred to stay at school or go to a special unit for pregnant schoolgirls, had one existed.

### *After the Birth*

Echoing sentiments heard in the other studies in this section, the young women all loved their babies and derived great fulfilment from motherhood. However, on reflection, most would not have chosen to be a mother so young. Inevitably the baby's welfare had always to be given very high priority and adjusting to motherhood proved more demanding than expected for some.

Only eight of the 26 young women appear to have returned to education for any length of time and another two for only a brief period. The main reasons given for not returning were lack of childcare facilities, uncertainty about how the school would respond, lack of motivation or of any clear reason for returning and 'personal choice'. Of those who did return, one was said to be doing well but two were persistent absentees. Two others had changed their schools because of pressures in the previous one. Two of the three young mothers about whom there are fuller case studies had gone on to further education; one was enjoying her courses although, in order to get benefits she could not be a full-time student but the other was finding college a struggle because of tiredness and was behind with her work.

When asked what they might do in future, most of the young women said they wanted to work either full-time or part-time, though only one of those not in already further education mentioned any need for more qualifications. The young women often seemed vague and sometimes unrealistic about future jobs. One spoke about becoming a social worker but had not even bothered to check up on what GCSEs she had obtained. Dale and Warm felt that some seemed to be drifting with a passive attitude to the future. Three had become pregnant for a second time only a few months after the birth.

### **2.3.2 Evidence from the new grandmothers**

Interviews were obtained with 15 (just over half) of the teenagers' mothers. Only three were enthusiastic about the support their daughters received from their schools, the other 12 being very critical. Several complained that, on returning to school, the girl was placed in a lower band, despite having had home tuition. There were also complaints of schools making a pregnant girl feel like an outcasts or 'washing their hands of her'. The harshness of one school was especially criticised: not only were the girls forbidden ever to bring their offspring to

school to show to their classmates but they were forbidden even to bring photographs or to talk about their babies.

### **2.3.3 Evidence from teachers and other professionals**

Small group interviews were conducted with between two and five teachers in three of the schools, of which one school seemed more positive and supportive than the other two. There were other small group or individual interviews with five home tutors, six school nurses and four EWOs and with other professionals from the health and welfare services.

The teachers claimed that their schools treated every girl as an individual, responding in ways that took account of such things as their health and family support. They would encourage pregnant girls to stay on at school (though some would leave quite early) but not in the last two months or so. The EWOs suggested that most girls left at about five months, when the pregnancy was becoming obvious. The teachers said there was no problem about letting pupils off for ante-natal appointments but that it was not their job to ensure that the girls attended either these or the parenting classes offered to them.

Communication about home tuition was often flawed. The teachers claimed that they put a lot of effort into liaising with home tutors but that the home tutors did not liaise well with them, while the home tutors said that the quality of communication varied from school to school and even among teachers in the same school. The home tutors saw the strength of the system lying in the relationships they could build with the girls and their families though they would like to be able to contact a medical person or social worker if problems were suspected that lay outside their sphere. Though the teachers saw home tuition as particularly valuable in the period immediately after the birth, they regarded the amount provided as inadequate, especially for girls about to sit examinations.

The professional groups were generally agreed that the majority of the young women did not return to school after the birth. Problems of childcare could prove insuperable unless the new grandmother was free during the day to look after the child. The EWOs said that only really well-motivated and able girls would return and continue despite such problems as sleepless nights with a crying baby and that not all schools would accept a returning young mother. The teachers spoke of a frequent drop in motivation to study because the baby got priority and mentioned such other problems as poor attendance and the parents of other girls not wanting their daughters associating with ones who had babies; moreover, those returning after 'maternity leave' were usually far behind with their work, although some made a real effort to

catch up. Both the school nurses and EWOs reported considerable differences among the schools in which they worked in the encouragement

given to young mothers to return to schools. The school nurses were also agreed that:

"if school was not an important part of the young woman's life before and during pregnancy, then it is going to be less important when they become mothers."

Although a number of the young mothers in NWBT seemed to have little real interest in continuing their education (though others had not) Dale and Warm were concerned about the real difficulties facing all but the luckiest of those who were at least willing to return to study. One of their main recommendations was that more should be done to encourage the return to education:

"The provision of childcare facilities, access to special courses, careers advice and counselling for these young women should be seriously considered."

#### **2.4: YOUNG MOTHERS GROWING UP (FAST) IN NORTHERN IRELAND: HORGAN (2001)**

As one of four studies in different parts of the United Kingdom, sponsored by the Save the Children Fund, on the general theme of the transition to adulthood in difficult or challenging circumstances, Goretta Horgan conducted in-depth interviews with 25 young women who had been school-age mothers. Her sample was accessed primarily through voluntary organisations that support young mothers in Northern Ireland, including Barnardo's, Gingerbread, the Shankill Early Years Project and the Foyle Young Independents' Group. It is not stated how many young women were approached but declined to participate and the original intention had been to interview 30. The organisations may have tended to approach the more articulate of the young women they had recently helped. In this respect, it would seem significant that the nine young mothers in the sample who were employed are reported to have all been on a contract basis and all involved in work with young people or young parents. It seems possible that some might even have been working for the organisations that recruited them for the present study. They had valuable things to say but they would not seem to have been a fully representative sample of former school-age mothers.

Horgan's interview schedule, included as an appendix to the report, contains nothing specifically about education. She explained that the direction of much of the interview was determined by the key themes the informant identified as important as they grew up. For instance, many of the young women spoke at some length about having to grow up quickly ("overnight basically") and take responsibility for a child, in most cases without help from the



father. A few saw having the child as having 'saved' them from a 'rackety' lifestyle that otherwise might have degenerated further.

In such circumstances, any evidence on the young women's attitudes to education is almost a bonus. Such evidence is often indirect and has sometimes to be inferred from reported behaviour or from the implications of a word or phrase rather than being apparent in definite statements. Moreover, since there is no list of questions or follow-up probes about educational matters, it should be recognised that the young women might have been willing to talk more about education had they been specifically asked. That, however, would have been a different research study.

Of the 25 young women, two had become pregnant at age 13 or 14, ten at age 15 or 16 and the remaining thirteen at age 17 or 18. The age at interview ranged from 14 to 27. In keeping with the conclusions in Horgan's review of previous research in the UK and USA which showed that young women who have experienced rejection, disruption or abuse within their families tend to be emotionally vulnerable in ways that put them at above average risk of an early pregnancy, no fewer than 14 of the 25 interviewees in her own study gave evidence of having lived in vulnerable situations before their pregnancy. Seven had experienced family breakdowns because of alcohol or domestic violence; another six, whose parents had separated, spoke of a difficult relationship with a parent's new partner and three had been in public care at some point. The frequency of at least the first and third of these situations is far, far higher than in the general population.

Of the eleven from settled, 'happy' homes, nine mentioned that one or both parents did not like their boyfriend and the relationship had caused friction at home. Three boyfriends were from a different religious denomination.

What shines through Horgan's account of the interviews is the love these young mothers had for their children, who had become the focus of their lives, even although nearly all of them would, on reflection, have preferred to have been older before having a child. Meanwhile their own needs and wishes were put very much in second place. At the same time the young mothers asserted a wish to be financially independent and to contribute to society as well as being the best possible parent. The stereotype of young unmarried women deliberately becoming pregnant to get a flat and state benefits was vehemently rejected; indeed some had welcomed the chance to be interviewed in order to refute such allegations. However, for many of them anything other than parenting – whether a return to education or employment – would have to wait until the child was at school or at least in pre-school education.

There were two important related reasons for this: lack of money and lack of affordable childcare. Well over half the sample said they were anxious to return to education and had made some attempt to do so. Lack of affordable and accessible childcare could prevent this. It is stated that all but six of the 25 interviewees were living 'in poverty'. One informant spoke of 'basically hiding' from her son's childcare organisers at the end of each month as she could not afford to pay them from her modest wages. Often (as in other studies) whether a young mother could return to education or take up work depended on whether her own mother was free during the day to look after the child and affectionate gratitude is expressed for the support received from mothers who were able to help in this way. Other informants had been frustrated by circumstances or, in one case, a false promise:

"That X Community Campus up there opened ... and it was all leaflets and all round the doors

saying: 'We have a crèche, we have this, we have that'. And we went up to enrol for our GCSE English and our GCSE Maths, and when we got up there they said they didn't have a crèche, they couldn't supply a crèche."

One Year 12 pupil returned to school six weeks after the birth but for only four days. Both her parents were out working during the day. Although the baby's unemployed and non-cohabiting father agreed to mind his daughter, getting the baby to him early in the morning, returning in time to catch the 8 a.m. bus for school, tending the child in the evening and trying to do homework "was far too much, so it was."

The costs of the actual educational courses, as well as of childcare, could also be prohibitive. All but one interviewee were above the minimum leaving age by the time of interview and 18 were at aged at least 19 years and so above even normal sixth form age. The abolition of student grants also further reduced their chances of continuing their education. One young woman calculated that a part-time route at the cheaper Open College would be her only possibility:

"I couldn't afford to go full-time. I would have to be part-time and stay on the dole as I need my house and benefits. I'm motivated enough. I really want to do it but just can't afford to go full-time .... That's why I'm thinking of Open College because it is only about £21 a month or something. "

Rather younger mothers, aged 16-18, might be of normal sixth form age but not all would be welcomed or even allowed back to their former schools. The young women's former post-primary schools had varied considerably in their attitudes to the pregnancies and some of the sample had encountered real prejudice. One young woman, who became pregnant at 16 and a half, described how the principal pressurized her to leave school earlier in the pregnancy than was physically necessary for her, giving her a contact number at a further education college as her only educational option. This was despite there being two younger pregnant pupils in the school, under the minimum leaving age, whom the principal was obliged, however reluctantly, to take back. Another informant spoke of being allowed back to school provided that she could arrange her own childcare but fortunately her whole family, led by her mother, rallied round to support her.

That some of the young women were determined to carry on with their education despite serious financial hardship emerges indirectly as one, explaining her basic weekly expenses for such things as fuel, nappies and milk, contrasts herself with 'someone at college' who might spend what would be a high proportion of the young mother's weekly income on a single fashionable garment at GAP. Another referred to 'my whole degree.'

Almost half Horgan's sample, especially those from rural areas, dismissed their sex education as hopelessly inadequate and several blamed this ineffective teaching for their pregnancies. One, who wished she had known more about contraception, described a school where about one fifth of the girls in her class became pregnant.

Another perspective on the young mothers' attitudes to education in this study emerged when they spoke, as many did, not of their own but of their children's education. This was an important consideration for all those whose children were three years old or more. Some were members of the Parent Teacher Association while others just kept a close watch on their children's progress. All were determined that their children "would get a better start from school than they had".

It would certainly seem that most of these young women appreciated the importance of education and qualifications, especially for their children, even if their own schooling had not always been very successful or happy.

## **2.5: TEENAGE PARENTS IN SOUTH AND EAST BELFAST: BUNTING (2003)**

For her PhD thesis Lisa Bunting (2003) interviewed 16 young women living in the South and East Belfast Trust (SEBT) area who had their first babies when aged 16-19. Access to the young mothers was obtained through SEBT health visitors. They were asked to locate mothers who had their first baby when age 15-19, who were still in contact with the child's father on at least a monthly basis and whose child was about to have one of the regular health checks from the health visitor, whether at 7, 18 or 30 months. To ensure reasonably easy communication, additional criteria were that both the baby's parents should have at least a working knowledge of the English language and neither should have been identified with moderate or severe learning difficulties. Twenty mothers who met the criteria were identified but, because of difficulty in locating some of them, only 16 were interviewed. In addition, Bunting interviewed four of the young fathers and received completed questionnaires from 84 health visitors.

Of the 16 young women, five had become pregnant at age 16 (but none younger than that), three each at ages 17 and 18 and the remaining five at age 19. At most just under a third and possibly none of the young women gave birth when under the minimum leaving age although at least one and possibly more conceived when still in compulsory education. By the time of interview twelve of the mothers had just one child, but three of the mothers had two children and one had three.

The main focus of Bunting's study was the amount of support which the young mother received from her child's father and from the two sets of families involved. Educational issues are only a minor theme in the empirical part of the thesis and not a great deal of evidence emerged. This is only to be expected in a study in which many of the young women had left school before becoming pregnant.

For example, in reply to a question on how the pregnancy and birth had changed their lives, it is unsurprising that most of the young women spoke mainly about having had to grow up very quickly and their increased burden of responsibility, now that they had to put their child first rather than themselves. For eleven of the 16, the pregnancy was completely unplanned and a shock. But though some instanced having had to give up nights out, only one is recorded as mentioning – and this was in reply to another question– having had had to give up her education.

Nearly half (7) of the 16 young mothers held no educational qualifications, a very much higher proportion than in the age cohort as a whole. One young woman had two GCSEs while the other eight had 5+ GCSEs. Unfortunately, the thesis does not indicate how many of these GCSEs were 'good' GCSEs with grades in the range A\* to C and a true comparison with the age cohort would need this information. Three of the young women with 5+ GCSEs had other qualifications as well, including RSA and CLAIT qualifications in Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and AS levels.

Although all 16 young women were over the minimum school leaving age by the time of the interviews, only three were in employment, one in a full-time and two in part-time work. None was currently in any kind of education or training course. However, a further five commented on the difficulties they had faced when trying to return to work and/ or education. In four cases this was because of a lack of affordable childcare and in the fifth –the mother with three single-birth children, who had worked after the first birth – because of the sheer impracticalities of trying to organise child care for three different stages of development.

Two of the 16 young women are of particular relevance to this review. The first was 'Paula', only 16 at the time of the birth, and the one with most regrets about young motherhood and the most ambivalence. She did love her child but would ideally have preferred to have it later and longed to have her "job and her education back". She had tried to access both further education and work since the birth but could not proceed because of a lack of suitable and affordable childcare. One of the youngest mothers in the sample, Paula had by far the most unsupportive mother; she had been thrown out of the family home and was co-habiting with her boyfriend.

Kelly, who had been 'looked after' from the age of 4,<sup>11</sup> also had her first child at age 16. She stated that she had deliberately got pregnant in order to get out of the care system and that she had wanted the chance to bring up a child in a much better way than she herself had experienced. For nearly a year she lived in supported accommodation with the baby. However, a year later, when she had left her young son with his father and grandparents to go on holiday and learned that they had taken custody of the child, she extended her holiday for another three months. By the time she returned, the child's paternal family had been granted a residency order on grounds of abandonment. Since then, Kelly only ever had supervised contact with her son. At age 18, Kelly had a second child, a girl, and at the time of interview

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<sup>11</sup> This will be a cross-reference to the chapter/ section about looked after children. Alternatively this case-book study may eventually go in the other chapter.

was living with her daughter and the father. Educational matters are simply not mentioned in this case-book study, which also illustrates something of the particular problems sometimes faced by young people who have been in the public care system.

### **3. SOME CONCLUSIONS FROM THE NORTHERN IRELAND LITERATURE**

#### **3.1 Family Backgrounds and Disadvantage**

As a group, the Northern Ireland studies contained relatively little information about the family circumstances in which the young mothers had grown up. However the high rates of unemployment in Dale and Warm's (c1997), in which over half the families of origin had no main breadwinner, and the seriously adverse family circumstances suffered by over half Horgan's (2001) sample are echoed in the wider literature. There was also ample evidence that most of the young mothers in all five studies detailed above were struggling to bring up their children on little money, commonly £100 per week. Especially as their children's needs and welfare were seen as coming first, this left the young mothers very little to spend on their own education if they would need such things as course fees, books and bus fares. An illuminating point is the decision in the Gingerbread study to have individual interviews in the Newry and Mourne area rather than to attempt a focus group meeting in Newry, which most would have found hard to access – perhaps a literal example of social exclusion.

#### **3.2 Educational Experiences and Qualifications**

Where details are given, the young mothers' qualifications would, on average, seem well below those of their contemporaries. In particular, the numbers with no qualifications – for example, about a quarter in Davies *et al.* (1996) and nearly half in Bunting (2003) – are far in excess of the teenage norms of the 1990s in Northern Ireland. Even for a sample of below average ability (an under-representation of grammar school pupils is indicated in both the CROW and the Dale & Warm studies) such figures show a failure to meet potential. On the other hand, some young mothers had, despite the odds, achieved a good deal. There are occasional mentions of degrees or current higher education courses in Davies *et al.*, (1996), Muston (1997) and Horgan (2001).

Some of the young women had faced considerable barriers in their schools to continuing their education once their pregnancies became known, while other schools, including the Newry and Mourne schools in the Gingerbread study, appeared more supportive. Some young

mothers were left mentally scarred by what was said or done at school, while other schools were more subtle in getting girls to leave 'for their own good' once their pregnancy became obvious (Dale and Warm, c1997). Sex education courses were generally considered inadequate.

Home tuition is examined in some detail in the CROW and Gingerbread studies and mentioned in Dale and Warm (c1997). Despite the official line presented by ELB spokespersons in Davies *et al.* (1996), some young mothers, even of compulsory school age, do not seem to have been offered any. Those who did receive it usually had a warm supportive relationship with their tutor and sometimes were able to understand things they had failed to master at school but there were frequent complaints about the limited quantity of tuition and its insufficiency as preparation for a set of GCSE examinations.

### **3.3 Attitudes to Education**

General attitudes to education varied but were particularly positive in the CROW study where the great majority regarded it as 'very important' or 'important', some 40% (the majority of whom were over the compulsory age) were attending full-time or part-time courses and the future plans of 70% included some further study or training. The sample for this study was, however, recruited through the ELBs from those on lists for home tuition and so may well have been more favourably disposed towards education than young mothers generally. In both the Gingerbread and Horgan (2001) studies one can see attitudes being shaped by experiences, which varied considerably from school to school. Even the disadvantaged sample in Dale and Warm (c1997), however, 'mostly' said that they had enjoyed school, even if only half claimed to have been good attenders. For most of the young mothers in Bunting (2003) education belonged to their past and none was currently on any kind of educational or training course. It could be argued that both the CROW and the Gingerbread studies, which used questionnaires, were unlikely to get many responses from young women with severe literacy problems or any who hated writing.

### **3.4 Plans for the Future, the Childcare Problem and the Myth of Wanting a Life on Benefits**

Even though they might be currently occupied as full-time mothers, whether from choice or necessity, very few of the respondents in the five Northern Ireland studies intended to remain indefinitely on benefits. Most wished to be self-supporting in future, at least once their children were of school age. In this they resembled respondents in many studies elsewhere.

However, another recurrent theme, both in Northern Ireland and in other parts of the United Kingdom, was the difficulty of obtaining affordable childcare if they currently wished to work or study. Whether they could return to education often depended on whether their own mothers, or other relatives, were free to look after the children. As for employment, especially at the time of the earlier studies, many of the lone mothers would have found it difficult, especially if they had few or no qualifications, to earn enough to be better off than on benefits. Some had tried but had been unsuccessful. In the past few years, there have been changes in the regulations that for many make working more profitable than formerly.

As in much empirical research in other parts of the United Kingdom, there was vigorous denial by the actual respondents of any suggestion that they had deliberately got themselves pregnant in order to leave school and live at the taxpayer's expense – though some thought it could well be true of some other young women. There is support for these protestations not only in the expressed intentions to work in future but in the evidence that the vast majority of the pregnancies, especially of the younger women and those not in firmly established relationships, were unplanned and often a severe shock. The idea that many of the young women were deliberately choosing a life on benefits was more likely to be voiced by the medical and educational professionals (Dale and Warm, c1997; Casson *et al.*, 2003).<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Dawson (1995)<sup>13</sup> and Dale and Warm (c1997) cited ELB personnel and teachers reporting more negative attitudes to education from pregnant schoolgirls than were heard first hand in the studies reviewed here.

It is relevant that the DHSSPS (2002) *Strategy and Action Plan 2002-2007* had as one of its five main specific targets that all teenage mothers of compulsory school age should complete their formal education. Action Plans included flexible arrangements involving partnerships of schools, colleges and voluntary and community organisations, to allow pregnant or parenting teenagers to remain in education if they wish and the development of a mechanism for funding childcare for those who could not otherwise continue with their education.

It had been hoped that the Northern Ireland studies, which were deliberately presented in chronological order, might show some progression, as young women increasingly benefited from the ideas and proposals of the DHSSPS reports of 2000 and 2002 but the pregnancies in even the most recent reports were too early for this. However, the reports in ETI (2000) and

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<sup>12</sup> Only the Executive Summary of this report was located.

<sup>13</sup> Cited in Davies *et al.* (1996). It proved impossible to obtain the original report, which apparently did not take any evidence from pregnant or parenting schoolgirls themselves.



DHSSPS (2002) on the School Age Mothers (SAM) project in the North Eastern Education and Library Board area sound promising.<sup>14</sup>

### **3.5 The Message from the Northern Ireland Research**

The evidence from the Northern Ireland studies was presented with a researcher's caution and a full awareness that the respondents may not have been fully representative of all young women in Northern Ireland who become pregnant and decide to keep their babies. Even if their attitudes to education were more favourable than those of many others in their situation, however, there is an optimistic message that at least a considerable proportion of these young women have not lost their educational aspirations. Such a message is encouraging for those who are attempting to facilitate their continuing education.

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<sup>14</sup> A more up-to-date primary source on SAM would be useful but could not be found.

## **CHAPTER 2: ATTITUDES OF DISADVANTAGED PARENTS AND THEIR CHILDREN IN THE NURSERY AND PRIMARY SCHOOL YEARS**

### **2.1: INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTERS 2 TO 4**

The next three chapters will consider disadvantaged children's and parents' attitudes to education at the various stages of schooling and beyond. The main focus will be on the Northern Ireland evidence but this will be set in a wider context. Though most of the studies cited focus on just one on the stages of education, three important NI studies cross the age sector boundaries.

One interesting recent source of qualitative evidence in Northern Ireland are the interviews carried out by Gallagher, Shuttleworth and Gray (1998) in nursery, primary and post-primary schools as part of a project commissioned by the Northern Ireland Economic Council (NIEC).

A second source of evidence, which is also relevant to several age groups and also written by Gallagher, is the evaluation, completed in July 2001, of the Community Approaches to Education for Regeneration (CATER) project of the Belfast Area Partnerships (BAPs).<sup>15</sup> The overall aim was to strengthen links between communities and their schools. Under CATER, in the space of just 18 months numerous activities took place which "touched the lives of hundreds of young people, parents and other adults across Belfast." Interviews with teachers and principals of participating schools and with community activists and groups of parents<sup>16</sup> who had some involvement in the initiative were carried out specially for this evaluation. For verdicts on a number of the activities, however, Gallagher had to rely on existing reports and other pieces of written evidence, some of which were understandably less precise than professional researchers would ideally like. Gallagher's (2001) report therefore contains both primary and secondary source material. The CATER project was essentially a facilitating one. It encouraged, funded (or part-funded) and collated local initiatives, which tended to take different forms in the five different Belfast areas, since each BAP identified priorities relevant to its own area. CATER achieved more in three of the areas than in the other two, where it ran into difficulties, in one case connected with problems of staff recruitment and retention and in the other with developing sectarian unrest.

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<sup>15</sup> This organisational framework of the CATER report is such that the evidence does not always fit neatly into the sections of the present chapter.

<sup>16</sup> It is not however always very clear which pieces of evidence came directly from the parents and which from other informants talking about parents' views and reactions.

A third cross-sector report is the *Scoping Study on Children/ Youth in Making Belfast Work Areas* which was completed in 1997 by a team in Queen's University, led by Rosemary Kilpatrick and Willie Thompson (Kilpatrick *et al.*, 1997). As well as obtaining data from a number of sources on existing provision, the research team administered rating scales to young people and providers in order to elicit what further provisions were needed. They also conducted focus groups of school-aged children, young adults aged 18-25, parents of pre-school children, teachers, providers of Jobskills, careers officers, leisure centre managers, social workers, community workers, health visitors and other professionals whose work brought them in contact with young people.

## **2.2: THE PRE-SCHOOL YEARS**

### 2.2.1: An American Perspective

Optimistic findings regarding the malleability of attitudes towards education of disadvantaged parents and their children comes from a group of longitudinal evaluations of preschool initiatives in the United States of America. Most of the children and their carefully matched controls were African-Americans living in the poorest parts of inner cities. Believing that their small-scale but high quality programmes had been more effective than Head Start, the directors of eleven such programmes formed a Consortium, pooled their findings and conducted two new follow-up studies. The pooled statistical findings suggested that the programmes' lasting effects were more upon attitudes to education and competent behaviour in the classroom than upon the children's scores on tests of intelligence or attainment (Lazar *et al.*, 1982; Royce *et al.*, 1983). The initial advantages which the nursery school children had on cognitive measures tended to fade after some years, although not as fast as in the Head Start evaluations. But even though their later test marks were often much the same as those of the control groups, the children who had attended the high quality preschool programmes were more likely to remain in their normal mainstream class, without either being required to repeat a year or being transferred to special education; they were better able than the others to continue learning in a mainstream class, though perhaps with some part-time remedial support. In the four programmes where most of the children were at least 17 years old by the time of the second Consortium follow-up study, significantly more of those who had been on the preschool programmes had gained a high school diploma (64.8% vs 52.5%), which by the 1970s was virtually essential for employability; most of the others had dropped out of school. When the young people were in their teens – the exact age varying from project to project –

the mothers of those who had been on the nursery programmes had higher ambitions for their children than the other mothers, while the young people themselves had higher occupational aspirations and expectations than those in the control groups.

Best known of the Consortium studies is the High/Scope or Perry Preschool Project at Ypsilanti, a town near Detroit in Michigan (Schweinhart *et al.*, 1993), in which 71% of the preschool group as compared with 54% of the controls eventually reached high school diploma level and far fewer of the preschool group had been in special education for a year or more (19% vs 39%). This study, unusually, found the former nursery school pupils drawing significantly ahead of the controls at age 14 on standardised attainment tests. The main reason, however, was attitudinal rather than cognitive, in that the former preschoolers omitted fewer questions; they were more prepared than the control group to 'have a go'. The researchers at Ypsilanti conducted further follow-up studies of the young people at ages 19 and 27, when the former preschoolers tended to be leading more productive and trouble-free lives; more of their income was derived from earnings rather than welfare, they had bought more houses and cars, they had fewer teenage pregnancies and, though many had a few brushes with the law as juveniles, far fewer had been arrested five times or more (7% vs 35%) or been arrested for drug dealing (7% vs 25%). Further American evidence of many economically disadvantaged children underachieving because they were not prepared to struggle and persist with challengingly difficult intellectual tasks or test items is seen in some of the studies by Edward Zigler and his colleagues.<sup>17</sup> With special encouragement, these children could often score much higher on a second intelligence test given soon afterwards. Seven months of nursery education (autumn to spring) had a similar beneficial effect on their approaches to the intelligence tests re-administered under standard conditions, this time without any extra encouragement.

Although these American studies demonstrated improvements in the attitudes of disadvantaged pupils and children as a result of pre-schooling, there were some signs that the most disadvantaged of all might be least able to benefit (Bronfenbrenner, 1976), perhaps because the parents were too overburdened with the task of survival to participate meaningfully in intervention programs. Bronfenbrenner, however, was writing with reference to cognitive gains rather than attitudinal change. Kuno Beller (1983), one of the Consortium mentioned above, found that – although all the children in his study would be regarded as economically disadvantaged by the usual standards – it was among those children who lived in two-parent families with at least one wage-earner rather than those in extreme poverty that

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<sup>17</sup> Zigler and Butterfield, 1968; Zigler, Abelson and Seitz (1973); Zigler and Trickett (1978).

their pre-schooling was most associated with raised achievement and motivation and with realistic occupational attitudes in adolescence.

It is not being claimed that the attitudes towards education of disadvantaged African-Americans in the 1960s are identical with those of disadvantaged Northern Ireland parents and children at the start of the twenty-first century. Nevertheless the American evidence of lasting increases in parents' and children's academic motivation after preschool programmes, many of which had elements of home visiting and parental involvement, carries an optimistic message.

### 2.2.2: An Intervention in the Greater Shankill

Although it is much too early to know whether the effects will be as long-lasting as those of the Consortium, a two-generation family-support initiative in the Greater Shankill has been shown to have helped the mothers of preschool children to have more positive attitudes towards themselves as parents and towards their children's potential futures (Sheehy *et al.*, 2000; Quiry *et al.*, 2001, McShane, 1999). The Greater Shankill Early Years Project (EYP), undertaken as part of a wider Regeneration Strategy for the area, sought to support and empower parents, both in their parenting role and as regards their own education, training and employment prospects. The provision of Home Visitors, themselves local people specially recruited, trained and employed for the purpose, played a key part in this. In order to avoid the stigmatising of clients that can occur if an intervention is obviously targeted at the most disadvantaged members of the community, their services were offered to all parents of a new generation of children, irrespective of identified need or evidence of family dysfunction, and might last, if the parents so wished, until the child moved on into nursery and primary education. One of the five specific aims of the EYP was to 'Raise the value placed on education by the Greater Shankill community'. Low educational achievement was one of the many problems identified in the area and it was hoped that a two-generation initiative of this nature might break into the "cycle of deprivation and demoralisation". Such approaches are in keeping with the thinking behind recent interventions elsewhere (Bailey *et al.*, 1988; Garbarino and Ganzel, 2000).

The evaluation of the EYP, by a team from the School of Psychology at Queen's University, included individual interviews with 34 mothers who were relatively new to the project and with 27 who had a more long-standing involvement. Six months later, 20 of the former 'new'

mothers were re-interviewed and their responses on the two occasions compared.<sup>18</sup> The evaluation paper does not indicate how many of these 61 mothers personally lived in particularly deprived circumstances but some at least clearly did. The picture the authors paint of the district is of “an inner city area marked by an ageing population, families locked into poverty and benefit dependence, with community structures all but destroyed”.

One of the most disturbing findings of the evaluation was that two-thirds of the mothers who had only recently joined the project had scores on a *Depression* scale that indicated serious depression and over half had scores that put them in the range for clinical depression.<sup>19</sup> Although the amount of serious and clinical depression significantly diminished over the next six months, even among the group of mothers with a longstanding association with the EYP, 30% could be regarded as clinically depressed. Similarly, over half (56%) of the ‘new’ mothers had what are regarded as high scores on a *Parenting Stress* scale. This figure reduced slightly (to 50%) over the next six months although only 33% of the ‘longstanding’ mothers were found to be scoring above this point. Levels of social support were generally very low for the new mothers, in terms of having neighbours, friends or family on whom they could call for support or professionals whom they could readily contact. The Home Visiting programme, however, helped to put parents in touch with a wider network of support and this seemed to be the key to progress along the other measured dimensions.

On two more specifically educational scales, more optimistically positive attitudes were seen after six months’ involvement with the EYP. Whereas only about a third of the new mothers believed that what they did could have any influence upon their child’s IQ, six months later the proportion who saw intelligence as not fixed but open to change through parental behaviour had risen to over half (55%). And whereas one of the striking characteristics of the ‘new’ mothers on first interview was their low level of academic expectations for their children, their expectations six months later, as well as those of the Longstanding group, were significantly higher. However, in all groups expectations for their children were related to the mother’s level of depression, the rise in expectations over the six-month period being linked to the lower levels of depression.

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<sup>18</sup> No reason is given for re-interviewing only 59% of a fairly small sample nor is any basis given for re-interviewing these particular 20 mothers.

<sup>19</sup> Although these figures may seem startling, many other studies have shown high proportions of disadvantaged mothers to be suffering from depression. Definitions of and cut-points for such constructs as ‘serious’ or ‘clinical’ depression vary somewhat with the instrument used.

After six months the mothers who were interviewed twice also had a significantly increased sense of their personal effectiveness as the mother of an infant and some increase in their sense of competence in influencing their child's progress at school. All of these might be considered 'empowering' dimensions. It was also observed that, as in American research by Wentzel (1998), the parental attitudes assessed in the Shankill evaluation tended to go together 'as a package' so that, mothers with a strong sense of their effectiveness as parents were also more optimistic about their child's educational potential and what they might do to enhance it.

Part of the theoretical infrastructure of the evaluation came from the substantial research literature – much of it by American psychologists – on the impact of depression and parental stress on parenting behaviour and thence frequently to behavioural problems as well as impaired academic performance in their offspring. Depressed mothers tend to find it hard to respond promptly and appropriately to their child's cues, with consequences both for the mother-child bond and early socialisation of behaviour (see for example Abidin, Jenkins and McGaughey, 1992; Kochanska, Clark and Goldman, 1997; Wakschlag & Hans, 1999). The link with behaviour is important since large numbers pupils entering the Shankill primary schools are found to have behavioural problems as well as language and other more cognitive difficulties. Elder *et al.* (1995) has shown a strong link between low income and a reduced sense of parental effectiveness.

This last point can be linked to findings from another part of the Shankill evaluation, a postal survey of both fathers and mothers in families involved in EYP. Although the response rate was disappointingly low, for both fathers and mothers the main outstanding difficulties in their lives after contact with the RYP programme were lack of employment opportunities and money worries. It is also a matter of concern to read in the evaluation (Sheehy *et al.*, 2000) references to many instances of serious ill health and other major family problems, over and above the maternal depression already discussed. It is clear that tackling urban decay and educational disadvantage cannot be done effectively through educational means alone.

#### *Case Studies of Ten Mothers*

Another paper from the evaluation, McShane (1999) presents ten case studies of participating parents, nine mothers and one father. Since five were married, three separated or divorced and two never-married and the number of children in the household ranged from one to five, their family structures obviously differed considerably. All ten parents had at least one stress factor in the home and three were judged to be under 'high stress' with at least three major stressors.

Of the ten parents, six had at least one child with special needs or a medical condition, such as dyslexia, other learning difficulties, epilepsy or Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD), and five had themselves an illness or disability, such as severe post-natal depression, psychiatric illness or a back injury leading to enforced unemployment. Four had little or no support from their extended families, whether because of death, distance or poor relationships. These case studies go a long way towards explaining why the levels of maternal depression in the larger interview sample should be so high.

Their own educational experiences varied but the majority had experienced unhappiness at school. Four had, however, enjoyed primary school, mainly because of the friends they made or sporting opportunities, although these four were also satisfied with how much they had learned there. The other six informants were more negative about their primary school days, in one case because of severe bullying while others had disliked over-strict teachers who used the cane. Only two of the ten parents had, however, a favourable verdict on their secondary school education. These two left with six 'passes' at 16+, whereas none of the others had more than two and six left without any (although two of these had subsequently gained some from City and Guilds). Problems experienced at secondary school included bullying leading to ceasing to attend, finding the work too hard, dislike of studying, losing interest and becoming involved with 'a bad crowd'.

All ten had left school when aged 16, although one did begin an A-level course. Employment was often patchy and low-skilled, though one had been a hairdresser and another a foreman in a chemical firm. All the women except one gave up work on the birth of their first child and six had not been employed outside the house since. Only three were currently employed even part-time, including one who was now an EYP project worker, but two more were taking active steps towards returning to employment.

Given such case histories, it might be expected that the majority of them would pass on negative views on education to their children. The evaluation, however, ends optimistically. All ten parents were positive about the EYP programme and the help received from their Project Worker. Although the majority had unsatisfactory school experiences, those who left without sitting public examinations now regretted this. Nine of the ten had taken some kind of class or course when on EYP and five had gained recognised qualifications (such as CLAIT, NVQs and RSAs). All ten parents had hopes for their children's education, although only one mentioned the word 'university'. All ten were aware of the benefits of pre-schooling, although a generation before three of their own mothers had been against sending them and one still thought it as unnecessary for her grandchild. Only two were dissatisfied with any part



of their children's pre-schooling and in both cases the child had special needs. However, the fact that, with support from the Project Worker, alternative provision was found for these two children reflects positively on the EYP and the mothers' increased confidence. (A generation before one of their mothers simply dismissed complaints of bullying with a "It must be your fault".) The eight parents with at least one child in primary school knew how their children are progressing. They felt able to approach the school on any matter concerning their children and also regularly attended parents' evenings. It remains to be seen, however, how long the effects of the Early Years Project last in the community.

### 2.2.3: The NIEC-QUB Research: Four Belfast Nursery Schools

Gallagher, Shuttleworth and Gray (1998) present four casebook studies of nursery schools as seen through the eyes of their principals.<sup>20</sup> All were located in disadvantaged areas of Belfast, two on Catholic housing estates and two in Protestant inner-city areas. Three of these areas had suffered from the Northern Ireland 'Troubles' and the violence the children had witnessed or learned about was reflected in some of their play, for example by a child who talked about planting a car bomb in a toy car. In all four nursery schools a substantial proportion of the children were from single-parent homes, where mothers in their late teens or early twenties were reliant on state benefits for income. Three principals said that unemployment was high in their area even in two-parent families; if there was a wage-earner at all this would often be the mother in a poorly paid part-time job. Three principals mentioned serious social and relationship problems in many of the families. In one school, like the sectarian violence, this sometimes emerged in the children's play when they might pretend to be "drunk, in prison, abusive or violent". Reflecting a problem in the Greater Shankill, the principal of one of the Catholic nurseries spoke of the high proportion of mothers suffering from depression; the effects of this could be apparent in the children's behaviour as they took a long time to settle into nursery school.

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<sup>20</sup> The case studies were based on semi-structured interviews for which a short list of very open-ended questions had obviously been prepared. In such circumstances, informants reply with the points of greatest salience for them. Unless it is known that other points were specifically raised by the interviewer, one often does not know for sure how the informant would have replied. Here, for instance, only one principal talked much about the children's general physical health. This does not mean that there were no children with health problems elsewhere but rather that the other principals did not see this as one of their most pressing of their many pressing problems. The strength of this method of seeking evidence is that it allows the informant's perspective to emerge rather than that of the person who planned the interview.

Although three principals indicated that the children were generally well enough provided for materially, all four reported a high incidence of speech and language difficulties. Many children had been referred for hearing tests or to speech therapists but at least three of the principals suspected that the main reason for the poor speech was the lack of conversation in the home. One principal said that many children would at first just shout at one another since that was the main form of communication they had heard. The development of listening skills was therefore an important element in the curriculum. Two principals – one in a Catholic and one in a Protestant area – were concerned about the lack of structure and discipline in the children's home lives and about poor parenting skills, although one appeared to see this as an even greater problem than did the other.

These same two principals had the most to say about parental attitudes. Both feared that a number of their parents did not much value formal education; although one said she could understand how such attitudes might develop in an area with chronic high unemployment. This principal appreciated that many of the parents had "quite negative memories" of their own time at school and was determined to make their experiences as parents of nursery school children a positive one. The staff tried to be as approachable as possible and a series of talks on a variety of topics were arranged; these were scheduled for the latter part of the school day so that parents could attend before collecting their children to take them home. The other principal (of School 3 in the report) was clearly finding it harder to win over those parents who had unhappy memories of schooling, although her difficulties may have been compounded by a local community with "a general disregard for education." Although a number of talks had been arranged on child-related topics, "parents almost never attend" and one mother had blankly refused to attend a recommended talk by the speech therapist, denying that her child had a language problem. A significant number of the parents at that school are tactfully described as "less than supportive", with some reported to have expressed contempt for the staff. These negative parental attitudes towards the school seem to have been picked up by the children who are described as "generally unruly and difficult". Discipline appears to have been a far greater problem at that nursery school than at the other three.

Male unemployment in the School 3 area had led to an increase in the number of fathers and grandfathers bringing the children to school. Despite almost daily contact with the school, most of the men are described as viewing education as 'a female thing' and therefore being "loath to attend talks or interviews about their children's progress". For example, fathers

would "never" attend the meeting held each February to discuss how well the child had settled and to note any problems.<sup>21</sup>

As for the two schools where parental attitudes were not reported as such in the casebook studies, one had "a parents' corner where leaflets and information from a variety of social agencies are left" and the other was heavily oversubscribed. Both scraps of information point, even if not conclusively, towards positive rather than negative parental attitudes.

#### 2.2.4: Parental Verdicts on Seven New Nursery Units

More positive parental attitudes to nursery education in disadvantaged areas can be seen in Coopers and Lybrand's (1997) evaluation of seven new nursery units which had been set up under the Making Belfast Work initiative. Since then, partly as a consequence of that evaluation, these nursery units have been mainstreamed and are now funded by the Department of Education. The seven sites – five in North or West Belfast and one each in Twinbrook and Newtownabbey – were chosen to be where there was space for such developments close to primary schools with high numbers of children eligible for free school meals and where there appeared to be a likely demand for nursery provision. In five cases the FSME was over 50%, in one school being as high as 92%.

The methodology of the evaluation included focus group discussions by parents at six of the seven schools and a total of 207 structured interviews with parents at all seven schools when they arrived to leave off or to collect their children. There were also observations of the children in their nursery classes, examination of curricular materials and interviews with the principals and assistant staff.

Although several times more parents would have been interviewed individually as participated in the focus groups, the two sets of evidence regarding the outcomes of nursery education were essentially similar. The judgments of the nursery school principals and teachers regarding the benefits for the children were also congruent. The parents saw their children as now more confident and better prepared for primary school. Their social skills had improved: they could share toys and play more happily with other children. If, as often was

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<sup>21</sup>These may be seen as typical male attitudes in a working-class neighbourhood rather than as showing any particular negativity towards the school. Ryan (1994) advises that the terms 'parent' and 'mother' are effectively synonymous in her evaluation of the Home School Community Liaison scheme in the Republic of Ireland.

the case, their nursery school friends proceeded to the same primary school, their presence could ease the transition. Nursery school attendance was thought to make the children better able to amuse themselves at home without craving constant adult attention. Various cognitive gains were also mentioned by parents: knowledge of colours, shapes, numbers and seasons and the ability to solve difficult puzzles. Various early literacy (or perhaps pre-literacy) skills were also claimed. A minority of the parents had cause to appreciate the diagnosis of problems in their children that might need extra help, speech problems being the most frequent of these.

Most of these parents in disadvantaged areas could also see benefits to themselves as a result of their children's attendance. Those in the focus groups said they had felt welcome at the nursery school and had learned how to teach their children at home. They had a better understanding of child development. Some had been encouraged to return to college to study or had found employment through contacts made at the nursery school.

Parents in the interview sample had been asked about opportunities for and participation in such activities as parents' meetings, school trips and coffee mornings. Strikingly high percentages (often over 90%) of those recalling the existence of such events also reported attending them. It is possible, of course, that some parents had forgotten about activities they did not attend. One suspects, for instance, that perhaps more than 65% of the parents had been invited to a parents' meeting at some point; attendance at such meetings was recorded by 60% of the sample. Only 11% of the interviewees, however, said they had not taken part in *any* of the activities listed.

Though the parents' verdicts on the nursery units are undoubtedly favourable, it must be borne in mind that these were parents who had enrolled their children in an optional form of education. Others parents living in the area might simply not have bothered to do so. At worst, however, this evaluation is one of a number of pieces of evidence in the report which indicate that many economically disadvantaged people will make good use of educational opportunities for their children if these are put within their grasp.

### **2.3: THE PRIMARY SCHOOL YEARS**

Even in the early primary school years, children can usefully record their attitudes to aspects of school life or to school in general by means of the well-known pictorial scales of five diagrammatic faces showing expressions ranging from a broad smile to a scowl. In the upper

primary school, if not before, they can present their own perspectives on educational matters in some detail, whether in individual or group interviews or in writing, as has been evidenced in Northern Ireland in the NFER Cohort Study (Harland *et al.*, 1999) and the recent report on children's experiences of sitting the Transfer Test (Leonard and Davey, 2001). In neither of these reports, however, were data analysed by social background. Indeed, there seem to be a dearth of direct evidence from primary school children relevant to this report, apart from the questionnaires and focus groups in the 'Scoping' study (Kilpatrick *et al.*, 1997). The main source of evidence for this section has had to be the perspectives of principals of schools situated in disadvantaged areas of Belfast.

### **2.3.1: Primary School Principals in the Greater Shankill**

As part of their evaluation of the Greater Shankill Early Years Project, the Queen's University Psychology team held a focus group for the primary school principals in the area, which eight of the twelve principals attended (Quiery *et al.*, 2001). The principals of the area are described as highly committed and as having made a number of efforts to improve resources and teaching in their schools. They were keenly aware of the difficulties faced by their children's parents in their efforts to support their children's education. There were two main types of difficulty. Firstly, many parents were facing major problems and immediate crises in their lives and home situations. Inevitably these took priority over their children's education. Even when circumstances allowed the parents to turn their attention to their children's schooling, many of them faced another set of hurdles because of their own limited and often negative experiences of school and formal education. This, for example, made it far harder for them to communicate with teachers than for a middle class mother who had a successful school career and many of the Shankill mothers did not feel comfortable in a school environment. The principals described the parents in their area as keen to support their children's education but not knowing how to do this or what was expected of them.

This will not be the only instance we shall find of parents, whose own school experiences were negative, still believing in the importance of education and anxious that their children should be more successful at school than they themselves were.

### 2.3.2: The NIEC-QUB Research: Eight Belfast Primary Schools

As part of the NIEC-funded research project, the principals of eight primary schools situated in socially disadvantaged areas within Greater Belfast were interviewed. Six of the schools were controlled and two were Catholic maintained schools. Gallagher, Shuttleworth and Gray (1998) presented the primary school evidence thematically rather than as casebook studies, as had done with their evidence from nursery schools. Two of the three main themes to emerge from the primary school interviews are relevant to this review: the social and demographic constraints experienced by the schools and the strategies the principals had employed to try to increase school standards, which had entailed working with parents or attempting to raise pupil motivation.

The details principals gave of the social contexts of their schools revealed that, although the locations of all eight schools could be described as in socially disadvantaged parts of Greater Belfast, the disadvantage could take rather different forms. While the percentage entitled to free school meals (FSME) may be the most convenient and best single indicator of social deprivation among its pupils – indeed in the NIEC-QUB project, principals often cited their FSME to the researchers – no one simple percentage could convey a complete picture of their situation. As one example, the principal of a Catholic school explained how the estate which their school served had been built entirely as houses, initially without other facilities and clearly with no thought given to the residents' employment. From the outset, unemployment had been 'endemic'; something the community had learned to live with. Despite the hardships of their daily lives, the parents were said to give a great deal of support to that school.

In other catchment areas, however, the substantial levels of poverty and social deprivation which had led the school to be chosen for the study were relatively recent and increasing. In these localities the total number of people living in the area would usually diminish as the more successful, ambitious and employable moved away to become first time home buyers. The few people moving into the area would be those who could not find or afford anywhere else. Principals would notice not only an increase in the proportion of single-parent families headed by a never-married mother but a general breakdown in traditional family structures. One principal had recently, for the first time, to send health visitors to a child's home to help the mother to cope.

While many of the more prosperous tenants on both Catholic and Protestant housing estates in Belfast were turning to home ownership, different patterns of geographical mobility were

observed in the two major denominations, which have implications for the social composition of schools' catchment areas. Drawing upon two analyses of 1991 Census material for the Fair Employment Commission, Gallagher *et al.* (1998) found that, although in both denominations there had been migration towards the suburban ring round the city boundary, Protestants had tended to move further out and to go into all surrounding areas, whereas a higher percentage of the Catholics had stayed nearer the areas they had previously occupied. In consequence, the Catholic areas remained more socially heterogeneous, whereas the inner-city Protestant areas became the home of an increasingly homogeneous but increasingly disadvantaged populace, who required much more support than before from the various social services. Principals and teachers were finding increasing proportions of their time being taken up with issues of social welfare.

Nevertheless, the primary school principals often spoke positively, and sometimes even warmly, about the attitudes of most of their parents towards education. They believed that parents have an important role to play in their child's education. During the interviews (see p. 88)

"Several principals were keen to point out that the majority of parents, regardless of their economic circumstances, were interested in the educational welfare of their children. Moreover, they claimed that the antipathy displayed by some parents was a reaction to their own unhappy experience of education. Therefore the onus lay with the school to persuade these parents that they too had an active role to play in their child's education".

The principal of a boys' primary school was particularly dismissive of the suggestion that parents in disadvantaged neighbourhoods were not interested in their children's education:

"That's a cop-out for some schools who don't try hard enough. There are very few uninterested parents. It may be in an unruly and undirected way but there are very few parents who wish to let down their children. They all want to see them be a big success. That success may be being a good footballer or winning the lottery or something, because you measure success in different ways. But they are all ambitious for their children one way or another."

Strategies for persuading parents that they could help their children to succeed at school could go far beyond verbal exhortation to include toy libraries and parenting skill courses; the latter could, among other things, enable parents to enjoy books with their children. Two principals of controlled schools where there were substantial numbers of young single-parent mothers had helped to further the mothers' own literacy. In one case mothers ("Some of them are

extremely bright individuals.") had been provided with courses staffed by tutors from a college of further education. At the second school, a group of mothers "had the discipline" to complete a year of *Read to Succeed* and gone on the next year to acquiring IT skills and taking a course in creative writing. The principal was so delighted with their progress that they had been entered for an Adult Learning Week award. Schemes of this kind – and also the establishment of a nursery class if there was not one already – were regarded as a necessary counterweight to the increasing proportions of socially deprived families with young children attending these schools. Although most of the principals told the researchers (Gallagher *et al.*, 1998, p89) that such initiatives had been well received and that there had been positive benefits for the children and parents who had participated, not all efforts had been an unqualified success. The principal of a coeducational primary school admitted:

"It's only been really in the last 2 or 3 years that we've got close enough to the parents. We have a little group where the parents come in and we go over the homework with them they're going to get that week and certainly ... you get a lot of parents coming in very keen in the early P6 times and this dies away because they say the children don't want to know ... They don't want to know at all."

In an age of Open Enrolment, when schools are competing for pupils, when declining rolls mean decreased budgets and when few homes in a city are not within accessible range of several primary schools (even if one may be much closer than any other), it was unsurprising that the "principals were concerned with ways of promoting a positive image of their schools in their local communities" (p. 86). Local newspapers and parish bulletins were kept informed about school news and invited to events where they could photograph children receiving awards for "attendance, music, drama, sport and academic achievement." In at least one of the eight schools, however, there was a suggestion that positive publicity was sought not only in order to recruit new pupils but also to enhance the regard for the school in the local community and thereby to motivate further the children and their families:

"Any success we have, however minor, is blown out of all proportion and advertised extensively. We have a policy; we have one teacher in charge of entering competitions. The people in this area are, to my mind, conditioned to failure and it is up to us to 'uncondition' failure'" (Boys' Primary School).

Rather less seems to have been specifically said during the interviews about the attitudes of the disadvantaged *pupils* or about motivating them directly, rather than through their parents. One principal spoke about favourable publicity or the winning of an interschool competition generating a 'feel-good factor' throughout the whole school. Three principals had observed that the boys in their school did not wish to be seen performing too well, although this gender



problem has been seen in several countries in many boys who could not be called disadvantaged<sup>22</sup> and the P6 pupils in the penultimate quotation were clearly not highly motivated. Prizes, certificates and awards were mentioned at a number of the schools, although the principal of a boys' primary school said that his best readers were intrinsically motivated and did not need prizes; however, it was not indicated whether or not any of these 'best readers' were among the more disadvantaged pupils.

On a specific educational topic, it was evident that, despite being in disadvantaged areas, many parents whose children attended the eight schools were keen to have their children entered for the Transfer Test and judged primary schools by their results on the test. The principals seem, however, to have been talking about 'their' parents generally here rather than with particular reference to the most disadvantaged.

### **2.3.3: CATER Initiatives for the Primary Sector**

Some of the evidence on pupil and parent attitudes in the CATER evaluation (Gallagher, 2001) is indirect, in the form of records of successful projects and events which could not have been a success (assuming the records are accurate) unless there was a substantial amount of parent and/or pupil interest and commitment. There were, however, also interviews with principals and teachers of primary schools, CATER staff, community activists and parent groups.

In both the South and the West areas, the main core of CATER primary school activities was linked to initiatives being developed and promoted by either the Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB) or the Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education (BIFHE) although there were additional more localised projects, based on specific needs and interests. In the Greater East area these relative emphases were reversed. Although some work was done with such City-wide providers as BELB and BIFHE, the major focus there was on the needs and circumstances of individual schools, resulting in a greater number of small-scale projects, including a breakfast club at one school, fortnightly coffee mornings where principal and parents could discuss topics of common educational interest and various initiatives to improve the school environment, with parents giving voluntary help.

#### ***Initiatives to improve Literacy***

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<sup>22</sup> See for example Bleach (1996), Bray *et al.* (1997) and CCEA (1999).

The main BELB-supported programmes were two linked reading initiatives, *Flying Start* for P1 and P2 pupils and *Better Reading Partnerships* (BRP) for pupils in P3 to P7 who have already begun reading. Both initiatives have among their important aims the enhanced enjoyment of reading. In *Flying Start* each school's teacher-coordinator trains parent/guardian volunteers to work with their own children but in *Better Reading Partnerships* each volunteer is allocated three pupils each. Many schools use classroom assistants for BRP but in one part of South Belfast a number of parents were recruited with CATER's encouragement. The BIFHE-promoted projects with which CATER became involved were the *Parents as Co-ordinators* course, originally aimed at pre-school children but since extended to older children, and two more specialist developments from it, *Read to Succeed* and *Count on Success*. In all these programmes, both the BELB's and BIFHE's, the volunteer helpers undertake a course extending over several weeks in their spare time for which they can receive accreditation, although that may require some extra work such as the submission of a portfolio. It is hoped that, especially on a programme like *Better Reading Partnerships*, trained parents can continue to be used as a resource by the school.

Although it was believed in some areas that local parents would be reluctant to become involved in such initiatives "due to their own negative experience of school", in other disadvantaged areas Gallagher found "an impressive collection" of resources for *Flying Start* made by the parents and children, together with detailed reports on what was read. Portfolio evidence also indicates that, whereas before the programme reading was felt to be something of a chore, *Flying Start* had made it more enjoyable and rewarding for both parents and children. Not all parent volunteers went through the full accreditation process. This was usually attributed to nervousness or lack of confidence, especially about their writing ability. However, in only one school did *Flying Start* collapse due to parents dropping out of training. Some parents who received accreditation for their work on the BIFHE-sponsored programmes are known to have gone on to take other courses.

Some quantitative data on pupil gains on *Flying Start* and BRP existed but, since these had not been collected in a standardised form and there were no control groups against which to compare progress, one has to regard them as interim results until, as was planned, more systematic quantitative evidence becomes available. There were no empirical data on the BIFHE programmes. Co-ordinators and other members of school staffs, however, spoke warmly of pupils' increased enjoyment in reading and their wider range of skills, even where there was no sign of improved reading test scores. Towards the end of 2000 a *Better Reading Partnerships* (BRP) event was held at the City Hall and judged by all to have been "an

enormous success”, raising the public profile of CATER and strengthening its relationship with the BELB.

Although CATER played a part in recruiting parents for the programmes mentioned earlier in this section, once they were recruited, the relationships were mainly between parents and schools rather than with the wider community. One project with a strong literacy element that did maintain strong links with at least parts of the community was a football club project in East Belfast organised through CATER by the Youth and Community Development Officer of Glentoran FC who worked with a number of local schools. Fathers were permitted to bring their sons free of charge to matches, about which a local journalist helped the boys to write reports. A family milk lounge was set up in an unused part of the club premises and the boys received football coaching. Everybody involved appears to have gained. Father–son bonds were strengthened, the boys’ literacy skills improved, while Glentoran was happy to see its soccer school benefiting and the recruitment of a number of new ball boys. The focus on *boys’* literacy can be seen as growing out of wider concerns about the apparent underachievement of boys (see, for example, NICCEA, 1999; Gallagher, 1997.)

#### *Other CATER Initiatives in the Primary Sector*

A very different type of course was mounted in West Belfast in response to parental demand, namely a Summer School in 2000 to provide preparation for the Transfer Tests that autumn. Despite CATER’s misgivings over selection tests and selective education in general, they agreed to support the Summer School as providing at least a partial counter-balance to the private coaching affordable only to more affluent parents. The main point of interest for this particular report is that preparation for the Transfer tests was the type of help which the parents identified as most desirable for their children. Gallagher was able to demonstrate – though he was well aware of the limitations of the available evidence – that far fewer of the children who attended the Summer School than of all children in West Belfast schools opted out of the tests (3% vs 29%) and that more of them gained a Grade B (18% vs 14%) or a Grade C (22% vs 15%). It is, of course, unlikely that children who had already decided not to take the 11+ would have given up holiday time to attend and the significance of the higher proportions of middle grades is uncertain without systematic information on how the previous performance of the Summer School attenders compared with that of other West Belfast children. Interviews with some of the primary school principals whose pupils had attended, however, found them happy with the outcome and believing that at least some of the pupils they sent had benefited in term of grades. They also saw the Summer School as enhancing relationships between teachers and parents.

It can be argued that CATER's support for a number of after-school clubs, and in particular homework clubs, in response to demand is evidence of positive pupil and parental attitudes to education. In many cases, the home situation would be less conducive to study than the club.

#### **2.3.4: Needs and Satisfactions of Disadvantaged Belfast Children aged 7-11 years**

As part of the 'Scoping' study for Making Belfast Work (Kilpatrick *et al.*, 1997), children and young adults living in disadvantaged areas of Belfast were asked to rate the adequacy of 17 items in their localities on 5-point scales on which '1' was the most positive rating and '5' the most negative. High (i.e. negative) ratings were regarded as an indication of needs that might be addressed through MBW. The sample included 95 pupils aged between 7-11 years. The authors admitted that some of the listed items, e.g. about jobs or doctors, might not be of great importance to this age group and so not rated as needs. The two items most favourably rated by the primary school pupils were the two most directly school-related. This seems to suggest a broad approval of the education they were receiving:

'There is enough help for pupils who have difficulty with school work' (Mean 1.6)

'I am getting a good education' (Mean 1.7)

Indeed their rather higher mean (2.3) on the only other item in the section *The School I Attend*, which read 'There are enough activities after school time' suggests that they were somewhat more critical of their schools' extra-mural provision than of what happened in the classroom. There was a general tendency for this age group to rate items more favourably than the older samples. The chief complaint of these primary-school pupils – and indeed the only one of the 17 items on which their mean rating (3.8) was higher than those of both the two older groups – was the age-relevant one of there not being enough parks in which to play in their local area.

When asked to indicate the three services or provisions they used most, the 95 primary school pupils, most often ticked 'libraries' (74%), ahead of 'youth clubs' (70%) and 'sports teams' (48%). Assuming the responses were honest and that the pupils were not thinking just of time-tabled visits to school libraries, this would seem to indicate an interest in voluntary reading, which was not, however, replicated in the older age groups.

While the quantitative data on attitudes to education from primary pupils in MBW areas as presented directly in the 'Scoping Survey' report appear optimistic, the authors identified an important theme from the focus groups

“a breakdown in the relationships between some teachers, some pupils and some members of the communities they serve. This was not just a problem for the secondary schools but also for primary schools” (p41).

Although there are no pupil quotations in the report expressing negative attitudes from primary school children, there are highly critical comments from primary school *teachers* regarding parental management strategies of both their children and finances. The authors interpret these and other comments as indicative of “a lack of awareness of the day to day problems that parents and pupils confront” as well as a lack of respect by school personnel towards their “customers”. Their repeated use of such terms as “some teachers” and “some pupils” makes it impossible, however, for the reader to quantify the extent of the divide although it is apparent that there are schools or classrooms with “little real understanding or empathy between the two sides.”

### **CHAPTER 3: ATTITUDES OF DISADVANTAGED PARENTS AND THEIR CHILDREN: TRANSFER AND THE YEARS OF COMPULSORY SECONDARY EDUCATION**

#### **3.1: INTRODUCTION**

This chapter looks first (Section 3.2) at research on how Northern Ireland parents from different social backgrounds set about applying for post-primary schools for their children and the characteristics of schools which they deemed most important in making their choice. Pupils' views on the Transfer Procedure are also presented, although this could be done only with regard to the FSME indices of the schools rather than of the individual speakers. The chapter then goes on in Section 3.3 to look at studies which focused on pupils who had recently made the transition to second-level education and then in Section 3.4 at studies focusing on those nearing the end of compulsory schooling. In Section 3.5 some secondary analyses are carried out on data from Year 12 pupils, collected as part of the recent Selective System research (Gallagher and Smith, 2000a). The final section (3.6) collates findings from research that looked rather more broadly at the years of compulsory secondary education, the MBW *Scoping* study and the CATER project.

#### **3.2: ABOUT THE TIME OF TRANSFER**

##### **3.2.1: Northern Ireland Parents in the Early 1990s**

In the first year of open enrolment in Northern Ireland, following the 1989 Education Reform Order, Sutherland and McKibben (1992) posted a questionnaire in January 1991 to a Province-wide sample of parents of the first Year 8 pupils to transfer to post-primary schools under the (then) new arrangements. The pilot sample for the draft version of the questionnaire had a deliberately lower-SES bias in order to test for readability among parents with little or no post-compulsory education. Of the 1019 respondents to the main survey (a 47.3% response), some 14% – in households where the male partners or main earners were in semi-skilled or unskilled occupations or else unemployed – were categorised as of lower socio-economic status. Although *any* parent who takes the trouble to reply to a questionnaire on his or her child's recent school experiences is almost certainly interested in that child's education, some of the answers of the lower-SES parents varied from those of the Professional/Managerial and the Skilled groups; on other issues there were no significant differences. In a sample where nearly 10% of the parents held a degree from a higher

education institution but over 40% had no academic qualifications, some answers were also analysed by the educational level reached by the parents.

Although slightly fewer respondents from the lower-SES category than from the other occupational groups had attended any Open Evenings or Open Days at post-primary schools before applying for a place for their child (82% vs 91%), more than four-fifths of them had done so<sup>23</sup>. Only 38% of them had, however, visited a grammar school, as compared with 71% of the Professional/ Managerial and 53% of the Skilled parents. When asked how helpful ten different potential sources of information had been in helping them to find out about post-primary schools, the parents in lower-SES households had been less influenced than other parents by open evenings/days or by school brochures. They had been much more dependent than the more economically advantaged parents on relatives, friends and neighbours.

Certain links were observed between parents' educational and occupational levels and their current preferences for different types of school, especially for children who had been awarded an intermediate grade in the Transfer tests. While over 90% of parents from all groups whose children were awarded a top grade wanted them to have a grammar school education, among the parents of children with a grade 3 (equivalent to a C1 or C2 in the present system), 56% of those from professional backgrounds but only 21% of those from the lower-SES group thought that a grammar school would now be best for their child.<sup>24</sup> The higher the educational or SES level, the higher the percentage of parents favouring co-education and the lower the percentage with no strong views on the matter. Thus, 60% of respondents from homes where the child's father had a degree wanted co-education and only 30% thought the issue unimportant. By contrast, only 26% of respondents from homes where the child's father had no educational qualifications wanted co-education and only 60% had no preference on the matter. A wish to have the child educated in an inter-denominational setting was expressed nearly twice as often by parents in Professional/Managerial than in lower-SES households (38% vs 21%).

When asked to rate the importance of each of 16 school characteristics in making a choice of post-primary school, parents from the lower-SES groups or who lacked educational qualifications attached less importance than did those in professional or managerial

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<sup>23</sup> The author of the report did wonder if non-respondent to the questionnaire from lower-SES households had been as good attenders at open evenings/days.

<sup>24</sup> A comparable trend was found in an American study by Dauber and Epstein (1993) in which college-educated mothers were more likely than those who did not proceed beyond high school to choose college-preparatory high school courses for their lower-achieving children.

occupations to the school having a sixth form, a wide range of subjects or good teaching resources but they had more often sought a school which they thought would offer special help to pupils with learning difficulties. They were also more likely to be attracted by the proximity of a local school or to be influenced by the fact that the school was their child's choice or that their child's schoolfriends also hoped to go there. These last points are in keeping with answers to another question in which twice as high a percentage of children from lower-SES households as from professional families were perceived as the sole main influence on the choice of school.

In the different emphases given to possible reasons for choosing a post-primary school the tendency of parents from professional or managerial occupations to have higher educational ambitions for their offspring than parents in lower-SES situations was evident. The less advantaged parents appeared to be focusing more on whether the child would be happy in the new school. However, the greater concern of the lower-SES parents with remedial provision may have been a realistic response to differences in the average attainments of the various social classes in primary school, although these differences in attainment were likely to have been influenced to an unknown degree by, among other things, prior parental attitudes and aspirations. It should also be pointed out that a number of other school characteristics were almost equally important to parents from all social strata, most noticeably the quality of the teaching, which was regarded as 'very important' by 94% of the whole response sample.

In their ratings after one term of their children's post-primary schools, parents from lower-SES backgrounds expressed rather lower degrees of satisfaction than more advantaged parents but this could be largely explained away when the types of school attended by their children were taken into account. Overall, grammar schools tended to be rather more favourably rated than secondary schools and a smaller proportion of children from lower-SES backgrounds than from the other groups were in grammar schools. Secondary schools were similarly rated by the Professional/ Managerial, Skilled and lower-SES parents whose children attended them and the same was so of grammar schools. However, it should be stressed that over 90% of parents gave their children's school a positive overall rating, although they might be more critical of specific aspects, such as pupil behaviour. It was also observed that parents with modest educational qualifications or none, who probably left school at the minimum age, tended to be more impressed than other parents by the teaching resources in their children's schools.



### **3.2.2: Year 8 Pupils' Recollections of the Transfer Procedure**

Among the informants interviewed as part of the Main Study of the recent Selection Procedure project were Year 8 pupils. Transcripts of group interviews with six to eight pupils each, or in one case an account by the interviewer in reported speech, were available from ten secondary high schools and six grammar schools (Sutherland, 2000). The ten secondary high schools varied greatly in their pupils' social backgrounds, with the percentages entitled to free school meals ranging from 77% down to 9%. While the home circumstances of individual participants were unknown, on some issues the discourse noticeably differed in secondary schools serving more and less advantaged areas. No such differences were observed among the grammar schools, in none of which more than 13% of the pupils was entitled to free meals.

At the same time it should be stressed that in all the group interviews, regardless of the type of school or the social background of its pupils, the Year 8 children spoke well of their schools, paralleling the generally favourable scores of the Year 12 pupils on the ACER scales (see below). Even though some of the pupils in secondary high schools had clearly been disappointed when they realised that they would not secure a grammar school place, several of them expressly stated that they would not now wish to leave their present school and no one volunteered a wish for a late transfer to a grammar school. Moreover, in those interviews in which Year 8 pupils were asked what they would say to P7 pupils who asked them about their new school in order to help them decide where to apply, the answers were again very positive, even from pupils who had just been criticising details of the behaviour of individual teachers or particular school regulations. One such pupil, for instance, would tell her younger friends:

“Come to this school because it's great. The teachers are really friendly and explain things really well.”

Differences related to the schools' social profiles could, however, be seen in the reasons the Year 8 pupils gave for applying for admission to their schools. In two secondary high schools, including the one with the fewest students on free meals (low FSME) most pupils, like those in grammar schools, included 'educational' reasons; they believed the school would help them maximise their educational potential. In other secondary high schools, especially those with higher FSME indexes, 'non-educational' reasons for applying tended to predominate, such as proximity to home or a wish to remain with friends from primary school. In particular, the few 'anti-educational' reasons, expressing wishes not to have to study too hard – or in pupil language 'not to be pushed too much' – were all heard in secondary high schools

where substantial numbers of pupils were on free meals. It is not, however, known if the actual speakers were entitled to free meals.

Although systematic data were not collected on the number of Open Evenings or Open Days attended to help children and their parents decide which post-primary schools to apply for, it was noticed that pupils at the secondary high school with the lowest FSME had, like most grammar school pupils, been with their parents to quite a number of such events. At the other extreme, only one member of the group at the secondary high school with the highest FSME appeared to have attended any other school's Open Evening and at the school with the second highest FSME there was no mention of going to any Open Evenings, not even at the present school. In the other secondary high schools, it seemed usual to have visited about two schools, including the one now attended. Attendance at more than one Open Evening or Open Day may be regarded as a possible indicator – although certainly not a definitive index – of interest in one's child's education.

### **3.3: PUPILS IN THE FIRST YEAR OF POST-PRIMARY SCHOOL (YEAR 8)**

#### 3.3.1: The 1975 Cohort Study

Although this Northern Ireland research was conducted earlier than most studies in this review, it is important for showing the persistence of pupil attitudes towards education and, in particular, the relatively poor prognosis for pupils who do not settle happily into their post-primary schools. The former Northern Ireland Council for Educational Research traced the progress of 3000 pupils who transferred to post-primary education in 1975 through to age 16 and, if they remained in the educational system, though to age 18. A battery of tests and measures of attitudes administered when the pupils were age 12 years and in first form (now known as Year 8) included a scale of Educational Alienation, one of seven attitude scales specially devised for the research (Spellman, 1979). More than any of the other six attitudinal scales, including one of liking the teachers at the new school, the Educational Alienation scale had correlated significantly (range -0.20 to -0.35) with various indices of parental education, father's occupation, the parent's active interest in the child's education and literacy in the home; it had also a substantial negative correlation of -0.59 with the criterion measure of academic performance in 'Year 8'. Four years later, the Educational Alienation score at age 12 correlated -0.60 with a weighted measure of examination performance at age 16 and -0.36 with remaining in full-time education after age 16 (Wilson with Gardiner, 1985). In other

words, the more socio-economically disadvantaged pupils were more likely to have negative views towards education even in the first year of post-primary education, views which would affect their academic performance that year. That measure of academic performance at age 12 was to prove the best predictor in the research of performance at age 16, which in turn was the best predictor of staying in full-time education. In a stepwise regression analysis on the data available at age 16, the Educational Alienation score still made a small independent contribution to the prediction of examination performance over and above Selection Procedure and 'Year 8' scores. Pupil attitudes, which were significantly linked to social background, were to have implications for young people's long-term educational futures.<sup>25</sup>

On reading the items of the Educational Alienation scale (Spellman, 1979, p 77) in 2001, some of them can be seen to be definitely biased towards either secondary or grammar schools, which may help to explain the unusually high correlation with academic performance. At age 12, much higher levels of alienation were seen in secondary intermediate than in grammar schools. However, at age 16 significant correlations were found *within* different grouping of pupils by their Transfer Procedure status (e.g. 'Qualified' for a free grammar school place) and these were closely linked to the different types of post-primary school.

### **3.3.2: Perceptions of the Year 8 Curriculum (from the NFER-CCEA Cohort Study)**

As part of the NFER-CCEA Cohort Study (Harland *et al.*, 1999), 2694 questionnaires were completed by Year 8 pupils in 21 schools. The sampling frame was designed to ensure that the schools would be representative of Northern Ireland post-primary schools as regards type (grammar or secondary), Area Board location and form of management. Two measures of social background were employed. Of the 72% of the pupils whose parental occupations were known, 1062 were categorised as working class and 866 as middle class. In addition, the 21 schools were grouped as high, medium or low in the proportion of pupils with free school meal entitlement (FSME). As in other Northern Ireland studies (e.g. Gallagher, McKeown and McKeown, 2000), very many more middle-class than working-class children had obtained grammar school places; in this study two-thirds (66%) of the middle-class children were in grammar schools while more than three-fifths (62%) of the working-class pupils were in secondary schools. And whereas only 12% of the middle-class pupils were in schools

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<sup>25</sup> Since this research, alternative statistical methods have developed which can more clearly trace the pathways of influence of background factors over time.

where high proportions of pupils were eligible for free meals, 33% of the working-class children were. This suggests a confounding of pupil and school variables, especially as the reported analyses of pupils of differing social backgrounds do not appear to have controlled for school type.<sup>26</sup> Groups defined by social background can obviously overlap with groups defined by school type. It is therefore not clear how far the significant differences reported in the next paragraph should be attributed to the schools and how far to the pupils reporting on them.

Only for relatively few of the questionnaire items, however, were significant differences reported for pupils from different social backgrounds. Most of these, like the differences found in the secondary analysis of Year 12 data from the Selective System project (Chapter 3.5), showed the less advantaged pupils and those in secondary schools to have more favourable attitudes. The pupils from the schools with high FSME indexes tended to see their curriculum as more relevant, both for their immediate circumstances and for future employment. In particular, like secondary school pupils in general, they saw more vocational relevance in practical and expressive subjects (including technology, home economics, health education, drama and art) than did grammar school pupils. The pupils from the high FSME schools also regarded Health Education as more important for adult life generally than did those from schools with medium or low FSME. Indeed the authors were concerned at the extent to which, by comparison, the middle-class pupils and those attending grammar schools and schools with low FSME (again, obviously overlapping groups) may have valued ICT but otherwise tended to attach much importance only to a narrow range of traditional examinable academic subjects. The more socio-economically disadvantaged Y8 pupils seemed to them to be more receptive to the broader curriculum.

Pupils from high FSME schools and those in secondary schools, however, reported less continuity and progression in their Year 8 lessons than did grammar school pupils and those in schools with more advantaged catchment areas. Harland and his colleagues suggested two possible explanations: courses in grammar schools might be better structured or, alternatively, the higher academic capacity of grammar school pupils (who, because of pupil distributions in Northern Ireland, would not have been in high FSME schools) might have been better able to perceive continuity and progression in their lessons.

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<sup>26</sup> This report is, however, described as an interim one on the Cohort Study and perhaps this matter will be examined in more detail subsequently.

On many issues, no significant differences were reported in the perceptions of the more socially advantaged and disadvantaged Year 8 pupils, even if there might be differences between pupils in grammar and secondary schools: these included curriculum breadth and balance, difficulty levels, assessment methods and subjects which had helped their personal development.

### **3.3.3: Twelve Year Olds in Four City Areas**

The perspectives of 12 year olds in 1981 and 1992 on the purposes of education, as well as on a wide range of other topics on the general theme of developing identities were researched by Jean Whyte (1995). Questionnaires were completed by a total of 404 pupils in 1981 and 476 in 1992, who were living in 'socially disadvantaged' areas of East Belfast, West Belfast, Dublin and London. Disadvantage was determined by the percentage of unemployed heads of household in the locality, which in each case was higher than in the city as a whole. The two Belfast areas had also been 'high in street violence' in 1981. In each location, pupils from two classes in each of two schools participated. The pupil sample in such a research plan is obviously better described as 'illustrative of possibilities' than as representative. For example, a charismatic teacher in just one of the schools could significantly influence the answers from that locality.

Views on the purposes of education were tapped by asking the pupils to complete two sentences by naming three things, the sentences being 'School is supposed to help us in life because it .....' and 'It's worth trying to do well at school because ....'. Note was taken of any responses that either (a) perceived school as a means to a good job or (b) perceived education as self-development or as a pathway to advanced qualifications or third-level education. Pupils might well give both types of answer in the course of replying to the two questions. Both types of answers were regarded as positive attitudes, although the former had a less extended view of education. In 1992 approximately 40% of both Belfast groups saw education as a means of self-development or obtaining qualifications. In 1992 just under 30% of the East Belfast children but less than a quarter of the West Belfast children saw education as a means to a job. In all four localities, fewer children saw education as a means to a job in 1992 than their predecessors had in 1981 but this may reflect the economic recession at the time rather than any fundamental and possibly permanent shift of attitude. In this connection, it was noticed that the decline between 1981 and 1992 was least in East Belfast, the area which possibly had the most marked tradition of the four of finding jobs through local networks of family, friends, neighbours and work associates.

More Belfast girls than boys saw school both as a way to a job and as a means towards self-development and qualifications, findings that can probably be related to the higher staying-on rates at school for girls than boys in Northern Ireland (NIERC, 1997). Whyte did, however express some concern about those who did not give any positive reason for education or working hard at school. Given circumstances in which most of the children were living in rented local authority housing and questions on occupations might offend – especially some officially unemployed people – Whyte devised socio-economic measures based on household possessions known to correlate with the overall SES level and asked about at various points in the questionnaire: television, bicycles, a car, a telephone and pocket money. Within the Belfast samples, however, these socio-metric measures were unrelated to the perceptions of the purposes of education.

### 3.4 FOCUS ON THE KEY STAGE 4 YEARS

The youthful informants in this section are all appreciably older than those in the last, between 14 and 16 years of age rather than 11-12 years. The principals and teachers who gave evidence to the NIEC-QUB researchers in the first part of this section concentrated on the Key Stage 4 years and the focus groups of pupils were enrolled in Year 11 classes. The latter part of the section looks at pupil reactions to new and experimental alternative KS4 programmes; although any secondary school might join the initiative and offer the new programmes to any of their KS4 pupils, in practice most participants in the first two years tended to be drawn from the more disadvantaged and the less academically successful half of the age cohort. This was certainly the situation in Grew's (2002) case study.

#### 3.4.1: The NIEC-QUB Research: Interviews in Post-Primary Schools

The two grammar and twelve secondary high schools which participated in the NIEC-funded research were selected because they had the reputation of being efficient schools or because they were known to be actively tackling problems of underachievement or because it was believed they were using innovative practices to achieve improvement. The percentages of pupils entitled to free school meals (FSME) ran virtually the whole gamut from very high to very low, with the two grammar schools having far lower FSMEs than the secondary schools. This is in contrast to the samples of nursery and primary schools, for which location in a socially disadvantaged area was a main criterion for inclusion. In consequence, whereas the interviews in the nursery and the primary schools are a rich source of evidence on principals'

perceptions of the attitudes to education of socio-economically disadvantaged parents, the theme of disadvantaged home background only occasionally emerged in the account of the interviews in the post-primary sector. Nevertheless, there were a few shafts of illumination as indicated below. In the post-primary schools there were interviews with teachers from a department nominated by the principal as efficient and with a group of Year 11 pupils as well as with the principal.

A girls' secondary school had organised a range of extra-curricular initiatives designed to promote learning and achievement. There had already been a 'Mathematics week-end' for pupils about to sit GCSE examinations and there was about to be a 'science week-end' with study on the Friday evening, and on the Saturday and Sunday. Pupils would go home to sleep but a team of parents would come in to school to cook their meals. From the Principal's statement that

“The message is... that a school in a disadvantaged or any area should no longer be a building which is locked up but should be open at all times in as far as possible”

it would seem that this school *was* in a disadvantaged area. Although it is not known whether or not the girls who availed of the occasional study week-ends were among the most socio-economically disadvantaged on the roll, the indication seems to be that at least some disadvantaged pupils and their parents are prepared to reschedule completely their normal weekend's programme in the hope of improving performance in forthcoming examinations. Pupil focus groups suggested that those who attended such week-end courses were “people who want to do well”.

In some areas of high unemployment, however, teachers had difficulty in motivating pupils who deemed education to be a waste of time. Such pupils could adopt fatalistic attitudes, believing that they would fail their GCSEs, that they had no chance of college or university and that therefore it was not worth even trying. Academic motivation could also be low in communities with family networks of small tradesmen's businesses that would offer a relative a job irrespective of formal qualifications. Nevertheless, another boys' secondary high school appears to have had some success in – almost literally – winning the hearts and minds of some previously disaffected pupils:

“We had an element in this year's Year 12 who were really 'anti' the system and we did have some difficulties with them. We've worked with them and worked with them and we thought we would have had problems with them in the examination situation, in GCSE but they were absolutely superb. .... They seem to have come round and matured slightly. We did have a problem with them, with some of them being slightly

disaffected. Whether it's their home background or what I'm not totally sure. But they all want to come back in the sixth form ... because they see the people who have come back have all got jobs or have gone on to further education and have done a whole lot better than even we thought. They can all say that they have got something out of it and the other kids see it"

(Teacher, boys' secondary high school).

When faced with such different developments and outcomes, it would be interesting to know more about family, peer-group and community values in the various localities.

With the exception of one or two who were going into apprenticeships, the Year 11 pupils, who were interviewed in groups of eight, nearly all planned to stay in education after taking their GCSEs. Most of them had hopes of going to university, although some were looking forward to a vocational course at a college of further education. If there were socio-economically disadvantaged pupils in the focus groups, their home circumstances would not seem to have had seriously adverse effects on their attitudes to education. How representative focus groups of eight pupils are of whole year cohorts is always problematic, unless they were known to be picked either at random or randomly within a sampling frame.<sup>27</sup> Even if the focus group members were, on average, possibly rather more educationally committed than the student body as a whole, their responses to questions about the behaviour of 'good' and 'poor' teachers, will provide a useful comparison with the perceptions of their schooling by certain disaffected groups in Section 4 of this review.

In the eyes of the Year 11 students, it was generally agreed that good teachers were supportive, could explain new material in an uncomplicated way, gave interesting lessons, would encourage pupils to work hard without demeaning them, could interact easily with them and share a joke with the class. Individual answers included:

I like the teachers who set things down in a simple way for you so that you can understand better. Instead of making everything more complicated and expecting you to understand it. Also the ones that are relaxed and you're not dreading going into their class and they're not going to be a bore. They make it more lively (Coeducational Grammar).

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<sup>27</sup> Such a frame could determine, for instance, the proportions of each gender, ability level and subject option group to be interviewed.



They can have a bit of banter, you do stuff after school like if it was drama you'll do a play with them after school or stay behind. ... he'll put himself to the limit for you so that you can get the highest success (Girls' secondary).

Yeah they do push you in a way but they don't sit and nag on and hassle and shout in your face. They just go 'Come on do a bit more work like that there'. And they make you see their point of view. They say, 'What are you going to do if you leave school with no exams' and you're just looking at her as if to say 'I don't know' (Girls' secondary).

Bad teachers, by contrast, were described as aloof, poor at explaining, inconsistent in the behaviour they demanded, and boring. They could be unfair in their treatment of pupils. In several interviews instances were described in which pupils were ridiculed or embarrassed by teachers in front of the class. Particular complaints included:

- If you ask a question they just automatically say you were not listening.
- If you got a question wrong, you never knew what his reaction would be. He could crack up or just say 'Unlucky you, you got that bit wrong'.
- They embarrass you in front of the class. Sometimes they don't mean to but they do.
- Nothing is ever good enough for them.

In the group interviews with Year 11 pupils in the NIEC-QUB research, however, it was generally agreed that there were more 'good' than 'bad' teachers in the school.

#### **3.4.2: Reactions to the New Flexibility Initiative at Key Stage 4.**

The groups of adolescents whose reactions to the Alternative Curriculum or Flexibility Initiative for Key Stage 4 have been recorded in recent evaluations of the initiative (ETI, 2003; Grew, 2002) would mostly be fairly or very socio-economically disadvantaged. Recognising that an essentially academic KS4 curriculum is not suitable for all 14 to 16 year olds – a number of whom absent themselves to the extent of premature school leaving – government departments both in Great Britain and Northern Ireland have begun inviting post-primary schools "to explore more creative and imaginative approaches to the curriculum at KS4" (DE, 4/2000). In Northern Ireland at KS4 up to 40% of the year can now be spent in vocationally-oriented activities, although all pupils are expected to work towards recognised qualifications appropriate to ability. The response to this invitation has come almost exclusively from non-selective post-primary schools. Within these schools the new programmes have most often been offered to lower-achieving pupils and less often to both the

middle and lower bands. Such classes typically include a substantial proportion of pupils from less economically advantaged homes. In Grew's case study school, for instance, more than half of all pupils were entitled to free meals and the percentage would almost certainly have been higher still among the pupils who embarked on the Alternative Curriculum programme.

The evaluation by the Inspectorate (ETI, 2003) is based on visits to 14 schools participating in the first two years of the Flexibility Initiative and data from questionnaires sent to 30 schools. Grew's (2002) small-scale dissertation study is based on two focus group interviews with Year 11 girls during the first year of 'Beechill' School's<sup>28</sup> involvement in the initiative, individual interviews with teachers in charge of the Alternative Curriculum programme in ten schools and two interviews with key informants – an Inspector and a Board Officer.

The two evaluations tell a fairly similar story. Most pupils responded positively to the Alternative Curriculum and appreciated being treated as young adults when in the FE colleges, training organisations (TOs) or work experience. Attendance rates were generally better than before, although not for all pupils and sometimes only at college, TO or work placement but not at school. The ETI report calculated a 10% improvement in attendance. In Grew's study (which considered only attendance on in-school days) four of the five previous poor attenders at Beechill showed a marked – and in one case a dramatic – improvement but the fifth did not. All ten teachers-in-charge of Alternative Curriculum programmes whom Grew interviewed reported overall gains in pupil motivation and attendance. All ten, however, also admitted that at least one pupil dropped out of the programme, although more had disappeared in the past from traditional courses. In both the ETI and the MEd studies the percentage of pupils from Alternative Curriculum courses who had continued in education or training after the minimum leaving age, or who were planning to do so if not yet of an age to leave, was higher than for pupils of similar ability in previous cohorts.

A number of individual inspection reports included, as well as references to cognitive gains, comments on high levels of motivation and to increased pupil confidence, self-esteem and maturity. However, the ETI report also observed that the school-based aspects of the course too often did not seem relevant to the pupils. Marked discrepancies between attendance in school and at the other forms of provision could sometimes be a symptom of that. Indeed, for some of the young people, the out-of-school elements could show up the inappropriateness of

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<sup>28</sup> Grew, of course, used pseudonyms in her dissertation. 'Beechill School' was not one of the 14 schools in the Inspectorate's visit sample ETI (2003).

the in-school provision as regards the rigidity of the timetable and the nature of the teacher-pupil relationships.

In similar vein, Grew's (2002) focus groups had something of a dichotomised view of the treatment received in school and in the training organisation. At the TO they felt they were treated as adults, with respect, trusted and allowed to use their initiative. The trainers were seen as efficient and, after years of failure at school, the girls were encouraged by constantly passing short units and by the trainers' assumptions that they would successfully complete the course. This was contrasted with their in-school days when they felt they were treated as children, "screamed at" or "yapped at", and constantly up against petty regulations, while at the same time not being expected to achieve anything much. School was sometimes viewed very negatively indeed:

"When I come to school I just sit and think to myself, 'What are we learning in this hole?' See, the things we want, we don't get in school. We learn nothing. School is no longer relevant to my life."

Somewhat horrified by such remarks, Grew wondered if the group situation had led to exaggeration in a spirit of bravado. From their progress records, it appeared that most of the girls *had* progressed quite well that year and during the focus groups they spoke very warmly of the programme's link teacher, 'Mrs Bell', who also took them for some classes. It may be that the highly negative remarks were not so much exaggeration as over-generalisation from their less congenial classrooms. The Inspectorate review may not include such forthright pupil statements in direct speech but would certainly seem to imply that similar opinions could be found in other schools.

Three related themes run through much of the qualitative evidence in the dissertation: respect, neighbourhood loyalties and social exclusion. Grew cites Cullen *et al.*'s (2000) description of the social exclusion experienced by similar pupils in England who were limited not only by poverty and by growing up in households in which no one had a job but by a very restricted geographical milieu. Travelling out of their immediate housing estate could be daunting and their sense of loyalty and belonging could be to an area as small as a single street. Grew observed similar unnecessary geographical and social restrictions in her own pupils some of whom, for instance, refused to do work experience in the town centre (within easy walking distance) as too far away and dangerous.

The training organisation was perceived as part of the local community and the trainers as "people like us" who treated them "with respect" as young adults. The language used in the TO was often earthy and liberally sprinkled with expletives. This was a matter of considerable

concern to the school staff but did not trouble the girls in the slightest. Indeed they perceived it as part of a grown-up relationship or the language one would use “with your mates”. There was therefore the somewhat paradoxical situation of trainers who sometimes roundly cursed the girls, freely ‘effing and blinding’ at them, being felt to treat them “with respect” whereas the teachers, who used only strictly parliamentary language, were often felt to lack ‘respect’ towards them. Teachers’ civil language could be perceived as cold, only superficially polite and even as snobbery.

Another strand emerged in the relationship between ‘respect’ and neighbourhood loyalties. The link teacher, ‘Mrs Bell’, whom the pupils all liked and admired, was raised in the area of the town in which the school is located and was reported to be the only teacher in the school who really publicised her connections with the area. A few other teachers in the school also grew up locally but apparently never mentioned it. Grew (who comes from a very different part of the Province) wondered if the pupils were receiving, as part of a hidden curriculum, messages that these teachers appear not to respect the locality and so not to respect their pupils’ backgrounds and thus, by implication, the pupils themselves. This could, in turn lead the pupils to reject these members of staff. It was suggested that more building on community links might help to improve relationships in the school generally.

At Beechill, girls were allowed on the Alternative Curriculum programme only if they and their parents were prepared to sign a contract with realistic and agreed targets of attendance, behaviour, and commitment. Parents were not, however, asked to participate in the evaluation. The volunteered comments of one mother to the link teacher are perhaps worth quoting, not only as a verdict on the programme but for the implications it contains for pupil motivation in such schools:

“I am so pleased that Eva did that course. She even made arrangements to stay with a relative while we went on holiday during the summer because she got a job in the same nursery over the summer. She is my youngest and the only one in the house that ever had an interest in anything. I’m so proud of her.”

Perhaps in the light of these pupils’ comments the main question underlying this review, “What are the attitudes of disadvantaged pupils and parents towards education?” needs a little expansion. Perhaps it should also ask ‘Attitudes to what kind of education?’

### **3.5: SECONDARY ANALYSIS OF ATTITUDINAL DATA FROM THE NI SELECTIVE SYSTEM RESEARCH (2000)**

#### **3.5.1: The Nature of the Secondary Analysis**

As part of the empirical research undertaken for the Government-commissioned research into the effects of the selective system of secondary education in Northern Ireland (Gallagher and Smith, 2000) a 40-item questionnaire, developed by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) was administered to Year 12 pupils in the 25 Main Study schools in Northern Ireland (Gallagher and McKeown, 2000a). The questionnaire was also administered to pupils in their final full year of compulsory education (S4) in the six Scottish schools which participated in the comparison study (Gallagher and McKeown, 2000b).

The 40 items of the ACER School Life Questionnaire are divided into seven separate scales, of which two are general and five more specific. The two specific scales are:

- *General Satisfaction* (or positive affect), which reflects favourable attitudes towards the school as a whole
- *Negative affect*, which reflects negative feelings about the school as a whole.

The five more specific scales are:

- *Teachers*, which contains items about the adequacy of the relationship between teachers and pupils
- *Relevance*, which refers to a belief in the relevance of the schooling for the pupil's future
- *Success*, which reflects a sense of confidence in one's ability to be successful in school
- *Status*, which indicates the degree of prestige accorded to the individual by significant others within the school
- *Social Integration*, which is concerned with a sense of learning about other people and getting along with other people in the school.

Each item is rated on a 4-point scale, with the response points labelled as 'definitely agree', 'mostly agree', 'mostly disagree' and 'definitely disagree'. For analysis purposes, these responses are scored from 4 to 1 respectively. An average score for each scale is derived from the items specific to it. The closer the average score is to 4, the higher the score on the scale. The closer the average score is to 1, the lower the score on the scale. For all scales except the general *Negative Effect* scale, the higher the score the more favourable the attitude towards the school.

Gallagher and McKeown (2000a) analysed the ACER scores from Northern Ireland by gender, finding that girls in Northern Ireland viewed their schools more favourably than did boys on five of the seven scales, including the General Satisfaction scale. Comparisons of the Northern Ireland responses from grammar and secondary schools showed that while grammar school pupils were significantly more confident in their ability to succeed academically (Success scale), the pupils in secondary high schools rated their teachers as more approachable and helpful and were more likely to indicate that they had learned to get along well with other people in the school (Teacher and Social Integration scales). The pupils in secondary high schools also emerged as less critical of their schools on the general Negative Affect scale and the girls, though not the boys, were more likely than their opposite numbers in grammar schools to believe that the school was preparing them well for the future (Relevance Scale). Drawing also on interview evidence from principals, teachers and pupils (which is reported in several other of the research papers in the collection) Gallagher and McKeown interpret these differences between the two types of school as showing, on the one hand, the grammar school pupils feeling more under pressure because of the high standards expected of them and, on the other, secondary schools striving to provide a “supportive and caring atmosphere”.

Attitudes of Scottish and Northern Ireland pupils were also compared (Gallagher and McKeown, 2000b) using, not the whole Northern Ireland sample, but a cluster of eight schools from just one part of the Province which had been chosen for a special Area Study. The part of Scotland chosen for the comparison study was “broadly similar” to that of the Northern Ireland Area Study. Nevertheless, on all seven scales, the Northern Ireland group had significantly more favourable attitudes towards their schools, although the differences were not very large and on the Negative Affect scale the difference was found only among the girls. In both Scotland and Northern Ireland, however, attitudes were generally positive, with means ‘better than’ the scale midpoints.

The present secondary analysis utilizes two other pupil background variables, both related to the socio-economic status (SES) of the home. The first, whether or not the pupil was entitled to free school meals (FSM or Not-FSM) is a frequently used index of social disadvantage, since such entitlement requires the family to be heavily reliant on social benefits for income. The second index was of the father’s employment status. The attitudes of pupils whose fathers were in non-manual occupations were contrasted with those whose fathers were in manual occupations or unemployed. Previous research experience has indicated that post-primary pupils rarely record parents as ‘unemployed’ unless they have been out of work for a

considerable period, by which time the effects are usually quite marked on the family lifestyle. Ideally the occupational index would have also paid some heed to maternal employment but there is as yet no generally accepted method of including this, while also coping with the number of incomes in the household, the simpler method of considering only the father's occupation was used. While families with a father in skilled manual employment are unlikely to be socio-economically disadvantaged in the usual sense of the term, it was hypothesised that, especially in grammar schools, where the majority of pupils are from middle-class backgrounds pupils from working class backgrounds might tend to be *relatively* disadvantaged.

### 3.5.2: Attitudes of Northern Ireland Pupils by their Socio-economic Backgrounds

Table 3.1: *Attitudes to School of All Northern Ireland Year 12 Pupils in the Survey by entitlement to free school meals*

| Scale                  | Mean |         | Standard Deviation |         | F Ratio | Significance |
|------------------------|------|---------|--------------------|---------|---------|--------------|
|                        | FSM  | Not-FSM | FSM                | Not-FSM |         |              |
| <i>General Scales</i>  |      |         |                    |         |         |              |
| General satisfaction   | 2.65 | 2.63    | 0.53               | 0.56    | 0.318   | 0.573        |
| Negative affect        | 1.98 | 2.00    | 0.51               | 0.51    | 0.937   | 0.333        |
| <i>Specific Scales</i> |      |         |                    |         |         |              |
| Teachers               | 2.97 | 2.91    | 0.47               | 0.49    | 5.251   | 0.022 *      |
| Relevance of schooling | 3.17 | 3.12    | 0.45               | 0.46    | 3.498   | 0.062        |
| Confidence of Success  | 2.91 | 2.96    | 0.43               | 0.44    | 5.044   | 0.025 *      |
| Status of individual   | 2.62 | 2.62    | 0.52               | 0.47    | 0.032   | 0.859        |
| Social Integration     | 3.05 | 3.01    | 0.45               | 0.40    | 1.992   | 0.158        |

Table 3.2: Attitudes to School of All Northern Ireland Year 12 Pupils in the Survey by employment

*status of father*

| Scale                  | Mean   |         | SD     |         | F Ratio | Significance |
|------------------------|--------|---------|--------|---------|---------|--------------|
|                        | Manual | Non-Man | Manual | Non-Man |         |              |
| <i>General Scales</i>  |        |         |        |         |         |              |
| General satisfaction   | 2.63   | 2.65    | 0.55   | 0.54    | 0.791   | 0.374        |
| Negative affect        | 1.99   | 2.00    | 0.50   | 0.51    | 0.076   | 0.782        |
| <i>Specific Scales</i> |        |         |        |         |         |              |
| Teachers               | 2.95   | 2.90    | 0.46   | 0.51    | 4.929   | 0.027 *      |
| Relevance of schooling | 3.12   | 3.14    | 0.45   | 0.46    | 0.869   | 0.351        |
| Confidence of Success  | 2.93   | 3.00    | 0.42   | 0.44    | 12.989  | 0.000 ***    |
| Status of individual   | 2.61   | 2.64    | 0.49   | 0.47    | 1.598   | 0.206        |
| Social Integration     | 3.04   | 3.01    | 0.42   | 0.39    | 2.327   | 0.127        |

Tables 3.1 and 3.2 show that for the whole sample of Year 12 Northern Ireland pupils, two of the attitude scales were significantly related to the pupils' family backgrounds. Regardless of whether the SES measure used was entitlement to free school meals or the father's occupation, the less advantaged pupils had a more positive perception of the relationships between teachers and pupils ( $p < 0.05$ ). Individual items where the differences were marked in the comparisons included "Teachers take a personal interest in helping me with my school work" and "Teachers help me to do my best". Despite this greater amount of reported help from teachers, however, the less socially advantaged pupils were less confident that they would succeed at school, as evidenced in the replies to such items as "I know how to cope with the work" and "I am a success as a student".



Table 3.3: *Attitudes to School of Northern Ireland Year 12 Pupils in Grammar Schools by entitlement to free school meals*

| Scale                  | Mean |         | SD   |         | F Ratio | Significance |
|------------------------|------|---------|------|---------|---------|--------------|
|                        | FSM  | Not FSM | FSM  | Not FSM |         |              |
| <i>General Scales</i>  |      |         |      |         |         |              |
| General satisfaction   | 2.57 | 2.61    | 0.47 | 0.53    | 0.451   | 0.502        |
| Negative affect        | 2.06 | 2.03    | 0.50 | 0.50    | 0.168   | 0.682        |
| <i>Specific Scales</i> |      |         |      |         |         |              |
| Teachers               | 2.85 | 2.86    | 0.41 | 0.48    | 0.052   | 0.820        |
| Relevance of schooling | 3.09 | 3.10    | 0.43 | 0.46    | 0.017   | 0.895        |
| Confidence of Success  | 2.85 | 2.99    | 0.34 | 0.42    | 6.011   | 0.014 *      |
| Status of individual   | 2.60 | 2.60    | 0.41 | 0.45    | 0.000   | 0.992        |
| Social Integration     | 2.99 | 3.00    | 0.39 | 0.37    | 0.020   | 0.887        |

These significant SES-related differences on the Teacher and the Success scales were in the same directions as two of the significant attitudinal differences in Gallagher and McKeown (2000a) between pupils in grammar and secondary schools. This raised the possibility that the SES-related differences might only be echoing differences between pupils in the two types of school since, as in many previous Northern Ireland studies, a much smaller proportion of the pupils in grammar school than in secondary schools were entitled to free meals (Gallagher, McKeown and McKeown, 2000, Table 7). Accordingly, the analyses were repeated separately for pupils in grammar and secondary schools. The findings are shown in Tables 3.3 to 3.6.

Table 3.4: Attitudes to School of Northern Ireland Year 12 Pupils in Grammar Schools by employment status of father

| Scale                  | Mean   |         | SD     |         | F Ratio | Significance |
|------------------------|--------|---------|--------|---------|---------|--------------|
|                        | Manual | Non-Man | Manual | Non-Man |         |              |
| <i>General Scales</i>  |        |         |        |         |         |              |
| General satisfaction   | 2.58   | 2.63    | 0.53   | 0.52    | 1.757   | 0.185        |
| Negative affect        | 2.05   | 2.02    | 0.48   | 0.51    | 0.757   | 0.384        |
| <i>Specific Scales</i> |        |         |        |         |         |              |
| Teachers               | 2.90   | 2.85    | 0.44   | 0.49    | 2.225   | 0.136        |
| Relevance of schooling | 3.07   | 3.11    | 0.46   | 0.46    | 1.639   | 0.201        |
| Confidence of Success  | 2.93   | 3.00    | 0.40   | 0.42    | 6.663   | 0.010 *      |
| Status of individual   | 2.61   | 2.61    | 0.44   | 0.45    | 0.006   | 0.941        |
| Social Integration     | 3.02   | 2.99    | 0.39   | 0.37    | 0.866   | 0.352        |

Within the grammar school sample, the minority of pupils who were entitled to free school meals and those whose fathers were in manual work or unemployed were significantly less confident about their academic success than those not entitled to free meals or whose fathers were in non-manual occupations (Success scale). No significant differences were found between these grammar school groups on any of the other six ACER scales (See Tables 3.3 and 3.4).

Within the sample of pupils from secondary high schools, no significant differences between pupils who were and were not entitled to free school meals were found in their attitudes to school on any of the seven ACER scales (Table 3.5). However, Table 3.6 shows that secondary high school pupils whose fathers were in non-manual occupations tended to believe that they had more prestige within the school (Status scale) than those whose fathers were in manual occupations or unemployed. They were, for example, more likely to agree that, "People look up to me". This scale did not differentiate pupils by social background in grammar schools nor in the Northern Ireland sample as a whole. No other significant attitudinal differences that could be related to either of the social background scales used here were found among the secondary school pupils, although on the Success scale, there was a trend in the same direction as in the grammar schools and in the whole sample, which just failed to reach the usual least stringent level of statistical significance used in educational research (<0.05).

Table 3.5: Attitudes to School of Northern Ireland Year 12 Pupils in Secondary High Schools by entitlement to free school meals

| Scale                  | Mean |         | SD   |         | F Ratio | Significance |
|------------------------|------|---------|------|---------|---------|--------------|
|                        | FSM  | Not FSM | FSM  | Not FSM |         |              |
| <i>General Scales</i>  |      |         |      |         |         |              |
| General satisfaction   | 2.66 | 2.65    | 0.54 | 0.58    | 0.145   | 0.703        |
| Negative affect        | 1.97 | 1.98    | 0.51 | 0.52    | 0.186   | 0.667        |
| <i>Specific Scales</i> |      |         |      |         |         |              |
| Teachers               | 2.99 | 2.95    | 0.48 | 0.50    | 1.300   | 0.254        |
| Relevance of schooling | 3.18 | 3.14    | 0.45 | 0.45    | 2.086   | 0.149        |
| Confidence of Success  | 2.92 | 2.94    | 0.44 | 0.45    | 0.407   | 0.524        |
| Status of individual   | 2.63 | 2.64    | 0.54 | 0.49    | 0.055   | 0.815        |
| Social Integration     | 3.06 | 3.03    | 0.46 | 0.42    | 0.751   | 0.386        |

Table 3.6: Attitudes to School of Northern Ireland Year 12 Pupils in Secondary High Schools by employment status of father

| Scale                  | Mean   |         | SD     |         | F Ratio | Significance |
|------------------------|--------|---------|--------|---------|---------|--------------|
|                        | Manual | Non-Man | Manual | Non-Man |         |              |
| <i>General Scales</i>  |        |         |        |         |         |              |
| General satisfaction   | 2.65   | 2.70    | 0.56   | 0.57    | 1.506   | 0.220        |
| Negative affect        | 1.96   | 1.95    | 0.50   | 0.52    | 0.206   | 0.650        |
| <i>Specific Scales</i> |        |         |        |         |         |              |
| Teachers               | 2.97   | 2.99    | 0.47   | 0.52    | 0.552   | 0.458        |
| Relevance of schooling | 3.14   | 3.19    | 0.45   | 0.45    | 2.531   | 0.112        |
| Confidence of Success  | 2.93   | 2.98    | 0.43   | 0.47    | 3.722   | 0.054        |
| Status of individual   | 2.61   | 2.69    | 0.51   | 0.49    | 5.796   | 0.016 *      |
| Social Integration     | 3.04   | 3.04    | 0.42   | 0.44    | 0.045   | 0.833        |

### 3.5.3: A Comparison with Findings from Scotland

A very different pattern of findings emerged, however, when the Scottish attitudinal data were analysed by the same two SES variables as were used for the Northern Ireland data, as in Tables 3.7 and 3.8. All six Scottish schools in the survey were comprehensives although,

because of differences in their catchment areas, there was at least as much variation among their social profiles

Table 3.7: Attitudes to School of Scottish pupils in their final compulsory year by entitlement to free school meals

| Scale                  | Mean |         | SD   |         | F Ratio | Significance |
|------------------------|------|---------|------|---------|---------|--------------|
|                        | FSM  | Not FSM | FSM  | Not FSM |         |              |
| <i>General Scales</i>  |      |         |      |         |         |              |
| General satisfaction   | 2.34 | 2.46    | 0.55 | 0.60    | 4.225   | 0.040 *      |
| Negative affect        | 2.14 | 1.99    | 0.57 | 0.50    | 8.304   | 0.004 **     |
| <i>Specific Scales</i> |      |         |      |         |         |              |
| Teachers               | 2.58 | 2.70    | 0.56 | 0.56    | 4.946   | 0.026 *      |
| Relevance of schooling | 2.99 | 3.09    | 0.50 | 0.50    | 3.965   | 0.047 *      |
| Confidence of Success  | 2.79 | 2.94    | 0.46 | 0.50    | 9.028   | 0.003 **     |
| Status of individual   | 2.41 | 2.51    | 0.51 | 0.49    | 3.801   | 0.052        |
| Social Integration     | 2.85 | 2.95    | .045 | 0.45    | 4.811   | 0.029 *      |

as among the grammar and secondary schools in the Northern Ireland Area Study, despite the latter having selective post-primary education.

On all seven ACER scales, Scottish pupils who were entitled to free school meals had less favourable perceptions of their schools than those who were not so entitled (Table 3.7). On the Negative Effect and Success scales the likelihood was less than one in 500 that the differences obtained were due to chance ( $p < .005$ ). Even more striking differences emerged between the scores of the Scottish children whose fathers were in non-manual occupations and those whose fathers were in manual occupations or out of work (Table 3.8). In this set of comparisons the differences on all seven scales were significant at least at the 0.005 level and on five of the scales the likelihood of a chance difference was less than one in 1000 ( $p < .001$ ). The Scottish pupils, whose fathers were in less prestigious jobs, or none, were not only less confident than the children of fathers in non-manual occupations that they could do well at school, as was the case in Northern Ireland. They felt themselves to be less valued as people. They also found the teachers less helpful, the curriculum less well geared to their needs and

the atmosphere less friendly. These latter trends were in the opposite direction to the findings in Northern Ireland.

Table 3.8: *Attitudes to School of Scottish pupils in their final compulsory year by employment status of father*

| Scale                  | Mean   |         | SD     |         | F Ratio | Significance            |
|------------------------|--------|---------|--------|---------|---------|-------------------------|
|                        | Manual | Non-Man | Manual | Non-Man |         |                         |
| <i>General Scales</i>  |        |         |        |         |         |                         |
| General satisfaction   | 2.31   | 2.56    | 0.58   | 0.57    | 33.883  | 0.000 *** <sup>29</sup> |
| Negative affect        | 2.07   | 1.94    | 0.52   | 0.48    | 10.723  | 0.001 **                |
| <i>Specific Scales</i> |        |         |        |         |         |                         |
| Teachers               | 2.57   | 2.78    | 0.56   | 0.55    | 23.852  | 0.000 ***               |
| Relevance of schooling | 2.97   | 3.17    | 0.55   | 0.46    | 28.185  | 0.000 ***               |
| Confidence of Success  | 2.77   | 3.04    | 0.53   | 0.45    | 50.048  | 0.000 ***               |
| Status of individual   | 2.39   | 2.60    | 0.46   | 0.49    | 33.261  | 0.000 ***               |
| Social Integration     | 2.89   | 2.99    | 0.43   | 0.43    | 9.618   | 0.002 **                |

It cannot but be noticed that even where the differences between the groups of pupils were statistically significant, they were still quite small, especially in Northern Ireland. There are at least two reasons for this. One is that there was a fairly high degree of consensus among the pupils regarding their schools, as can be seen in the quite small standard deviations for the scales. For the great majority of items, between 50% and 70% of the pupils ticked the same response (e.g. 'mostly true'). Amid so much general agreement, even quite small differences of opinion between groups will show up. In addition, the samples of pupils were substantially large, increasing confidence in the accuracy of the means obtained (i.e. reducing standard errors).

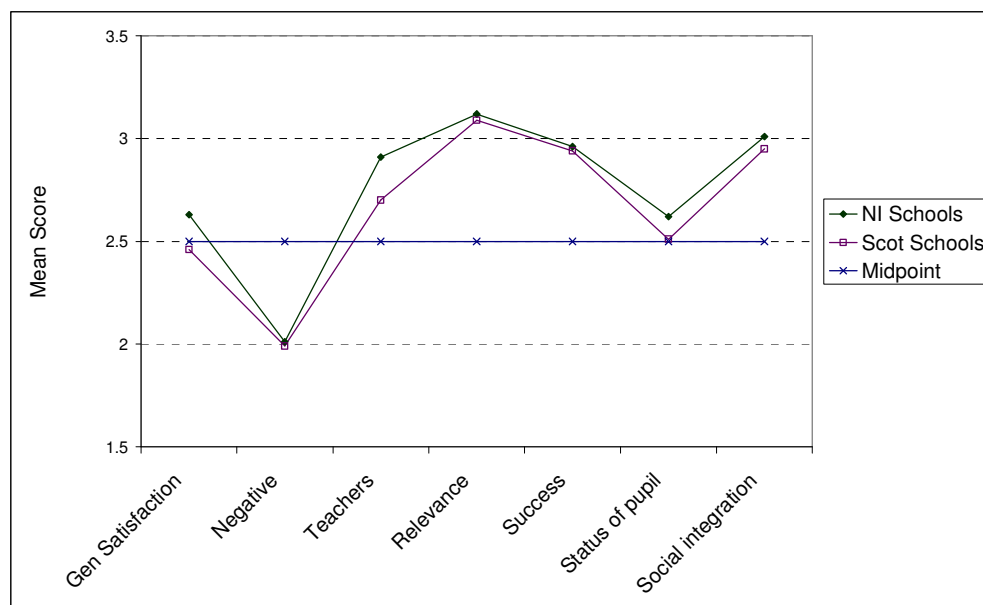
The differences between the Northern Ireland and the Scottish patterns of attitudes can also be seen by comparing diagrammatically the mean ACER scores of pupils who were and were not entitled to free school meals in the two parts of the UK. It will be recalled that Gallagher and

<sup>29</sup> Significance levels are cited correct to three places of decimals.

McKeown (2000b) found that overall the Northern Ireland pupils in the Area study expressed rather more positive attitudes towards their schools than the Scottish pupils, although the differences were not large. A comparison restricted to pupils not entitled to free meals, as in Chart 3.1, though including data from all 25 Main Study schools and not just those in the Area Study, also showed relatively small differences, other than on the Teacher scale, although on all seven scales the Northern Ireland attitudes were more favourable to the school.

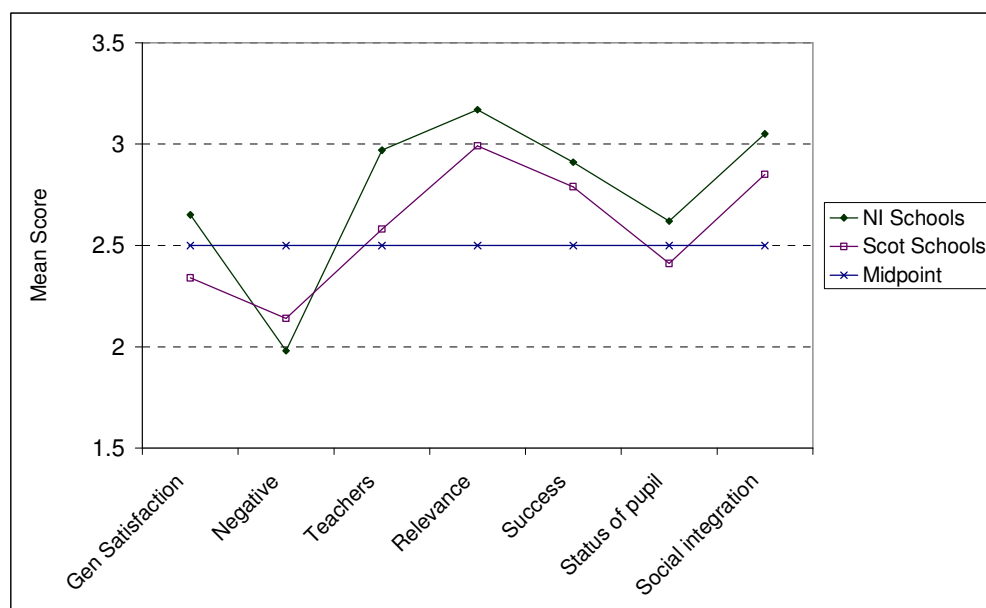
A comparison of the ACER scale scores of pupils entitled to free meals, as in Chart 3.2, shows much larger differences than for the non-FSM pupils, with ‘clear water’ between the Northern Ireland and Scottish mean scores on all seven scales; again, the arithmetical difference was largest for the Teacher scale. In Northern Ireland both the FSM and the non-FSM pupils scored, on

Chart 3.1: Attitudes of Northern Ireland and Scottish Pupils NOT Entitled to Free Meals



average, above the mid-point on all seven scales, apart from the Negative Affect scale, where their averages were comfortably below. The Scottish FSM pupils, however, had an average scores below the mid-point on both the General Satisfaction (2.34) and the Status (2.41) scales. More of them than in the Northern Ireland sample may have been experiencing lower self-esteem as well as a measure of alienation from school.

Chart 3.2: Attitudes of Northern Ireland and Scottish Pupils who were Entitled to Free Meals



To sum up this section, this secondary analysis of data from the recent Selection Project (Gallagher and Smith, 2000) suggests that the stereotype of disadvantaged pupils being more negatively disposed towards their schooling and education does not reflect inevitable reality. The more usual trends may have been found in the Scottish data but in Northern Ireland the efforts reported in the interviews by principals and teachers in secondary high schools to make their schools caring and supportive, to ‘pick up the pieces’ and raise the sights of pupils who may have arrived with a sense of failure would seem to have been appreciated by their pupils; the majority of these pupils would have come from less advantaged backgrounds than most grammar school entrants. Only on two scales were there any signs of the less socially advantaged pupils in Northern Ireland having more negative attitudes. In secondary high schools, pupils whose fathers were in less prestigious occupations (or none) themselves scored lower on the Status scale, a trend not found in the grammar schools. In the sample as a whole and in the grammar sector, pupils entitled to free meals and those from working-class backgrounds or with unemployed fathers had less confidence than other pupils in their ability to succeed academically. Such attitudes proved to be predictive. These pupils were, on average to perform less well in their GCSE examinations later in the year, just as they had already been markedly less successful in their Transfer Tests some six years previously (Shuttleworth and Daly, 2000). Whether such attitudes are an expression of ‘learned helplessness’ or just a sense of realism is a question beyond the scope of this review. Even the less advantaged groups in these Northern Ireland comparisons had, however, scores on the ‘favourable’ side of the mid-point on all the scales. On the only other scale in which significant differences were found in this secondary analysis of the Northern Ireland data, the

Teacher scale, the less socially advantaged pupils actually appeared at first to have more favourable attitudes (Tables 3.1 and 3.2) when scores from the whole sample were analysed, although the differences were no longer significant when the data from grammar and secondary schools were treated separately; it would seem this was essentially a difference between the two types of school.

There are, however, two further considerations. On all seven scales, except Success in grammar schools, a one-way analysis of variance showed significant (and often very highly significant) differences among the scores in the 17 secondary high and among the scores in the 8 grammar schools of the Main Study, as well as among the scores in the 6 Scottish schools. The extent to which differences within the school types reflected the policies and efforts of the school staff as opposed to, say, parental or neighbourhood attitudes towards schooling is another question beyond the scope of this review. The second consideration is that even the Main Study included only 25 schools, just over a tenth of the post-primary schools in Northern Ireland. It is not certain that the same findings would emerge from a study of all Northern Ireland post-primary schools.

### **3.6: RESEARCH ACROSS THE YEARS OF COMPULSORY SECONDARY EDUCATION**

#### **3.6.1: CATER Initiatives affecting the Post-Primary Sector**

An Easter School for GCSE candidates attending West Belfast post-primary schools, which received CATER funding in 2000 and 2001, its third and fourth years, bore several signs of success. Numbers had risen each year, from 35 to 75 to 152 to 276. At one point there was a waiting list for the 2001 school but the creation of an extra class meant that everyone could be accommodated. The evaluator found the students pleased with their four-day course, for which a fee of £20 was charged. They perceived it as “good use of their time” and attended well. Although they showed no obvious panic at the prospect of their coming exams, some indicated that good GCSE results were important to them for admission to sixth form and eventually to better jobs.

However, there appeared to be some shift in the purpose of the Easter School. The original aim had been to raise likely GCSE ‘D’ grade students who were capable of a higher grade to ‘C’ grade, which would have been to the benefit of both themselves and their schools. If the true aim was to help moderately able students and especially the less unmotivated ones, that would have meant targeting three secondary schools in particular. Gallagher does not name



these schools but, judging from, amongst other things, the analysis of low-achieving schools in Kilpatrick *et al.* (1997) it would seem that at least two of these three schools would be boys-only secondary schools. Most of those who have attended the Easter Schools are, however, young women and in 2001 a majority of participants were from grammar schools. The subjects offered in 2001 “included intermediate and higher maths and a series of modern languages including French, Spanish and Irish”, although there had been some requests for a wider range of courses. The subjects named are, it will be noticed, among those that tend to be taken at GCSE level by more able students. Although the Easter School may well have helped its students to improve their grades, the report gives a slight sense of ‘preaching to the converted’. The CATER team acknowledged to the evaluator that attracting the hardest-to-motivate pupils was a constant problem for them. The obvious conclusion to be drawn is that student motivation is a variable commodity in West Belfast. Although Gallagher did not think that it would require an extraordinary level of motivation to attend the course, he found participants to be well enough motivated and with a common-sense approach to the use of their time. It is not known how serious a deterrent the £20 fee might be for young people who did not enrol.

A vacation course for intending GCSE candidates was also organised, in the Greater Shankill area in the summer of 2000. This went well for two weeks but ran into difficulties in its third week because of political unrest in the area. A detailed report on the school indicated that the main perceived benefits were that it helped to focus the young people’s study plans “and helped to build positive links between the young people and community organisations”. The local schools were said to be generally enthusiastic about the innovation. So again there was evidence of young people in disadvantaged areas (although not necessarily the most disadvantaged young people of all) seeking to go well beyond their school’s minimum demands. In both the Shankill and the West Belfast vacation schools for GCSE students, there was evidence that these out-of-term educational experiences in a more informal atmosphere could create a different kind of relationship between teachers and students.

Mention has already been made of homework clubs and other after-school activities supported by CATER, some of which were for post-primary rather than primary school pupils.

### **3.6.2: Secondary School Pupils in the Scoping Study for ‘Making Belfast Work’**

#### *Dangers of academic failure in disadvantaged areas of Belfast*

In their ‘*Scoping*’ study for Making Belfast Work Kilpatrick and her colleagues (1997) maintained that, while some desirable facilities might be altogether missing from an area, there was a statutory obligation to provide schooling and that, for this, the possible gaps in provision were less likely to be in physical existence than in effectiveness. They examined the results at 16+ of 29 secondary high schools in Greater Belfast as reported in the School Performance Tables for 1995-96, concentrating on the lowest-performing 16 schools, in none of which more than 15% of the Year 12 pupils had been awarded five GCSE at grades A-C. Indeed, in three of these schools not a single pupil had gained five GCSEs at grades A-C and in six of them at least 20% (and in one as many as 38%) had obtained no GCSEs, not even at grade G.

Correlational evidence indicated that the percentage awarded five or more ‘good’<sup>30</sup> GCSEs and the percentage obtaining no GCSEs might be measuring different aspects of a school’s functioning. The authors went on to suggest that obtaining zero GCSEs might be considered an ‘indicator of disengagement from educational processes’ (in other words essentially an affective rather than a cognitive variable) since very few pupils are incapable of achieving at least one GCSE at G level.

For the 16 low-achieving schools, insignificant correlations were found between the two GCSE-based criteria and the percentages of pupils entitled to free school meals, leading Kilpatrick and her colleagues to deduce that high levels of social need, as measured by FSM entitlement, “do not explain low levels of academic performance for Belfast schools” but indicate that other factors are at work. While few educationists would deny the existence of other factors, the lack of *any* significant relationship between FSM entitlement and GCSE performance is contrary to usual research findings (e.g. Gallagher, 2001, pp 13-18<sup>31</sup>). Some secondary analyses on the 1995-96 data for secondary high schools in Greater Belfast showed that while the correlations of FSM entitlement with the percentages gaining at least five ‘good’ GCSEs and zero GCSEs were indeed insignificant for the 16 lowest achieving 16 schools, they were significant when all 29 Greater Belfast schools in the study were included

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<sup>30</sup> i.e. grades A to C or, more recently, A\*-C.

<sup>31</sup> Although Gallagher (2001) stresses that the relationship is only a general one and that at any level of FSM entitlement there is variation in schools’ performance.

(respectively -0.530\*\* and 0.468\*)<sup>32</sup> and for all the controlled schools (-0.632\* and 0.713\*\*). Among the maintained secondary schools, FSM entitlement correlated significantly with the percentages awarded five GCSEs at A-C (-0.768\*\*) although not with the percentages gaining no GCSEs (0.302). None of the 13 higher achieving schools had an FSM entitlement as high as the mean of the 16 lower achieving schools (55.2%). It can also be argued that correlations based on only 16 cases are likely to be unstable while another complicating factor is the greater number of pupils in maintained than controlled secondary schools entitled to free meals; the averages in the present study were 55.8% and 39.9% respectively ( $p=0.001$ ). The relationship between FSME-based indices of social need and school performance, (or pupil disengagement from education, if that is what leaving school with no GCSEs really signals) would not seem to be a simple linear one.

Whatever their cause, the effects of educational failure at 16 on young people in disadvantaged areas, as revealed in the focus groups of the 'Scoping' study were sometimes only too apparent to the research team although they could take different forms. Some young people are described as having come to terms with their lack of success and prepared to make the best of their lives, accepting that this may mean a low-paid job without prospects or else a training scheme place rather than anything more prestigious. Other young people had become alienated, sometimes expressing hurt and anger against the schools and other agencies which they felt had damaged them. While the authors are careful not to draw unjustified causal lines, in their mapping studies they observed a link between the areas round schools with high levels of zero GCSEs and the number of probation orders and other court disposals. They also found limited evidence in the focus groups that teachers in schools where few leavers had failed to gain at least some qualifications were "rather more respectful to their pupils" than some elsewhere.

### ***Expressed Educational Needs of Pupils aged 12-15 in Disadvantaged Areas of Belfast***

In their ratings of the adequacy of 17 items in their localities as part of the 'Scoping' study (Kilpatrick *et al.*, 1997), 340 pupils aged 12-15 from disadvantaged areas of Belfast gave six of the top seven places to the three items on their school and to the three on the house where they lived (the item on good doctors being rated sixth equal). These seven mean ratings were in the narrow range of 2.0 to 2.4. Joint first was the item, 'I am getting a good education', with a mean rating only slightly higher (i.e. indicating rather more criticism) than that from

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<sup>32</sup> The convention has been followed of denoting correlations significant at the 0.05 level by a single asterisk (\*) and ones significant at the 0.01 level by a double asterisk (\*\*).l

primary pupils (2.0 vs 1.7). The post-primary pupils were, however, in general more critical of most of their local facilities than were the younger schoolchildren. These ratings would appear to suggest still quite positive attitudes to education persisting into the secondary school.

The chief complaints expressed by 12-15 year olds on this checklist mostly concerned a lack of leisure opportunities. The majority denied there were plenty of things to do (4.0) or that there were enough parks (3.6) so that they often had to go outside their area (3.7). Like respondents in the other age brackets, they also did not think there were enough places to which children in trouble could go (3.7). The three types of local services most used by the 12-15 age group were all oriented to sport and leisure: youth clubs (54%), sports teams (42%) and sports training (41%).

## **CHAPTER 4: ATTITUDES REGARDING THE POST-COMPULSORY YEARS**

### **4.1: INTRODUCTION**

After this introduction, the chapter will consider (in 4.2) research on the extent to which remaining in full-time education beyond the minimum leaving age – an important gateway to high status occupations – is related to home circumstances, attitudes to education and local opportunities for employment. The Northern Ireland evidence will be set in a context of findings from Great Britain and a few from the USA. The next part (4.3) will look at the opposite end of the spectrum, at some of the most marginalized young people in the age group whose post-compulsory lives are likely to have got off to a bad start, namely, those not in education, work or training in the first two post-compulsory years. When aged 16-18 years, these young people are sometimes referred to, following research in South Wales, as being in ‘Status 0’.<sup>33</sup> Matters to be examined here will include the extent to which those in Status 0 in Northern Ireland come from disadvantaged backgrounds, their attitudes to schooling and training and their future ambitions. Evidence from the MBW ‘Scoping’ study on the 16-24 age group will then be summarised (4.4). Many of the informants here, unlike those in Status 0, were on training schemes. The chapter will end with a quick look at some American research on early leaving (4.5) and a very brief consideration of a few of the issues raised in this chapter.

### *4.2: STAYING ON IN POST-COMPULSORY EDUCATION IN GB AND NI*

#### *4.2.1: Motivation for Staying or Leaving*

Once young people reach the minimum school leaving age, their continuation in full-time education is sometimes regarded as an, admittedly fairly weak, indication of favourable attitudes to education. Since young people in full-time post-compulsory education have relinquished immediate financial rewards in the form of either wages or training scheme

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<sup>33</sup> The name is a consequence of UK government policy since the late 1980s, regardless of the party in power, to encourage that young people, quite forcibly if necessary, into becoming members of a, preferably well-trained, workforce. While modest allowances are given to those on recognised training programmes, with few exceptions (such as young mothers and the seriously disabled) those under 18 are ineligible for state benefits. The existence of those not in education, training or employment and not members of one of these exceptional groups is scarcely recognised for some official purposes. They are in obvious danger of marginalisation from society and their strategies for survival are a matter of concern and some curiosity.

allowances, it can, however, probably be safely assumed that either they or their parents (or both) regard being in full-time education as worthwhile or at least having certain advantages in comparison with available alternatives. Although some writers with a background in economics (for example Micklewright, 1989; Whifield & Wilson, 1991; Andrews & Bradley, 1997) have written as if such choices were always strictly rational, with staying-on often described as 'investment in human capital', reasons for such choices can be social or even frivolous as well as academic or economic. School effects have also sometimes been demonstrated (e.g. by Fergusson & Unwin, 1996) in which pupils similar in their gender, social backgrounds and qualifications are more likely to remain in full-time education if they had studied at some schools than in others.

Gordon (1981) produced a useful concept of 'push and pull' factors determining choices at age 16. For those leaving school the former factors would be the negative attitudes to school or to further study that lead some young people to seek an escape to an alternative way of life, while by the latter are meant the attractions of earning a wage or of achieving a more adult status which may 'pull' young people out of school towards employment, even if they had found post-primary schooling a not uncongenial experience.

Unfortunately for this review, only a few studies seem to have considered, and not as a main focus, the extent to which the desire for a wage was prompted by serious financial needs in the family rather than the young person's desire for independence. This is a matter that needs more careful investigation than simply including something like 'need the money' in questionnaire checklist, as is sometimes the case. It has been argued that in the UK today very few families are so poor that they could not keep their children in education if they and the young people are determined enough and that it is a case of family priorities. At one extreme is the traditional stereotype of the Scottish lad o' parts subsisting when at university on a bag of oatmeal from the family croft. At the other is the stereotype of a modern young person whose life is almost entirely focused on shopping for the latest clothing with the 'right' labels and on their evening entertainment, both of which can be expensive interests.

Also unfortunately for the review, while a number of studies both in Great Britain and Northern Ireland, have shown significant statistical associations between early leaving and both lower SES backgrounds and less favourable attitudes to education (especially views on the worthwhileness of staying on in education), it is rarer to find detailed analyses of such attitudes by social background. For the purposes of the review, most of the publications reviewed in this section provide only partial evidence.

#### *4.2.2: Some Evidence from Great Britain*

Various research studies from ‘across the water’ have found – unsurprisingly – that pupils who leave full-time education or are planning to do so at the earliest opportunity have, on average, less favourable attitudes to their schooling than those who remain and are less committed to improving their qualifications. They may, however, be more motivated by ‘pull’ than by ‘push’ factors. In both the studies of Kysel *et al.* (1992) and of Maychell and Evans (1998) the most frequent type of reason given for leaving at the minimum age was a desire for the independence of a job and a wage packet, although the second most frequent type of reason, expressed by just over a quarter of the early leavers, was a clear dislike of school. In both studies leaving school was associated with lower social class, although the distinction was between middle and working class, rather than between disadvantaged and other people and neither publication reports the relationship between social class and individual reasons for staying or leaving.<sup>34</sup> Some very negative attitudes to school were also expressed by recent leavers in the Northern Ireland ‘Scoping’ study (Kilpatrick *et al.*, 1997). It would be wrong, however, imply that all early leavers have deeply hostile feelings towards school: Cheng (1995), for example, reported that only 15% of early leavers in a Youth Cohort Survey in England, though admittedly as compared with 3% of the ‘stayers’, would go so far as to agree with the statement, ‘school is a waste of time’. In an NFER survey 69% even of the early leavers (but as compared with 82% of the stayers) thought their schooling had been useful preparation for a job and 36% of the leavers (as compared with only 52% of the stayers) agreed that they mostly enjoyed being at school (Maychell and Evans, 1998).

The main reason given in most surveys for remaining in education is the instrumental one of gaining qualifications that will lead towards the chosen of career or better job prospects generally (e.g. Kysel *et al.*, 1992; Paterson & Raffe, 1995). In the latter paper, however, it was also observed that in four Scottish Young People’s Surveys (SYPS) between 1985 and 1991 increasing proportions of ‘stayers’ were offering intrinsically educational reasons for remaining in education, such as enjoyment of particular subjects. All these could be called as ‘pull’ factors exerted by the school but there may also be ‘push’ factors from outside if the likely alternatives to remaining in education are undesirable, e.g. unemployment or limited training programme options. Furlong (1987),<sup>35</sup> for example, saw some young people staying on in education to maintain their self images, since in most (though not all) communities it is

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<sup>34</sup> When preparing a review such as this one frequently hankers to be able to do a secondary analysis.

<sup>35</sup> Cited in Raffe & Willms (1989)

more prestigious to be a student at school than unemployed. Fergusson and Unwin (1996) concluded that in certain parts of Derbyshire some less able pupils were staying on by default while the ones leaving school for employment or the more prestigious training schemes tended to be of average ability or rather better. Hagel and Shaw (1996) concluded from their large-scale survey in six urban areas that

“It should not be assumed, however, that staying on was necessarily a positive choice; it was simply the best of the options open to them. It may only delay the point when they have to face the depressed employment market and in many cases it was leading to money and debt problems.”

In their review of participation trends between 1985 and 1991, Paterson and Raffe (1995) found that the relationship between young people staying on and their parents' educational levels remained significant but was weakening over the four surveys which they analysed; the greatest increase in staying on was found in those whose parents both left at the minimum age. A similar, though statistically non-significant, trend over time was found in relation to the father's occupation. Moreover, when the young people were grouped by their attainments at age 16, the rise in staying on was steeper among those with no 'good' O-grades than in any of the other groups. Paterson and Raffe saw these trends as signalling

“a relative democratisation of education and a greater acceptance that continued learning is appropriate for all young people and not only for the academically able or the socially advantaged.”

They added, however, that such processes had still a long way to go in the United Kingdom. A parallel contemporaneous trend can be seen in some of the literature from the USA in which the greatest decrease in dropping out rates before high school graduation in the late 1980s was seen in black males, whose completion rates previously lagged very far behind most other demographic groups (Rumberger, 1987; Cairns, Cairns and Neckerman, 1989). In a more recent study of pupils in their final compulsory year in 29 schools in different parts of England, Foskett and Hesketh (1997) found less difference between middle-class and working-class pupils in the percentages intending to continue in full-time education after 16 (85% vs 72%) than in the percentages opting for an academic course (60% vs 36%).

One study which distinguished young school leavers' perceptions that their *families* needed their wages from a personal desire for spending money is Essen and Wedge's (1982) analysis



of data from disadvantaged and other members of the National Child Development Cohort. The reason for leaving which showed largest proportional difference in endorsement from disadvantaged young people and the total sample was *Family need money*. This was a reason given by 44.5% of those disadvantaged at both age 11 and 16 (the most extreme category) as compared with 11.6% of the total sample, almost a fourfold difference. The two other main reasons for wanting to leave were also statistically significant ( $p < 0.01$ )<sup>36</sup> but proportionately less: *Don't like school* (32.8% vs 18.9%) and *Want independence* (60.5% vs 47.1%). Even here, however, it is notable that more than half the leavers who had lived in disadvantaged circumstances for many years did *not* give their family's need for their financial contribution as a reason.

Having summarised some of the general issues raised in the research on school leaving and its relationship to social background factors and attitudes to education, let us look at some Northern Ireland research. Three relevant studies were located, one from the 1990s, one from the 1980s and one from the 1970s. The last mentioned is earlier than most of the other research examined in detail in this review but is interesting for its distinction between financial necessity and a desire to have cash in hand as motives for leaving school at the first opportunity.

#### *4.2.3: Staying on and Family Backgrounds in the 1990s: The NIERC Findings*

A literature review with some secondary analysis of existing data sets, which was commissioned from the Northern Ireland Economic Research Centre (NIERC) and published in 1997, was largely based on a major research project which studied youth unemployment in Northern Ireland in the context of a wider age cohort (Armstrong *et al.*, 1997; Armstrong, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c).

The NIERC (1997) report found that continuing participation in full-time education in Northern Ireland was more likely if parents were employed, and especially if they were in non-manual occupations. The paper appreciated that this could be for economic reasons (i.e. that there is less pressure on such young people to begin to contribute to the household income) as well as for attitudinal reasons (e.g. parents with post-compulsory education themselves are more likely than those without it to encourage their offspring to stay on in

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<sup>36</sup> The statistical calculations would, of course, have compared the disadvantaged young people with the *other* teenagers, not with the whole sample of which they were members.

education). The percentages remaining in full-time education in a sample of secondary (i.e. non-grammar) school pupils which reached the minimum leaving age in 1993<sup>37</sup> ranged from 63.7% those whose fathers were in non-manual occupations and 64.2% for those both of whose parents were working full-time to 50.4% of those whose fathers were unemployed and 49.7% of those whose mothers were unemployed or economically inactive. This kind of contrast between 'work rich' and 'work poor' households will be referred to in some other studies to be reviewed in this section. Pupils entitled to free school meals are usually living in 'work poor' homes although the correspondence between the two sets of measures is not absolute.

Having found some qualitative evidence in the course of the review that there were some young people in Northern Ireland intending to leave full-time education mainly in order to secure the £30 a week which they would then get if they participated in vocational training programmes, NIERC (1997) suggested that more financial support might be needed to encourage disadvantaged young people to remain in education.

#### *4.2.4: Staying on and Family Backgrounds: the PPRU Cohort Study of the 1980s*

A Northern Ireland cohort some nine years older than that of the 'Status 0' surveys, i.e. in their final year of compulsory education in 1983-84, was followed up by the Policy, Planning and Research Unit (PPRU) of the former NI Department of Finance and Personnel (PPRU, 1986). As in the NIERC (1997) surveys, the pupils who returned to full-time education at 16+ were, on average, more advantaged than any other group on a number of measures. Those on the government's Youth Training Programme (YTP) or who were unemployed were markedly more disadvantaged on several background variables than the young people in full-time employment. Just over four-fifths (81%) of the young people in full-time education lived in owner-occupied homes, as compared with three-fifths (60%) of those in full-time work and just over two-fifths of those on YTP schemes or unemployed (43% and 41%) respectively.<sup>38</sup>

The 'work-rich/ work-poor' pattern of the NIERC (1997) surveys is seen again. Nearly three-quarters (74%) of the fathers of those in full-time education were employed, as compared with just over two-thirds (68%) of the fathers of young full-time workers and not much more than half the fathers whose children were on YTP schemes (57%) or unemployed (53%).

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<sup>37</sup> The database is from the 'Status 0' survey, see below.

<sup>38</sup> Nearly all families not in owner-occupied homes (which included those still on a mortgage) were in public housing rented from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

Paternal unemployment rates were about two and a half times as high among those whose children were on YTP schemes or unemployed as among the fathers of those continuing in full-time education (24% and 26% versus 10%).<sup>39</sup> Nearly half the mothers (46%) were described as full-time housewives but young people in full-time education were the most likely to have mothers working either full- or part-time and the unemployed teenagers were the least likely (55% versus 36%).

As for the nature of the parental occupations, the fathers of those in full-time education were twice as likely as the fathers of the young people in employment and nearly three times as likely as those whose children were on YTP schemes or unemployed to be in the Registrar General's (RG) categories I or II (professional or intermediate occupations). The percentages were respectively 44%, 22%, 16% and 15%. Less than half as many of the fathers whose children remained in education than of any other group were in the RG categories IV or V for semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers, (11% versus 22%-28%). As for the mothers in employment, it was only among those whose children were still in full-time education that the percentage whose own jobs were in the RG categories I or II reached double figures (28%).

The educational levels of parents and older siblings showed similar trends. More than half of both the fathers and mothers (53% and 57%) of those in full-time education had some educational qualifications. Although by today's standards a sample in which nearly half lacked any educational qualifications would appear disadvantaged, they were much better qualified than the parents of the other groups. The young people in YTP or who were unemployed came from families where just under a third of the fathers (32% and 31% respectively) and only about a quarter of the mothers (25% and 27%) held any such qualifications. Of the small proportion of the sample whose parents had degrees or professional qualifications, by far the highest proportion were still in full-time education. The inter-group pattern was being repeated in the young people's own generation, although by the mid-1980s the great majority of school leavers had qualifications. Only 8% of the older siblings of the sample members still in education lacked any educational qualifications as compared with 34% of the older siblings of those who were unemployed. Among the sample members themselves, 89% of those in full-time education had at least one O-level pass as compared with less than half of the other groups – and the gap would be expected to widen as those in full-time education sat further examinations.

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<sup>39</sup> Between 15% and 21% of the fathers in the different groups were described as 'other'; this term usually includes those whose fathers are deceased or whose occupations are unknown.

The interview evidence reported in PPRU (1986) relates to the young people's situations at the start of their second post-compulsory year and is therefore not about the decision to stay or leave at 16.<sup>40</sup> Some of the points made, however, have a bearing on the wider themes of the review. Although the majority (62%) of the sample felt there were financial difficulties associated with staying on in education, the researchers did not feel that the decision to stay or leave was closely related to financial difficulties. There was not a great deal of difference in the percentages of leavers and stayers (67% vs 60%) who thought there would be financial difficulties for the family if they remained in full-time education.<sup>41</sup>

This study produced reasonably positive evaluations of most elements of the YTP schemes by trainees, most of whom were, as has been shown, if not actually 'disadvantaged' were of below average SES status. Most trainees (81%) would recommend their present or most recent scheme to other young people. Though there were differences in the ratings of the various schemes, in general work experience and work-related training were more highly rated than the elements of further general education. Despite most young people on YTP being dissatisfied with the training allowance, in reply to another question, almost three-quarters said they had coped 'well' or 'very well' on it and only 22% that they had coped 'badly' or 'very badly' financially when on YTP.

#### *4.2.5: A Large-Scale NICER Study just before the Raising of the School-Leaving Age*

During the last school year before the raising of the minimum leaving age to 16 years (1971-72), Bill, Trew and Wilson (1974) carried out a major survey among over 3000 of the final cohort entitled to leave school at fifteen, which included interviews with nearly 300 of their parents. Although less than 3% of the grammar school pupils left full-time education at 15, among those in secondary intermediate schools (as secondary high schools were known in these days), 56% of the boys and 44% of the girls did so. Some of the boys would probably have left in order to embark on traditional apprenticeships. The main reasons given in a questionnaire by pupils who intended to leave at the end of the year were to earn money (90%) and because of the greater maturity enjoyed at work (c67%), though "over half" recorded their dislike of school as a factor. Since among the parents who regarded 15 years as the most appropriate leaving age, the pointlessness of further schooling for pupils who were not interested was a far more frequently mentioned reason than economic necessity

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<sup>40</sup> That may well have been a topic in an earlier and less accessible report.

<sup>41</sup> In the light of Essen & Wedge's (1982, p94) findings, a more sensitive test might have been to examine the answers of the most disadvantaged members of the sample.

(c90% vs c22%), it seems reasonable to regard both intended and actual leaving in this report as generally associated with a low valuing of education. The association would not be found in every pupil and family, of course, but was there in the sample as a whole.

Several links were found in this research between early leaving from secondary intermediate schools and less advantaged home circumstances.<sup>42</sup> Exactly half (50%) of the fathers of the early leavers had only a semi-skilled or an unskilled job as compared with 29% of those who stayed on in their secondary schools and 37% of those who transferred to a further education college. Incomes were lower in the leavers' families than in the other groups and the interviewers observed fewer and poorer quality household appliances and furnishings. More of the leavers' homes were rated as untidy, without reference to material possessions. The leavers' homes had also less of what might be called 'cultural capital'. There were fewer books and parents were less likely to enjoy reading. Fewer of the early leavers' parents had stayed at school beyond their fourteenth birthday, which was the minimum leaving age in Northern Ireland until 1957; this difference was more marked among the mothers than the fathers. These home-based factors, and also the parents' wishes on the subject, were all found in regression analyses to have independent effects in helping to predict whether a pupil stayed in education or left at 15.

Bill, Trew and Wilson (1974) were careful to point out that a typical early leaver would not have suffered seriously from all the disadvantages in the previous paragraph although his or her home would be less prosperous and less stimulating than that of the typical 'stayer'. Socio-economically disadvantaged pupils would, however, tend to be among those who were neither encouraged by their parents nor themselves keen to stay on at school long enough to gain any academic qualifications. For many of these youngsters, being an early leaver would seriously reduce their prospects of upward mobility out of their disadvantaged circumstances.

#### *4.2.6: Staying on and Levels of Local Unemployment*

A finding in some studies that more young people remain in education in areas of high local unemployment than of low local unemployment, especially if the qualifications gained by staying on are modest, has been explained as a 'discouraged worker' effect. In this, young people postpone the miseries of unsuccessful competition for scarce jobs or hope the labour

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<sup>42</sup> Because so few pupils left the grammar schools at 15, these comparisons were made only for the pupils at secondary intermediate schools and their families.

market will soon improve. Where the converse trend is found, i.e. that the leaving rate is greater in areas of high unemployment, even when pupils' social backgrounds and qualifications are taken into account, this is sometimes described as an 'added worker' effect, as the young person is encouraged to find any kind of work that will supplement the family income.

A high unemployment rate in the residential area (whether in the ward, Local Government District, travel-to-work area or whatever) can be regarded as a measure of local or neighbourhood disadvantage which can impact upon a young person's future opportunities. There has been a debate in the British research literature regarding its effect upon staying on rates at school. Raffe and Willms's (1989) analysis of staying on rates in Scotland suggested a 'discouraged worker' effect whereas the analysis by Gray *et al.* (1992) of Youth Cohort Study data in England showed a tendency in the opposite direction.

#### Staying on and Levels of Local Unemployment: the NIERC Findings

In Northern Ireland the NIERC (1997) review presented data from the 1991 Census on the educational participation rates of 16 and 17 year olds in each of the 13 Travel to Work Areas (TTWAs) in Northern Ireland. Some of the 16 year olds would not have reached their first legal leaving date. For 17 year-old males the lowest participation rate was 42% in Ballymena and the highest was 56% for Enniskillen. For 17 year-old females the percentages ranged from 58% in Strabane and Londonderry to 79% in Dungannon. It was observed that the urban areas of Belfast and Londonderry consistently had among the lowest rates of participation, though not necessarily the lowest of all, for both sexes and at both ages.

Only for the 16 year-old males was there a strong relationship between educational participation and local economic conditions *across* the TTWAs. For these 16-year-old males rates of continuing participation were lowest in the high unemployment areas of Strabane and Newry and highest in Enniskillen and those parts of the Belfast TTWA outside the Belfast District Council area. Across Northern Ireland the relationship was much less strong for 16 year-old girls and all 17 year olds. However, *within* the urban areas of Belfast and Derry educational participation rates were found to correlate inversely with adult unemployment rates for all groups. This is explained in the review as probably resulting from young people living in inner city areas of high unemployment judging that there would be little benefit to be gained from staying on in education because their employment prospects were so poor.

These findings do not support the ‘discouraged worker’ hypothesis as defined by Raffae and Willms’s (1989). Unless, however, the young people could at least earn some money from training allowances, if not from employment, it would not support the ‘additional worker’ hypothesis either. It may, however, help to explain the appreciable numbers of young people in parts of Northern Ireland who spent much of the first two post-compulsory years in ‘Status 0’.

#### **4.2.7: Other Northern Ireland Research**

In the NICER longitudinal project on the cohort that transferred to post-primary education in 1975 (see also Chapter 3.3.1) scores on *Educational Alienation* and *Teachers and Teaching* scales at age twelve were significantly correlated (-.36 and .21 respectively) with remaining in education after fifth form (Year 12). However, it appeared that the effect of these attitudes to schooling operated largely through pupil performance. A weighted score based on results in public examinations at 16 (which Educational Alienation did help to predict) was the most important predictor of staying on *after* 16, to which these attitudinal variables made no further independent significant contribution, though gender, Selection Procedure status and attendance did make small separate contributions (Wilson with Gardiner, 1982). Attitudinal data nearer the minimum leaving age would have been of interest but were not gathered.

The DENI’s Statistical Bulletin (SB2/96) on *Free School Meals and Low Achievement* (DENI,1996) illustrated how school leavers in 1993-94 who were entitled to free school meals were less likely than those not entitled both to remain at school beyond the compulsory school age and to enter higher or further education. However, it is not clear whether these relationships would still be found after controlling for examination results at 16 and 18. Admission to higher education and even to sixth form in some schools can demand certain standards of qualifications.

### **4.3: YOUNG PEOPLE NOT IN EDUCATION, TRAINING OR EMPLOYMENT (‘STATUS 0’)**

#### **4.3.1: The Origins of the Research**

At the opposite end of the spectrum from the young people who stay on in full-time education after the minimum leaving age and who in increasing numbers later proceed to higher education are school leavers who are not only out of education but also apparently out of

work and not in training. Such young people have become a cause for concern for various reasons. From a humanitarian point of view, worries have been expressed about their welfare, especially since the 1988 Social Security Act rendered most people aged under 18 (the exceptions including young mothers and seriously disabled young people) ineligible for unemployment benefits.<sup>43</sup> Other concerns rise from fears about law and order and over personal and public safety if these young people are becoming increasingly embroiled in crime as a source of income. A third type of concern has been voiced by those who, having studied patterns of employment, know that early unemployment often leads on to long-term unemployment in later years (Armstrong, 1997c).

Pioneering work in this field was undertaken in South Glamorgan by a team at the University of Cardiff who estimated that the proportion in any month of young people in 'Status 0' in that region varied between 16% and 23% of the cohort. Such figures were more than twice as high as official data had suggested (Rees *et al.*, 1996). These Welsh figures caused concern in Northern Ireland where there has been a history of high incidence of long-term unemployment (Armstrong, 1997b). In 1995 the Training and Employment Agency (T&EA) therefore funded a study of the nature and extent of Status 0 in Northern Ireland (Armstrong *et al.*, 1997; Armstrong 1997b). Shortly afterwards there came worrying confirmatory evidence from Tyneside where appreciable numbers of young people aged 16-24 were found to be drifting aimlessly with diminishing hope of employment, often either in or on the fringes of criminality (Wilkinson, 1996).

#### **4.3.2: Studies of 'Status 0' in Northern Ireland: Research Design**

The research in 1995 in Northern Ireland had three strands (Armstrong *et al.*, 1997). First, a detailed examination of data sources from the T&EA, the DENI and the Census Office provided 'snapshots' of the numbers of young people in Status 0 at particular points in time. Such snapshots cannot, however, distinguish between young people in Status 0 for a long period and those there only briefly when between jobs or courses. The former are obviously much more of a cause for concern than the latter. In order to learn more about the 'dynamic' aspects of 'Status 0', e.g. how many young people move frequently in and out and how long spells in Status 0 typically last, a survey was conducted among 980 young people throughout Northern Ireland (from an approach sample of 1492) who had first been eligible to leave school in June 1993. The sampling frame was deliberately biased to over-represent young

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<sup>43</sup> This means that in theory virtually all 16-18 year olds, unless in one of these exceptional groups, or perhaps of independent means, should be in education, employment or training.



people likely to have been in Status 0 but the resulting data were weighted to correct for such biases when estimating results for the whole year group. Data were gathered through structured individual interviewing, a method considered more likely than a postal survey to gain a response from marginalized teenagers, some of whom would almost certainly have limited literacy skills. The interview method also enabled a careful month-by-month recording of each young person's activities during the first two post-compulsory years. The large survey was complemented by in-depth qualitative interviews with a total of 25 young people (10 females and 15 males) living in Strabane, or Derry or Belfast, with a careful balance of Catholic and Protestant locations. All 25 young people had at least some experience of Status 0 and were contacted through community or youth workers or probation officers (Loudon and McCready, 1997).

Since nearly a quarter of the large sample were found to have been in Status 0 at some stage during the first two years, it appeared desirable to track the cohort over a longer period. This was especially so since for many of the age cohort the timing of the first interview in June 1995 marked the end of school, further education or training courses. Although the percentages in Status 0 in the 1995 survey were lower than those in the South Wales report, the percentage of long-term unemployed people in Northern Ireland remained well above the UK average. It therefore seemed particularly important to know how many 18-year-olds drifted into unemployment or at least away from the formal labour market when their youth training programmes ended. The team from the Northern Ireland Economic Research Centre (NIERC) and the University of Ulster who conducted the 1995 surveys (with a few changes of personnel) were commissioned to conduct a follow-up project (McVicar *et al.*, 2000). For this, a final sample of 712 young people responded to a structured interview schedule in June/July 1999 and 30 young people were interviewed in depth (Loudon and McCready, 2000). The small sample came from the same locations as in the 1995 survey but it was not practicable to try to go back to the same young people.

#### **4.3.3: Young People in 'Status 0' in Northern Ireland: How many? Who are they?**

Status 0, as its name implies, is a state which young people may move into and away from rather than necessarily a stable description of a proportion of the age cohort. In the large 1995 survey it was estimated that, even discounting the summer months of July and August, some 22%-23% of the age cohort had at least one spell in Status 0 within two years of leaving school although for 9% of the cohort this was only a short spell of 1-3 months. The young people about whom the researchers were seriously concerned were the 8% who had spent 6 or more months of their first two post-compulsory years in Status 0. About half these (i.e. an

estimated 4% of the age cohort) had been in Status 0 for at least 12 months and “many had been continuously unemployed for 24 months.” The problem was therefore seen as one of a small but appreciable minority (8%) of the age cohort (some 2000 young people each year) with long periods of unemployment or in other situations categorised as ‘Status 0’ rather than large numbers dipping only briefly.

Demographic and biographic data on the young people in Status 0 for 6 months or more were compared with data for the rest of the sample. Variables associated with a significantly increased likelihood of a long spell in Status 0 during the first two post-compulsory years, even after controlling for all other background data in a probit analysis, included having fewer than 5 GCSEs (a more important criterion than any lower cut-point), immediate post-school unemployment in the early autumn of 1993 (this increased the probability more than ten-fold), having attended a secondary rather than a grammar school and a school not located in the North-East of the Province, and living with only one parent. Catholics and young women were both more likely to stay on in full-time education after Year 12 but, if this was controlled for, both groups were more at risk of a long spell in Status 0; the difference for young women attributed to the number caring for a child (Armstrong, 1997b). Coming from a large family or a household with unemployed or economically inactive parents was significantly *correlated* with being in Status 0, even if these variables did not contribute to the final most elegant prediction; concern was therefore expressed that the poverty of being in Status 0 may have been exacerbated by impoverished families being unable to offer much financial assistance (Armstrong, 1997b).

During the in-depth interviews in 1995, it emerged that only 2 of the 12 young people interviewed in Belfast but 9 of the 13 in Derry/ Strabane were living with both natural parents. Most of the Belfast homes had no full-time wage earner, although the mother might have a part-time job and there was usually a steady income between benefits and wages.<sup>44</sup> Three of the Belfast group were living in hostels for the homeless because of serious family dysfunction and two were in a Young Offenders Centre. One young woman in the North-West had been in a children’s home, though living independently by the time of the interview. In both localities there was mention of at least one alcoholic and one highly aggressive parent. Nevertheless, 8 of the 12 young people in Belfast and ‘most’ of those in Derry and Strabane spoke well (if not always entirely uncritically) of their parents. Even if the ‘majority’ in the North-West could fairly be described as not fitting “the stereotype of vulnerable young people

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<sup>44</sup> Reports on the interviews in Belfast and the North-West may have been conducted and written up by different researchers. They do not always report on exactly the same things.

coming from broken homes”, the 25 young people as a group appeared to have experienced an above-average share of family difficulties.

‘Snapshot’ data from the 1991 Census showed the incidence of Status 0 membership to be twice as high in some Local Government Districts as others, being 8%-10% in Belfast, Derry and some of the rural areas in the west but only 4%-6% in the north of Co. Down and much of the north-east of the Province. Ward differences were even greater: in over 20 wards no young person was in Status 0 in April 1991 but in five wards a fifth or more of the age group were so placed.

The 1999 follow-up survey found that, by the time of the interviews at age 22, the proportion in employment had grown to about two-thirds, about a fifth were in higher education and only tiny numbers were in further education or training. The proportion of non-participants<sup>45</sup> in education, training or employment rose significantly, from 6.5% to 10%, at the start of the fourth year, matching sharp drops in the numbers in training and FE. Non-participation rose further thereafter, reaching a peak of 13.8% in August 1997 and was 12% at the time of the survey. As in 1995, the problem was a marginalized minority in non-participation for quite long periods of time, exit rates from non-participation being ‘very low’ after age 19. Snapshot survey data confirmed the difficulty young people can have in entering the adult labour market.

Although no single characteristic was found to determine whether a young person would experience long-term unemployment or non-participation in the years 18-22, for the whole sample one of the highest risk factors proved to be a medium-to-long spell in Status 0 before the age of 18. This, together with the earlier finding that immediate post-compulsory unemployment was predictive of a long-term in Status 0 points to the importance of that first post-compulsory term. Some, however, including two of the four case studies, began well enough in the autumn of 1993 but later slipped into marginalized positions. Other significant predictors of unemployment when aged between 18 and 22, some of which are associated with unemployment generally in Northern Ireland included being a Catholic, having unemployed parents and especially an unemployed father, living in Belfast or the West of the Province, and having fewer than five GCSEs at grade A-C. For young men, not living with both parents at the age of 18 (June 1995) was a risk factor. Although living with a single

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<sup>45</sup> The term ‘Status 0’ is reserved in this review, as in most of the literature, for those aged 16-18 who are not in education, training or employment. Unemployment after age 18 is a recognised state for which benefits may be claimed, even if there will probably be requirements to attend for job interviews, go on schemes, etc.

parent did not significantly affect the participation rates of young women, having children of their own (not necessarily as a single parent) was for them the highest predictor of a substantial period of non-participation.

#### *4.3.4: Attitudes to School and Training Courses*

Evidence here comes from the in-depth interviews. Only the 13 from Derry and Strabane in the 1995 survey reported on their primary schooldays. These were generally remembered as enjoyable and two of the 13 had 'passed' the Transfer Tests. Verdicts on post-primary education were much more negative. Of the young people interviewed in 1995, who would have been closer to their schooldays (unless very persistent truants indeed!) those in the North-West confessed to a general loss of interest in schoolwork at this stage. Many admitted they had done little serious studying. For the few who claimed to have liked secondary school their enjoyment tended to come from friendships ('Five years and good craic') rather than from their course. A number admitted to frequent truancy, in some cases effectively dropping out of school before their GCSE examinations, though a few had obtained qualifications. Most worryingly, all the young women in this group complained of being bullied or 'picked on' and by staff as well as by pupils. Other sufferings included sarcastic teachers and complaints about bullying being ignored.

In the Belfast interviews in 1995, the themes of truanting and not settling to work were again frequently heard. Some now saw membership of a 'bad crowd' of unmotivated fellow-pupils as a significant factor in their lack of school achievement. Schools were criticised for 'not bothering' with those who were not working and as too readily resorting to suspensions or exclusions. Eight of the 12 in Belfast obtained no qualifications at 16, although two gained six GCSEs, one of whom was also awarded an RSA and a GNVQ at level 2. Most regretted not doing better.

Similarly dispiriting accounts of unenjoyable secondary schooldays were given by the young people recruited for the 1999 interviews. A few had dropped out prematurely and more were disaffected. The GCSE year had been particularly difficult for many, in some cases because of fortuitous factors such as illness. The minority who wished to stay on for Year 13 typically found their options very limited because of poor GCSE results. Again, many wished they had done better.

As Loudon and his colleagues wrote in the 1997 report, it would be too simple to state that the informants were just low achievers with a natural dislike of schooling, who were only too

ready to criticise and complain. Several had family problems that would have distracted all but the most resolute from their studies and 'quite a number' had to contend with such very real deterrents within the school as bullying, 'negative peer pressures', hostile teachers who could fling hurtful epithets at them and a general lack of sympathy for their problems. That the primary years appear to have been usually enjoyable (at least in the North-West) would suggest that they had no objection to education in principle. But many had become seriously alienated in practice from their own education by the early secondary years. Generally negative opinions of secondary education were also expressed in the research from South Wales and Tyneside.

Informants in both the 1995 and 1999 samples appear to have received generally poor advice about post-16 options whether at school or elsewhere although some may have been more intent upon leaving than in seriously considering what to do next. False starts, haphazard subject choices and placements, unavailability of preferred options all meant that a few – including three of the four case studies – were no nearer establishing themselves in some kind of occupation at 22 than they had been at 16, although it must be remembered that the main criterion for recruitment to these interviews was a substantial (though not necessarily a very recent) period in Status 0.

There was much criticism of the training placements although, almost by definition, these were young people more likely than most likely to walk out of placements into 'non-participation'. As Wilkinson (1996) found in Tyneside, those who had developed negative, or even hostile, attitudes to secondary education were likely to carry these attitudes over into further education or training. Those in Northern Ireland, like those in Sunderland and South Glamorgan, often resented being given boring menial work ('treated like a skivvy'), especially if alongside regular employees doing similar work for full wages. Some of these young people were, however, failing to appreciate the limitations of their qualifications and current abilities. Some of the others in Northern Ireland appear to have had better grounds for complaint in that they were receiving very little training in placements that were virtually never visited by the YTP tutors. Tutors who took an interest in them appear to have been appreciated.

There were mixed reactions in the Northern Ireland research to the special schemes set up to help young people into work, especially the New Deal. Some enjoyed the experience, though others did not, and more were highly dubious that the New Deal would ever lead to serious employment. Their scepticism was, however, shared by the youth and community workers on the programme who were interviewed in another part of the research. The Youthways

programme was, by contrast, generally praised for enhancing self-confidence and helping with personal problems, even when it did not directly lead to success in finding employment. Opinions of training schemes were in general much more negative than those in the survey of the PPRU cohort in section 2.6.1.

#### *4.4.5: Present Situations and Future Ambitions*

There are certain ambivalences in the emerging picture of the lifestyles and ambitions of the young people in the detailed studies. The researchers in the 2000 report were in no doubt that the young people they met all wanted to work. They wanted ‘proper jobs’ and not to be fobbed off with short-term schemes that would lead back to unemployment. But though their ambitions were conventionally respectable and ‘normal’, it is rather more questionable how many would realise them. Some had in the past been thwarted by bad luck, which would hopefully change for them. Other quotations seem to betray a lack of organisation and planning or of realistic aims, though increasing maturity might remedy that.

The way of life described by many in the earlier report was of a boring weekly pattern of lying in bed late (“I don’t lie in too late. I get up about half past twelve”), hanging around arcades or friends’ houses, waiting for the week-end’s outings which would be funded either by a little casual ‘undocumented’ work or perhaps theft. They usually belonged to a social network of young people in similar situations and in which such a mode of living was accepted. While that may be a lifestyle more likely in an 18-year-old than a 22 year-old, it would seem that such young people would have to make structured changes to achieve their aim of ‘a permanent job’. Follow-up interviews with the same actual young people, who would now be in their mid-twenties, would be a fascinating idea though probably very difficult to implement.

#### **4.4: YOUNG PEOPLE AGED 16-24 YEARS IN THE MBW ‘SCOPING STUDY’**

Most of the sample of young people over 16 in ‘Scoping’ study for Making Belfast Work came from training organisations and there is no specific evidence from those staying on at school beyond the minimum leaving age.

#### **4.4.1: On the Transition from School to Work or Training**

Government training schemes were not viewed favourably in the focus groups of the 'Scoping' study by those young people from disadvantaged areas of Belfast who were obliged to attend them (Kilpatrick *et al.*, 1997). They felt that training scheme participants were regarded as "cheap labour" and that they had little opportunity of secure employment at the end of the course. They found the training untaxing. This made life pleasantly easy at the time but some felt they should be 'stretched' to make more of themselves.

Attitudes to finding employment in the light of their limited qualifications varied. Some young people, mainly teenage boys, had high expectations of getting a job on leaving school, which for those with opportunities for work in a family firm or with friends might be justified. Teenage girls tended to see a greater need for qualifications ('four GCSEs for a part-time job with Dunne's') and such attitudes may be related to the better GCSE results of girls than boys. Other young people were more despondent. They thought either that there were 'no jobs' or that they were unlikely to obtain employment, whether because of their limited qualifications or else because they believed potential employers held stereotyped adverse views about people from their disadvantaged residential areas.

#### **4.4.2: Expressed Environmental Needs of Young People aged 16-20 Years in Disadvantaged Areas of Belfast**

Concerns about the search for employment also emerged in the ratings of the adequacy of 17 items in their localities by 93 young people aged 16-20. The lack of sufficient jobs was one of their top three complaints, along with there being not enough places for children in trouble to go to and a lack of things to do. Vocational training was the local service which the greatest proportion (60%) had used, followed by youth clubs (40%) and careers guidance (36%). As most or all of these young people had left school, the strictly educational items were less relevant for them than to younger respondents.

#### **4.5: EARLY LEAVING AND ITS PREDICTORS IN THE USA**

Only brief mention will be made of a number of research studies in the USA which, often using sophisticated statistical techniques, have examined the predictors of dropping out of high school before graduation in ways that do not seem to have been attempted in Northern Ireland. For many years, a high school diploma (HSD) has been regarded in the USA as a

minimum qualification for all except menial occupations and one which in some form<sup>46</sup> is attainable by the vast majority of young people. Unsurprisingly, in all these studies, teenagers from lower SES backgrounds – regardless of whether these were assessed in terms of income, parental occupation or parental education or some combination of these – were more likely to leave before completing high school than were the more socio-economically advantaged. Many other background and biographical variables have consistently been associated with dropping out, including male gender, poor academic performance, behavioural problems at school and especially displays of aggression, lower educational or occupational aspirations, having had to repeat one or more years, association with peers who will also drop out, substance abuse, low self-esteem, low locus of control (i.e. feeling one's actions have little effect on one's life), little parental involvement in children's education and schools with poor quality facilities and inadequate teaching staff (for a more detailed review see Rumberger, 1987, and Jimmerson *et al.*, 2000).

Some of the more interesting studies have not been content just to find simple correlates of dropping out but have explored processes within the family and transactions between family and school factors that over time increase or decrease the likelihood of dropping out. Ensminger and Slusarick (1992) for example, reported on a longitudinal study of a large sample of young Black people, about half of whom came from families below the poverty line when they were first enrolled in Chicago schools. Both the first grade marks for arithmetic and the first grade teachers' ratings of aggressiveness were statistically significant predictors of whether or not the students would complete high school some eleven years later, as were poverty in first year and whether the mother had herself completed high school. The predictions were not, however, uniform for all groups and some interactive effects were noted. For example, although there was a substantial difference in the graduation rates of non-poor girls who had high and low arithmetic marks in first grade (77% vs 57%), there was much less difference among girls below the poverty line (60% vs 58%). The authors suggest that the poor children may have tended to feel alienated from school regardless of their performance. And although having a mother with little education was an overall risk factor, boys with high first grade arithmetic marks or who had high aspirations but whose mothers had not completed high school had unusually high graduation rates. Conversely, for boys with poor arithmetic marks in first grade, having a mother who finished high school reduced the likelihood of dropping out of high school.

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<sup>46</sup> Including a General Education Development (GED), which can be taken after the normal school age, although some would not regard it as truly equivalent to a HSD.



Parenting styles and family rules have also been shown to be related to premature leaving in the USA. In the Chicago-based project above, teenagers whose parents imposed curfew rules were more likely to complete high school (Ensminger & Slusarick, 1992; Ensminger *et al.*, 1996). In a prospective study based on a Californian high school (Rumberger *et al.*, 1990), the dropouts' parents had been described the previous year as often showing one of two tendencies. Some were negative in reactions to their children's grades, imposing sanctions for poor ones and receiving news of good ones coldly. Others tended towards a 'Permissive' parenting style with few regulations, no supervision of or help with homework, non-attendance at school events and little interest in grades. Left without much guidance, their children tended to do less work and cut more classes, behaviours that contributed to poor grades and eventual dropping out. The parents of those who completed high schools emerged higher on an 'Authoritative' scale of 'firm but democratic' behaviour in which children were encouraged to study, praised when they merited it and given just as much independence as they could safely handle.

A point made by several of these American writers is that dropping out of high school is rarely a sudden event but is usually the culmination of a process begun much earlier. Ensminger and Slusarick (1992) found that first grade performance and experiences established fairly stable patterns for later years. Jimmerson and his colleagues (2000) dramatically declared, "The process of dropping out begins prior to the child entering school" and believed that many variables previously considered to be predictors of dropping out, such as truancy and failing grades in high school, are better thought of as markers of a process already well advanced. In their longitudinal study of 143 young people born in poverty or with other risk factors, Jimmerson *et al.* (2000) included measures of parental involvement, peer relations, academic performance and behaviour in school at ages 12 and 16 in their database. Though all such variables correlated significantly with dropping out (and in the expected directions) none of them improved predictions based on data from the first three years of life: the child's gender, a composite measure of the quality of early caregiving at various points in the first 42 months and the early home environment on the HOME scales. These early years scales included measures of sensitivity to the child's needs but also the provision of opportunities for stimulating play and the quality of help and instruction given to the child in the completion of four tasks. Such findings led Jimmerson and his colleagues to stress the importance of *early* intervention as a way of reducing school dropout much later.

#### **4.6: THREE POINTS FOR CONSIDERATION**

In a review of research examining the correlates of staying on in education or leaving, it must be borne in mind that the percentage of the age group staying on has soared. In a 14-year period that would cover most of the studies in this chapter, the percentage of leavers from Northern Ireland schools going on to higher education more than doubled between 1986-1987 and 2000-2001 from 15.2% to 33.3%, while the percentage going on to either higher *or* further education rose from 42.1% to 60.1%. Such rises change the implications of continuing in education. For instance, Foskett and Hesketh's (1997) social class differences at age 16 were less in the numbers continuing in education than in the types of courses taken.

There was relatively little hard evidence in the research reviewed here of poverty *preventing* many young people from continuing in education as opposed to lower socio-economic backgrounds *discouraging* them. In several studies – including the Northern Ireland reports by Bill *et al.*(1974) and PPRU (1986) – young people from lower SES families seemed to be more often motivated by the attractions of having a wage and spending money than by the necessity of contributing to the family budget as soon as possible. Differential class values seemed to be important here. It was notable that the clearest evidence of financial need as a deterrent to continuing education for a sizable proportion of a sample was seen in Essen and Wedge (1982). That study aimed to focus on young people who were actually 'disadvantaged,' using fairly strict criteria that proved to be applicable to only 5.8% of the whole NCDS sample,<sup>47</sup> and asked specifically whether there the family needed a wage from the respondent. Most of the other studies discussed here were less specifically focused on *disadvantage* as such.

The American research briefly considered in the last section points, as several of the authors conclude, to the importance of early intervention if it is desired to have more young people, especially among the less advantaged, committed to serious continuing education or training.

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<sup>47</sup> Young people who at age 11 or 16 or both were on low income (supplementary benefits and/or free school meals), in poor housing *and* in atypical families (5+ children or single parent).

## **CHAPTER FIVE: Young People Showing Signs of Disaffection from the Education System.**

### **PART ONE: PERSISTENT ABSENTEES**

#### **5.1 Introduction to chapters 5-7**

Rather than attempting to cover the full range of delinquent and problematic behaviours observable in some children and young people – which would provide material not just for a single chapter but for a whole book – this chapter will concentrate on the attitudes of three groups of young people whose behaviours directly threatened their education. These are (A) pupils frequently absent for reasons unacceptable to the school; (B) excluded pupils and (C) pupils whose in-school behaviour caused their schools serious concern, leading eventually in a number of these cases to the provision of alternative forms of education. These three groups do, however, partially overlap, with a number of pupils belonging to more than one group and some to all three. Although some frequent absentees behave impeccably when they do attend, others are so disruptive in class that they may be excluded, at least temporarily, or alternative educational provision be sought for them.

Two main questions will be addressed in this section:

- 1) Are the children and young people who show these problem behaviours more disadvantaged, on any of the criteria suggested in Chapter 1, than the age group as a whole?
- 2) Although, almost by definition, the young people in the studies in this section could not always have been wholeheartedly committed to education and many of them were likely to have had very negative attitudes towards at least some aspects of their schooling, what exactly did they and their parents have to say about education? In this connection, it proved important to distinguish what informants said about education in principle from what they said about their own or their children's particular school experiences. Both quantitative and qualitative evidence can be valuable here, the former for presenting a clear overall picture of at least some dimensions of the topic, the latter for its insights into informants' construction of their world. Qualitative studies, in which the researchers really listened to what the young people and/or their parents had to say about education can be particularly helpful

when, as here, the informants' backgrounds and experiences are likely to be very different from those of the researchers and of the most likely readers.

- 3) A third but subsidiary question to which some attention will be given is whether negative attitudes of young people alienated from education can be ameliorated. This chapter does not pretend to include a full evaluation of attempts to reduce disaffection in Northern Ireland schools but some relevant evidence arose in studies of young people who had participated in programmes of alternative education or other initiatives.

## *5.2: PERSISTENT ABSENTEES*

### **5.2.1: Introduction to this Section**

It would seem reasonable to hypothesise that if pupils miss appreciable amounts of schooling when they are well able to attend (let us not worry too much for the moment about defining an 'appreciable amount') and especially if such absences are not confined to one hated school subject, then either the pupils or their parents or both are unlikely to be giving top priority to the education provided by the children's schools. This review would not, however, conclude that there is a simple linear relationship between attendance and attitude to education without first reviewing the existing evidence on what absentees and their parents have to say. The relationships between absenteeism and social background will also be examined.

#### **5.2.1a: The terminology of absenteeism**

One difficulty in reviewing research about absenteeism is the degree of inconsistency in the terminology used by different writers. Some writers use the same terms but with different interpretations. The word 'truancy' can cause particular confusion. Although it is virtually always used to describe absence for reasons of which a school does not approve, some writers, including the authors of the Pack Report (1977) in Scotland and of the more recent Social Exclusion Unit's (1998) report on '*Truancy and Social Exclusion*' in England have used the term for all absences unacceptable to a school, regardless of whether the absence was instigated by pupil or parent. Others, including the Department for Education in Northern Ireland, prefer to reserve the term for absences instigated by pupils, of which their parents are probably not even aware. In 1974 Tyerman defined truancy as one form of 'conduct disorder'.

Because such diverse definitions of ‘truancy’ can cause confusion, the main text of this report has preferred the use of such terms as ‘unauthorised’ or ‘disallowed’ absence to cover all absences for reasons not acceptable in the statutory guidance for schools. It should perhaps be pointed out that such terms refer to the school’s and not the parent’s perspective. The quite commonly used term ‘unjustified absence’ has been avoided as problematic in cases where most readers would sympathise with a pupil’s reluctance to go to a particular school or class. The term ‘truancy’ (or ‘classical truancy’) is restricted to pupil-instigated absence for disallowed reasons. When pupils or parents are directly quoted, however, their terminology obviously has to be used.

The term ‘condoned absence’, defined by Galloway (1976) as ‘absence with parents’ knowledge, consent and approval’ has been much used in Northern Ireland, especially in the 1970s and 1980s. Some of the studies reviewed below, e.g. Caul and Harbison (1986), suggest that the term was sometimes used to include cases better described as ‘reluctant toleration’ and that care should be taken not to use it too sweepingly or else to apply caveats where appropriate.

O’Keefe (1994) drew attention to a useful distinction between all-day absences marked in the register (which he called ‘blanket truancy’) and post-registration truancy (PRT) in which, after registering, the pupil either leaves the school site or skips one or more classes. None of the major Northern Ireland studies of absenteeism took account of possible PRT, which was not systematically monitored the same way in all Northern Ireland schools.

### *5.2.1b: The Northern Ireland Evidence*

The Northern Ireland literature on persistent absentees which is relevant to this Review is of three types. First, each of a series of three Government sponsored surveys of the extent of persistent absenteeism found statistically significant associations between persistent absenteeism for disallowed reasons and measures of social disadvantage, although the details of these associations varied between surveys. Secondly, two surveys in the 1980s, though differing in scope and scale, produced some quantified data on the attitudes to education, in one case, of ‘poor’, ‘fair’ and ‘good’ attenders and, in the other of condoned absentees and their parents. Thirdly, a number of Masters level dissertations and theses have each presented case studies of persistent absentees in the writer’s own school or, in one case, of poor attenders in two schools where the author, a college tutor, was leading small groups of students on a Youth and Community Work course.

## 5.2.2: PROVINCE-WIDE SURVEYS: WHO ARE THE NORTHERN IRELAND ABSENTEES?

### **5.2.2a: The Plan of the Northern Ireland Surveys of Persistent Absenteeism**

The three Government-sponsored surveys of persistent absenteeism were conducted in the spring terms of 1977 (Harbison and Caven, 1977), 1982 (Moore and Jardine, 1983) and 1992 (Sutherland, 1995). Though there were minor differences of detail in the methodologies, in all three surveys, Education Welfare Officers (EWOs) collected information on each pupil of compulsory education age who had been absent for about a quarter or more of the term or of a chosen 12-week block. This approach was derived from the work of David Galloway (1976, 1985) in Sheffield. In each survey a distinction was made between pupils absent mainly or entirely because of illness and those with a substantial amount of absence for 'disallowed' reasons. In the 1977 and 1982 surveys absentees were categorised according to whether the greater part of their absence was due to illness or other reasons. In the 1992 survey only those persistent absentees with fewer than seven days of disallowed absence were classed as Type I absentees (mainly or entirely because of illness) and those with seven or more days of absence for disallowed reasons as Type II.<sup>48</sup>

In the course of the three surveys there was a steady reduction in the proportion of persistent absentees, off school for a quarter or more of the time, from 7.8% of the compulsory school age population in 1977 to 6.1% in 1982 to 3.0% in 1992. Over the 15-year period, the amount of Type I absenteeism roughly halved from 3.6% to 1.7% while the percentage of Type II absenteeism fell by two-thirds in the same period from 4.2% to 1.4%. In all three surveys the incidence of both types of absenteeism increased over the three main age bands, namely the primary school, lower secondary (KS3) and final compulsory (KS4) school years. In all three surveys the age-related increase was greater for Type II than Type I absenteeism.

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<sup>48</sup> Neither method is ideal. In the 1977 and 1982 surveys very substantial amounts of 'disallowed' absence could have been disguised if there were sufficient days of illness. In all three surveys pupils who remained healthy might have had 8-13 days of 'disallowed' absence and (correctly) not been identified by the EWS as cases for the research. It is unlikely that the change in the basis of classification in 1992 would have made a great deal of difference to the incidence of persistent absenteeism identified.

### **5.2.2b: Northern Ireland Absentees in 1977**

#### *Absenteeism and Social Disadvantage*

The main 1977 survey (Harbison and Caven, 1977) endeavoured to discover if a strong relationship (with a correlation of 0.80) found by David Galloway (1976) at school level between absenteeism rates and free school meal entitlements (FSME) in Sheffield also held good in Northern Ireland. A significant correlation of 0.60 was found in the Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB) but no links were found in any other ELB or in the Province as a whole. It may be that such links at school level between absenteeism and social disadvantage can be found only in cities where school catchment areas are likely to be more socially stratified than in smaller towns and rural areas.

Two later book chapters explored further the relationships between absenteeism and social factors in the Belfast area in the late 1970s. Caven & Harbison (1980) grouped the Belfast secondary schools (of which there were then far more than at present) into 17 catchment zones and correlated their absenteeism levels with a number of socio-economic measures for the area derived from the Census and other sources. Absenteeism was found to be significantly linked not only to FSME rates but also to a range of other area variables including both adult male and juvenile male unemployment, the proportion of 'semi-skilled' and 'unskilled' workers, rented rather than owner-occupied housing, overcrowded homes, homes lacking basic amenities, the birth rate, households with no car and the proportions of retarded readers and of adults with no examination qualifications. For some of these variables an even higher correlation was obtained if they used –rather than the percentage absent for 15 days or more – a more extreme category of absenteeism, namely the percentage of pupils off school for more than half the term. Caven and Harbison were, however, careful not to attribute causality to these associations.

#### *Can Future Absentees be identified?*

The 1977 survey showed that nearly 4000 pupils were absent for more than half the term without acceptable reasons. These extreme non-attenders were found mainly in the older age groups and in city areas. Harbison, Fee and Caven (1980) wondered how far it would be possible to identify in advance pupils at risk of such very high levels of absenteeism later on, particularly because of the associations with unemployment. A cohort of Belfast pupils, aged about 13 in 1977, had when in primary school taken part in research by the BELB psychologists. Data existed on their reading test scores at 9 and 11, their verbal reasoning test

scores in the Selection Procedure, teachers' estimates of their ability<sup>49</sup>, teacher ratings on the Rutter behaviour scales, their percentage attendance in P7 and also on such family background measures as parental occupations and number of siblings.

A total of 98 pupils (50 boys and 48 girls) on whom such primary school data had been gathered were identified as extreme non-attenders in 1977. Because of the by then well-established association in the literature between absenteeism and social disadvantage, a carefully matched control group of better attenders from similar backgrounds was found by selecting from BELB records the next child of the same sex in the same P7 class as the 'extreme absentee'.

Compared with the total BELB cohort even the comparison group came from more socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and had had significantly lower scores on the ability measures, as well as poorer attendance in P7. Compared with the total BELB cohort, the selected group of absentees were lower on all measures of ability, attainment, attendance, behaviour and socio-economic background. When compared with the control group, these very persistent absentees were significantly lower on all measures of ability, behaviour and attendance and all but one measure of attainment but there were no socio-economic differences between these two groups from the same primary school classes. So socio-economic disadvantage alone could not explain the very poor attendance in 1977 of the 98 selected pupils.

However, even when socio-economic backgrounds were controlled, the future 'extreme' absentees were already by age 9 obtaining low reading scores. By age 11, they were also obtaining lower scores for verbal reasoning and emerging as more neurotic and anti-social than their classmate. Nearly two-thirds (65.5%) of them were judged by their teachers to have been absent for trivial reasons or because of 'truancy', as compared with only 27.4% of the controls. Even in primary school they were significantly different from schoolmates from similar social backgrounds.

Gender factors were also seen. The differences between the future persistent absentees and the control group in intellectual, attainment and behavioural measures were much more marked among the boys than the girls. Conversely, only among the girls were the persistent absentees significantly more likely to have a working mother. Harbison, Fee and Caven

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<sup>49</sup> The measures used to select pupils for grammar schools have varied over the years (see Sutherland, 1990). In 1975, when these pupils were in P7, comprised scores on two verbal reasoning tests and scaled teacher estimates of suitability for a grammar school.



concluded that persistent non-attendance may have to be understood rather differently for boys and girls. Some girls' non-attendance may well be related to social and domestic pressures. The boys' absenteeism might more often have been linked to difficulties at an individual level in adjusting to the cognitive and behavioural demands of school. The authors saw their research as a step on the way towards being able, on the basis of a broad range of measures, to identify likely future persistent absentees in time to help them with appropriate intervention strategies.

### **5.2.2c: Northern Ireland Absentees in 1982**

McGuinness and Jardine (1984) reported on the personal and family characteristics of the 6,153 pupils whose absence of 14 or more days in the spring term of 1982 was mainly for reasons other than illness (i.e. Type II absence). The information on them came from the individual forms which the EWOs completed for each identified absentee. No such forms were completed for the other pupils but comparisons were made, where possible, with similar data on families and young people in the general Northern Ireland population, especially with data from the most recent General Household Survey (GHS), and with evidence from the research literature.

#### *Family Characteristics*

Of the absentees' fathers living at home whose employment status was known, almost twice as many as in the GHS sample were unemployed (37.4% vs 19.7%). Just over half (55.6%) of the absentees' fathers were employed, nearly all full-time, and the remaining 7.0% were either sick or, in a few cases, retired. In the GHS sample more of the fathers were employed (66.6%) and rather fewer sick or retired (5.7%). Of the absentees' mothers living at home, only about half as many as in the GHS sample were in either full-time or part-time employment (19.3% vs 38.9%) and more were full-time housewives (77.1% vs 52.2%). Of the absentees' mothers who were employed, almost equal numbers were in full-time and part-time occupations. Though the occupational status of the great majority of parents living at home was known, data about the nature of their current or most recent jobs were so often missing that this variable was not really viable.

In comparison with the general Northern Ireland population, these persistent Type II absentees' families can, as a group, be described as 'work poor'. An indication of the resulting low incomes in many of their families was the finding that nearly half the absentees

(49.0%) were recorded as receiving free school meals. This was more than twice as high a percentage as the 23.3% estimated for the whole school enrolment that year.

There were also differences in the household composition of absentees and other children. Though the majority of the absentees (69.7%) lived at home with both parents, the percentage in single-parent households (26.8%) was at least twice high as in any of the contemporaneous estimates for Northern Ireland children as a whole. The absentees' families tended to have more children than the families in the GHS sample, averaging respectively 4.6 and 3.2 children. Indeed, 17.8% of the absentees' families had more than six children and 3.4% and more than ten. It would certainly be harder for parents to keep track of the school-going activities of a very large than of a small family. More than half the absentees (56.1%) had one or more siblings known to the EWO completing the form as having had problems with attendance.

### *Interventions*

Two-thirds of the absentees (67.6%) were recorded as receiving some kind of special help because of a learning, behavioural or attendance problem, or some combination of these. Over three-fifths (61.8%) were receiving help with attendance, a fifth (19.8%) with learning difficulties and 8.8% with behaviour problems. Comparative figures for the whole school enrolment are not given.

Just over a tenth of the absentees had appeared in court because of their non-attendance following the intervention of the EWS or social services. Approximately one-in-twenty of their parents had been taken to court because of their child's non-attendance. There were considerable inter-ELB differences in the frequency and types of prosecution.

### *Characteristics of Three Main Categories of Type II Absentees*

As in the other two Northern Ireland surveys, the EWOs categorised each Type II absentee's manner of non-attendance, using a classification system derived from Galloway's work in Sheffield. Three categories accounted for approximately 90% of the absentees. Nearly two-thirds (64%) were considered to be absent 'with the parents' knowledge and consent', or what is often called 'condoned absence'. Smaller numbers were judged to have parents who were aware of their absence but were unable to insist on their attendance (12%) or to have been absent without their parents' knowledge (11.3%). The latter could also be called 'classical truancy'. Differences in the characteristics of these three groups, even if not always

numerically very large, can be seen as suggesting different family scenarios that could well lead to different styles of absenteeism.

*Condoned Absentees:* The parents who were thought to be fully aware of and to accept – and even in some cases to initiate – their children’s absences were even more likely to be at home all day than were other two groups of absentees’ parents. This was despite the fact that all three groups of absentees’ parents were less likely to be employed than were respondents to the General Household Survey. As many as 40.6% of the condoned absentees’ fathers were unemployed and 80.7% of their mothers were recorded simply as housewives. McGuinness and Jardine’s statistical findings can be interpreted as indicating that in homes where no one has a job to go to in the mornings, getting children out to school may not be a well-established part of the daily routine.

*Classical Truants:* More of the parents who were believed to be unaware of their children’s absenteeism (60.3% of fathers and 33.1% of mothers) than of the other two groups of parents were in employment, even although even these percentages are appreciably below these in the GHS. If their parents’ jobs required them both to leave home before their children would normally set off for school, their offspring could well be tempted either not to go to school at all or to return home before the end of lessons.

*Parents Aware of Absence but Unable to Insist on Return:* The distinctive characteristic of this group of absentees was the higher number living in single-parent families. Just over a third (34.5%) were living with one parent, usually the mother, and rather more than most of these mothers were employed (26% vs 19.3%). Moreover this was the group of persistent absentees whose siblings were the most likely to have attendance problems (61.1%). The picture that emerges from McGuinness and Jardine’s figures (though it would have been fully applicable not more than about a quarter of the cases) is of a harassed mother, unsupported by a male partner, struggling to cope with the demands of a job and of unruly children. Ironically these parents, who would not seem to have the most negative attitudes to education, were more than twice as likely as the parents of condoned absentees to have been taken to court because of their children’s non-attendance.

### **5.2.2d: Northern Ireland Absentees in 1992**

#### *Home Factors*

There was much missing data on pupils' backgrounds in the 1982 survey and so it was agreed that in 1992 EWOs should be asked to provide only information that they already had on the absentees or which they could easily find out from the schools. Thus the only index of socio-economic status used in 1992 was whether the children were entitled to free school meals, an established measure of poverty. In fact, just over half of all persistent absentees (some 52%) in 1992 were entitled to free school meals, as compared with 28.6% of all pupils of compulsory school age. Significantly more of the Type II than of the Type I absentees were entitled to free meals: 61.3% *versus* 45.0% in the primary sector and 60.0% *versus* 42.3% in the post-primary sector (Sutherland, 1995). The well-known association between poverty and poor health might explain why the proportion of Type I absentees entitled to free meals was about half as high again as in the general population. The proportion of Type II absentees entitled to free meals was, however, twice that of the general population. This suggests that even stronger than the link between poverty and illness were links between poverty and such factors as disaffection from school or apathy about attending.

Although Sutherland (1995) found the proportion of Type I absentees from lone-parent families to be much the same as in the best estimate for the general population at the time (19%),<sup>50</sup> the percentage of Type II absentees from lone-parent families in the primary sector was distinctly higher (24.9%) and in the post-primary sector it was almost twice as high (36.5%). In each of the Key Stage 3 years the percentage of Type II absentees in one-part families was over 40% but it had fallen to 31.2% by the final compulsory year. It would seem that unpartnered mothers may have had more difficulty than most parents in getting young people of 11-14 to attend school but that in the Key Stage 4 years many other youngsters had also become absentees so that the link with lone-parenthood was less pronounced. It was also observed that over half the small groups of absentees for whom EWOs volunteered each of four additional explanations were from lone-parent households. These additional reasons for absenteeism were 'taken into care', 'changes of address', 'pregnancy' and 'family problems'. All four explanations point to family disruptions or family traumas and, though relatively small numbers of absentees were involved, these would seem to have included particularly vulnerable children facing multiple personal and family problems.

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<sup>50</sup> From the Continuous Housing Survey (CHS) of 1990-91.

Just over half (53.7%) of the Type II absentees in the Key Stage 3 years and rather more than 40% of those at Key Stage 4 and in primary schools were known to have one or more siblings with attendance problems. For less than a third of the sample were EWOs prepared to state that there were no siblings with such problems; in nearly a quarter of the cases they had insufficient information to say. The presence of other avoidably absent children in the home would certainly be a deterrent rather than an encouragement to go to school.

## **Interventions**

**Table 7.1: Percentages of Absentees in 1992 Receiving Special Help (in percentages)**

|                           | <i>Learning Difficulties</i> |              | <i>Behaviour Problems</i> |              | <i>Attendance</i> |              |
|---------------------------|------------------------------|--------------|---------------------------|--------------|-------------------|--------------|
|                           | Type I<br>%                  | Type II<br>% | Type I<br>%               | Type II<br>% | Type I<br>%       | Type II<br>% |
| Primary School (KS 1 & 2) | 16.2                         | 27.2         | 2.1                       | 6.6          | 9.8               | 31.2         |
| Key Stage 3               | 13.5                         | 28.6         | 4.4                       | 21.2         | 23.0              | 59.3         |
| Key Stage 4               | 10.2                         | 17.3         | 4.2                       | 16.0         | 23.6              | 54.2         |

More than half the post-primary Type II absentees but just under a third of those in primary schools were receiving special help with their attendance problems (Table 7.1); the percentages are rather lower than in 1982. Some (e.g. ETI, 2002) would argue strongly that not providing such help in the primary years, when absenteeism for unauthorised reasons is in its relatively early stages is a seriously missed opportunity.<sup>51</sup> A surprising finding in 1992 was that nearly a quarter of the Type I absentees in post-primary schools, who had under seven days' absence that term for reasons other than illness, had also at some stage received help with attendance problems. It is not known whether these Type I absentees had simply received help in catching up with missed work or if they were being supported to ensure they attended when well enough.

Although no contemporaneous data for the whole school enrolment are available, the percentages of Type II absentees in the primary and KS3 years who were receiving help because of learning difficulties (27.2% and 28.6% respectively) would have been well above

<sup>51</sup> Obviously it would be the present situation rather than that of 1992 that should now be of most concern.

the population norms. So too would the percentages of Type II absentees in the KS3 and KS4 years who were receiving help with behavioural difficulties (respectively 21.2% and 16.0%).<sup>52</sup> How many more absentees would have benefited from similar help and the extent to which the help encouraged those who received it to attend school were matters beyond the scope of the survey.

Official action against absentees, in the form of appearances before attendance panels or at court had been taken against 14 (4.1%) of the Type II absentees in primary schools and 398 (12.2%) of those in the compulsory post-primary years. As in 1982, the ELBs differed considerably in the number and types of actions they initiated. Male and Female and Catholic and Protestant absentees and their parents were equally likely to be summoned before panels or courts. Less equitably, summonses had been issued significantly more often if absentees were entitled to free school meals than if they were not (15.4% vs 7.4%) and if they lived in single-parent rather than two-parent households (17.3% vs 9.9%). These last two trends persisted even when three levels of Type II absenteeism were analysed separately so that the explanation for their more frequent prosecution was unlikely to be simply that they were more often avoidably absent.

### *Early Leaving*

When asked if the persistent absentees in the two KS4 years were expected to stay on at school beyond their earliest leaving date, the EWOs reported that only 22.7% of the Type I and 5.7% of the Type II absentees were expected to do so. Nearly half the Type I absentees (46.8%) and more than three-quarters (78.5%) of the Type II absentees were fully expected to leave but the EWOs felt uncertain about 30.6% of the Type I and 15.7% of the Type II absentees. It would have been better to hear directly from the absentees themselves and, with hindsight, the pro forma should have asked about remaining in full-time education rather than necessarily in school<sup>53</sup> but by any standards the proportion of Type II absentees thought likely to stay on at school was very low.

Of the pupils in Year 12, more than twice as many (44.3% vs 19.7%) of the Type II as of the Type I absentees had officially left by the Easter of that year, something that only the older members of the year cohort were entitled to do. Not many Type II absentees could have been staying on voluntarily, even to the end of their basic course. In many cases this would

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<sup>52</sup> Help with behavioural problems seemed more widely available to absentees in 1992 than in 1982.

<sup>53</sup> Some secondary schools do not have sixth forms.

probably have been another indicator, over and above the unauthorised absences, of a lack of commitment to education.

### *Some Particularly Disadvantaged Groups of Persistent Absentees*

Even with the limited background information available in the 1992 survey, some groups of Type II absentees, with substantial amounts of absence for reasons other than illness, gave special cause for concern. Pupils absent from primary school with their parents' full knowledge but for no known good reason seemed a particularly disadvantaged group. Even in comparison with other Type II absentees, higher proportions of them were entitled to free school meal entitlement (78.6%), lived in single-parent families, had siblings whose attendance was poor and had received help for learning difficulties and attendance problems. The 'condoned absentees' in the post-primary were, however, more typical of all Type II absentees.

Though pupils kept at home to help with domestic tasks tended to have shorter absences than some of the other Type II groups, more than two-thirds of them were on free meals and their siblings were more likely than most to be poor attenders also. In the post-primary sector pupils absent because of formal or informal suspensions formed a particularly problematic group, over half of whom were receiving help with behaviour problems and about a third for learning difficulties.

### **5.2.2e: Some Conclusions from the Northern Ireland Surveys of Persistent Absenteeism**

In all three Northern Ireland surveys of persistent absenteeism, socio-economically disadvantaged pupils were more likely than other pupils to have been absent for at least a quarter of the school term mainly for reasons other than physical illness. Each survey, because of its particular methodology, included one or two perspectives on the link between absenteeism and disadvantage not found in the other two. At the same time it must be stressed that the great majority of socio-economically disadvantaged pupils – as defined, for example, as those entitled to free school meals – were not 'persistent absentees' as defined in the surveys. Conversely, not all persistent absentees come from deprived backgrounds.

In the first survey in 1977 the associations that were actually demonstrated were with disadvantaged communities within Belfast at least as much as with the level of disadvantage in individual families. At school level a highly significant association was found in the Belfast ELB but not in the other four Board areas nor in the Province as a whole between the

percentages of persistent absentees and the percentages of pupils entitled to free school meals. Catchment areas in Belfast would have steeper social stratification than in the other Board areas. In a further analysis (Caven and Harbison, 1980), which drew also on Census and other data for Belfast and which divided the schools into 17 catchment areas, school-level absenteeism was seen to be related not only to free school meal entitlements but to a range of other social-economic variables, including unemployment. In a second additional analysis (Harbison, Fee and Caven, 1980) which sought to discover if absenteeism in secondary schools could be predicted, Belfast pupils identified as persistent absentees for non-medical reasons at age 13-14 were found to have been no more socio-economically disadvantaged at age 11 than a control group of pupils from the same primary school classes. The future 'persistent absentees' were, however, poorer attenders, even at age 11 than the control group and, especially in the case of boys, had lower scores on verbal reasoning, primary school attainments and on behaviour measures. Even the control group, however, were more socio-economically disadvantaged, poorer attainers and worse attenders at age 11 than the general Belfast population. Within the disadvantaged communities where the absentees and the controls lived, difficulty in conforming to or reaching the cognitive and behavioural standards expected in primary schools seemed a better predictor of future absenteeism than further analysis of SES variables.

In both the 1982 and 1992 surveys pupils persistently absent for non-medical reasons were more likely than average to be entitled to free meals, to live in lone-parent households, to have siblings who also had attendance problems and to be receiving special help for learning difficulties, or for behavioural or attendance problems. In the 1982 survey associations were also reported between particular family circumstances and particular categories of avoidance absence. Condoned absentees were the most likely to have both parents at home all day while, conversely, more of the 'classical truants' than of the other main categories of non-medical absentees had both parents out at work. The group whose parents were unable to insist that they return to school included an above-average proportion living in single-parent families.

The 1992 survey compared the absentees off school for mainly medical (Type I) and non-medical (Type II) reasons. Even the Type I absentees were about 50% more likely than the general population to be on free school meals and a nearly a quarter of those in the post-primary sector had received special help in connection with attendance problems. The Type II absentees were, however, more likely still to be on free meals and to have received special help of some kind at school. They were also more likely than Type I absentees to live in one-parent households. The association between social background and Type II absenteeism appeared at its strongest in the Key Stage 3 years. As far as can be gauged from a cross-



sectional rather than a longitudinal study, it looked as if in the Key Stage 4 years the pupils now swelling the numbers of absentees may have come from less disadvantaged homes than those whose attendance had caused concern for some time. Alternatively, other home factors not included in the survey, such as parental attitudes to their children's futures, may have become more important as the minimum leaving age approached.

### **5.2.3: Absenteeism and Disadvantage: the UK-wide evidence**

#### *The Family Correlates of Absenteeism*

As in the Northern Ireland surveys reviewed in the previous section, numerous studies in England, Scotland and Wales over more than half a century of research have shown a high percentage of unauthorised absentees to come from disadvantaged home backgrounds and, indeed, often from homes that could be described as 'multiply disadvantaged', as in Galloway (1985). To give some more specific associations, absenteeism has been significantly associated with low social class on the Register General's scale (Fogelman, 1978; Reid, 1984; Casey and Smith, 1995), with low incomes and reliance on state benefits (Hodges, 1968; Farrington, 1980), with unemployment (May, 1975; Blythman, 1975; Galloway, 1982; Reid, 1984; Casey and Smith, 1995; Zhang, 2003), with eligibility for free school meals (NACEWO, 1975; Blythman, 1975; Reid, 1984; Stokes and Walton, 1999; Zhang, 2003), with poor quality housing (ISTD, 1974) and with overcrowding (Tibbenham, 1977). Zhang's (2003) recent study showed the relationship between poverty and absenteeism in London boroughs to be greater in the primary than in the post-primary sector, a finding reminiscent of the particularly disadvantaged circumstances of 'condoned absentees' in Northern Ireland primary schools in 1992. Similarly, Galloway (1982) found his primary school absentees in Sheffield to be living in even more disadvantaged circumstances than those in the secondary sector. After interviewing parents, Zhang's (2003) explanation was that younger children are frequently dependent on their parents to get them to school but for parents with severe financial problems this may not be a priority. Older children are better able to make their own way to school and whether or not they choose to arrive may be influenced, Zhang thought, by such non-family factors as peer group influence.

Tibbenham's (1977) analysis of data from the National Child Development Study (NCDS) of a cohort of children born in 1958 found that overcrowding had an effect upon attendance levels over and above that of social class. A paper from the Institute for the Study and Treatment of Delinquency (ISTD, 1974) discussed how overcrowding could make it

impossible for children to sleep until the whole family settled down for the night with the result that young children were over-tired in the morning; Roger White's (1987) vivid case study of Colin, one of six large youngsters in a small council house, unable to get to sleep on the living-room couch until television ceased for the night (which it then did) illustrates such a situation. It will be recalled that Caven and Harbison (1980) showed absenteeism to be related to poor housing in Northern Ireland and their analysis, like Tibbenham's, suggested that the effects of housing did not completely overlap with those of poverty as measured by FSM eligibility.<sup>54</sup> Modern house-building programmes and the generally smaller size of families today probably mean that fewer children live in overcrowded homes than was the case some decades ago.<sup>55</sup> However, for those who do, the greater demands of GCSE coursework in the Key Stage 4 years, the very time when absenteeism rates soar, would introduce an additional strain.

Some UK research has shown absenteeism for 'disallowed' reasons to be associated with what might be termed the emotional climate of pupils' homes or with parents' behaviour rather than with the material aspects. Examples here include associations with marital strife or parental separation (Blythman, 1975; Reid, 1984; Casey and Smith, 1995), with maternal depression (Galloway, 1982), with having a psychiatrically treated father (Farrington, 1995), with lack of discipline and structure in the home (Young, 1947; Hodges, 1968) and with an lack of love and security (Tyerman, 1968). Evidence that the parents of absentees show less active interest in their children's education than other parents has been shown by Blythman (1975), Reid (1984, 1987) and Farrington (1995) among others.

### **The Nature of the Comparison Group**

Some caveats should be made about the above findings, where the focus has been on significant associations. By no means every variable related to SES or other family factors has correlated significantly with absenteeism though the existence of a general trend is indisputable. There can be considerable differences according to whether absentees are compared with the general population or with a more closely matched group in an attempt to discover what makes one child in a class skip school frequently but another attend more regularly. That was the general plan behind Harbison *et al's* (1980) comparison of future persistent absentees and their former primary school classmates in Belfast, which found both groups showing similar SES disadvantage. Young's (1947) early study in the east end of

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<sup>54</sup> Caven and Harbison (1980) used factor analysis; Tibbenham used a form of regression analysis.

<sup>55</sup> Check this with census data, even 1991 vs 1971 data would serve this purpose.

Glasgow found truants and controls to be similar in health, family income, and housing space but the truants suffered more from dirty clothing and vermin, defective discipline and “vicious conduct and drunkenness in the home”. More recently, Reid (1984) used *two* comparison groups of good attenders in his study of absentees in two Welsh schools. One group (CG1) came from the same low-streamed classes as the persistent absentees, the second (CG2) from higher streams. Absentees and their classmates were almost equally likely to live in public rather than private housing and to have an unemployed father, while the CG2 group were much more likely to enjoy the benefits of private housing and a regular salary or wage coming into the home. The three groups were, however, almost well spaced out in the percentages of fathers or guardians whose main lifetime occupation was in the ‘unskilled manual’ category (55%, 38% and 13%). About twice as many of the absentees as of either control group had suffered the separation or divorce of their parents or the death of one of them (44% vs 19% and 23%).

### **Absenteeism and Academic Performance**

There are echoes in the research literature from Great Britain of the low scores in verbal reasoning and reading of Harbison *et al's* (1980) future persistent absentees in Belfast and of the finding in both the 1982 and 1992 surveys that persistent absentees were more likely than other pupils to have received help with learning, behavioural or attendance problems. In a study of the development of delinquency in 411 South London males, Farrington (1995) found low IQ, poor school attainment and troublesomeness to be significant predictors of ‘truancy’. Headteachers in Blythman’s (1975) study gave poor performance at school as a cause of ‘truancy’ as pupils sought to avoid an unpleasant situation. Teachers judged Reid’s (1984) absentees to have more behavioural problems than the control groups, including more neurotic and anti-social tendencies.

#### *Which cases of Absenteeism are taken to Court?*

The somewhat disturbing evidence in the Northern Ireland surveys of both 1982 and 1992 that the families taken to court for absenteeism were even more disadvantaged than the families of other persistent ‘illicit’ absentees has a parallel in a more recent study by Hoyle (1998) in the north of England. Three-fifths of the families taken to court in Hoyle’s survey were headed by a lone mother and nearly four-fifths were unwaged. As was in the case of the 1992 NI survey (there being no relevant evidence in the report on the 1982 survey), the cases that became the subjects of court cases in Hoyle’s study did not appear to have behaved any

‘worse’ than the other absentees brought to the attention of the EWS, for whom other options, such as long-term support, were prescribed.

Also in the north of England, Blacktop and Blyth (1999) described a sample of absentees’ families taken to court for their non-attendance, of whom two-thirds were from lone-parent families and just over half were receiving clothing grants as well as free school meals and income support. Although the LEAs in Blacktop and Blyth’s study were unable to provide information on the general levels of social disadvantage in other absentees referred to the EWS, the levels in the families taken to court were certainly extremely high.

### **Other Factors related to Absenteeism**

A final caveat in this section concerns the emphasis on family factors related to absenteeism. This is because of the overall nature of this review. In the past teachers and other professionals in education typically laid the blame for absenteeism firmly at the door of uncaring parents and character faults in pupils. From the late 1970s onwards, however, it has been appreciated from the work of researchers like Reynolds and Murgatroyd (1977), Rutter *et al.* (1979) and Reid (1984) that such school factors as the quality of teaching, regulations, rewards and punishments, and perhaps above all pupil-teacher relationships also play a vital part. How pupils perceived these important factors will be a theme in remainder of this chapter.

## **5.2.4: Two Surveys of the Attitudes of Persistent Absentees in Northern Ireland**

### **5.2.4a: Poor Attenders’ Reflections on the Final Two Years of Compulsory Education**

In autumn 1984, a few months after they reached the end of compulsory education, the young people in the PPRU Cohort study<sup>56</sup> were interviewed for the second time (Jardine, 1987). Using subjective rather than objective measures, their teachers had rated just over three-quarters of the original sample of 2980 pupils as ‘good’ attenders, about a tenth as ‘poor’ attenders and the remaining 13% as ‘fair’ attenders.<sup>57</sup> These attendance ratings were significantly related to performance in public examinations at the end of fifth form, the difference between the mean weighted scores of the good and poor attenders being equivalent

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<sup>56</sup> See Chapter 4.2.4

<sup>57</sup> While it seems possible from Jardine’s text that some of the poor attenders may have suffered poor health, the patterns of answers suggest that much of this group’s absence was ‘unauthorised’.

to three O-levels (or present-day GCSEs) at C grade. Moreover, 44% of the poor attenders but only 12% of the good attenders had no GCE or CSE passes at the end of fifth form.

At the time of the second sweep, just over half (52.5%) of the interviewees were still in full time education: 60.2% of the good, 33.5% of the fair and 25.9% of the poor attenders.<sup>58</sup> While similar proportions were on Youth Training Programmes (YTP) the poor attenders were the least likely to be in full-time employment and the most likely to be unemployed. It should be borne in mind that, when the young people were asked about their final years of compulsory education, their answers may have been influenced by their examination results, subsequent experiences and current situation as well as by whatever factors had shaped their attendance records.

The most striking finding was that the majority of young people in all three groups, including the poor attenders, were on the whole quite or very positive about school. Although on nine out of ten fairly general items the good attenders were significantly more positive than the poor attenders, 74.7% of the poor attenders recalled the previous two years at school as enjoyable and 60.6% as worthwhile, 75.2% regarded their school work as worth doing, 84.6% felt they had been helped by their teachers to do their best and almost all (97.3%) had plenty of friends at school. Only 10.4% of the poor attenders, though as compared with only 3.3% of good attenders, felt that their teachers 'were always picking' on them. It would seem that at most only a small minority of the poor attenders could have been seriously disaffected with school. It was perhaps more ominous that only 36.5% of the poor attenders – though only 54.4% even of the good attenders – indicated that their friends took school seriously and that substantial minorities in all three attendance groups had suffered from the presence of too many troublemakers in the class.

When asked to rate how well their school had helped them to acquire each of eight areas of knowledge or skills that would be useful after they left school (e.g. 'being able to get on with other people', or 'being able to answer questions from someone who might give you a job'), the only item on which the responses of good and poor attenders were significantly different (89.2% vs 68.4%) was 'having exams and qualifications'. For the better qualified good attenders this was the way their schools had helped them most, while the poor attenders ranked it fourth. Both groups thought their schools had greatly enhanced their social skills but

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<sup>58</sup> The intervening period has certainly seen increases both in staying-on rates and in qualifications at age 16.

only a minority felt they had received help with money management, a skill which in another item they had had considered to be among the most important on the checklist.

### *Pupil Attitudes in Well and Poorly Attended Schools*

A series of further analyses compared the responses of good and poor attenders and the ratings of them by teachers in the ten secondary high (i.e. non-grammar) schools with the highest and the ten with the lowest attendance rates; these are referred to respectively as HAB and LAB schools.

In their general attitudes to school, the groups of poor attenders in HAB and LAB schools resembled each other more than they did the better attenders in their own schools. Both good and poor attenders had more often suffered from troublemakers if they were in poorly-attended schools (though only for the good attenders was the difference statistically significant) and the good attenders in low-absence schools were the only group even half of whom (54.4%) perceived their friends to be taking school seriously.

On the curricular items, the good attenders gave more positive ratings in the low-absence schools, the differences being statistically significant on money management, getting on with other people and examination qualifications. The poor attenders, however, tended to be more appreciative of the life-skills courses in high-absence schools, although none of the differences was statistically significant<sup>59</sup> and the trend was in the opposite direction (i.e. similar to that of the good attenders) on examination qualifications.

### *Teacher Ratings of the Good and Poor Attenders*

When rated by their teachers on twelve qualities, which did not include attendance or punctuality, the good attenders were perceived more positively (as would be expected) and pupils in low-absence schools than those in high-absence schools (which would, of course, have contained more poor attenders). When both pupil and school attendance levels were taken into account, a more complex picture emerged. The differences between the teachers' ratings of good and poor attenders tended to be less in the high-absence than low-absence schools on the majority of items, notably communication with teachers, relationships with

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<sup>59</sup> There may be a statistical artefact here. Because there were many more 'good' than 'poor' attenders smaller percentage differences would be significant for the good attenders. Some non-significant arithmetical differences for the poor attenders were larger than the statistically significant ones for good attenders, notable for 'being able to get on with other people' (62.5% and 84.8% as compared with 91.8% and 78.9%).

peers and the amount of supervision required. Despite the better ratings overall in low-absence than in high-absence schools, poor attenders were given better ratings in HAB than in LAB schools on several items (e.g. ‘concentration on work’ 23.2% vs 5.9% and ‘relations with peers’ 47.8% vs 29.4%) although on other items, including ‘attitude to authority’ the poor attenders in high-absence schools received worse ratings (47.8% vs 64.7%). The teachers’ ratings of the poor attenders in low-absence schools therefore appear to be more generalised than those in the high-absence schools – an ‘inverse halo’ or ‘horned’ effect? Certainly the attendance records of poor attenders would be more conspicuous in a LAB school but there is no objective evidence in the paper on which to compare their other behaviours in class.

The following conclusions can be drawn from the evidence in this book chapter:

- The poor attenders in the PPRU Cohort Study of the mid-1980s may have viewed their last two years of compulsory education somewhat less favourably than did the good attenders but the majority of them still expressed basically positive attitudes to school.
- The poor attenders suffered no shortage of friends but their friends were not very likely to provide what a school would consider good models of pupil behaviour.
- Poor attenders were more likely to receive teacher criticism if in well-attended than in badly-attended schools, where their absences would be less remarkable. Only 6.3% of those in LAB schools (actually slightly fewer than the 10.8% in HAB schools), however, felt ‘picked on’ by their teachers.

#### **5.2.4.b: A Study of ‘Condoned Absentees’ and their Parents**

Also in the mid-1980s, Leslie Caul and Joan Harbison directed a project which included interviews with 38 pupils in the fourth and fifth years (Years 11 and 12) of eight Belfast secondary schools, who had been absent for more than 14 days in one term for non-medical reasons (Caul and Harbison, 1986; Harbison, Caul and Vannan, 1989).<sup>60</sup> There were also interviews with 54 of the parents of such young people. Contrary to researchers’ usual experience, in this project it proved easier to find the parents at home than the young people at school.

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<sup>60</sup> Caul and Harbison’s (1986) research also suggested that there was a good deal of subjectivity in teachers’ and EWOs’ categorisations of absence. The percentages of pupils in the eight schools who were identified as absent for more than a quarter of the previous term entirely or mainly because of (a) illness, (b) parentally condoned absence and (c) other unauthorised reasons were too diverse for it to be likely that all teachers and EWOs were using the same criteria. Some of Caul and Harbison’s sample were originally assigned to a different category of unauthorised absence.

Although the research literature on absenteeism from the 1950s to the mid-1980s had repeatedly stated that parents' negative attitudes were an important contributory factor in absenteeism, most parents in Caul and Harbison's research expressed very positive views towards education in principle. As many as 91% said it was 'important' to go to school and 80% claimed that they themselves had 'always' gone to school though only 43% of the parents judged their schooling to have been useful to them. Responses to an open-ended question on the value of education suggested that most had an instrumental concept of education; its value lay in whether it would help a person to read and write and to get a job.

Just over half the parents (55%) said they would try to insist that their children attend and had made some kind of protest about their children's unnecessary absences but the majority admitted to being powerless to force their teenagers to attend. Over two-thirds of the parents (70%) admitted their children's attendance was 'not as good as it should be'. Nearly a third also admitted that they would not always know if their children were truanting. Trying to get the young people to attend was clearly an uphill task, since nearly two-thirds of the parents (64%) said their child 'disliked' school. This proportion, however, varied with the locality; in one area, which had two of the eight schools, every parent said that their child hated school but in two other areas the parents were fairly evenly divided on whether their child liked or disliked school.

Some 70% of the parents described their children's school as approachable and were happy to discuss problems there. Indeed, over half (54%) had contact with the school in the past year. A minority (20%) would have liked more contact.

In view of the difficult home circumstances of many absentees in surveys throughout the UK, it was noted that over half the parents volunteered information about one or more perceived sources of stress in the family. The largest single group (20%) spoke about illness or injury.

The young people's views – and it should be borne in mind that the samples of parents and pupils did not represent quite the same set of families – expressed a greater degree of indifference to school than those of the parents. Only 68% (as compared with 91%) thought it important to attend, just over half (55%) said that their parents insisted upon attendance and only 8% (compared with over 80%) said that they always attended. Less than half of the pupils (40%) however said they actually disliked school; another quarter (26%) were 'indifferent' and a third (34%) claimed to like school. The pupils therefore expressed less actual dislike of school than the parents thought their children felt, though this may have been



because the most disaffected pupils were the least likely to be at school when the interviewer called.

The reasons pupils gave for not attending were boredom (26%), dislike of particular subjects (24%) and teachers (15%). Only 18% of the pupils (7 of the 38) wished for a change of schools, since they felt that all schools were much the same. The authors interpreted their evidence, which included volunteered comments as well as percentage responses to set questions, as showing that the young people were doubting the relevance of their schooling.

When asked how they spent their time when they did not go to school, over half (56%) of the boys and 41% of all pupils described leisure activities. A third (33%) of the girls reported caring for a relative and another 24% said they were 'working', which usually meant housework. Only 6% of the boys mentioned each of these activities. About a fifth of all pupils (but a third of the boys) were 'away from home' with no further details. The parents' replies to a parallel question were rather different, especially as a quarter (24%) of the parents denied that any of their children's absences were 'unjustified'. The other main difference between parents' and pupils' answers was that fewer parents reported caring activities (7% vs 22%). If they did admit that their children's absences were sometimes unjustified, they most often described them as involved in leisure activities (31%) or working (24%), with 15% 'away from home'. Though the detailed activities of those 'away from home' remain somewhat mysterious, it would not seem that the majority of Caul and Harbison's absentees, and especially not the majority of the girls, were following the stereotype of 'roaming the streets' and slipping into crime (see, for example, SEU, 1998).

### **5.2.5: Some Survey Evidence of Persistent Absentees' Attitudes of in Great Britain**

A previous section of this chapter (5.2.3) showed that many of the links between absenteeism and various forms of disadvantage in Northern Ireland have also been found in other parts of the United Kingdom and, indeed, that details and ideas from other jurisdictions can shed light on NI findings. This section will explore whether the attitudes towards education of the absentees in the studies by Jardine (1987) and Caul and Harbison (1986) were replicated elsewhere in GB or whether the fairly positive attitudes to education in these studies were unique to Northern Ireland.

### **5.2.5a: Attitudes and Opinions of Absentees in Great Britain**

#### *From a Youth Cohort Study*

Casey and Smith (1995) analysed, by the frequency of self-reported truancy, data from the fifth cohort of the Youth Cohort Study, who completed their years of compulsory education in England and Wales in 1990. 'Truancy' was defined as the skipping of school on pupils' own initiative and the five categories ranged from 'never' to 'for weeks at a time' This was a rather different measure of absenteeism from the teacher ratings in Jardine's (1987) analysis of the PPRU Cohort data, which would have included 'condoned absence'. Nevertheless, in both studies, poor attendance was a significant predictor of GCSE results and was related to post-school destinations. In both studies it was not simply a case that few poor attenders returned to school for a sixth year; in both studies among those who went straight into the labour market good attenders were more likely to get good jobs and poor attenders to become unemployed or economically inactive. Casey and Smith's 'truants' tended to come from disadvantaged families but their poor school attendance subsequently made an independent contribution to their poor examination results and to poor post-school outcomes, perpetuating the disadvantaged nature of their lives.

In both surveys, the good attenders set much more store than poor attenders on gaining good qualifications. Conversely far more of the poor attenders in the Youth Cohort Study regarded earning money in the near future as very important.

Unsurprisingly, the poor attenders in the Youth Cohort Study (as in the PPRU study) had more negative attitudes to their previous school than good attenders. At first sight the attitudes in England and Wales appear more polarised than in Northern Ireland, with only 5% of those who never truanting but 47% of those who truanting for weeks at a time thinking school a waste of time, a larger difference than in the replies to Jardine's questions. However, the categories of attendance in the Youth Cohort Study included more extreme ones than in Northern Ireland: some 10% of the PPRU sample were in the worst-attending category but only 2.5% of the Youth Cohort in England and Wales. The two sets of figures cannot therefore be properly compared in fine detail. Moreover, even among those in the Youth Cohort Study who admitted truanting for weeks at a time, a small majority were prepared to deny that school was a waste of time.

### ***Some Evidence from South Wales***

In Ken Reid's (1981, 1984) study in two comprehensive schools in South Wales persistent absentees (PAs) and a control group (CG1) drawn from the same, generally low-stream classes as themselves shared a number of the same complaints about school. Fully ten times as many of the PAs and GC1s (38% and 42%) as of a control group drawn from more academic streams (GC2) said they enjoyed 'nothing' about school. Significantly more PAs and CG1s as GC2s disliked school for each of these reasons: teachers, curriculum, rules and discipline. Like the persistent absentees, their better attending classmates were mainly aiming only at unskilled or semi-skilled occupations. On Cohen's School Opinion Questionnaire, in comparison with the academic controls, both the PAs and GC1s found it quite difficult to make much sense out of what happens in the school and neither group felt that they were really part of the school community.

Yet, despite not getting much enjoyment from many aspects of school, the control group drawn from the same classes as the absentees recorded almost perfect attendances. They had, however, found some compensatory factors in school life. In particular the GC1 controls reported having more friends in school than did either the absentees or the more academic controls and for some of GC1 it may have been the prospect of meeting up again with friends at school that got them there in the morning. In addition, even if they complained about the curriculum in general, the GC1 group identified more individual subjects that they enjoyed than the absentees. The lower-stream control group may have found it difficult to make sense of all that was happening in the school but they were significantly less likely than the absentees to feel so confused that they did not know where to turn. They were also much less likely than the absentees to record that they could not protect their personal interests in the school or that the school was too big to look after pupils as individuals. Compared to their good attenders in their class, the absentees must have found school unfriendly, confusing and with few enjoyable spots in the day to make the rest bearable.

### ***7.2.5b: Attitudes and Opinions of Absentees' Parents in Great Britain***

*A Scottish study contemporaneous with Caul and Harbison (1986)*

In a study based on a secondary school in a working-class area of central Scotland, David Brown (1987) found that, contrary to his initial hypothesis, the parents of both conscientious attenders and of 'truants' (his term) held basically favourable views of their own schooling

and of education generally. Half the persistent absentees' parents were basically 'satisfied' with their child's school and over three-fifths thought it was doing a good job in preparing their children for the future. The criticisms which many parents did make of their children's schooling were usually of specific aspects, such as lax discipline or particular teachers. Despite a popular belief in some educational circles including the Pack Committee (1977), Brown saw little sign of parents passing on negative views of schooling to their offspring, the opinions of both generations being based mainly on their own observations and experiences. The opinions of the absentees' parents were, admittedly, often inconsistent, but then so were the attitudes of the other parents. They might, for instance, say that the school was preparing their child well for the future but later remark that it was what one learned elsewhere that mattered in adult life. Brown saw a strong element of what he termed 'working-class fatalism' in such inconsistencies; the parents tended to feel that they had little control over their lives and, although they had a belief that education might help them, they were unsure how it could. Brown noted that both sets of his parents scored low on such 'middle-class' indexes of interest in their children's education as visits to school and discussions with the child.

Where the parents of good attenders and absentees differed most in Brown's study was not in their opinions about education but in the circumstances in which they would keep their children off school. It would seem that some of Brown's so-called 'truants' would at least sometimes be better described as 'condoned absentees' though two of the three parents in the case studies were clearly concerned about their children's 'truancy'.

#### *A Recent Survey in 7 English LEAs*

A recent investigation by Malcolm *et al.* (2003) into the causes and effects of absence included a comparison of the answers of 296 parents whose children attended a fairly representative range of 13 primary and 14 secondary schools without necessarily having attendance problems (Set One) with the replies of 77 parents, unconnected with these 27 schools, who had been clients of the EWS in the same LEAs (Set Two).

Although on all issues the more representative Set One were at least a little more favourable to education, high proportions of both sets of parents thought education and qualifications important and appreciated that children who did not attend regularly would probably do badly in their schoolwork. Only a small minority of either group (3% and 8%)<sup>‡61</sup> thought that children did not do anything useful at school, though Set Two were nearly three times as

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<sup>61</sup> The symbol ‡ indicates a statistically significant difference. Levels of significance are not given.

likely to do so. The EWS clients in Set Two were, however, markedly more tolerant of children skipping school than the Set One parents, being more likely to agree that ‘missing school occasionally won’t do any harm’ (53% vs 39%)‡ and that ‘there may be more important things for children to do at home (24% vs 6%)’.‡ While almost all parents would agree for their child to stay at home if feeling unwell, more of the Set Two parents thought absences would be justified to see the doctor (88% vs 73%) or the dentist (80% vs 55%)<sup>62</sup> or if they were needed to help at home (18% vs 4%).

When asked why children might want to skip school, bullying (mentioned by 76%) was by far the most frequent reason given, followed by difficulty with the work (31%) and problems with particular teachers (30%). Boredom, suggested by only 8%, was the parents’ fourth most frequent reason. In reply to a similar question in Galloway’s (1982) earlier study in Sheffield, ‘bullying or teasing’ was by far the most frequent answer given by the parents of primary school absentees and ‘fear of the teacher’, followed by ‘extreme dislike of a particular subject by the parents of secondary school absentees.

#### *Absentees’ Parents in Three Jurisdictions*

Caul and Harbison (1986) in Northern Ireland, Brown (1987) in Scotland and Malcolm *et al.* (2003) in England all showed that most parents of persistent absentees in their studies, contrary to the popular stereotype, were quite favourably disposed towards education in principle, even if not very effective in ensuring their children attend. Because they had comparison groups of parents of better attenders, Brown (1987) and Malcolm *et al.* (2003) were, however, also able to show that the absentees’ parents were less strict about the circumstances in which they would even try to enforce attendance. The concept of ‘working-class fatalism’, which Brown used to effect, might also have been applied to many of the parents in the Northern Ireland study.

#### **7.2.6: Case Studies of Absentees in Northern Ireland**

This section will look at the findings from four Masters level dissertations at Queen’s University both to see to what extent they confirm trends already discussed earlier in the chapter but also whether they add fresh insights. Three of the dissertations were based on

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<sup>62</sup> It might be thought surprising that so many parents did *not* seem to approve of absence for such medical purposes, although non-emergency dental appointments can sometimes be made in the school holidays.

pupils attending the author's own school; the fourth on two schools where the author was involved with college students in a Youth and Community Work programme.

### ***5.2.6a: Six Condoned Absentees from a Primary School***

#### *Family Background and Previous History*

Bell's (1994) casebook studies of six P7 absentees from a school in the Shankill area of Belfast is the only dissertation of the four about primary school pupils. The well-established association between absenteeism and social disadvantage is clearly illustrated in that five of the fathers were either currently unemployed or had been unemployed in the fairly recent past and all six pupils were reported to be on free meals – as were 80% of the enrolment.<sup>63</sup> Two of the six homes were currently overcrowded and one had previously been until older siblings moved out.

All the families represented had experienced a greater or lesser degree of instability or trauma. Though all the children's parents were still alive, only three of the six were living with both natural parents. One boy, Fred, greatly upset after witnessing the aftermath of one of his mother's failed suicide attempts now lived with his grandparents while his unemployed parents and three siblings lived elsewhere. Relatives of four of the children had been in prison including two who currently were incarcerated, a father and uncle. Neither of the two girls had ever been in trouble with the police but one had seen a kneecapping. Three of the four boys had already some kind of police record and the fourth had eluded capture in a chase. Their misdemeanours were regarded as fairly typical of the local peer group: throwing bricks at cars, stealing wood for bonfires and 'pinging' windows.

Four of the six children, including both girls, had reading and mathematics scores well below the average even in that school, where academic standards were well below the Northern Ireland average. Comments on behaviour were all favourable in the early years but for all four boys had seriously deteriorated by P4, with complaints of such things as disruptiveness, distractibility and laziness. Only for Fred was there a later improvement. This was because a caring and insightful teacher, aware of Fred's troubled home circumstances, was skilled at

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<sup>63</sup> It is a slightly puzzling why some children in this and other studies in the review were on free meals despite apparently having parents, including fathers, in employment. However, such employment may have been very transitory, or part-time (especially for mothers), or very low paid (especially before the introduction of the Minimum Wage), or perhaps in some cases in an alternative economy. School records of parents' employment may have been out of date or researchers may have been told about a parent's 'usual occupation' without it being mentioned that the parent was currently out of work.

defusing potentially explosive situations, often by getting Fred to sit beside him until he felt calmer.

### *Attitude to Schooling*

Though five of the six children admitted missing school 'quite often, possibly more than one day a week', all six thought it vitally important to come to school and be educated, whether as preparation for the 'big school', for future employment or vaguer reasons. Four of the children seemed adept at feigning sickness when they wished to stay off school (in one case by swallowing washing-up liquid) and a fifth could always persuade her mother she needed extra help at home.

Individual teachers could play a major part in whether pupils liked or disliked school. The qualities admired in teachers were much as in other research: fairness, interest in the pupils, a sense of humour and well organised lessons. Conversely, teachers who shouted at pupils, had harsh discipline or who meted out what were perceived as unfair punishments could make pupils want to stay off school. Three pupils included being able to meet up with their friends as among the school's attractions.

Individual subjects were often included among the liked and disliked aspects of school but the pupils' tastes varied, apart from a general preference for more practical activities. An unanticipated finding was that two pupils with very low attainment quotients expressed enjoyment of what are often considered to be academic subjects. This seemed to be a benefit from setting pupils in P6-P7 for mathematics and English and generally pursuing a policy of differentiated teaching which gave pupils appropriate work in which they could achieve success.

### ***5.2.6b: Poor Attenders at a Girls' Secondary School***

Because of concern at 'Rockford College', an all-girls' secondary school in Co. Antrim, at the sharply deteriorating attendance over the compulsory years of some pupils, mainly from the lower attaining classes (Band C), McCormick (1999) included in her dissertation casebook studies of eight girls in Year 10 whose attendance had become unsatisfactory, falling below 80%. She originally planned to study twelve girls but one declined to take part and three were difficult to track down because of their non-attendance (cf. Caul and Harbison, 1986).

Five of the girls lived at home with both parents but three with just one parent, who in one case was the father. In three of the families there was no parent in work and five of the eight girls were on free meals. While one should not attach undue weight to such small numbers, the proportion who might be termed economically disadvantaged was, again, well above the Northern Ireland average.

Initially, six of the girls claimed that various illnesses and medical conditions were the main causes of their absences, while a seventh gave fear of bullying as her main reason. As the interviews, with their assurances of confidentiality, continued, other explanations usually emerged, such as babysitting for a neighbour, feigning sickness, recuperating from a part-time job washing dishes in a local bar/restaurant, visiting an ailing grandmother in Scotland for unscheduled long week-ends or staying at home to look after a mother whose 'bad back' often troubled her. Two of the girls admitted sometimes taking a change of clothing and going into Belfast for the day and one had a more protracted period of absence in the past when she went with a friend to work in a fairground in Newcastle, an escapade which turned particularly unpleasant.

Only two of the girls appeared – at least from the notes on their interviews – to be seriously disaffected with school and not in the slightest concerned that their absences might jeopardise their chances of qualifications and subsequently of employment. One pointed out that she had gained part-time employment easily and never failed to turn up at the workplace if she was to be paid. The other six identified liked and disliked aspects of school, the former sometimes including academic subjects as well as meeting up with friends. Other subjects might be seen as boring or too difficult but the answers of these six girls were probably not dissimilar to what their better-attending classmates might have said. Indeed some of these girls claimed to be shocked to learn the extent to which their absences had escalated<sup>64</sup> and were beginning to be worried about the effects of their attendance on their school performance. Three girls mentioned ambitions for careers in the police, child care or as a veterinary assistant, all of which they knew would require good GCSE results.

### *The Parents' Evidence*

Seven out of eight parental questionnaires, with questions modelled on ones in Caul and Harbison's (1986) research, were returned. Parent and pupil answers are not, however, individually matched. Five parents thought their own schooling had been useful, giving them

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<sup>64</sup> A school now had a new EWO who hoped to introduce some procedural changes.



skills for employment or widening their interests; the two who disagreed wrote that they had not learned much or that when they were teenagers education for girls was not thought important.

Claiming to have been good attenders themselves, all seven parents thought it important their daughters attend school since their futures required a good education. However, six parents admitted that their daughter's attendance was not as good as it should be, though they would always know if she was not at school. Six parents claimed they would always insist their daughter went to school, whether she wanted to or not, but such answers did not tally with several of the descriptions of what the girls might do if they stayed at home: listen to music, homework, watch TV or help with chores. Only two parents said that if their daughters were at home they would be ill in bed.

All but two of the parents thought that their daughters either disliked or were indifferent to school. Included in the reasons for such answers were schoolwork with which the girl could not cope, too much homework, being bullied by other pupils and being shouted at by teachers. Some parents also saw long-term health problems contributing to the absences. Most of the ways in which the parents thought the school could improve their daughters' attendances were in the area of pupil-teacher relationships. The teachers should really listen to the pupils, take them seriously, talk through their problems with them, be more pleasant to them and encourage them. However, most of the Year 10 form teachers and other staff who took part in the research held the parents responsible for their daughters' poor attendances, with only a few recognising ways in which the school should change.

#### ***5.2.6c: A Youth and Community Work Programme in Two Boys' Secondary Schools***

Because of changes in the education system, the labour market and the political situation, some aspects of the oldest of the four dissertations in this section, that of McCarney (1980), have a historical air but other findings are similar to those in more recent studies. For two consecutive years McCarney led a team of four final-year student teachers, who had opted for a Youth and Community option, in working with identified persistent absentees from a secondary school. The original plan was that the team would meet the absentees in a youth club each Friday – cleverly choosing the day when they would be least likely to attend school – for a morning of games, group discussions, crafts and help with schoolwork. The groupwork, based on a model developed by Leslie Burton at Swansea, was a central part of the programme and aimed to encourage the boys to discuss their attitudes to school, their

reasons for non-attendance and future plans. Residential visits and other excursions would provide further opportunities for personal development.

School A, to which they were attached in the first year was in a comparatively advantaged area of West Belfast. The homes of all the boys from School A who were interviewed had all five basic amenities listed on the Census form and overcrowding was not an issue. In contrast, School B, to which they were attached in the second year, drew on a catchment area nearer the inner-city where the housing stock was much older. Only 25% of the pupils from School B whom McCarney interviewed lived in homes with all five basic amenities and 75% were in overcrowded conditions. Whereas School A's attendance rate of 91% in 1977-78 was the highest for a Catholic boys' secondary school, School B's rate of 81% was among the lowest. It was therefore hypothesized that persistent non-attenders from School A would differ from the other pupils more markedly than would those from School B.

#### *Year One: the Boys from School A*

Seven boys attended regularly enough to be regarded as core members and to be the subjects of casebook studies and another four came often enough to provide additional evidence. Despite the satisfactory quality of their modern housing, all eleven came from low-income families and were on free meals and clothing allowances.<sup>65</sup> None had been on a train until a group excursion to the Ulster Museum. Of the seven core members, only three lived in two-parent households and one of these had become almost a classic school phobic following the unexpected death in hospital of a sister. One mother and one father were dead. Another father had deserted his family and there were rumours in the neighbourhood about the source of his mother's income. The seventh father was serving a prison sentence for a political murder and the mother was unable to cope well with the demands of a young family to feed, a house to clean and a husband to visit, let alone with ensuring that her children arrived at the schools to which she sent them in the mornings.

At least two of the seven boys, who had strong needs for excitement, had been in frequent trouble with the law and spoke convincingly about interrogations in Springfield and Castlereagh. One of these, age 15, was an expert driver with skills not to be found in any official driving test, who sometimes drove for the paramilitaries. When not needed by them, joy-riding was an alternative pastime but a recent escapade had ended in his being caught by

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<sup>65</sup> Before the final draft or publication try to find out the conditions for granting FSM over the years. I once heard that at some previous stage all families with 4+ children could get FSM regardless of family income.

the police in a car that turned out to have been already stolen by the paramilitaries. Having been already tarred and feathered by one side, Jim was now awaiting a court appearance. Petty thieving was endemic among the group.

Four of the seven boys from School A were in their final compulsory year and their persistent absenteeism from school mainly resulted from their perception of the curriculum as irrelevant for them. Two of them, including the expert driver, resented being in an examination class because at that time the school gave work experience only to non-examination classes. They reckoned that work experience would have more currency among local employers than CSE passes, which were what the school valued. The other two final-year pupils were on the school roll only because their 16<sup>th</sup> birthdays occurred just after the previous leaving date. One of them had secured a scarce apprenticeship in the holidays which could not be held open for him. Denied the opportunity to contribute to his single-parent household as a wage-earner, he sought a more adult status in involvement with the paramilitaries.

#### *Evidence from the School A Pupils*

Despite the illicit nature of some of the boys' extra-curricular activities, despite the way attendances slumped when schoolwork was planned and despite various unforeseen incidents, the essentials of the planned programme were implemented at School A. Videotapes showed how, encouraged by the presence of the students, intermediate in age between themselves and the tutor, the boys became increasingly fluent at discussing issues. School was described as too harsh in its discipline, too often unfair in its punishments and with pointless rules about uniforms. Teachers often went far too fast and refused to stop to explain things. Over time, what emerged was the very limited degree of trust between the pupils and many of the teachers. Even teachers with counselling roles were not all thought capable of respecting pupils' confidences. ("They're just teachers sitting in an office.") A few teachers might be regarded as 'all right', including one who came to a Friday session, listened to what the boys said and was able to explain why the school authorities had made certain decisions. However, even that teacher was really accepted only by those whom he had already taught. There was some relief all round that a planned visit by the headmaster never materialised.

On school attendance, there was strong agreement at one session that it was a parent's duty 'to send you to school'. Whether one actually arrived there was another matter. There was generally thought to be 'something wrong' with the school phobic's mother who let him stay at home. It became evident in discussions that persistent non-attenders often began by missing only the occasional day – typically when homework had not been done – but absences might

later increase in frequency and length. Occasionally non-members of the group, who had homework undone, would try to join for the day as an alternative to facing the subject teacher.

Another perspective on attendance emerged one Friday when five girls appeared and asked to join the group claiming that girls played truant too, only they usually spent the time in the home of someone whose parents were at work (cf. McGuinness and Jardine, 1984, in section 7.2.2c). Membership of the group was, however, restricted to pupils on the roll of School A.

Follow-up visits to the boys' homes early the following autumn indicated that all had benefited from the programme. The four leavers had either embarked on a chosen career or were persisting with applications to get on an appropriate Government Training Scheme (GTS), perhaps with a temporary part-time job in the meantime to provide some money. The only one who was actually unemployed at the time was spending week-ends cooking at Corymeela while waiting the results of an application for a GTS pre-catering course. The former school phobic was now a regular attender at a pre-catering course and staying on in the evenings to catch up with lost work in the basic academic subjects, much to his mother's delight and amazement. The two younger boys in the group were seen to have matured considerably.

When evaluating the project, it was found that much as the boys had enjoyed the excursions and the residential visit, the group discussions were what they felt had helped them most. ("The talk in the wee room was best.") They had found it valuable to learn how others saw themselves and the school and through discussion to understand themselves better. They had also learned that "not all teachers are bad".

Few details are given of parental interviews but at least two mothers had found Fridays by far the easiest weekday to get their sons out of bed. The one mother cited at some length expressed views similar in essence to those in McCormick's (1999) study of absentee girls some 20 years later.<sup>66</sup> She wished that teachers would try to find out something about pupils as individuals, worthy of respect, before meting out harsh and often unfair punishments, which made the boys resentful. Her son, born blind in one eye, had several times been punished for giving 'silly looks' when he had only been screwing up his eyes to see something. He had preferred to accept punishment rather than risk derision from classmates by admitting a disability. She admitted her son was impetuous but, if properly handled at

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<sup>66</sup> See section 7.2.6b

school, might have followed an older brother to university. The boy's high intelligence had been clearly evident to the project team.

*Year Two: the Project in School B*

Experiences in the first year – including advice from the boys – led McCarney to focus the next year on younger boys whose absenteeism might be less deeply ingrained. The project in School B, however, ran into other difficulties. Friday activities in the youth club premises in School B's catchment area became increasingly restricted, partly because the building was inadequately heated, with regularly broken windows and a leaking roof but even more so because of the project's deteriorating relations with the club leader, the club secretary (a teacher at School B), the sprightly 86-year-old caretaker and a number of teachers. Much of the building was made out-of-bounds to the project. Some group members would bizarrely prefer to have their attendance marked at school and then to play post-registration truancy at the club than just have their attendance marked at the club. Later, the club was found to be not unconnected to a branch of the local paramilitaries, whose activities deterred several boys from regular attendance at both school and the club.

There is much less evidence in the dissertation that the five core members of the project at School B showed the same personal development as the seven in School A had the previous year. One 14-year-old was attending school much better but attributed that mainly to a reorganisation of the classes. Three other boys were truanting or 'mitching' as much as ever while the fifth was not only a persistent non-attender but progressing towards a career of theft and crime. When evaluating the programme, the boys in School B tended to concentrate on the enjoyable excursions and said little about the group work, of which they would have done much less than the group in School A.

In their comments on their schooling the Group B boys, like those in Group A, were highly critical of the harsh discipline imposed by many teachers and disliked the regulations about wearing school uniform. They rejected much of the curriculum, including a new integrated curriculum on which school staff had spent much time but which the principal admitted was not taught very well.

*A Comparison of the Boys in School B with those in School A*

Drawing on the sociological theories of Durkheim, McCarney (1980) saw the boys in School A as 'functional rebels' who had rejected the system to which the school and the majority of

its pupils belonged because it gave them low status. They had then learned deviant ways of behaviour. The boys in Group B were seen as having grown up in an alternative culture to that of the school, which was alien to them. Several had acquired from home and neighbourhood an alternative set of skills and knowledge to what is taught in school. One boy was a skilled poacher. Catching live rabbits with ferrets to sell to the 'greyhound man' was a more or less legitimate source of income, depending on whether they should have been in school at the time, and an early group excursion took the form of a hunting trip.

The boys in School A were better able to understand the project's ground rule that, though they could speak freely in discussions about their activities, without fear of retribution, while actually on the project they must not steal, vandalise property or commit any other delinquent acts. A sign of this was that the behaviour of the School A boys at a short residential course at Easter had impressed the prior who ran the centre. By contrast, when the School B group stopped at a mini-market to buy lunch on the way to the hunting trip they emerged with far, far more than their pocket money could have purchased and were dismayed at being required to return many obviously pilfered non-edible items. A 3-day visit to Dublin in the Easter Holidays was an outstanding success until on the last evening two boys, having run out of money, raided the gas meter in the hostel. Perhaps it was a sign of some kind of progress that the culprits were ostracised by the other group members but the resulting rift was so serious that none of the group attended any further Friday sessions and the project was terminated apart from the follow-up interviews.

The family circumstances of at least some of the School B group seemed even more worrying than anything encountered at School A. Two of the group were brothers, with a father whose erratic disciplining included at least one beating so severe that hospital treatment was necessary and tying them to their beds for a day or locking them in the small cupboard under the stairs<sup>67</sup> when they came in late. The boys were well enough fed and clothed but neither parent appeared to show them any affection; for example, their mother seemed quite unconcerned when one of them ran away from home, saying she did not want him back. The project team agonised over whether the parents should be reported for child abuse. Another boy clearly loved his grandmother but his father was unknown and only the immediate family knew which of the many 'aunts' in the household was his true mother. The parents of the other two boys were, however, reported to be now taking an interest in their attendance, in one case with some effect.

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<sup>67</sup>At least a decade and a half before the Harry Potter books!

Added to such impaired emotional relationships were the problems of poverty, of overcrowding in most homes and of living in an area severely afflicted by the political unrest of the times.

#### ***5.2.6d: Monitoring Attendance at a Boys' Secondary School***

In an all-boys' secondary school in Belfast, where unjustified absenteeism was a serious problem, Gannon (1999) evaluated a new initiative called PACT (Promoting Attendance and Combating Truancy), which combined an electronic registration system with follow-up procedures. Gannon interviewed 15 poor attenders (five from each of Years 10, 11 and 12) and six parents of absentees from an approach sample of 20 parents. Additionally, he interviewed 15 teachers and a group of EWOs. Gannon presented his interview evidence in the form of the numbers of respondents in the different categories who made particular points, with some illustrative quotations but, unlike the other writers in section 7.2.6, did not write individual casebook studies.

There is little background data on the sample as such but the school had a high FSM entitlement and 50% of the pupils were judged to be in need of special help. Only one of the six parents interviewed had ever been to a parents' evening and their main contacts with the school had been through "home visits by the EWO or when they were sent for by the school."

In his dissertation, Gannon usually employed the direct term 'truancy' rather than something like 'unauthorised absenteeism' and in fact 'Truancy' is the first word of his title. Since the absenteeism described seems to have been mainly, though not entirely, on the initiative of pupils, this is not inappropriate. One mother, however, neatly explained a form of condoned absenteeism:

"My son is never on the beak. I only keep him off when I need him in the house."

#### *Extent of Unauthorised Absenteeism*

None of the 15 pupils attempted to deny that in O'Keefe's (1994) terms they regularly committed both blanket and post-registration truancy (PRT). Indeed they appeared to commit both, especially PRT, more often than the school realised. In post-registration truancy, groups of friends might go off for a smoke at a lesson changeover, missing the next class. It seemed that they usually stayed on the school premises rather than go home or elsewhere. The 15 boys varied in the length of their blanket truancy: while four had never stayed off as long as a

week, five had gone off for at least three weeks at a time. All six parents admitted their sons truanted. Three of them played down its seriousness, appearing to see it as just something all boys do, especially in fine weather. From other interview evidence it seemed that the parents were, not entirely unreasonably, more worried about their sons' possible involvement in alcohol, drugs, other substance abuse or joyriding than with their missing a few days from school.

### *Reasons for Truancy*

All 15 boys gave dislike of teachers as a main reason why they would wish to skip school. Twelve volunteered this answer immediately and the other three mentioned it when presented with a check-list of possible reasons. They intensely disliked teachers who shouted at them, even when they were trying their best, or who humiliated them in front of their classmates. However, when asked later what they thought about the school, they viewed most teachers favourably as 'sound' or 'dead on'. Like pupils in numerous other studies, the boys appreciated teachers who treated them fairly, who had a sense of humour and from whose well-organised lessons they felt they learned something worthwhile. Unfortunately they did not perceive all their teachers to be like that.

Two other reasons for truancy mentioned by most of the boys were peer pressure to join their friends out of class and dislike of particular lessons. However the latter objections were less to any particular subject than to methods of teaching, especially 'boring' lessons in which pupils had to 'write all the time.' Five boys each mentioned bullying by other pupils and dislike of wearing the uniform as deterrents to going to school.

Three of the pupils' reasons for skipping school were also endorsed by parents. Two parents cited instances of boys receiving unfair treatment from particular teachers and several regretted the 'bad company' their sons had got into. The boys' dislike of the uniform regulations, especially regarding footwear, were well known to the mothers. Ripped schoolbags caused problems in families near the breadline and one mother had been more than reluctant to buy a new school blazer for a son who would be leaving school in a few months' time.

Though both pupils and parents blamed mainly school factors for the boys' unwarranted absences, only three of the 15 teachers interviewed acknowledged that factors under the school's control might play any part. The majority blamed the National Curriculum, though curriculum content did not seem to be a major factor for the boys. Other reasons which



teachers suggested included home problems, lack of parental interest in their children's education and peer pressure. The last was also mentioned by both pupils and parents. The answers, however, illustrate the tendency noted by many researchers for blame in educational as in other matters to be laid at the door of other parties.

### *The Perceived Value of Schooling*

Despite their poor attendance, all 15 boys had something good to say about the school, even if just about the opportunity to meet up with their friends. Ten pupils thought school was 'important' for getting a job. The subjects they rated as important were the ones they saw as helping them to find employment. They all mentioned mathematics and English and other 'important' subjects included Home Economics, Careers, Art, CDT, Science and work experience. Various boys are quoted with ambitions to be joiners, chefs or to work in a leisure centre.

All parents praised the school and its facilities and two were particularly appreciative of the attentiveness of form teachers. There were, however, some criticisms of the unfair behaviour of particular teachers, of a lack of homework and of the strict uniform regulations. Two of the six also expressed some of the most apathetically negative parental attitudes towards education encountered in Northern Ireland during the literature search for this review, certainly since a minimum leaving age of 16 became established. As one of them said:

“He hates school. He takes off to work with his uncle. He needs the money. I can't wait until he is old enough to leave.”

Quite properly for a researcher, Gannon raises the possibility that, since the parents were interviewed in school by a teacher, they may in their praise of the school have given what they saw as desired or expected answers rather than what they really felt. Another possibility is that, since only six out of 20 parents responded to the invitation to be interviewed, the evidence gathered may have been unrepresentatively favourable to the school. In that case the fact that a third of the small sample seemed so uninterested in their sons' education could be very ominous.

### *Pupils' and Parents' Opinions of the PACT Initiative*

The pupils generally acknowledged that truancy was now much more likely to be detected since attendance in nearly every period was recorded. One boy, however, rightly calculated that if a mother wrote a fictitious absence note the son would escape censure.

The parents all praised the new system. One mother particularly appreciated that there was now always someone with whom she could discuss her son's attendance problems. Another was relieved that the school now really knew whether her son was present every period whereas, when she had contacted them in the past, she had often been told he was present when he was not. Teachers, however, saw the success of the PACT initiative depending partly on parental co-operation and it was feared that the parents' active co-operation might be less than the comments in this paragraph suggest. There was some justification for their fears in some of the answers given even from what may have been an unrepresentatively conscientious and supportive group of parents. Gannon's research took place in the first year of the initiative, when there were still teething troubles, and time would be needed to discover how well it could work.

### **7.2.7: Some Important Findings from this Section**

In Northern Ireland, as elsewhere in the UK, pupils persistently absent for 'disallowed' reasons' come disproportionately from disadvantaged homes. Although many pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds attend school satisfactorily, low socio-economic status (SES) was in one major NI survey found to be even more closely linked to unauthorised absenteeism than to illness.

The most useful studies include a small group that have compared details of home backgrounds and the attitudes of unauthorised absentees with comparison groups of similar SES rather than just with the general population.

Such studies suggested that absentees' homes often tended to suffer from emotional upheavals and family discord and the homes might be less well organised.

Unsurprisingly, persistent absentees enjoyed school less than did good attenders and they seemed more prone than other pupils to have particularly difficult relationships with at least some of their teachers

A number of studies showed persistently unauthorised absentees to value qualifications less than did other pupils.

Bullying was disturbingly often given as a reason for avoiding school.

However, many pupils persistently absent for disallowed reasons had something good to say about the school, even if just about its social opportunities. Many absentees could distinguish between teachers who were 'alright' and those with whom they were at loggerheads. On the other hand at least one important study showed them to have fewer friends than good attenders in the same low-stream classes.

Few absentees' parents – in studies that sought first-hand evidence from them – showed fundamental opposition to schooling although they might query its value for pupils near the leaving age and, perhaps with justification, might be highly critical of certain aspects of their child's school.

Most absentees' parents paid at least lip service to the importance of getting a good education and many were disappointed in their child's poor attendance. They were, however, not usually good at translating such dispositions into getting the child to attend regularly.

Several studies showed absentees' parents to give less priority to attendance than other parents and to be more ready than other parents to accept certain reasons for staying off school.

Research has, however, shown that the causes of absenteeism are complex and vary from child to child.

## **CHAPTER SIX: Young People Showing Signs of Disaffection from the Education System.**

### **PART TWO: EXCLUDED PUPILS**

#### **6.1: Introduction to this Section**

Although many of the pupils in the studies of absenteeism and of young people with behavioural problems (see Chapters 5 and 7) had been excluded from school at some stage, either temporarily or permanently, this section concentrates on studies where the focus is on exclusion as such. Three main questions are asked here:

1. Do children and young people excluded from school come from more disadvantaged families than the age group as a whole?
2. Apart from issues of family disadvantage, are any categories of pupils at particular danger of being excluded?
3. What do young people think of the schools from which they have been excluded and of the processes that led up to their exclusion?

Excluded pupils' views on any alternative educational provision they experienced will be examined in the second part of Chapter 7 rather than in this section, since both in Northern Ireland and England such provision was often not only for excluded pupils but also for other groups of young people who ran into difficulties when attending mainstream schooling full-time.

The Northern Ireland literature on exclusions seems to be much sparser than that on absenteeism. Indeed, only three Northern Ireland studies relevant to this section were located, all, however, published within the past five years. These were the two reports written for the DENI by Rosemary Kilpatrick and her colleagues about pupils suspended or expelled from Northern Ireland schools Province-wide in 1996-97 (Kilpatrick *et al.*, 1999)<sup>68</sup> and about multiply suspended pupils (Kilpatrick and Barr, 2002)<sup>69</sup> and, thirdly, a more qualitative study in a single Board area which focused on eleven excluded pupils of secondary school age (Eastwood, 2000).

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<sup>68</sup> Much of this study is about the incidence of suspensions and expulsions and provision for excluded pupils. No evidence was taken directly from either excluded pupils or their parents.

<sup>69</sup> Consideration of several parts of Kilpatrick and Barr (2002)'s report on various types of alternative provision for excluded pupils is deferred until section 7.5 since not all young people attending some of these alternative forms of education had necessarily been excluded from school.

## **6.2: Characteristics of Pupils Excluded from Northern Ireland Schools**

### ***6.2a: Gender and Types of School***

Kilpatrick, Barr and Wylie (1999) obtained approximately an 80% response when they asked all post-primary and special schools and a sample of primary schools in Northern Ireland for information on all pupils they had suspended or expelled during the school year 1996-97. Among the 2631 pupils<sup>70</sup> recorded by their schools as having been suspended that year, males outnumbered females in a ratio of approximately 5:1. Approximately 79% of the suspended pupils were from secondary high schools, 11% from grammar schools, 6% from primary schools and 3.7% from special schools. Though the majority of the suspended pupils were in Years 10-12 of secondary high schools, there was concern, similar to that expressed in a number of English studies (e.g. Hayden, 1996; SEU, 1998) that the number of suspensions in the primary sector was increasing. It was observed that there were twice as many suspensions from controlled primary as from maintained primary schools, although suspension rates from post-primary schools in the two main denominational sectors were similar. Kilpatrick and her colleagues also expressed concern about the number of pupils suspended from special schools, including those set up to provide for pupils with educational and behavioural difficulties (EBD).

Most of the 2631 pupils were suspended only once but in a smaller group of 281 pupils suspended three or more times (the 'multiply suspended' group) the gender difference was even more marked than in the whole sample, with males outnumbering females in a ratio of about 9:1. However, among the 76 pupils reported to have been *expelled* in 1996-97, all from the post-primary sector, the gender ratio was again about 5:1, much the same as in the whole sample of suspended pupils. Multiply suspended and expelled pupils, like the total sample of suspended pupils, were mainly in Years 10-12, the largest number of expelled pupils (42% of the total) being in Year 11.

Eastwood's (2000) analysis of 1998-99 data in one ELB on pupils who were 'out of school' (a concept that included long-term non-attenders as well as pupils who had been suspended or expelled) found that, as with Kilpatrick *et al's* (1999) excluded pupils, the vast majority (90.1%) had been in secondary high schools. In this NEELB study males again outnumbered females, although in a ratio of only about 2:1. In contrast to Kilpatrick *et al's* survey which

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<sup>70</sup> Even if the figure of 2631 is, as Kilpatrick *et al.* (1999) thought, an underestimate of the true number of pupils suspended by these schools, the present report is more concerned with the characteristics of excluded pupils than with the actual numbers.

found this trend only in the primary sector, the NEELB study showed that disproportionately more pupils were 'out' of controlled than maintained *secondary* schools.

#### 6.2b: Home Factors

In Kilpatrick et al's (1999) survey data on free school meal eligibility (FSME) were available for some 79% of the 2631 pupils suspended from schools in Northern Ireland in 1996-97. Considering only those whose FSME was known, of the pupils suspended just once during the year, 42.2% were entitled to free meals; among those suspended more than twice during the year, 53.9% were entitled to free meals. The difference between the FSM rates of the multiply suspended pupils and those suspended just once was statistically significant.

Pupils reported in the survey to have been *expelled* were even more socio-economically disadvantaged than those whom the school was prepared to take back after a period on suspension. Among the 66 expelled pupils whose eligibility (or otherwise) for FSM was known, no fewer than 46 had been entitled to free school meals at the time of expulsion. That is, 60.5% of all 76 expelled pupils and 69.7% of those for whom the information was available were entitled to free meals. Assuming that the FSME in Northern Ireland had not risen much above 30% by 1996-97,<sup>71</sup> even those suspended just once would have had an above average likelihood of free meal entitlement. Debarring such pupils from school could have more serious consequences for the family budget or the young person's nutrition than would be the case for pupils not entitled to free meals.

Eastwood (2000) did not indicate how many of the 'out of school' pupils in the NEELB area in 1998-99 were entitled to free meals. Another part of his paper, however, reports in some detail on the home circumstances of a randomly-drawn sample of eleven pupils, eight male and three female, all excluded from secondary high schools in the NEELB, who were interviewed by EWOs already familiar to them. In each case there was also an interview with a parent/guardian and a staff member from the school. There was no doubt that most of the young people lived in disadvantaged circumstances. Only three of them were living at home with both birth parents, although in four other cases both parents had joint responsibility for the child. One mother was dead. Only two fathers were currently employed – one as a taxi-driver and the other as a baker – and only two others mentioned any previous occupation – one as a roof-tiler and the other as a labourer. Only two mothers worked outside the home,

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<sup>71</sup> It was 28.6% in 1992 at the time of the absenteeism survey. This is one of several places where a list of FSM entitlements in NI over time would be most useful before the final version of the report.

even part-time, the others being classified as 'housewives'. At least seven and possibly eight of the households were entirely dependent on state benefits. At least that number would have been entitled to claim free school meals for their children, although this specific information is not given. Most of the sample were members of large families, the average number of children in the household being five and the range 3-10.

Most of these NEELB families had also experienced social or behavioural problems. Seven parents expressed concerns about the sample members' behaviour or the 'bad company' they were keeping and only two were not concerned about the behaviours of *any* of their children. Seven of the families had some involvement with the police. This was usually because some of the younger members had been engaged in shoplifting, breaking and entry or trespass but in one family both the father and a son were in prison for burglary. Three families were reported to have been involved with the social services and in one family all four children were on the At-Risk Register. From replies given to a question about things that had made them happy or sad, it is evident that at least one of the sample had been in care. One boy hated his father who, he claimed, was violent towards his mother and himself and another was afraid whenever his father came home drunk. Otherwise, generally good relations within the family were reported and most of the young people felt they could talk with their parents.

Most of Eastwood's (2000) sample of excluded pupils can therefore be described as economically disadvantaged and as living in households that had suffered more than most from social problems and involvement with the police or justice systems. The incidence of 'broken' homes was also well above average. The parents' employment histories (and the likely educational histories lying behind these) suggests that they would have limited cultural capital with which to support their children through school and into realistically ambitious careers. However, in most of the homes – though with two marked exceptions – the current emotional atmosphere seemed good, with the majority of the young people feeling able to discuss matters with their parents.

#### 6.2c: Progress at School

The survey by Kilpatrick *et al.* (1999) was carried out a time when the Northern Ireland Code of Practice (1996) for pupils with special educational needs (SEN) was not yet statutory – although schools were working towards it – and it was known that some 2% of the school population had statements of special educational needs in October 1996. However, of the 2631 suspended pupils, 5.7% (i.e. nearly three times as many) had such statements and another 3.2% were in the process of being statemented. Some of these statements were for

emotional and behavioural difficulties rather than learning difficulties or learning difficulties alone. The disproportionately high number of pupils excluded from special schools (see above) would seem another aspect of the same trend.

Yet another indication of the vulnerability of suspended pupils, and especially multiply suspended pupils, were the well above average proportions known to such agencies as the educational welfare and educational psychology services. The information was too incomplete to be used in between a quarter and a third of the 2631 cases, but of the remainder, 40.2% of the multiply suspended and 19.5% of those suspended just once had been seen by an EWO. Similarly, more than twice as many of the multiply suspended as of those suspended only once during 1996-97 had been seen by an educational psychologist. Even the percentages for the 'singly suspended' pupils are much higher than for the general school population.

Four of the young people in Eastwood's (2000) paper recollected having learning difficulties in primary school and this number doubled to eight for difficulties with secondary school studies. Seven of the sample were considered by their teachers to have learning difficulties, though it is not indicated how far the groups with self-reported and ascribed learning difficulties overlapped. The teachers were not always very explicit about the pupils' learning difficulties but there were mentions of reading problems and poor concentration. The attendance of nine of the eleven pupils was described as 'poor' or 'just satisfactory'. Information on in-school remedial provision was too patchy to be reported here and it is perhaps more significant that in 'more than half the schools sampled' the teachers said they were not involved in these pupils' education when they were 'out of school'. The few who were involved said they had liaised with the home-tutor or with the Guidance Centre. Only three of the young people had, however, received any home tuition, only one was reported to have been admitted to a Guidance Centre and it was evidence that several of the young people had received no education for a considerable period. The above factors were all likely to have helped to shape the young people's attitudes to school and to education.

6.2d: Any groups of pupils whose exclusion rates cause particular concern?

An issue in the research literature on exclusions in England is the extent to which pupils with certain characteristics – most notably black African-Caribbean boys and children in local authority care (LAC) but also such other groups as Travellers and school-age mothers – are



over-represented in the numbers excluded from school.<sup>72</sup> One must therefore ask if any such group of pupils in Northern Ireland is particularly vulnerable to exclusions and in particular whether any group might be unfairly discriminated against.

The residential social workers interviewed by Kilpatrick *et al.* (1999) were concerned that the children in their charge were discriminated against and suspended too readily, with some schools and teachers automatically assuming that it was the young people's fault that they were in care. Having 'accommodated' pupils excluded from school entailed additional supervisory duties for care workers. Besides, exclusion from school could be contagious in a unit, they told the researchers. If one or two pupils were excluded, the others might refuse to attend. One unit was visited where all eight residents had been out of school during the year.

During the research, disturbing evidence was also given to Kilpatrick *et al.* (1999) in focus group interviews with social workers. They feared that having a child suspended could put additional strains on parents, who sometimes found such offspring 'beyond control' and asked for them to be taken into care. The Social Services Inspectorate report (c1998) makes the further point that, for children and young people already in care, suspension from school could put intolerable burdens on foster parents or residential care workers who had then to provide supervision for 24 hours a day. Under such pressure, placements could break down.

Three other surveys were located which measured the incidence of suspensions among LACs in a single Northern Ireland Health Board or Trust area. In a small-scale questionnaire survey of 18 young people all in residential care in the Southern Health and Social Services Board Area no fewer than ten (55.6%) of them reported having been suspended from school (Maxwell, 2000). In another somewhat larger survey of 71 looked after children in the same area, most of whom (83%) were in foster care, only 9% reported suspensions (RES, 2000). A survey in the South and East Belfast Health and Social Services Trust of looked after children, of whom 58% were in foster care and only 14% in local authority residential care (Kilpatrick and Barr, 1999) found that 15 (16.1%) of the 93 pupils on whom information was available had been suspended from school in the 1997-98 or 1998-99 academic years. It would seem that in Northern Ireland in the late 1990s being in residential care was a greater risk factor for suspensions than foster care.

No research evidence was, however, found of any ethnic minority being disproportionately excluded from Northern Ireland schools. There are, however, very few Black children of

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<sup>72</sup> See Section 7.3.3 below.

African-Caribbean origin in Northern Ireland schools. Nor did there appear to be research evidence to support the hypothesis that Traveller children in Northern Ireland might be disproportionately excluded (after enrolment) on the grounds that their frequently poor academic achievements and relative lack of familiarity with the *mores* of schools catering mainly for settled pupils could lead to situations which schools might find difficult to handle. The attendance of Traveller children and young people has, however, been a major problem in Northern Ireland as elsewhere, especially in the post-primary years and especially for boys in this age group. The very age and gender group which in most other ethnic communities (including that of the white majority) is most prone to suspensions and exclusions – namely boys in Years 10-12 – has in the case of Travellers, at least until recently, seldom remained on the school rolls.

There is, however, evidence that, at least until fairly recently, school-age mothers in Northern Ireland might well find themselves excluded from their schools. These young women and their attitudes to education are the topic of Chapter One.

The Northern Ireland evidence on the backgrounds of pupils excluded from schools can be seen to be sounder in some respects than others. There is substantial evidence that more boys than girls and more pupils in Years 10-12 than either younger or older pupils are suspended or expelled from Northern Ireland schools, as are more pupils entitled than not entitled to free school meals. Children in residential care appeared to be at particularly high risk. A disproportionate number of the excluded pupils had been stated in Kilpatrick *et al's* (1999) survey or, in the NEELB study, were otherwise in academic difficulty. However, only for 11 young people in a single study within one Board area (Eastwood, 2000) was fairly detailed research evidence of home circumstances found, far less evidence than on the home circumstances of persistent absentees. It could even be argued that, since in each of Eastwood's eleven families a parent agreed to be interviewed and since relations between the young people and their parents were mostly good, the families may, as a group, have been less dysfunctional than the average excluded pupil's family. It therefore seems wise to set the Northern Ireland findings in the wider context of other research in Great Britain.

### **6.3: Characteristics of Pupils Excluded from Schools in Great Britain**

#### 6.3a: Home Factors

Two quite recent major studies in England and Wales succeeded in obtaining substantial amounts of background information on samples of 343 and 193 young people who had been

excluded from at least one school. In research primarily aiming to trace the links over time between exclusion and offending, Berridge *et al.* (2001) examined the files on 343 young people, who had been excluded from schools in six LEAs about three or four years earlier and involved to a greater or lesser extent in local voluntary sector projects, five in different parts of England and one in Wales. (The gap in time was necessary to follow up the effects of exclusion on future behaviour.) Reliance on project files compiled several years before, however, inevitably meant that missing data were usually truly lost and the quality and quantity of family background data provided by schools varied greatly. Berridge and his colleagues complemented the file data with in-depth interviews with 28 of the young people. Since this interview sample all lived in or near London and was self-selected, it was not claimed to be representative of excluded young people but it added a wealth of detailed illustrative evidence.

The file data, which in the circumstances should be regarded as providing *minimum* estimates of sample characteristics,<sup>73</sup> revealed serious levels of social, economic and educational disadvantage. Nearly half the sample (47%) was eligible for free school meals, as compared with 17% of the whole secondary school population in England and Wales at the time. Almost as many (45%) – but doubtless an overlapping group – were living in lone-parent households. A similar percentage (45%) had been referred to the social services, no fewer than 18% had been in care at some stage and 8% had been on the child protection register. Substantial minorities had been involved with the police (37%) and the Youth Justice system (20%) but all the percentages in this paragraph are far above the average for the general population. From the interviews it was also evident that not only had these young people been in contact with professionals from a wide range of organisations and agencies but, because of the disruption in their lives, they had many changes of social workers, carers, psychologists and teachers.

The interviewees' tales illustrated the complexity of troubles they had experienced, although a few of these problems, such as chronic asthma, are not uncommon in the general population

“sexual abuse, addiction to drugs or alcohol, homelessness, parental violence, frequent movement between the homes of separated parents or other family members,.. chronic asthma, educational crises, or crises precipitated by the young person's offending, loss of a sibling....., the loss of a significant member of the extended family through death or as a result of relocation and/or family conflict and the

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<sup>73</sup> If there was no mention of a variable, e.g. social service involvement, it had to be assumed that it did not apply to the young person in question.

loss of friends and supportive community networks through relocation.”

A number of interviewees recalled events as stressful as any in the mini-biographies of persistent absentees and disaffected pupils in Northern Ireland (Chapters 5 and 7). One boy's father was shot when he was aged 14. Two of the mothers were long-term alcoholics. One boy and his mother were attempting to transfer to another housing estate because of a violent neighbourhood feud.

Daniels *et al.* (2003) tracked 193 excluded young people, mostly from Years 9 and 10<sup>74</sup>, over a two year period in order to examine the influences of pre-exclusion factors and of post-exclusion processes and provision on their outcomes and life chances. As requested by the Department of Education and Skills, which commissioned the research and which was particularly concerned about groups believed to be ‘at risk’, they deliberately over-represented young people from ethnic minorities (only 53.9% were white) and included 20 teenagers in care in the sample. Whenever possible, the young people and/or their parents were interviewed both at the start and end of the project. During the two-year period the team tried to keep track of the sample's whereabouts through visits to and telephone conversations with the staff of units they had attended, link workers and other professionals as well as with the young people themselves and their parents.

Although the data were far from complete, there were again high incidences of several adverse home circumstances. A quarter (25%) of the 76 fathers whose occupations were known were described as ‘unemployed’ and it was suspected the proportion would be higher among those for whom there were no data. At the time of the exclusion 95 (61.3%) of the 155 whose household compositions were known were not living with both natural parents. Of the 161 on whom there was adequate information on whether or not they had a record of pre-exclusion offending, 62 (38.5%) had such a record. As many as 45.5% of those on whom there were data had some pre-exclusion involvement with drugs, although there were insufficient data to analyse this involvement in more detail in the whole sample.

Vignettes in the report give case study evidence of some particularly disadvantaged home situations, which – to use an extreme understatement – would not have encouraged the young person to concentrate on his or her school studies. Two boys in Vignettes 3.1 had witnessed serious domestic violence resulting in the hospitalisation of their mothers; one of these boys found it difficult to live with the fact that he had been unable to protect his mother from attempted rape and murder. The father of one sample member and a sister of another were in

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<sup>74</sup> Years 10 and 11 in Northern Ireland

prison for murder. Other young people gave details of their or their family's involvement in drugs.

Other reports showing an association between school exclusion and adverse home circumstances include Hayden and Dunne (2001) and Ofsted (1996).<sup>75</sup> The latter noted in par. 15 that the children of families under financial or emotional stress are more likely than most to engage in behaviour leading to exclusion. Although his analyses were limited to one large comprehensive school, Ashford (1994) observed that children from one-parent families were twice as likely as those from two-parent families to have fixed-term exclusions and seven times as likely to have a permanent exclusion. Children from reconstituted families (e.g. living with their natural mother and a step-father) were in even greater danger of exclusion from school; they were eight times as likely as those in two-parent families to be indefinitely excluded and 13 times as likely to be expelled.

Carol Hayden (1996 and in other publications) sees pupils excluded from primary schools as a particularly vulnerable group. In a study of 218 primary-age children excluded from schools in two local authority areas, though usually (76% of cases) for a fixed period, at least 81% of the children in the county council LA and 90% in the London Borough were already known to such out-of-school agencies as social service departments, child and family guidance clinics and various education support agencies. Of 38 children chosen for more detailed study, only four were living with both their natural birth parents. The case histories included examples of violent family relationships, abuse and bereavements, while some of the black and mixed-race families also mentioned racial harassment. All but four of the 38 children were receiving SEN support at school. Parsons (1994)<sup>76</sup> has also drawn attention to the very adverse home circumstances of many of the children excluded from primary schools

A number of smaller-scale interview studies of excluded pupils provide further, and usually quite detailed, evidence. Although the paper makes no specific mention of poverty, all six excluded pupils interviewed by Gersch and Nolan (1994) had experienced family disruptions, e.g. parental separation or interrupted care. These disruptions had often necessitated additional changes of school. Gersch and Nolan (1994) believed that their sample's understandable pre-occupation with their family problems was one major reason why they had difficulty in coping at school, although they also tended to have limited academic and social skills.

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<sup>75</sup> Both cited in the literature review in Appendix A 1 of Daniels *et al.* (2003).

<sup>76</sup> Cited in Hayden (1996) and Kilpatrick *et al.* (1999).

Of the six young pupils, all aged 16, whom Pippa John (1996) interviewed in a centre for young people excluded from school, only two were living with both natural parents. One boy was living with a 'guardian' after a very unsettled childhood with periods in local authority care. Two of the families are recorded as being dependent on state benefits, in one case entirely and the other to supplement the mother's part-time earnings. The financial circumstances of the other four families are not mentioned but since three of them – in addition to the two on state benefits – were living on council estates or inner-city housing association properties, they are unlikely to have been particularly advantaged.

### **6.3b: Age and Gender**

The research designs adopted by Berridge *et al.* (2001) and Daniels *et al.* (2003) made it inevitable that the majority of the excluded pupils in their samples were in the last two or three years of compulsory education but their focusing on this age group was based on evidence, including official Government statistics, that these were the years when expulsions were most frequent. In 1998 the Social Exclusions Unit reported that 80% of excluded pupils were aged 12-15 and 50% were 14 or 15, though there were fears that the proportion from primary schools was rising.

A recent graph in *The Times Public Agenda* supplement of 7<sup>th</sup> October 2003 showed that in the school year 2001-2002, 77.5% of permanently excluded pupils were aged 12-15, 19.2% were aged 8-11, 4% were aged 4-7 and only 0.3% aged 16-19.

Both official statistics and research data have consistently shown boys to be more likely to be expelled than girls. Blyth and Milner (1996) reported ratios of between 4:1 and 5:1 in national studies by the DfE (1992) and the Secondary Heads Association (SHA, 1992). The Social Exclusion Unit (1998) gave a ratio of about 5:1. More recently, Ofsted (2000)<sup>77</sup> reported that in 1998-99 the ratio was over 10:1 in the primary sector and around 4:1 in the post-primary sector.

### **6.3c: Other Groups at above average risk of Exclusion from School in England**

Booth (1996), SEU (1998), the DfEE's (1999) Draft Guidance<sup>78</sup> and Osler *et al.* (2001) have all indicated groups of pupils who are over-represented among the excluded. In addition to

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<sup>77</sup> Cited in Osler *et al.* (2001)

<sup>78</sup> Cited in Gordon (2001)

boys and younger teenagers, as discussed in the previous section, all four reports mention children in local authority care, some ethnic minority groups but especially boys of African-Caribbean origin and children with special educational needs. Groups identified in at least some of these reports include Travellers, school age mothers and young carers.

Unduly high numbers of children in care being suspended were also reported in England by Stirling (1992). In research based on interviews with staff from two LEAs, one metropolitan and one rural, it was found that of the 60 children in seven residential homes, 32 had not been attending school regularly. Only two of the 32 were officially recorded as permanent exclusions, the others being on indefinite or unofficial exclusions which could continue for months or even years with little alternative provision. 'Indefinite' exclusions were discontinued in England in 1993 but 'unofficial' ones by their very nature would be harder to eradicate. Maginnis (1993)<sup>79</sup> reported that in the Lothian region of Scotland young people in children's homes were 80 times as likely to be excluded as those in their own homes, although the SEU (1998) report for England and Wales stated that looked after children were 'only' ten times as likely. Firth and Horrocks (1996) see high exclusion rates as only one of the disadvantages, although an important one, facing many of the children 'in care' in England. As was evident in Chapter 6.2d, this disadvantage was also found in Northern Ireland.

Although no research evidence was found showing disproportionate exclusion rates of ethnic minority pupils in Northern Ireland, this has been a major issue in England, especially as regards pupils of African-Caribbean descent. These pupils have variously been calculated to be four to six times as likely as white children to be excluded from schools in England (Blyth and Milner, 1996; Gilborn and Gipps, 1996; SEU, 1998). The difference is even greater between Black and white boys, though Black girls are excluded "much more than other girls" (Gilborn and Gipps, 1996). While it would be easy to attribute such differences simply to racism in the school system (which may indeed sometimes be the case), there have been qualitative studies showing that white teachers may often misinterpret the body language of Black youths in their class, seeing aggression and threats where none was intended (see Gilborn and Gipps, 1996).

Among the many studies showing a significant association between special educational needs (SEN) and exclusion, Berridge *et al.* (2001) found that 'nearly half' (44%) of their 343 case files indicated that the pupil had been assessed for SEN and that nearly a fifth (19%) showed

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<sup>79</sup> Cited in Firth and Horrocks (1996)

that the pupil had a statement of SEN. The latter percentage would be about eight or ten times as high as in the general population. Similar percentages were reported by Daniels *et al.* (2003): of the 145 excluded pupils on whom they had firm data, 42% were recorded as having special educational needs and 17% as statemented. In Pippa John's (1996) smaller-scale study, five of her six interviewees had marked learning difficulties and sixth low self-esteem regarding her academic ability, despite having made considerable recent progress.

Research has, however, also pointed to school practices and teacher behaviours as well as at pupil characteristics and family circumstances as factors contributing to pupils' exclusion from school. An early study by Galloway (1976) showed that, although the percentage of pupils entitled to free school meals was a good predictor of the amount of persistent absenteeism, it did not significantly predict the exclusion rate. In Sheffield in the years shortly after secondary school reorganisation, the schools with the highest exclusion rates tended to be former grammar schools which were having to cope with wider ability ranges and many less well motivated pupils than formerly. Osler *et al.* (2001) are among the writers who have cited evidence (in their case from Rowbotham, 1995, and from research carried out on behalf of the Commission for Racial Equality and reported in Osler, 1997) that some schools with high levels of deprivation have low exclusion rates. Several writers have seen such evidence as pointing to the importance of successful school management to keep exclusions from the school at a minimum..

Another point made by such writers as Stirling (1992), Booth (1996) and Vulliamy and Webb (2001) is that more pupils are effectively excluded from school than ever appear on official exclusion statistics. For example, parents may be persuaded to 'voluntarily' withdraw their troublesome children from over-subscribed schools and seek transfers elsewhere, before an exclusion order would make them less acceptable to other schools.<sup>80</sup> Booth (1996) was also particularly concerned at how segregating pupils into special education could also be a form of exclusion, which he defined as "decreasing the participation of pupils in the cultures and curricula of mainstream schools."

#### **6.4: Attitudes to Education and their Former Schools of Excluded Pupils and their Parents in Northern Ireland**

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<sup>80</sup> The workplace parallel, of course, is the employee who is given the options of resigning or a 'sacking'.



### ***What the Young People Said in Northern Ireland***

None of the young people in Eastwood's (2000) study, who had on average been out of school for eight months (range 2-18 months), wanted to return to the school that had excluded them but six said they would like to try another school. All but two had aspirations for some GCSEs, although most of their occupational ambitions needed only limited academic qualifications. Some had enjoyed the company of the peer group at their previous school and some had enjoyed individual subjects. Most of them, however, had disliked their former school because they felt they had been

harassed and treated unfairly by teachers. Among the positive and negative comments were:

“I am always shouted at and feel that I am of little value.”

“I have been punished for things that others have also done.”

“I disliked teachers who would not take time to explain subjects that I couldn't cope with.”

“He was fair, gave time to listen to me and never shouted even when I was wrong.”

There is a heavier weighting of negative comments here than in the responses of the Year 11 pupils attending post-primary schools in Gallagher, Shuttleworth and Gray's (1998) report but both groups have similar views about what constitutes good and bad teachers. As in many other studies in this review, pupils more often complained about the specific behaviour of particular teachers than about the school in general.

Kilpatrick and Barr's (2002) study of the provision for pupils excluded from school included focus group interviews with Year 10 and Year 11 pupils who had been in Educational Guidance Units (EGUs) for between three and 12 months. Two contrasting views of their previous schools emerged. One group appeared to detest everything or almost everything about school and had absolutely no wish to return. The other group – like many of the persistent absentees in Chapter 7.2 – had enjoyed some aspects of school, including certain subjects, and in some cases were quite looking forward to returning. Kilpatrick and Barr, probably wisely, did not attempt to quantify the numbers expressing these two sorts of views since, even if there are transcripts, focus group evidence does not lend itself to that kind of analysis. These attitudes could sometimes be seen in the explanations the young people gave for their expulsion; while the first EGU student quoted had deliberately courted expulsion, the second regarded himself as unfortunate because a classroom prank had gone further than intended:

“I got chucked out of school 'cos I hated it. I smashed windows. I did things that I knew would put me out of school.”

“I got kicked out because I put a teacher off a chair. It was bangers. It blew the teacher off the chair. We didn’t mean it. It wasn’t only me but I got blamed for it.”

### ***What Parents said in Northern Ireland***

The parents in Eastwood’s (2000) study varied in how helpful or otherwise they had found the attitudes of teachers at the school or such professionals as EWOs, educational psychologists or psychiatrists in handling their child’s case. At best, however, the effects of their involvement had been short term. Had the effects been otherwise, of course the case would not have led on to a long-

term exclusion. Two comments sum up the views expressed:

“Communication with the school staff was rare and they failed to listen to my views.”

“While face to face discussions with school staff was reasonable and they were understanding, it never resolved the problem.”

Although Kilpatrick *et al.* (1999) did not approach parents directly, the school spokespersons in their survey were asked how ready their pupils’ parents were to come to school to discuss their children’s problems. Such readiness could be interpreted as parental willingness to co-operate in trying to prevent problem situations (whether of learning or behaviour) escalating to a stage where serious action, such as exclusion from school, might have to be taken.<sup>81</sup> Of the primary school informants 22% said such parents were generally unwilling to come and another 5% that they were only ‘sometimes’ willing. Similar percentages were recorded by the informants in special schools. In the post-primary sector, the secondary high schools found it more than twice as difficult as the grammar schools to bring the parents of problem pupils to school: in 20% of the secondary high schools parents were reported to be generally unwilling to come and in another 20% to be only sometimes willing. In a substantial minority of schools, and especially of secondary high schools, parents of problem pupils would seem to be perceived as apathetic or less co-operative with the school than they might be. It would, of course, have been good to get the parents’ own perspectives.

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<sup>81</sup> It must, however, be borne in mind that it can be much more difficult for some parents than for others to visit the school (see Chapter 1).

### **7.3.5: Attitudes to Education of Excluded Pupils and their Parents in Great Britain**

Just three studies will be considered here.

**Daniels *et al.*** (2003) provide the most quantitative data, though this is illustrated with quotations from their interviews. In the sample as a whole, 9.3% reported having had a satisfactory relationship with *all* their former teachers, 57.0% with *some* teachers but about a third (33.7%) with *none* of their teachers. There were, however, marked ethnic differences in that all eleven Bangladeshis and about half the 48 Blacks said they had got on with *none* of their teachers, as compared with only a quarter of the Whites. Liked teachers had such qualities as being ‘more understanding’ but might also be ‘efficient’, whereas disliked ones were often described as strict, as blowing minor incidents out of proportion and as labelling pupils negatively because of a sibling.

The interviewees had tended to get on better with their peers than with their teachers, although 17% (with no marked ethnic differences) had not got on with any of their former classmates.

Many of the sample had liked at least some of their school subjects: 43.6% enjoyed or attained well in physical education or sport, 36.2% in academic subjects (e.g. mathematics or geography), 25.5% in creative subjects and 18.6% in practical subjects. Liking of subjects was bound up with two things: its perceived ‘relevance’ and the relationship with the teacher. Boys in particular might be easier to motivate in subjects like mathematics, science or technology than in modern languages, history or religious education. Formal writing was often found difficult and so was disliked.

**Berridge *et al.***’s (2001) were able to take a more chronological approach in their 28 interviews. Almost all these young people said they had enjoyed primary school, even although many of them had difficulty with the work. Twelve of the group had been excluded at some stage from their primary schools, although only one permanently. Five of the group linked their behavioural problems in primary school with their learning difficulties and one mother interpreted her son’s outrageous behaviour in primary school as a way of diverting attention from his reading difficulties.

Unsurprisingly, those who had behavioural difficulties in primary school appeared the least able to cope in secondary school where, without the supportive and nurturing atmosphere of a primary school, they were expected to behave in a more responsible and independent fashion. The researchers heard various tales of the young people starting to ‘bunk off’ within weeks of

transfer, of feeling ‘picked on’ because of their style of dress or because they had a classroom helper, or of just feeling very lonely. But even interviewees who had hated most aspects of their secondary schools could usually identify a subject and/or a teacher that they had liked.

**Pippa John** (1996) used ethnographic methods to explore the perceptions and self-concepts of six young people who had been permanently excluded from school. From the interview evidence, she highlighted several themes which have been seen to recur in other studies in this review, both in Northern Ireland and elsewhere. These included:<sup>82</sup>

**1. Respect:** Lack of ‘respect’ from teachers was a common grievance and there were particular objections to being treated as if a child. A common response was to fail to feel ‘respect’ for the teacher in question and perhaps to express this in behaviour:

“They didn’t respect me at all so I didn’t respect them.”

“If you treat me like a kid ... I’ll just muck about. If you want me to act like a kid, then I will.”

**2. Fairness:** The young people felt they had not been listened to, or not given a chance to tell their side of the story when incidents occurred in which they appeared to be at fault. Alternatively, they might feel ‘picked on’ and treated more harshly than other pupils who had done the same things. This could be linked with accusations of racism by Black pupils if they felt they were treated differently from the majority because of their colour.

**3. Humiliation:** Public humiliation by a teacher in front of classmates was bitterly resented. One of the group would be asked to read things out in class by a particular teacher who should have known how limited this boy’s reading skills were.

“That did show me up. That showed me up something rotten. ... He used to do it on purpose”

**4. Physical Contact:** These pupils tended to react particularly violently to physical contact from teachers, as for example any attempt to restrain them. John (1996) suggests that these pupils may have been subjected to inappropriate physical contact or physical violence in the past in their out-of-school lives and so may appear to over-react to physical contact in school. (Since the young people in John’s study were in mainstream school, most teachers have become extremely cautious about even touching a pupil.

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<sup>82</sup> This list is useful but it might prove better to leave it until the final chapter when an attempt will be made to draw various strands together. This is at least a first draft of such a section.

**5. *'Having a Laugh'*:** Laughter in the classroom can provide a diversion from boredom. Although teachers who introduce some laughter in their lessons can be popular and effective (Woods, 1979), in John's sample this term would refer to their being encouraged by their classmates to take on the role of class clown. Acceptance by their peers in this role, even although it could get them 'into trouble' could become more important to them than settling down to learn.

**6. *Labelling or Reputation*:** The young people resented teachers who gave them negative labels too readily which then caused the teachers to perceive them in a stereotyped way. There was particular angst if the label was based upon the acknowledged bad behaviour of an older sibling but applied to the younger one for a trivial offence. As with treating the teenagers as much younger children, there was a real danger that they might start living up (or down?) to these labels.

**7. *Notions of Self*:** John was concerned about the very low self-esteem and poor self-concepts of the young people in her sample. This theme runs through many of the previous themes highlighted: the feelings of humiliation, of not feeling respected, or of being prepared to do anything to win the approbation of the peer group, even at the cost of academic failure or confrontations with the school discipline situation. John reminds us that psychological theory sees the self-concept developing interactions between people; in a school situation these would be between teachers and pupils. The fragile self-concepts of her interview sample were seen as affecting both their behaviour and their willingness to move forward academically.

Interestingly, Pippa John (1996), who at the time of writing was working in a centre for excluded young people, confessed to having been herself excluded from school. As a pupil, she would have done almost anything 'for a laugh' but deeply resented being blamed for what she had not done. She recalled working hard for teachers with whom she had a good relationship but having "little respect for those who could not control the class". As a professional, she could see that, 20 years on, excluded pupils felt much as she had. The research evidence seems to support this.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN: Young People Showing Signs of Disaffection from the Education System.**

### **PART THREE: YOUNG PEOPLE WITH SERIOUS BEHAVIOURAL PROBLEMS AT SCHOOL**

#### **7.1: Introduction and Comparators**

##### **7.1a: The Focus of this Section**

The defining characteristic of the main studies described in sections 7.2 to 7.5 is that they are of pupils whose behaviour got them into serious trouble with their schools in Northern Ireland. In most cases, the problem behaviour arose from or was associated with disaffection with school. For convenience, the studies are grouped by the pupils' locations at the time of the investigations, whether in a mainstream school or in some form of alternative provision. A considerable proportion of the young people in the studies here had been persistent absentees and/or had been excluded from school but absenteeism and exclusion as such are not the main foci of these investigations. The progression is from studies of pupils still enrolled in mainstream schools to those of young people receiving a different kind of education away from a normal school site. Nearly all the studies located were of secondary age pupils, most often in the KS4 years. Quite often, however, as for example in Maltman (1994, see Section 7.4.2) the serious problems had begun earlier.

##### **7.1b: 'Normal Disaffection': Some Northern Ireland Comparators**

Disaffection from school may be a recurrent theme in this section but it is important to bear in mind that there are few, if any, pupils who have not disliked at least some aspects of their schooling. What is of interest is whether the complaints of those pupils who are identified by teachers or researchers as 'disaffected' or 'seriously disruptive' differ in nature or just in intensity from those of other pupils on similar types of courses.

##### ***Complaints from a Rural Secondary School in Northern Ireland***

The rural secondary school in which Elizabeth Brown (1997) carried out her study of pupil disaffection did not seem to suffer unduly from either behavioural problems (which were

reported to be ‘usually successfully resolved’) or from severe social disadvantage in its catchment area. Pupil opinion there would, therefore, probably be at least as good as one could reasonably expect from any stratified random sample of secondary high school pupils. Indeed, although only one of Brown’s interviewees claimed to “love” school, most said it was “OK” or that they “quite” liked it, or that they liked some aspects of it. There were, however, three main types of complaint.

Firstly, there were strong objections to the treatment received from certain teachers. Pupils felt deeply resentful when teachers appeared to deliberately embarrass them in front of their classmates, or hurled such epithets as ‘fathead’ at them or used hurtful sarcasm. The teenagers hated being “screamed at” or feeling that they were treated in a way appropriate only for much younger pupils. Also some teachers were perceived as treating individual pupils or groups of pupils unequally, as for instance punishing pupils of one gender but not the other for similar misdemeanours. Whole-class punishments, when there were only a few real culprits, were also seen as highly unfair – as was a school rule that punished a pupil caught in the company of another who was smoking as severely (with two detentions) as the actual smoker.

Secondly, there were complaints about what was perceived as the over-strict enforcement of petty regulations. No one objected to school uniform in principle but girls resented criticism of their skirt lengths and hairstyles, especially when they were “nothing out of the ordinary” while a boy, reprimanded for wearing a coat indoors when moving between classes, pointed out to the researcher that it was the best way to carry it when he had much else to transport. A total ban on chewing gum on school premises was regarded with general contempt. The third main type of complaint in Elizabeth Brown’s (1997) study, which was heard most often from pupils taking nine or ten GCSEs, was of too much homework or too much pressure to do well at school.

### ***Year 11 Pupils in the NIEC-QUB Research Revisited***

While some of the circumstantial detail may be unique to Brown’s study, the basic complaints, especially the first, were heard in many other studies in this review – and not only from pupils considered to be ‘disaffected’. For example, the Year 11 pupils in the NIEC-QUB research reported on in Chapter 3.4.1 (Gallagher *et al.*, 1998) included in their accounts of the behaviour poor teachers, which were often illustrated with specific examples, unfair treatment of pupils and a tendency to ridicule or embarrass pupils in front of the class. Poor teachers were also described as inconsistent in their behaviour to students, boring, poor at explaining

things and humourless. These Year 11 pupils, who were certainly not chosen on the basis of disaffection, did, however, generally agree that there was only a minority of 'bad' teachers in their schools and they had plenty of appreciative things to say about the 'good' teachers they had experienced.

### **7.1c: Additional Perspectives from Great Britain**

#### ***Two Large Surveys by the National Foundation for Educational Research***

While a survey of 1265 final year pupils in 38 primary schools and 1009 first-year pupils in 41 secondary schools in England (Keys, Harris and Fernandes, 1995) showed mostly fairly positive attitudes, there was some concern that 8% of the top primary and 10% of the first year secondary pupils appeared to hold a basically negative attitude, denying that they liked school 'on the whole'. About 5% in each group found no lessons or hardly any lessons interesting. A quarter of the secondary school sample thought there were too many rules. Only half as many of the pupils who disliked school 'on the whole' as of the others indicated a liking for their class teacher (40% vs 80%). Perhaps somewhat ominously, though not surprisingly, the pupils who did not much like school were less likely than the others to say they worked hard in lessons, or that they got good marks, or that they behaved well in school or that homework was important. However, the difference in attitude between the pupils in primary and secondary schools was much less than had been initially feared, although ideally research would have followed the same pupils from primary to secondary education rather than have two quite separate pupil samples. On several items boys expressed less favourable attitudes than girls; they were less likely to express a liking for school or their teachers and more likely to admit to boredom in lessons, to not working hard at school and to bad behaviour in class.

Although transfer to secondary school did not apparently lead to any major deterioration in attitude in the 1995 report by Keys and her colleagues, an earlier questionnaire survey by Keys and Fernandes (1993) of 1160 Year 7 and 980 Year 9<sup>83</sup> pupils in respectively 47 and 43 schools found significantly less approval of their schools among the older cohort on a number of items – though again one might prefer a longitudinal study. Fewer of the Year 9 than of the Year 7 pupils, for instance expressed a liking for some or all of their teachers (38.3% vs 60.2%), or were seldom if ever bored in class (35.1% vs 50.5%) or would rarely if ever count the minutes till a lesson ended (38.3% vs 49.4%) or saw at least most of their teachers able to

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<sup>83</sup> Equivalent to Year 8 and Year 10 in Northern Ireland



keep order in class (56.2% vs 73.7%). Fewer of the Year 9 than of the Year 7 pupils thought their school rules sensible (61.1% vs 79.5%) and about twice as many thought there were too many rules (40.2% vs 20.5%). While some of these differences may just show the older pupils becoming less enthusiastic and more discerning, some of these figures show substantial levels of dissatisfaction and criticism.

### ***Pupils in the Second Year of Three English Comprehensives (Wallace, 1996)***

Gwen Wallace's (1996) paper also focuses on pupils in the KS3 years, on a cohort who in 1991-92 were in the second year of post-primary education. Of the three schools which the sample attended, two were in areas of high unemployment and one of these had an ethnically very diverse enrolment. As they discussed the qualities of *ideal* teachers, the pupils made plain many of the main attributes of teachers whom they disliked. Ideal teachers were seen as friendly, helpful, respectful of pupils and with a good sense of humour. They were also well organised and able to keep order in class. By contrast, bad teachers would resort to physical threats, shouting or verbal abuse. They might tell a class they were 'rubbish' or that they hated them – tactics that only increased the negative feelings in the class. Either their classes were disorderly, so that little was learned, or they were over-strict with many petty rules.<sup>84</sup> Any humour in their classes was likely to be at a pupil's expense.

Like the NFER researchers, Wallace observed some gender differences, though hers were qualitative rather than quantitative. In Wallace's (1996) paper the girls seemed more interested than the boys in establishing good personal relations with their teachers. The boys were more critical of teachers who could not keep order but less likely to condemn those who shouted at the class, some arguing that this could be a necessary strategy for keeping order.

## **7.2: Studies of Disaffected Pupils**

### **7.2a: Six Disaffected Pupils in a NI Secondary High School (Maltman, 1994)**

Although the four boys and two girls in Tina Maltman's (1994) casebook studies of Year 12 pupils at 'Blackfield', a secondary high school in Greater Belfast, all became persistent absentees and although some of their stories bear similarities to those of young people in Chapter 5, her thesis is being reviewed here rather than in the earlier section because all six

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<sup>84</sup> This is also the second complaint in Elizabeth Brown's (1997) study

young people presented a wider range of problems than absenteeism alone. They were seen as illustrating Reid's (1989) description of disaffection as multi-faceted, varying in its details from individual to individual and as reflected in high rates of "absenteeism, truancy, disruption and underachievement" as well as in the pupils' attitudes towards school and their expectations for the future. None of the six achieved academically nearly as well as they should and their range of unacceptable behaviours included non-cooperation in class, untruthfulness, vandalism, abusive language, theft and fighting other pupils. Both girls were sometimes guilty of the last of these. Certain themes recur in a number of their stories but each of the six young people had a distinctively different case history and had faced a different set of problems. Indeed, most of their stories had some quite unusual elements. It would seem that some of these young people, especially Paul and Brian (see below), went through phases when they were so preoccupied with home-based problems that attending school understandably became of relatively little importance to them.

#### *Domestic Circumstances*

Five of the six pupils had suffered from the break-up of their families, although one set of parents (**Henry's**) were together again after several separations. The strains for Henry of living in a highly volatile atmosphere were exacerbated by poor family communications. On one occasion his father was whisked into hospital with no explanation and once, when Henry was in the USA, his mother just sent him a new address; this was the first intimation of a parental separation.

The parents of Susan, the only girl living in a single-parent household, had divorced when she was in primary school. **Susan** had a very close relationship with her mother and two elder sisters but remained in contact with her father, despite continuing parental acrimony.

**Brian** was a child of his mother's second marriage and had several much older half-siblings. When Brian was in Year 10, his father left to live with someone else. As his distressed mother's health deteriorated, her control over his behaviour weakened though she tried to be supportive of the school. He frequently truanted and was often verbally abusive to teachers. In April of Brian's Year 11 his mother died suddenly. Successive placements with two older sisters ran into difficulties because of his frequent trancies from school, his abscondings from their homes and his undesirable friends. His father refused to take any responsibility and a step-brother beat him severely. Just when Social Services were about to take Brian into care, a friend of his late mother offered him a home and this arrangement seemed to work well.

Though **Wayne** described his parents as overprotective of their children, keeping them off school longer than necessary when ill, and as very supportive of his schooling, all six children in the family were on the 'at risk' register after a sibling had a fractured skull and there were also fears about neglect and malnutrition. His parents' acrimonious separation after a volatile relationship at the start of Wayne's secondary school career led his mother to move to an executive estate near her extended family and to transfer him during Year 8 to Blackfield School. Wayne's home life was neither peaceful nor conventional during his time at Blackfield because of his mother's drinking habits, her health, her constantly changing live-in partners and an on-going feud with a neighbour, which led to the house being 'visited' and substantially damaged by paramilitaries. Wayne himself was twice 'disciplined' by paramilitaries, once for making an illicit house to house collection, but was later suspected of himself becoming involved with paramilitaries.

Until Year 10, **Paul's** home life with an older and a much younger brother seems to have been quite happy, though there was some name-calling at school because the estate where he lived was seen as a paramilitary enclave. Before Christmas of his Year 10, however, his father's brother was murdered and, after a period of extreme depression, his father left home. As it was his father who had encouraged Paul with schoolwork and set limits on his behaviour while his mother focused on the younger brother, Paul started doing things which his father would not have allowed, such as truanting and smoking. The former escalated to the point of prosecution in Year 11 and at much the same time Paul, still only aged 14, learned that his 15-year-old girlfriend, a pupil at another school, expected their baby. A son was born in July. Feeling responsible for the child, Paul returned to school for Year 12 after a long absence and, with his father, signed a contractual agreement which stipulated his obligations. Paul began the year well and enjoyed work experience but dropped out before his GCSE examinations. As his compulsory schooling came officially to an end, Paul was happy to live with his partner and baby but relations with both his parents had deteriorated.

The only pupil of the six whose nuclear family remained a strong and stable unit throughout her life, a girl named **Karen**, had suffered a different kind of major upheaval in her P7 year when her family returned to Northern Ireland after ten years in Australia. In contrast to her parents, who had very much wanted to rejoin the extended family in NI, Karen still thought of Australia as her true home. Five years later, she still resented the move from a relatively affluent Australian life style to an estate beset with paramilitary involvement and vandalism.

### *Socio-Economic Status*

As a group, Maltman's six pupils would seem to have been more distinctively disadvantaged in terms of fraught family relationships and traumas than in their socio-economic profile, which was only slightly lower than of the whole school enrolment and only in some respects. Whereas some 10% (but only 10%) of the pupils in the school came from 'white-collar' families, all six heads of household represented in the study were working class, three 'skilled' and three 'unskilled'. One of the latter was unemployed. Maltman gives little detail about the families' material circumstances and in some cases it would have been relevant to know whether absentee fathers were contributing to the budget in these pre-CSA (Child Support Agency) years. Brian's home was certainly impoverished after his father left and an early morning milk round which he undertook to help his mother, which entailed rising at 3 a.m., often either made him late for school or too lethargic to concentrate on his studies. Susan's part-time work in a hairdresser's salon may, however, have been undertaken largely out of interest.

### *The Primary School Years*

All six pupils enjoyed their early primary school years when none had a sense of failure. Three of them – Henry, Brian and Susan – found the work in P6-P7 hard and opted out of the Transfer Tests. Henry's Transfer Report suggests markedly limited academic ability, which his secondary school career did nothing to disprove. Susan appears to have suffered both from being pressurized by her teacher and from her own lack of academic self-confidence. The other two boys, Wayne and Paul, were bitterly disappointed not to do well enough in the Transfer Tests to win a grammar school place but had been quite confident until the results arrived. Karen had loved her Australian primary school and had hated being absent for any reason. Her return to Northern Ireland well through the P7 year was badly timed in that it was too late to sit the Transfer Tests and the primary school class she joined seemed reluctant to admit her to any friendship group, leaving her feeling unwelcome.

### *Careers at 'Blackfield School'*

The six pupils enjoyed most or all of their first two post-primary years in 'Blackfield School' though Paul had to endure some name-calling and Susan's friendships were with older girls rather than classmates. The first three secondary years were organised in three bands with Karen and Paul in the top band and the others in the bottom band. After a year, Wayne was happy to be promoted to the middle band but Susan declined such an offer, fearing she could

not cope. All six seem to have made a good start as regards academic progress and conduct but by Year 9 some criticisms of behaviour are mentioned for all except Brian. For instance Wayne was inattentive and had several unauthorised absences, Paul was frequently late and also lazy while Karen's behaviour was 'lively and co-operative' in some subjects but 'sullen and lazy' in others.

All six, however, ran into serious behavioural problems in the course of Year 10, which increased in Year 11. Family circumstances seemed to be a trigger for at least three of the boys since their parents separated during their Year 10 (even if Henry's mother later returned). For three of the boys there were the additional traumatic events of a mother's death or impending early fatherhood or a paramilitary association. The attendance of all four plummeted. Henry was the most seriously disruptive of the group, both in the classroom and on the many occasions when an exasperated teacher sent him outside. Among other misdeeds, he was abusive to the principal and other teachers, smashed windows, wrote graffiti, bullied other pupils and was three times excluded temporarily. None of the other boys was described as truthful or attentive in class and Wayne additionally had a reputation for petty theft in school and for trashing other pupils' work.

The two girls' disaffection seemed fuelled by confrontations with teachers and school authority. Both girls were in some ways mature for their years, highly interested in their appearance and they felt that the conventional version of the uniform restricted their individuality. Form teachers tended not to approve of their alternatives to the school blazer, the length of Susan's skirt or the amount of distinctive jewellery they both wore. Both girls had particular problems with certain male teachers whom they perceived as sarcastic or unable to cope with young women. But while Karen became increasingly disaffected, Susan was partially reclaimed (even if she eagerly looked forward to leaving school) when the hairdresser for whom she worked part-time insisted that Susan study for her GCSE examinations if she wished to continue hairdressing with her.

#### *Attitudes to School in Year 12, at the Time of the Main Study*

Though they had all been in serious conflict with the school authorities, the pupils varied in their attitudes to school as they came to the end of their compulsory years. Paul, Wayne and Henry all made more positive than negative comments. Indeed Paul's only complaints were about the amount of homework in English and mathematics. He enjoyed most subjects as well as the extra-curricular opportunities and, unlike several of the others, he now appreciated the efforts of his form teacher and of the EWO and realised that if he had heeded their advice he

could have avoided many of his difficulties. Wayne too professed to like most subjects and also to be willing to discuss his problems with his class tutor. Henry said he liked school and disliked only one teacher, whom he found sarcastic, but he did not like having too much work or getting up early for school.

Both Brian and Susan enjoyed only a few subjects and the majority of their comments were negative, while Karen's were almost totally negative. Brian liked Geography and PE but disliked double periods, homework (which he regarded as unimportant), wearing the uniform and his form teacher. Susan liked English and typing but wrote that she could not be bothered working hard in other subjects and resented spending time on homework. She was not very happy at school and could hardly wait to leave. Both girls objected to what they saw as an overabundance of unnecessary school regulations, especially regarding things like jewellery. Karen wrote that she hated all subjects, was not good at any, that neither homework nor examinations were of any importance to her and that the only thing she wanted to discuss with her form tutor was how soon she could leave school.

For the least able pupils – Henry, Brian and to a lesser extent Susan – there was another problem in that the organisational change in Year 11 from three broad bands to mixed ability teaching was felt as threatening because they were now sometimes ridiculed by cleverer classmates. Conversely, Karen and Paul, the ablest two, were opposed in principle to banding because of the name-calling which lower-stream children – including two cousins of Karen's – sometimes received.

#### *The Parents' Attitudes to Education*

Though parents do not seem to have been interviewed directly for this research, a good deal of data seems to have been available from the case records and their children's evidence. All the boys' parents are described as generally supportive of the school and of any disciplinary measures which the school took against their sons. The fathers of Brian, Wayne and Paul are on record as having encouraged and helped them with their school-work as far as they were able, but these three fathers all left the family home somewhere in the Key Stage 3 years. Though their wives were also supportive of the school – very supportive in the case of Brian's mother – they had not the same power and influence as their husbands over the boys, who were all deeply resentful of their fathers' departure. All three boys did things which their fathers would not have allowed and their mothers could not stop, including truanting. The poor health of two of the mothers (Brian's and Wayne's) was an additional factor. Henry's

parents were together again at the end of his Year 12 but he is recorded as “playing one quarrelling parent off against the other”.

It is apparent that the emotional lives of all four boys were in turmoil because of home circumstances. Many psychologists would suggest that much of their bad behaviour in school – especially things like verbal abuse – was a result of their transferring anger and other unresolved negative feelings towards their parents on to teachers, as alternative authority figures. This is most likely in the case of Wayne and Paul, who found little to object to in Blackfield School itself when they reviewed it at the end of Year 12.

The girls’ parents, by contrast, are described as supporting and even encouraging them in their criticism and non-acceptance of school rules. They had often contacted the school to voice support for the stance their daughters had taken. The hairdresser for whom Susan worked part-time was actually more supportive of school mores than was her mother. Both girls had a good deal of condoned absence and unduly protracted absences that started with an accident or a physical illness. It may not be co-incidental that both casebook studies refer to claims or attempted litigation after accidents. Karen’s parents are described as encouraging their children to act independently and are described as ‘anti-authoritarian and anti-establishment’, living amid a large extended family on an estate with high unemployment figures and strong paramilitary links. Karen’s negativity towards school, however, had increased by Year 12 beyond what her parents accepted and she was defying their efforts to get her to return to school in time to prepare for her GCSE examinations.

### *Tailpiece*

Maltman reported any recent news about her six cases. These youngsters would have been in the same age group as the Northern Ireland ‘Status 0’ cohort (Armstrong *et al.*, 1997) but it was not necessarily the most predictable ones who fell into that category. Paul was stacking supermarket shelves to support his partner and child. Susan was working full-time in the same hairdressing salon as before. Brian, the former part-time milkman, had become a self-employed ice-cream salesman. Karen had started but not completed the first year of an NVQ course in equestrianism and soon afterwards become pregnant. Nothing, however, was known about either Henry or Wayne, in the latter case because the family were moved for their own safety by the security forces.

### **7.2b: From the Making Belfast Work ‘Scoping Study’**

The associations which Maltman (1994) demonstrated between academic underachievement and (though the combination of factors varied from individual to individual) such variables as disaffection or alienation from school, absenteeism, disruption in class and in at least one case illegal activities also emerged in the ‘Scoping’ study carried out for Making Belfast Work (Kilpatrick *et al.*, 1997, p38). A link was found there between schools where there was a high proportion of Year 12 pupils with zero GCSE grades and nearby areas with high numbers of probation orders and other court disposals. Although the researchers’ data did not show whether or not the young people in trouble with the law were the ones failing to gain any GCSE grades, they argued that a likely explanation was that some young people, angry and frustrated at school, were acting out their anger in delinquency. They were not, however, suggesting that schools are the only cause of alienation from society, realising that families and neighbourhoods can also play a part.

### **7.2c: Some Research Evidence from Great Britain**

‘Disengaged’ boys in the North of England

In a study conducted in three comprehensive schools in the North of England, Chaplain (1966) compared the perceptions of schooling and of themselves as learners of 32 male pupils who had been identified by their teachers as ‘disengaged’ with those of 27 others considered to be better ‘engaged’ with their courses. The boys were in the second or third post-primary years.<sup>85</sup> Many of these adolescents had a strong sense of justice – and of injustice! – and they reported a number of instances of what was perceived as unfair treatment in class. But while two-thirds of the engaged pupils thought teachers were fair to them, two-thirds of the disengaged pupils thought they received *unfair* treatment. Engaged pupils would, however, feel aggrieved if there was a whole-class punishment for what only other pupils had done and they had also sometimes observed teachers ‘victimising’ pupils who had bad reputations, even if their troublemaking was in the past:

“Now he’s calmed down like, but Mr ... just picks on him.”

Unsurprisingly, the disengaged pupils, like pupils in other studies, disliked being humiliated in front of the class and, as elsewhere, there were complaints about teachers deliberately asking pupils questions they could not answer to make them seem stupid. Chaplain (1966)

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<sup>85</sup> Years 8 or 9 in England, equivalent to Years 9 and 10 respectively in Northern Ireland.



explored the effects of such teacher behaviours and of the difficulties which many of the boys were experiencing with schoolwork on these pupils' self-images. Among the insights of Chaplain's study was that many of these 'disengaged' boys would really have liked to achieve more in school but, rather frightened by their poor basic skills and sometimes also by a history of absenteeism, did not know how to catch up. None of the 25 teachers who were prepared to share their thoughts on disengagement with Chaplain appreciated this, though some did see the 'disengaged' boys as protecting their self-esteem and their 'street-cred' with their peers by dissociating themselves from the school's aims and values. Only one of the 25 teachers appreciated that teacher behaviour might sometimes be a factor in the boys' disengagement. The others blamed only factors in the boys themselves, their parents or the local community. Chaplain also found that both 'engaged' and 'disengaged' boys looked for similar qualities in the teachers in whom they would confide, namely those willing to listen, those they thought would understand them and those whom they felt they could trust.

### ***A Typology of Working-Class Secondary Pupils in Wales***

Although Philip Brown's (1987) investigation in a Welsh urban area with high unemployment was undertaken before state benefits were withdrawn from able-bodied 16-18 year olds and when the examination system at age 16, with both O-levels and CSEs, was more divisive than at present, his typology of fifth-formers (Year 12 in the current Northern Ireland system) is still be potentially useful. Of most relevance to this review is his distinction between 'Rems' (short for 'Remedials' lacking in effort rather than ability) and 'ordinary kids'.<sup>86</sup> Both groups had working-class backgrounds and saw their futures in working-class occupations.

Many of the 'Rems', who preferred to call themselves 'Tidy Lads', formed a conspicuous anti-school culture. As the preferred soubriquet suggests, most Rems were male. By 5<sup>th</sup> form, most alienated females in the focus school were either persistent absentees or, effectively, premature leavers. Male Rems would, however, continue attending, albeit irregularly, because for them staying at home was boring, whereas at school they could meet their friends and 'have a laff'. Many Rems had been identified as trouble-makers much earlier. Easily bored at school, they had started 'messaging about' until their schoolwork became increasingly meaningless to them, both in the sense of 'irrelevant' and of 'incomprehensible'. Believing that 'whom' rather than 'what' they knew (i.e. family connections) were more important for entry to the semi- or unskilled manual jobs at which they were aiming, any CSE qualifications

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<sup>86</sup> Both groups can be contrasted with the 'Swots' (a term given by other pupils but generally rejected by the recipients), who were on O-level courses and generally aiming at middle-class non-manual occupations.

they might have taken were also seen as irrelevant and Rems were usually in non-examination classes. Open conflict with teachers was frequent. They were often banned from lessons and a number had been excluded from school.

Though the 'ordinary kids' had a pragmatic, instrumental attitude to school and did no more work than they thought necessary, they believed that the CSE qualifications for which they were being prepared would help them gain entry to the traditional skilled manual jobs to which they aspired. They tended to despise the Rems for not making more effort and as more likely than themselves to be unemployed. While careful not to appear too subservient to teachers, the 'ordinary kids' tried to avoid open conflict with them, even if they thought a teacher was behaving unfairly, since teachers' references might help their employment prospects. Responses to a questionnaire item on attitude to school also demonstrated the difference between 'Rems' and 'ordinary kids'. Of pupils taking only two or fewer CSEs (i.e. mostly Rems), 47% 'disliked it a lot' and another 11% 'disliked it a bit'; among those taking at least three CSEs (mostly 'ordinary kids') the corresponding figures were 11% and 15%. In other words, over half the Rems but only about a quarter of the 'ordinary kids' had negative attitudes to school and four times as many of the Rems had very negative attitudes

### **7.3: Pupils Receiving In-School Support for Behavioural Difficulties**

#### **7.3a: Pupils in Three In-School Support Units in the SEELB (Mongomery, 2001)**

##### *The New In-School Support Units*

Finding in the late 1990s that its provision for pupils with severe emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD) at Ardmore House Special School was insufficiently flexible to cater either for emergency cases or for pupils needing longer-term support than the standard 8-week placements, the South-Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) invited schools to submit bids for in-school schemes, which would have Board support. This was in accord with the Department of Education's view that schools themselves are the best places to tackle pupils' inappropriate behaviour. The first three SEELB schemes, which started in September 2000, were evaluated in a dissertation by Brenda Montgomery (2001), a member of the SEELB Behaviour Support Team.

The project co-ordinators in the three schools were agreed that up to four or five pupils, who would probably be at different academic stages, was a manageable number at any one time. In

Schools A and C the Support Units were available for pupils at both Key Stages 3 and 4 and were taught by the co-ordinator, supported by a classroom assistant. These two schools put most emphasis on behavioural matters, while addressing the requirements of the Northern Ireland curriculum. The scheme in School B was available only to Key Stage 3 pupils, on the grounds that behaviour and attitudes are easier to change at that age. The School B scheme also differed from the other two in using seven teachers from across the subject range and having a more academic emphasis.

Pupils had usually been referred to the units, according to the co-ordinators, for such behaviours as disobedience, shouting in class, work not done or for a series of incidents. Such reasons for referral are what the Elton Report (1989) described as 'low intensity/ high frequency' misbehaviour, which over time can be very stressful for teachers. One school also highlighted problems in pupil-staff relationships. While some of the pupils may have had short temporary suspensions (there are no individual casebook studies in the dissertation) they would not have reached the stage of permanent exclusions from their present schools, unlike some in later parts of the chapter.

The co-ordinators spoke of great improvements in the pupils' behaviour in the Units, though one sometimes saw some 'slippage' afterwards. Mainstream teachers generally spoke positively about the Units and their beneficial effects on pupils, though there was some confusion about their purpose. While all but two of the 58 teachers who completed questionnaires thought the unit in their school should support pupils, 39% thought that it should punish them for their misdeeds. One teacher wrote: *"It should be an unpleasant place while still having a positive ethos."*

### *The Pupils' Evidence*

So, after a period in one of the units described above, what did pupils think? Montgomery (2001) interviewed a total of seven pupils (5 boys and 2 girls), two or three from each school.

When asked what they disliked about school, the three most frequent answers were "teachers who shout a lot", "being blamed for something you didn't do" and "getting up early". These three replies were also heard in various other studies in the review, the last most often in studies of absentees. Unfortunately, pupils who misbehave are liable to provoke the wrath of teachers and also to be under suspicion when misdemeanours are discovered. One boy in School B replied "the Unit". All pupils admitted that their previous bad behaviour was the reason they had been sent to the Unit.

The pupils all enjoyed the 'quiet' of their Unit and the opportunity to make progress with their studies. The teachers in the Unit, and especially the co-ordinators, were well liked. Six of the seven pupils felt the aim of the support centre was to help rather than punish them. They appreciated such things as videos on anger management and the discussions about attitudes and behaviour; as one in School A poignantly said, "It's the first time things have ever been talked through." The one exception here was a School B pupil (B2), the only one who included 'the Unit' in the list of disliked aspects of school. Though he liked the co-ordinator and enjoyed the opportunities for drawing, Pupil B2 would ban all such Units. Montgomery knew of a few factors that may have contributed to his negative attitude. More than the other six, he had been teased by classmates when sent to the Unit and his father had beaten him on hearing the news. Pupil B2 was also sensitive to threats from teachers that, if he did not behave in class, he would be sent back to the Unit.

The other six pupils were not however, all entirely uncritical of their Units. Two disliked being in the same room all day and one missed being with friends. The pupils also tended to see the Unit as something which had helped them but from which they had now moved on and they would be disappointed (perhaps in themselves?) if they had to return. One pupil, C3, was particularly surprised at this hypothetical prospect and replied, "I wouldn't need to. I'm being good, ain't I?" All the pupils felt their behaviour had improved as a result of their stay in the Unit and six felt sure that they could sustain their improved behaviour provided that they had their teachers' support and regular contact with the Unit Co-ordinator. The latter, of course, would be a benefit which a short-term placement in a special EBD school could not easily provide. Another reason for these SEELB Units' apparent 'success' seems to be the way they could tailor their help to individual pupils' needs and personalities and to the situation to which they would be returning. Pupil C1, for example, had been given a little rhyme to help him 'keep his cool' in situations where he would previously have had an angry outburst and he went on to write a poem about what he had learned,

signed 'Ex Messer'. The generally very positive pupil reaction was summed up by Pupil A2:

"I never enjoyed school before. This is my best year yet. Teachers respect me and I respect them"

Parental reactions in this dissertation would seem to have come at second hand through the pupils since Montgomery did not include parental interviews in her methodology. Though none of the others are reported to have been as negative on hearing that their child was being sent to a Unit as Pupil B2's father, who slapped him round the head, some others were said to have been disappointed. Other parents thought that Units were "a brilliant idea" and one who had initially been disappointed changed her mind during the time her son was in the Unit.

*7.3b: Two SSPPR-funded Projects reviewed by the Inspectorate*

Two of the case studies in ETI (2000) are of preventive projects funded by the Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation (SSPPR) which aimed to keep in their mainstream schools pupils at risk of ‘dropping out’ or of exclusion. One of these projects was based in a single secondary school in Newry; the other involved a voluntary organisation (Barnardo’s) working with a number of primary schools in Belfast. Although the portrayals of these projects by members of the Inspectorate do not contain the same kinds of attitudinal evidence as is found in many of the reports by researchers in this review, several of the inspectors’ judgments directly or indirectly describe project effects on the attitudes of young people or their parents.

The CRISP Project in St Joseph’s Boys’ High School, Newry

St Joseph’s Boys’ High School in Newry is situated in an area of long-term high unemployment and many of the boys come from “highly-disadvantaged families and communities”. The range of pupil ability is described in ETI (2000) as wide, with 50% of entrants having serious literacy and numeracy difficulties. In addition, a “significant number” have behavioural problems. For many years the school suffered from declining enrolments although by time of the report annual intakes had doubled to about 90 and the total enrolment was about 400.

In 1995 the school opted into the Raising School Standards Initiative (RSSI) but by 1998 had made sufficient progress to continue whole-school development without the level of support provided by RSSI. However, some form of continuing support was felt necessary to address such matters as attendance, pupil behaviour, disaffection at KS4 and links with parents and the community. With SSPPR funding, a Counselling, Respite and Intervention Support Programme (CRISP) began early in 2000. An additional staff member, with a background in social work, was appointed as a student support officer. Although CRISP was still in the early stages of development when the ETI (2000) report appeared, reported outcomes included 35 parents already registering an interest in a proposed parenting programme. Home-school links were reported to have ‘improved’ although no details are given of the evidence for this. By 1999-2000, the previously poor attendance rate had risen to 90%, just one percentage point below the Northern Ireland average for non-selective secondary schools.

## The Barnardo's After School Project

The Barnardo's After School Project was set up to support primary-aged children although mention is also made in the ETI (2000) report of a pilot service in St Joseph's College, Belfast, for pupils transferring to secondary school. The Project began in Ligoniel in March 1996 and later developed, in response to needs identified by the local community, in the following areas of Belfast: (a) North Queen Street; (b) Hammer, Shankill Road; (c) Whiterock; (d) Andersonstown; (e) Markets; (f) Donegall Pass; (g) Glenwood Primary School.<sup>87</sup>

The After School Project has aimed to help children in areas of multiple disadvantage to reach their potential and to prevent them from becoming "disaffected with and marginalized from education and training". Both young people and their parents are encouraged to value education. At the time of the ETI (2000) report some 340 children from across Belfast were attending voluntarily on four afternoons (Monday to Thursday) each week. Project activities are managed by fully-qualified teachers, assisted by teams of volunteers.

Outcomes mentioned in the report include, in addition to increased academic and communication skills, two describing attitudes to education:

- education seen by children and adults as enjoyable and rewarding through, for example, praise, rewards, star charts, trips or certificate days;
- young people see learning as not confined to the school but as part of the whole community.

The short Project summary does not, however, present any detailed or quantitative evidence for these conclusions.

### **7.3c: In-School Support Projects in the Report on Multiply Suspended Pupils**

As part of their investigations into provision for pupils repeatedly suspended or excluded from school, Kilpatrick and Barr (2002) received four completed questionnaires about after-school or part-day programmes designed for pupils with attendance and/or behaviour problems. They also visited two of the projects for interviews. These programmes might take place in the school or at an outside location, such as a youth club, and an individual pupil's involvement usually lasted between six weeks and one term. For most of the week participants were expected to attend their usual mainstream courses. Most of the projects were

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<sup>87</sup> All these areas can be considered, to a greater or lesser extent, to be disadvantaged.

able to draw on staff from a range of professional backgrounds to support the young people, including youth officers, social workers, EWOs and members of voluntary groups as well as teachers.

Pupils participating in only one of the projects were interviewed. There was general agreement that the activities had been enjoyable and useful and that the project was having positive effects for them both at school and at home. The young people particularly liked the group work, which was a new experience for many of them. They also appreciated being consulted about activities and having their opinions taken seriously as, for example, when they were invited to evaluate aspects of the programme.

Two groups of parents whose children were participating in such projects were interviewed. They were generally happy about their involvement and felt that their children had benefited. Many could

give specific illustrations of the new and more desirable behaviour, as, for example, a son admitting to being angry about something rather than just attacking the furniture. Some parents (like some in Montgomery, 2001) had initially been concerned that their children had been selected for such a project but were happier after project workers had visited them to explain the purposes of the programme. Several parents of Year 12 pupils feared, however, that their offsprings' behavioural problems might now be too deeply ingrained for such projects to be effective.

The main attitudinal problem in connection with these part-time projects, however, lay in those mainstream schools where staff had no input into the projects nor had them adequately explained. Teachers in such schools might disapprove of what they saw as poor attenders or badly behaved pupils being 'rewarded' with enjoyable afternoons out – as indeed might well-behaved pupils with good attendance – or the teachers might have unreasonably high expectations of what such projects could achieve. On the other hand, teachers who perceived their schools as having a stake in the organisation of the projects were generally positive towards them.

#### **7.4: Pupils Being Educated Other than At School**

#### **7.4.4a: Ardcardnet: An Alternative Education Provision in the SEELB for Children with EBD**

Faced with evidence that not all young people with severe emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD) could be successfully included within mainstream education, the South-Eastern Education and Library Board also set up the Ardcardnet Project to offer an alternative educational provision in a socio-economically disadvantaged part of the Greater Belfast area. The young people on the

Project have all been in the Key Stage 4 years. Basic features of the Project include:

- a very informal set-up, initially in a youth centre and never in a school, and with everyone on first-name terms, in the belief that the atmosphere of a traditional school would alienate the young people and
- restriction of ‘classes’ to six pupils in order to build relationships and develop group skills,

even at the cost of being able to offer each group only two hours of education each day.

Project aims included the provision of meaningful tuition in order to prepare the young people either to return to school or for training courses or employment, as well as giving them a wide range of social and vocational opportunities.

In the fourth year of the Project, Caroline Karayiannis (2001) evaluated it for a master’s level dissertation. This was done (a) by examining the backgrounds and progress of all former students for whom data could be obtained and (b) through individual interviews with a representative group of six former students, four boys and two girls. She found that of all young people who had been on the Project in its first three years and who could be contacted, 76% were in employment or training and only 24% were claiming benefits. Considering that, when they joined, most were perceived as at high risk of unemployment and social exclusion, these figures were considered gratifying. Attendance levels were higher than would have been predicted from the students’ previous records and ETI inspection reports were favourable.

##### *Family Backgrounds*

Case files revealed histories of serious disadvantage, and very often of multiple disadvantage. Benefits were the main source of family income for over two-thirds (69.6%) of the young people. Three-fifths (60%) of them lived in single-parent households. A full fifth (21.4%) were on the register for neglect and/or abuse and 19.4% were or had been in foster or residential care. Though these last two statistics refer to (overlapping) minority groups, the



percentages are far, far in excess of those for the whole population. In addition, nearly one former student in nine (10.7%) had a close family member in custody.

All six former students who were interviewed can be seen as coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, even in a text that highlights distinctive features rather than always presenting data systematically (e.g. it is not usually explicitly stated whether or not the family was on benefits). Two of the six had seen violence in the home; in one case the marital discord was continuing but in the other the abusive and alcoholic father had died when the child was aged five. A third had a single-parent mother unable to exercise much control or influence over him. Both parents of another boy were on disability benefit. One girl was described as coming from a 'troubled family' with a seriously depressed mother, while the family of the sixth former student, a boy, had suffered 'much tragedy' in the Troubles and been forced to move house.

Although mainstream schools had formerly regarded many of the parents of Ardcarnet pupils as unsupportive, the Project tried to work with parents as partners in the alternative provision – and with success in most cases. Staff made efforts to keep parents well informed of all activities, especially pupil successes, and at 'graduation' invited the parents to a lunch to thank them. In turn, Karayiannis reports that most parents were willing to attend interviews and to motivate their children to attend the Project. In the six casebook studies, only two parents are described as 'unsupportive'. One was the mother who was too depressed to help. The other was a father who was seen as condoning or even encouraging his son's truancies as an aspect of the marital warfare he was waging against his wife, who was supportive of the Project as she had previously been of her son's school. Thus, only one parent would be considered to be deliberately unsupportive. The parents themselves were not approached in Karayiannis's research.

#### *What the Young People Said*

Only one of the four boys but both girls had enjoyed primary school. However all recalled their primary school years more fondly than what followed. By Year 9 (the second post-primary year in Northern Ireland) if not before, all six interviewees were experiencing serious problems. Two boys, who received no help from teachers when they were obviously struggling with their work, saw increasingly little point in attendance. A girl, whose complaints of being bullied were similarly ignored, lost most of her self-confidence and became a school refuser. These six young people would seem to have had more difficulty than most interviewees in the Selection System research (Sutherland, 2000) in adapting to the

ways of post-primary education and to the diverse demands and expectation of different subject teachers. Four of the six, however, had later to make one or more further transitions, whether because of expulsion, the closure of a special unit or a school merger. All four found later transitions much harder than the initial Transfer to secondary school. When still in mainstream, four of the interviewees are described as having truanted, skipped classes or refused to attend at all. All the boys manifested other unacceptable behaviours, whether just verbal abuse or something more dramatic such as “destroying toilets and head-butting a teacher”. The schools’ reaction to the poor attendance and other misbehaviours was purely punitive and none of the six was offered any form of counselling or other help. For the boys in particular, such a response only exacerbated their behaviour. All four spoke of gaining status among their classmates for being ‘bad’ and appearing unafraid of authority.

Though the interviewees were apprehensive when they first joined the Arcarnet Project – it was yet another transition and to an unfamiliar type of setting – all regarded it as the most helpful ‘school’ they had ever attended. They enjoyed the informal atmosphere, the sympathetic staff who would listen to them, the manageable amounts of work with help readily available when needed, the varied experiences and the *craic*. About the only criticism came from the former school refuser who, her confidence restored, found the short hours frustrating as she wanted to achieve more. Although Karayiannis uses relatively little direct speech in her dissertation, two of the four boys are specifically reported as saying the Project staff treated them ‘with respect’.

Transition from the Project to training or employment could be difficult. One young man had a spell in a young offenders’ detention unit for assaulting a policeman. Four of the six interviewees either dropped out of training courses or were not on target for completion, although one of these later found a more congenial apprenticeship which seemed to be going well. However, it was noted that those currently in ‘Status 0’ or on benefits – and Karayiannis deliberately included a few of these in her sample – were all about to embark on some more purposeful activity, such as a Prince’s Trust scheme. More optimistically, the former school refuser had been accepted on a diploma course in childcare and a boy who had initially refused training as he wanted only to work outdoors on a farm had, at the time of interview, successfully completed the first year of a course at an agricultural college on full grant. Such behaviours show a purposefulness of attitude that, for various reasons, some of which were not the fault of the young people, was lacking in the early post-primary years.

### **7.4.b: The Pathways Project**

The Pathways Project was set up in 1998 to support young people, nominated by their schools, who were considered to be disaffected, marginalized and at risk of social exclusion. Research by Ross Thompson in 1997-98<sup>88</sup> had pointed to the need to provide vocational guidance and work placements for young people in the Key Stage 4 years, even if they were not attending school, since these were the least likely to seek out advice and training for themselves as they approached the minimum leaving age.

Two evaluations of the Pathways Project were located: (1) an interim report on the first six months, August 1998 to February 1999 (Field, 1999) and (2) an evaluation of the Project's impact on young people in its second year, 1999-2000 (Field and Rea, 2000). Evidence for the evaluations came from perusal of documentation, questionnaire surveys and interviews (variously individual, group and by telephone) with Project staff, the young participants, parents, school staff and others.

#### **The First Six Months**

In the first six months only three schools were involved. All were Belfast secondary schools with high levels of free school meal entitlement. Their varied selection criteria help to describe the young informants whose views are presented below. St Gabriel's High School, a boys' school, offered the project to all members of their lowest-stream Year 12 class on a part-time basis; two boys, who had unhappy experiences with a previous project, refused to go but the other ten participated. Castle High School nominated young people who were effectively out of the school system, usually because of exclusion; with support from Pathways, five returned to mainstream but were soon out of school again.<sup>89</sup> Mount Gilbert Community High School, by contrast, offered the project only to problem pupils whom they considered 'turnroundable', i.e. who could be kept in mainstream with support or returned to mainstream. Of the 15 pupils from Mount Gilbert – five in Year 11 and ten in Year 12 – all except two were still attending at the end of the interim evaluation.

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<sup>88</sup> Mentioned in Field (1999)

<sup>89</sup> Several projects reviewed in Chapter 7.3 pointed to the generally low success rate in returning permanently excluded pupils to mainstream schools

### **What did the first participants think?**

In contrast to a questionnaire distributed on an early Project outing, one issued in January 1999 was completed 'sensibly'; this in itself was regarded as a sign of the young people's growing maturity and sense of engagement. When asked to circle from a list of nine words those that best described Pathways, over half the 28 respondents circled 'fun' and 'interesting' and no one circled 'boring' or 'dull'. On Likert-type items, most of the young people agreed that they looked forward to project sessions, that they could relate to project staff, that project staff listened to them and that Pathways had made them think about what they wanted to do in future. There was some disagreement about how many new things they had learned although only two thought Pathways a waste of time. By far the most frequently given reason for joining the project was the work experience, followed by the opportunities for vocational training and guidance. Help with basic skills was low on the list.

Such answers led Field (1999) to conclude that though the young people might be disaffected from school and were not much interested in academic study, they were serious about wanting to be employable. Moreover, if approached in ways they found acceptable, they were reasonably willing to learn.

### **The Second Year of the Project**

In the second year (Field and Rea, 2000), a total of 26 pupils from seven schools (including the original three) were involved. They met on three sites, denominationally differentiated. By this time the Project had fully adopted an 'exclusive' model with a full week's programme, or nearly so, as opposed to expecting pupils to attend their mainstream schools for most of the time. The weekly programme included two mornings on basic skills, a morning on group work, an afternoon of visits and a whole day on work placements as well as designated time for ICT, chosen specialist subjects, individual tutorials and home visits.

### **Attitudes of second year participants**

All the young people were studying for qualifications, often in ICT and basic skills, although very few were following GCSE courses. They told the evaluators, who visited their centres in March 2000, that they had made much more progress than when at school. They were specially appreciative of the one-to-one tuition they had received in Pathways which had prevented them from getting 'left behind' when they had difficulty in understanding

something.<sup>90</sup> The programme was generally seen as enjoyable but “hard work”, with one quoted as complaining of “too much work”.

Their improved basic skills, including communication skills with adults, and their work experience had made the young people feel employable. When asked about their future plans, most wanted to start a job and earn money as soon as possible but a few were interested in vocationally-oriented FE courses. One girl was already enrolled on a NVQ childcare course. A few others would consider an FE course if they could not readily find employment. One might ask whether *any* of them would have expressed an interest in FE before joining Pathways.

The evaluators noted the young people’s acceptance of Project boundaries, their regular attendance and their sensible behaviour in discussions, seeing these as indicators of personal growth and maturity. They can also be regarded as behavioural indicators of favourable attitudes to Pathways. Such observations and what the young people told them helped to confirm the conclusions of the previous year that however disaffected they had been in school, the young people were serious about being employable and could be helped to become more so.

### **Tailpiece**

A Newsletter compiled by the Hazelwood Pathways group included a comparison of Pathways and school. Nothing in it contradicts the more official evaluations. The young people agreed that Pathways was better. The first reason given was, “You don’t get shouted at!” The more relaxed atmosphere with tolerance of smoking was liked. Staff were seen as kinder. The writers also felt they had learned more and were glad that they would emerge with some qualifications, even if these were not necessarily GCSEs.

### **7.4c: EOTAS Projects Included in the Report on Multiply Suspended Pupils**

Kilpatrick and Barr (2002) present descriptions and participants’ opinions of a range of initiatives for pupils already expelled from or in danger of permanent exclusion from mainstream education. When possible – although this often proved to be difficult – they

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<sup>90</sup> The individualised approaches, often with participants working on different topics at their own pace, could disguise the slower learners from other group members.

sought the opinions of the participating pupils and their parents. Their evidence on after-school or part-time supportive projects for pupils who were expected to attend their normal mainstream classes has already been presented in Chapter 7.3c. Since the actual projects are not named in Kilpatrick and Barr's (2002) report, it is not known how far, if at all, they overlap with the other Northern Ireland studies in this section of the review.

### ***Pupils in Educational Guidance Units (EGUs): from the MSP Project***

All five ELBs used temporary withdrawal from school as a strategy with pupils who had behavioural problems. Such pupils might be given a place in a special school or in an Educational Guidance Unit (EGU), the latter being the Northern Ireland equivalent of a pupil referral unit (PRU) in England. Kilpatrick and Barr (2002) received five completed questionnaires from EGUs and visited two of the units for observation and interviews.

EGUs had been in operation in Northern Ireland for only a short time when Kilpatrick and Barr (2002) carried out their study. Young people might attend EGUs on a full-time or part-week basis and some EGUs also offered outreach support to pupils in schools. The Department of Education's original intention was that EGUs would provide only a time-limited intervention of between a term and a year, with the goal of a successful return to mainstream education. Reintegration rates from the EGUs, however, ranged from 20% to 100% and some of the pupils returned to mainstream were later expelled or transferred to special schools or to home tuition. Reintegration into mainstream from the PRUs in England was also a Government ideal but as early as 1994 (Circular 11/94)<sup>91</sup> it was appreciated that it could be unrealistic to expect those near the end of their school careers to return to mainstream, while later Government advice (DfEE, 1999) suggests considering the alternatives of further education or joint enrolment at a PRU and school to suit individual circumstances. Another set of problems, both in England and Northern Ireland, have been related to variable admissions criteria for EGUs or PRUs and the inappropriate grouping together of pupils of very different levels of ability and with needs for different types of support (Field, 1999; Kilpatrick and Barr, 2002; Daniels *et al.*, 2003).

The above background details may help to explain the evidence given to Kilpatrick and Barr (2002) in small focus groups by pupils attending Educational Guidance Units (EGUs). The two contrasting views of the young people to their mainstream schools have already been presented in Chapter 7.4. One group had hated school and could see no relevance in academic

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<sup>91</sup> Cited in Daniels *et al.* (2003, page 133)

education. The EGU's objective of returning pupils to school would have absolutely no appeal for them. The second group had liked at least some aspects of school and might be quite looking forward to returning there. The researchers regarded them as 'turn-aroundable' and could envisage this second group but not the first possibly returning successfully to their schools.

Pupils' attitudes to mainstream school were sometimes reflected in their opinions of the EGU, though the report does not attempt to indicate the balance of favourable versus unfavourable comment. One of the most favourably disposed pupils indicated, however, that the teachers were helpful but sometimes the work was too easy. The researchers were somewhat concerned that, while the young people could describe what they liked or disliked about their previous school and about the unit and what they did in the unit, they did not seem to appreciate that the unit was intended to help them learn how to manage their behaviour. Mostly they saw their time in the unit as a punishment for their misdeeds or as a respite for their teachers.

#### ***Pupils in Provision for Those without a School: from the MSP Project***

Kilpatrick and Barr (2002) obtained questionnaire evidence from five Board or voluntary/community projects that offered alternative education to young people who had no school to which to go. This might be because of permanent exclusion from a previous school or because, after such events as withdrawal from a school by a parent or a young person leaving secure accommodation or a child or young person either entering care or having a change of care placement, no suitable school willing to enrol the young person had yet been found. Board projects were more likely than community projects to attempt to cover the Northern Ireland curriculum but even the former were limited by a lack of resources and teaching staff.

The researchers managed to have only a few interviews with students who were in these alternative projects. The young people, who were mainly in Year 12, all stated that they had disliked their mainstream secondary schools and preferred their current provision with its shorter day, less formal atmosphere and more individual attention. Relationships with staff were much better than at school.

One pupil is quoted:

“Here they treat us with respect and don't yell at us all the time. In school nobody listened. They didn't want to know when you tried to say it wasn't your fault. I got blamed when it wasn't me and others got away with it.”

Parents were quite pleased with their children's placement in such units, though one also commented on the narrow subject range. There were mixed opinions of the expulsion process and whether the schools were justified. Many had found the expulsion process hard to understand.

Though quantified SES data are not presented for these pupils, a comment to the researchers from one of the leaders of a voluntary/ community project that unfortunately the young people enrolled were not eligible for grants for school clothing, bus passes or free school meals, suggests that substantial numbers had disadvantaged home circumstances.<sup>92</sup>

### ***Pupils in 'Diversionary Projects: from the MSP Project***

In Northern Ireland there were also a number of projects, funded by various sources,<sup>93</sup> which did have an educational component but whose main aim was to divert young people considered to be at risk of slipping into criminality and to keep them in the community. They were staffed mainly by social workers but teachers might also participate. Kilpatrick and Barr (2002) received questionnaire evidence from eight of these and, again, visited two sites. The young people participating in such projects whom they interviewed generally regarded them favourably, but more for the good relationships than for the activities provided for them. One young person regretted the lack of opportunities for craft work, while another is said to have encapsulated the feelings of many others in the words:

“I like the people but I don't like the work. IT'S BORING.”

#### *7.4d: EOTAS Projects reviewed by the Inspectorate*

##### *Three Case Studies*

Three of the case studies in the Inspectorate report (ETI, 2000) are of projects organised away from mainstream premises for young people in the Key Stage 4 years who had shown marked disaffection from school or whose schooling had completely broken down.<sup>94</sup> The Shantallow Training Services project in Derry and the Gap Project in Newtownabbey had perhaps a

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<sup>92</sup> Admittedly bus passes are not a means tested benefit although free meals and clothing grants are.

<sup>93</sup> For more details, see Kilpatrick and Barr (2002, section 2.8.1).

<sup>94</sup> A fourth case study project, the Towers Project in Newtownards/Bangor, offered *both* alternative education and after-school programmes and so does not fit easily into the framework of this chapter, an important consideration being whether the young person was attending school reasonably well.



stronger vocational orientation than the Lagan Valley Education Project (LVEP) in Polegate since the two former vignettes highlight weekly work experience. All three projects, however, gave attention to personal development; to skills in literacy, numeracy and ICT; to the acquisition of some formal qualifications, not necessarily at GCSE level; and to vocational guidance. All three projects were located in areas of marked social disadvantage. The area served by the Shantallow Project is described as characterised by much long-term unemployment and high benefit dependency, while many participants in the Gap project had been in care or experienced other forms of family breakdown. There is mention of frequent involvement with the Criminal Justice System or of rising crime rates in the accounts of the Gap, Shantallow and Towers projects.

When considering the project outcomes reported by the Inspectorate it should be borne in mind that the prognosis for all, or almost all, participants would have been very bleak had they not become involved in the projects. Thus the findings that three of the eleven starters on the Gap project in 1999-2000 were required to leave because of “persistent, serious dysfunctional behaviour” and that each year about a fifth of those on the Shantallow project did not complete the course<sup>95</sup> have quite different implications from those of similar drop-out rates from mainstream. In all three projects the attendance rates – especially of the ‘stayers’ – were much better than when at school. Most participants were therefore, implicitly, showing more commitment than they had at school, as was also evidenced by the qualifications gained.

Some of the other outcomes recorded indicate the young people’s positive attitudes either to the Project or to the importance of becoming employable (cf Field, 1999). Participants on the Gap project were thought to have become better able to relate to staff, parents and each other; while this reflected improved social skills, there is also an implication of a positive relationship with the Project staff. When on work experience, many of the young people on the Shantallow Project had impressed employers with their work skills and personal qualities. About half are reported to have gone on to work placements, either with the same employer or with a strong recommendation from the previous employer. The young people in the Lagan Valley Project were reported to have “good and stable” relationships with the staff and to show improved attitudes to learning. The atmosphere of the Project is described as “friendly and relaxed”, with attitudes of mutual trust and respect – but at the same time presenting participants with demanding academic challenges.

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<sup>95</sup> No drop-out figures are mentioned for the LVEP.

Favourable parental attitudes were also reported. In both the Gap and the LVEP Projects, parental involvement was identified as among the factors believed to contribute to the Project's success. Parents of the young people in the Shantallow Project were described as "appreciative and supportive"; many had expressed "relief and satisfaction" that their children were "re-engaged in a secure learning environment." Parents of participants in the LVEP were similarly glad that their children were being "educated in a safe and secure place by adults who care"<sup>96</sup> and also that they were causing them less concern. Some were also able to take pleasure in their offspring's examination successes.

#### *Some General Comments by the Inspectorate on EOTAS Projects*

Although they made a number of recommendations for improving EOTAS projects, the inspectors' general comments on their effects on the young people and their attitudes were essentially very positive. Some of the points also appeared in connection with case study projects.

Almost all the young people whom the inspectors interviewed had said they liked the project's activities, including the educational ones (5.4).<sup>97</sup> Group work and structured discussions seem to have been especially popular (6.6). Like Field (1999), the inspectors saw the young people as willing to learn if they felt accepted by teaching staff and suitable challenged and supported (5.3). Attendance was nearly always higher than when in mainstream school. The young people reported that improved attendance helped to increase their self-confidence and sense of purpose (5.5). Parents/ carers were seen as supportive of projects and appreciative of improvements in their children's attitudes and behaviour (5.6); they particularly appreciated being consulted and informed about their children's progress (8.7).

#### **7.5: CONCLUSION(S)**

A question raised early in this section was whether the complaints of pupils identified by teachers or researchers as 'disaffected' or 'seriously disruptive' differ in nature or just in intensity from those of other pupils on similar types of courses. Chaplain's (1996) conclusion

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<sup>96</sup> The recurrence of the idea of their children being in a safe place on the projects seems to point to the vulnerability of the young people to criminal and other adverse influences if left to their own devices unsupervised.

<sup>97</sup> References to paragraphs in the report.

with regard to 'disengaged' boys in the North of England would seem to be applicable to a number of other studies in this review:

While engaged pupils are as ready as disengaged pupils to comment critically on teachers who are unfair, it is the disengaged ones who more often claim they are treated unfairly and who receive more negative messages from teachers.

Both engaged and disengaged pupils disliked much the same kinds of teacher behaviour only the 'disengaged' ones received more of it. To some extent this was inevitable because their behaviour was worse in class. Another factor, however, would seem to be their poorer social skills, which could sometimes result in their unintentionally angering teachers. In addition, lacking the basically good relations with their teachers enjoyed by the more 'engaged' pupils, many of them seemed more ready to take offence (seen for example in Brown, 1987).

This section of the report has, however, some more positive messages. While some seriously disaffected teenagers seemed almost beyond the help of educational professionals (even those in alternative education), others responded well to the specialist support offered. If treated in a kindly and fair way by staff who believed in their potential and who set them appropriately stimulating tasks, many of them made substantial progress to a purposeful young adulthood.

## **Conclusion**

### **Chapter One: Early Motherhood**

Part One of the chapter considers the wider perspective of national and international studies into early motherhood, and concludes from the evidence that, at least in western societies, the risk of teenage pregnancy is highest for those who have grown up in disadvantaged circumstances and/or have poor educational attainment

The report then focuses on the Northern Ireland literature: Davies, Downey and Murphy (1996), Muston (1997), Dale and Warm (c1997), Horgan (2001), Bunting (2003). Although detailed information on economic background of the respondents in the studies is limited, there is still the suggestion that most of the young mothers were generally struggling to bring up their children on very little money (see especially Dale and Warm, c1997), which in turn made it difficult to consider educational courses due to the necessary child care required to facilitate such a return to full-time education.

On average it would seem that qualifications among the young mothers are well below the average of their contemporaries, although there were some notable exceptions as reported in Davies *et al* (1996), Muston (1997) and Horgan (2001). Schools varied in their reaction to the pregnancy and the level of support provided. Sex education classes were generally considered to be inadequate. Home tuition, where provided, was often welcomed by the young mothers but was found inadequate as preparation for GCSEs. Lack of communication between schools and tutors emerged as a negative factor affecting the progress of the young mothers' education.

Attitudes to education varied between the studies, depending on the samples used in each case, but were generally positive. This included widespread support for the importance of education in Davies *et al* (1996), while Dale and Warm (c1997) found that most respondents said that they had enjoyed school, even if only half claimed to have been good attenders.

Very few of the respondents intended to remain on benefits indefinitely, but many expressed concern at the difficulty of affording child care to allow them to go back into education or out to work. Given the low qualifications of most of the respondents, many of the lone mothers would have found it difficult to find employment with an income above what they would receive on state benefits. There was however vigorous denial by the respondents of any suggestion that they had deliberately got themselves pregnant in order to leave school and live

at the taxpayer's expense – though some thought it could well be true of some other young women.

Despite awareness of the small and unrepresentative nature of the samples, there is an optimistic message that at least a considerable proportion of these young women have not lost their educational aspirations. Such a message is encouraging for those who are attempting to facilitate their continuing education.

## **Chapter Two: Part One. The Pre-school years.**

The first section of this chapter considers the attitude of parents in disadvantaged areas to preschool or nursery education. It begins by situating the Northern Ireland research against an optimistic backdrop provided by admittedly outdated but otherwise comparable projects in the US. Lazar *et al* (1982) and Royce *et al* (1983), for instance, report the long-term positive attitudinal impact of preschooling in disadvantaged areas.

In Northern Ireland a number of studies are cited. Several of these (Sheehy *et al.*, 2000; Quiery *et al.*, 2001; McShane (1999)) are based on the Greater Shankill Early Years Project (EYP), undertaken as part of a wider Regeneration Strategy for the area. These studies revealed high levels of social deprivation, unemployment and depression, low levels of family support and educational motivation. The EYP scheme did however succeed in raising parental expectations and in lowering levels of parental depression. Moreover, despite their own negative experiences of school, all ten parents in McShane (1999) were positive about the EYP project, nearly all were completing courses through the EYP, and all had hopes for their own children's education.

Two further studies, Coopers and Lybrand (1997) and Gallagher, Shuttleworth and Gray (1998) report on small numbers of nursery units in disadvantaged areas. These again highlighted the lack of support frequently encountered for education in areas prone to chronic unemployment, but Coopers and Lybrand (1997) in particular report that the parents did welcome preschool education: the parents saw their children as now more confident and better prepared for primary school; various cognitive gains for the children were mentioned; parents reported benefits to themselves, including greater parenting skills, encouragement to take up courses and greater involvement in the life of the school and their children's educational progress.

## **Part Two: The Primary School Years**

There is a dearth of evidence directly from primary school children as analysed by social background. Instead the main sources of evidence are the primary school principals in disadvantaged areas of Belfast. Quiery *et al* (2001) interviewed primary principals in the Shankill area, who revealed the two central obstacles as, firstly, the parents' own more pressing problems, and, secondly, their lack of knowledge of how best to support their children's education.

Gallagher *et al* (1998) interviewed eight primary principals in disadvantaged areas of Belfast. Two of the themes identified are important here. Firstly, they discovered demographic differences between Catholic and Protestant areas: although in both denominations there had been migration towards the suburban ring round the city boundary, Protestants had tended to move further out and to go into all surrounding areas, whereas a higher percentage of the Catholics had stayed nearer the areas they had previously occupied. In consequence, the Catholic areas remained more socially heterogeneous, whereas the inner-city Protestant areas became the home of an increasingly homogeneous but increasingly disadvantaged populace, who required much more support than before from the various social services. Secondly, Gallagher *et al* (1998) report on the various strategies employed by the school principals in order to increase parental support for their children's education. This ranges from adult literacy programmes to a concentrated publicity effort through the local community press to raise the positive profile of the school and highlight the achievements of its pupils, this in communities accustomed to failure.

As part of the 'Scoping' study for Making Belfast Work (Kilpatrick *et al.*, 1997), children and young adults living in disadvantaged areas of Belfast were asked to rate the adequacy of 17 items in their localities on 5-point scales on which '1' was the most positive rating and '5' the most negative. This revealed broad approval from the children (aged 7-11) for the education they were receiving, while criticism focused on the lack of activities provided after school hours as well as the lack of nearby parks to play in. 74% of the respondents reported that they used their local library, a figure which is not replicated in older age groups.

### **Chapter 3: Attitudes of disadvantaged parents and their children: transfer and the years of compulsory secondary education**

The chapter begins by looking at research (Sutherland 1992, Sutherland, 2000) into how parents from different social backgrounds approach their children's transfer from primary to secondary school. Sutherland (1992) reveals that 82% of parents from the lower SES category had attended Open Evenings or Open Days before applying for a place for their child, compared to the only slightly higher figure of 91% from the other occupational groups. Nonetheless some differences did emerge between social backgrounds: for instance in the more educationally or socially disadvantaged families, co-education and integrated education were deemed to be of less importance than in families with higher educational or social levels. When asked to rate the importance of each of 16 school characteristics in making a choice of post-primary school, parents from the lower-SES groups or who lacked educational qualifications attached less importance than did those in professional or managerial occupations to the school having a sixth form, a wide range of subjects or good teaching resources but they had more often sought a school which they thought would offer special help to pupils with learning difficulties. They were also more likely to be attracted by the proximity of a local school or to be influenced by the fact that the school was their child's choice or that their child's school friends also hoped to go there.

In the following section a number of studies are cited which consider the attitudes of pupils in year 8, the year immediately following the transfer from primary school. The report refers to the Cohort Study (1975), Harland *et al* (1999) and Whyte (1995). The first of these, the Cohort Study (1975), although conducted earlier than most studies in this review, is important for showing the persistence of pupil attitudes towards education and, in particular, the relatively poor prognosis (in terms of future educational achievement) for pupils who do not settle happily into their post-primary schools. In particular the rating of pupil educational alienation was found to correlate significantly with social background, parental education and interest. There was also a significant negative correlation between pupil educational alienation and a measure of academic performance in year 8. Harland *et al* (1999) found in a study of 21 schools that very many more middle-class than working-class children had obtained grammar school places; in this study two-thirds (66%) of the middle-class children were in grammar schools while more than three-fifths (62%) of the working-class pupils were in secondary schools. Differences between social backgrounds emerged however on only a small number of questions. For instance pupils from the schools with high FSME indexes tended to see their curriculum as more relevant, both for their immediate circumstances and for future employment, but the same pupils reported less continuity and progression in their

Year 8 lessons than did grammar school pupils and those in schools with more advantaged catchment areas.

The report then considered pupil attitudes at Key Stage 4 and drew conclusions from a piece of NIEC-QUB research (with year 11 pupils from two grammar schools and twelve secondary schools), as well as two evaluations of the Alternative Curriculum or Flexibility Initiative for Key Stage 4 (ETI, 2003; Grew, 2002). The NIEC-QUB research focused on a range of schools, not all from socially disadvantaged areas. There were nonetheless some reports of initiatives to promote learning in disadvantaged areas, such as a “Mathematics weekend” prior to GCSEs when classes were offered on Friday evening and again on Saturday and Sunday. Motivation was also cited as a problem in some disadvantaged areas, for instance in areas of high unemployment or in areas where tradesmen’s businesses offered the possibility of work without further qualifications. In Grew’s study (2002) of alternative curriculum innovations, offered to the lower streams of non-selective secondary schools, over half of the respondents were entitled to free school meals. This report and the ETI report (2003) revealed that the innovations led to an overall rise in motivation and attendance among the pupils involved, although the continued lower attendance in the school-based component of the courses suggested that school still needs to become more relevant to these pupils, who reported that in the out-of-school elements they were treated as adults, something they welcomed. This even included being reprimanded in language liberally sprinkled with expletives, but this was not perceived as a problem at all. Indeed the pupils rejected the school teachers’ expletive-free language as snobbish. In conclusion, then perhaps in light of these pupils’ comments the main question underlying this review, “What are the attitudes of disadvantaged pupils and parents towards education?” needs a little expansion. Perhaps it should also ask ‘Attitudes to what kind of education?’

Some secondary analyses are then carried out on data from Year 12 pupils, collected as part of the recent Selective System research (Gallagher and Smith, 2000a). As part of the empirical research undertaken for the Government-commissioned research into the effects of the selective system of secondary education in Northern Ireland (Gallagher and Smith, 2000) a 40-item questionnaire, developed by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) was administered to Year 12 pupils in the 25 Main Study schools in Northern Ireland (Gallagher and McKeown, 2000a). The questionnaire was also administered to pupils in their final full year of compulsory education (S4) in the six Scottish schools which participated in the comparison study (Gallagher and McKeown, 2000b). To sum up, the secondary analysis of the data suggests that the stereotype of disadvantaged pupils being more negatively disposed towards their schooling and education does not reflect inevitable reality, at least not



in the case of the Northern Ireland school pupils. Only a small number of disadvantage-related conclusions could be drawn at all. One such conclusion was that in the sample as a whole and in the grammar sector, pupils entitled to free meals and those from working-class backgrounds or with unemployed fathers had less confidence than other pupils in their ability to succeed academically. Such attitudes proved to be predictive. These pupils were, on average to perform less well in their GCSE examinations later in the year, just as they had already been markedly less successful in their Transfer Tests some six years previously (Shuttleworth and Daly, 2000).

In their 'Scoping' study for Making Belfast Work Kilpatrick *et al* (1997) discovered no statistically significant correlation between high levels of social need and poor performance at GCSE, and suggested that other factors must also be taken into account. This seems to contradict Gallagher (2001) and imply that the relationship between FSME-based indices of social need and school performance is not a simple linear one.

#### **Chapter Four: Attitudes regarding the post-compulsory years**

In a review of research examining the correlates of staying on in education or leaving, it must be borne in mind that the percentage of the age group staying on has soared. In a 14-year period that would cover most of the studies in this chapter, the percentage of leavers from Northern Ireland schools going on to higher education more than doubled between 1986-1987 and 2000-2001 from 15.2% to 33.3%, while the percentage going on to either higher *or* further education rose from 42.1% to 60.1%. Such rises change the implications of continuing in education. For instance, Foskett and Hesketh's (1997) social class divisions at age 16 were less in the numbers continuing in education than in the types of courses taken.

Unfortunately for this review, only a few studies seem to have considered, and not as a main focus, the extent to which the desire for a wage was prompted by serious financial needs in the family rather than the young person's desire for independence. This is a matter that needs more careful investigation than simply including something like 'need the money' in questionnaire checklist, as is sometimes the case. Nonetheless some conclusions can be reached. For instance, the NIERC (1997) report found that continuing participation in full-time education in Northern Ireland was more likely if parents were employed, and especially if they were in non-manual occupations. The paper appreciated that this could be for economic reasons (i.e. that there is less pressure on such young people to begin to contribute to the household income) as well as for attitudinal reasons (e.g. parents with post-compulsory education themselves are more likely than those without it to encourage their offspring to stay

on in education). Having found some qualitative evidence in the course of the review that there were some young people in Northern Ireland intending to leave full-time education mainly in order to secure the £30 a week which they would then get if they participated in vocational training programmes, NIERC (1997) suggested that more financial support might be needed to encourage disadvantaged young people to remain in education. In a similar vein, research data collected by the T&EA (1995) study of young people in Status 0 (school leavers who are not only out of education but also out of work and not in training) revealed that coming from a large family or a household with unemployed or economically inactive parents was significantly *correlated* with being in Status 0.

There was, however, relatively little hard evidence in the research reviewed here of poverty *preventing* many young people from continuing in education as opposed to lower socio-economic backgrounds *discouraging* them. In several studies – including the Northern Ireland reports by Bill *et al.*(1974) and PPRU (1986) – young people from lower SES families seemed to be more often motivated by the attractions of having a wage and spending money than by the necessity of contributing to the family budget as soon as possible. Differential class values seemed to be important here. It was notable that the clearest evidence of financial need as a deterrent to continuing education for a sizable proportion of a sample was seen in Essen and Wedge (1982). That study aimed to focus on young people who were actually ‘disadvantaged,’ using fairly strict criteria that proved to be applicable to only 5.8% of the whole NCDS sample, and asked specifically whether there the family needed a wage from the respondent. Most of the other studies discussed here were less specifically focused on *disadvantage* as such.

The American research briefly considered in the last section points, as several of the authors conclude, to the importance of early intervention if it is desired to have more young people, especially among the less advantaged, committed to serious continuing education or training. Jimmerson *et al* (2000) remark for instance that “The process of dropping out begins prior to the child entering school.” Moreover parenting styles and family rules have also been shown to be related to premature leaving in the USA (Rumberger *et al.*, 1990; Ensminger & Slusarick, 1992; Ensminger *et al.*, 1996).

## **Chapter Five: Persistent absentees from school**

In Northern Ireland, as elsewhere in the UK, pupils persistently absent for ‘disallowed’ reasons’ come disproportionately from disadvantaged homes (details are reported from three Northern Ireland government-sponsored studies: Harbison and Caven, 1977; Moore and

Jardine, 1983; Sutherland, 1995). In both Moore and Jardine (1983) and Sutherland (1995) pupils persistently absent for non-medical reasons were more likely than average to be entitled to free meals, to live in lone-parent households, to have siblings who also had attendance problems and to be receiving special help for learning difficulties, or for behavioural or attendance problems. In all three Northern Ireland surveys of persistent absenteeism, socio-economically disadvantaged pupils were more likely than other pupils to have been absent for at least a quarter of the school term mainly for reasons other than physical illness. Sutherland (1995) reported that absentees due to medical reasons were about 50% more likely than the general population to be on free school meals. Absentees for non-medical reasons were, however, more likely still to be on free meals and were also more likely than medical absentees to live in one-parent households. The association between social background and non-medical absenteeism appeared at its strongest in the Key Stage 3 years.

Some very useful studies, such as Harbison and Caven (1977), have compared details of home backgrounds and the attitudes of unauthorised absentees with comparison groups of similar SES rather than just with the general population. Such studies (e.g. Sutherland, 1995) suggested that absentees' homes often tended to suffer from emotional upheavals and family discord and the homes might be less well organised.

Unsurprisingly, persistent absentees enjoyed school less than did good attenders and they seemed more prone than other pupils to have particularly difficult relationships with at least some of their teachers. A number of studies showed persistently unauthorised absentees to value qualifications less than did other pupils. Bullying was disturbingly often given as a reason for avoiding school.

However, many pupils persistently absent for disallowed reasons had something good to say about the school, even if just about its social opportunities (e.g. Jardine, 1987). Many absentees could distinguish between teachers who were 'alright' and those with whom they were at loggerheads. On the other hand at least one important study showed them to have fewer friends than good attenders in the same low-stream classes.

Few absentees' parents – in studies that sought first-hand evidence from them – showed fundamental opposition to schooling although they might query its value for pupils near the leaving age and, perhaps with justification, might be highly critical of certain aspects of their child's school. Most absentees' parents paid at least lip service to the importance of getting a good education and many were disappointed in their child's poor attendance. They were, however, not usually good at translating such dispositions into getting the child to attend

regularly. Several studies showed absentees' parents to give less priority to attendance than other parents and to be more ready than other parents to accept certain reasons for staying off school.

## **Chapter Six: Pupils excluded from school**

This chapter set out to consider the case of pupils excluded from school and aimed to answer three questions: firstly, do children and young people excluded from school come from more disadvantaged families than the age group as a whole?; secondly, apart from issues of family disadvantage, are any categories of pupils in particular danger of being excluded?; and thirdly, what do young people think of the schools from which they have been excluded and of the processes that led up to their exclusion? In attempting to answer these questions, only three relevant studies conducted in Northern Ireland were located: Kilpatrick *et al* (1999), Kilpatrick and Barr (2002) and Eastwood (2000).

In answer to the first question the data collected by Kilpatrick *et al* (1999) reveal a clear link between school exclusion and social disadvantage. For instance, of those pupils suspended once from schools across Northern Ireland in 1996-97, for whom information was available, 42.2% were entitled to free school meals (Northern Ireland average is c.30%). Among those suspended more than twice during the year, the percentage receiving free school meals rises to 53.9%, and most revealingly, among those expelled from school the figure is 69.7%. The conclusions taken from Eastwood's (2000) random sample of eleven excluded pupils, although less reliable, also reveal economic disadvantage, social problems, single parenting, unemployment and reliance on state benefits as a frequent factors in the family backgrounds. This is consistent with data from other UK studies, such as Hayden and Dunne (2001) and Ofsted (1996).

In attempting to answer the second question concerning particular groups of children most likely to be excluded from school, aside from those socially disadvantaged, there is some interview evidence from Kilpatrick *et al* (1999) which suggests that residential social workers were concerned that the children in their charge were discriminated against and suspended too readily, with some schools and teachers automatically assuming it was the young people's fault that they were in care. Having one child suspended could, they claimed, encourage others to seek exclusion too. A number of small survey studies also seem to suggest that the incidence of suspension or exclusion was greater among children in residential care than in foster care. There is no data to suggest that there is any greater risk of exclusion due to race

or as members of the Traveller Community. Exclusion does seem to be gender-related, and is particularly associated with levels of special educational need. These Northern Ireland findings compare generally with those in other parts of the UK (see Booth, 1996; SEU, 1998; the DfEE's Draft Guidance, 1999; and Osler *et al.*, 2001) with the difference that in England the issue of race/ethnicity is very significant.

In answer to the third question concerning the views of the excluded pupils themselves, there is relatively little data from the Northern Ireland studies compared to other studies carried out elsewhere in the UK. Nonetheless, some tentative conclusions can be drawn. The views of eleven excluded pupils in Northern Ireland were reported in Eastwood (2000) and these revealed, unsurprisingly, criticism of the school from which they had been excluded. This criticism, however, focused on individual teachers rather than on the school itself. Kilpatrick and Barr (2002) conducted focus group interviews with Year 10 and Year 11 pupils who had been in Educational Guidance Units (EGUs) for between three and 12 months. These revealed both vehement opposition to the idea of returning to school and also the expression of enjoyment of some aspects of school and some subjects, and a desire to return. The parents of excluded children, whose views were reported in Eastwood (2000), varied in their support for the school and its teachers. The school spokespersons interviewed by Kilpatrick *et al* (1999) revealed that there was at least a perceived unwillingness on the part of the parents of problem children to come into school to discuss the issue.

### **Chapter Seven: Young people with serious behavioural problems at school**

The initial review of Northern Ireland studies aimed to discover whether the complaints of those pupils who are identified by teachers or researchers as 'disaffected' or 'seriously disruptive' differ in nature or just in intensity from those of other pupils on similar types of courses. Brown (1997) looked at disaffection in a rural secondary school in Northern Ireland and found that the disaffected pupils made three main complaints: concerning the treatment received from certain teachers (when perceived as harsh or unfair); regarding over-strict enforcement of petty rules such as uniform regulations; and, thirdly, due to excessive academic pressure. This research, and in particular the complaint about poor teachers, concurs with the views of the Year 11 pupils in the NIEC-QUB research reported on in Chapter 3.4.1 (Gallagher *et al.*, 1998). More detailed studies were carried out in England by Keys, Harris and Fernandes (1995) and Wallace (1996) and the latter investigated KS3 pupils in three secondary schools, two of which were in areas of high unemployment. Wallace (1996) discovered that here too pupils were able to distinguish between the attributes of

teachers they liked and those they disliked, the latter resorting to physical threats, shouting or verbal abuse.

The second section of the chapter considered the situation of disaffected pupils who were still in school in Northern Ireland. In Maltman's (1994) casebook studies of Year 12 pupils at 'Blackfield', a secondary high school in Greater Belfast, the four boys and two girls all had distinctly different case histories and had faced a different set of problems. However they illustrate Reid's (1989) description of disaffection as multi-faceted, varying in its details from individual to individual and as reflected in high rates of "absenteeism, truancy, disruption and underachievement" as well as in the pupils' attitudes towards school and their expectations for the future. The pupils differed greatly in their level of enjoyment of school and in the level of parental support for their education. As a group, however, Maltman's six pupils would seem to have been more distinctively disadvantaged in terms of fraught family relationships and traumas than in their socio-economic profile, which was only slightly lower than of the whole school enrolment. Kilpatrick *et al.* (1997) in the Scoping Study carried out for Making Belfast Work found that there was a link between schools where there was a high proportion of Year 12 pupils with zero GCSE grades and nearby areas with high numbers of probation orders and other court disposals. Research from the UK (Chaplain, 1966; Brown, 1987), though outdated, bears much resemblance to the Northern Ireland findings.

The third section of the chapter is a review of studies of in-school support units for pupils with behavioural difficulties in Northern Ireland. Montgomery (2001) evaluated the first three SEELB in-school behavioural units shortly after their introduction. Pupils had usually been referred to the units, according to the co-ordinators, for such behaviours as disobedience, shouting in class, work not done or for a series of incidents, but clearly their behaviour had not been sufficiently bad to merit permanent exclusion. Montgomery (2001) interviewed seven pupils, some from each unit involved, and discovered that all the pupils felt their behaviour had improved as a result of their stay in the Unit. Six even felt sure that they could sustain their improved behaviour provided that they had their teachers' support and regular contact with the Unit Co-ordinator. There is however no indication of the level of social disadvantage among the pupils interviewed. Two other studies, carried out by the ETI (2000) into preventive projects funded by the Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation (SSPPR), are perhaps more relevant. The first, the CRISP project in a secondary school in a socially disadvantaged area of Newry, revealed that even in its infancy, the programme was having marked success: 35 parents had expressed an interest in a parenting programme and pupil attendance had risen to 90%, just below the Northern Ireland average for comparable schools. The second study focuses on the Barnardo's After School

Project in areas of multiple disadvantage throughout Belfast and reports that 340 children were benefiting from this attempt to reduce disaffection and see education as a community issue.

The final section considers the case of pupils being educated other than at school, and evaluates a number of projects and education centres (Karayiannis, 2001; Field, 1999; Field and Rea, 2000; Kilpatrick and Barr, 2002; ETI, 2000). These studies provide great encouragement and reveal many positive comments by the once disaffected young people who respond well to the more relaxed non-school environment created. In one study of the Ardarnet Project in Belfast Karayiannis (2001) discovered that benefits were the main source of family income for over two-thirds (69.6%) of the young people. Three-fifths (60%) of them lived in single-parent households. A full fifth (21.4%) were on the register for neglect and/or abuse and 19.4% were or had been in foster or residential care. Karayiannis (2001) interviewed six of the young people who all regarded the project as the most helpful “school” they had ever attended, and appreciated the informal atmosphere and sympathetic staff. There is also evidence that the project’s determined efforts to gain the support of the parents were largely successful and further indication that the young people were motivated to move into further training or employment upon leaving the project. A similar positive reaction by the young people was noted by Field (1999) and Field and Rea (2000) in their studies of the Pathways Project, involving initially three schools from disadvantaged areas of Belfast. These revealed that though the young people might be disaffected from school and were not much interested in academic study, they were serious about wanting to be employable. Moreover, if approached in ways they found acceptable, they were reasonably willing to learn. By the second year of the project All the young people were studying for qualifications, often in ICT and basic skills, while the evaluators noted the young people’s acceptance of Project boundaries, their regular attendance and their sensible behaviour in discussions.

In conclusion, while some seriously disaffected teenagers seemed almost beyond the help of educational professionals (even those in alternative education), others responded well to the specialist support offered. If treated in a kindly and fair way by staff who believed in their potential and who set them appropriately stimulating tasks, many of them made substantial progress to a purposeful young adulthood.

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