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Experiences of education among minority ethnic groups in Northern Ireland

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Experiences of education among minority ethnic groups in Northern Ireland



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Executive summary

A feature of Northern Ireland's transition from conflict has been significant growth in inward migration and ethnic diversity. This has been reflected at school level in substantial increases in the number of pupils from minority ethnic or newcomer backgrounds. According to Department of Education statistics for 2022/23, minority ethnic¹ and newcomer pupils comprised 6.1% and 5.5% of the pupil population respectively (DENI, 2023a). Between 2.5% and 2.7% of all pupils were recorded as being from both minority ethnic and newcomer backgrounds.²

Greater pluralism represents a considerable change in a society and education system shaped by historical community divisions, where over 90% of schools are predominantly Catholic or predominantly Protestant in intake and character. However, the educational experiences of minority ethnic, migrant and newcomer groups (hereafter minority ethnic groups) in this distinctive social and political context have received limited research attention over the past 20 years. Consequently, further evidence is required to examine how well policy and practice is serving their needs.

This study aimed to address the gap in research on the experiences of education among minority ethnic children and parents in Northern Ireland (NI), and adopted four objectives:

- 1) To explore how minority ethnic families select schools for their children and the circumstances that inform these decisions.
- 2) To examine children's and parents' experiences of school life and school engagement.
- 3) To investigate children's and parents' views of the NI curriculum and its delivery, including support for English and heritage languages.
- 4) To provide evidence and recommendations for policy and practice to improve the educational experience of minority ethnic groups.

To address these objectives, the research comprised a review of literature, government- and school-level policy and data concerning education among minority ethnic groups in NI; qualitative interviews with 62 children aged 9-15 (30 female and 32 male) and 53 parents (41 female and 12 male) from diverse minority ethnic backgrounds across the region; and interviews and focus groups with 43 stakeholders, including educators, policymakers and representatives of statutory and voluntary agencies that work with minority ethnic communities. Families were recruited through contact with

A **newcomer pupil** is defined in policy in Northern Ireland as “a child or young person who has enrolled in a school but who does not have satisfactory language skills to participate fully in the school curriculum and does not have a language in common with the teacher” (Supporting Newcomer Pupils, DENI, 2009, iii).

Designated newcomer funding is typically provided to schools for 3 years per pupil, and thereafter on an annual basis according to need. Once pupils are assessed as having satisfactory language skills to participate fully in the curriculum, they are no longer classified as newcomers but are recorded in data on **former newcomer pupils**.

¹ In Northern Ireland, Department of Education data on ethnicity aggregates all white pupils other than those from Irish Traveller backgrounds into a single ethnic group. Thus, data on the minority ethnic pupil population does not include white migrant pupils. This contrasts with statistical practices elsewhere in the UK, which typically include white migrant pupils within a separate ‘white other’ category.

² Data suppression within some categories, due to low numbers or the risk of identification, means it is only possible to give upper and lower boundaries for this number.

schools, community organisations, cultural groups and professional networks, as well as via social media, and interpreters were provided where requested. All primary data were collected between April 2022 and March 2023. The findings are summarised below.

Policy and statistics

- **Background data on newcomer and minority ethnic pupils indicate the existence of inequalities relative to the pupil population as a whole.** The proportion of newcomer pupils attending grammar schools (12%) is substantially lower than among non-newcomers (44%) at post-primary level. Newcomer pupils' GCSE outcomes are also significantly lower than those of their peers: in 2018/19, 59% of newcomers achieved 5+ A*-C grades, compared with 87% of non-newcomers and 86% of former newcomers. Rates of Free School Meal Entitlement are highest among Irish Traveller pupils (65%), Black pupils (37%) and pupils from the other ethnic group (35%), all of whom are also under-represented in grammar school enrolments, and almost half of Irish Traveller pupils (49%) are recorded as having special educational needs. At GCSE, pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds achieve at similar levels to white pupils on the measure of 5+ A*-C grades, 83% and 87% attaining this level respectively in 2018/19, though a larger gap is evident when this measure includes English and maths. In each case, however, these aggregated figures are likely to mask variation across ethnic groups.
- **A review of policy among 50 schools reveals that most do not have publicly available newcomer or diversity policies.** Despite tackling racist bullying being a priority in the Racial Equality Strategy (OFMdFM, 2015), most anti-bullying policies made only scant reference to racism. In 2021/22, over half (27) of the sample schools included admissions criteria giving preference to the children or siblings of past pupils, which may be detrimental to first- and second-generation migrants. Following a High Court ruling in 2022 that prioritising the children of past pupils constitutes indirect discrimination, guidance from the Department of Education 'strongly' recommends that schools do not use 'familial criteria beyond sibling currently attending the school' (DENI Circular 22/15). Indicative evidence suggests that the use of such criteria has declined but continues in some schools.

School admissions

- **Interviews reveal that navigating the complex NI education system is a challenge for migrant parents.** This is especially difficult for those with lower levels of English language fluency, and existing multilingual information resources, published by the Education Authority, are not widely known or consulted.
- **Other families from minority ethnic backgrounds are important sources of information about prospective schools.** Participants described consulting four main sources of information: friends and acquaintances; the child's primary school (for post-primary admissions); voluntary and community sector organisations; and published information. Other minority ethnic families' experiences were considered more authentic than promotional school literature and were viewed as particularly valuable sources of information on issues of racism and inclusion.
- **The proximity of the school to home is a major influence on school choice,** particularly at primary level. For families without access to a private vehicle, schools within walking distance were strongly preferred. Distance remained influential at post-primary level, as children began to travel independently to school and safety became a more prominent concern, but was weighed against factors including school type and reputation. Increased distance to school, and associated

transport arrangements, could be a particular issue for refugee and asylum-seeking families when allocated housing in a new area.

- **Diversity of intake is an important factor in school choice for those living in areas of high and medium diversity.** Many parents viewed a diverse intake as a protective factor against racial discrimination. However, some viewed schools with high levels of linguistic diversity as a potential hindrance to their child's English language development. Concerns were also raised that schools with large newcomer populations might impede children's integration into NI.
- **Educational standards are an important consideration, but often one of several priorities in post-primary school decisions.** Other factors included a school's approach to pastoral care, facilities, diversity of intake, and the degree of pressure that might be placed on the child. Educational reputation was deemed less important for parents choosing primary schools than post-primary schools.
- **While a school's religious denomination is not a priority in many families' decision-making, parents were not ambivalent about denominational schooling.** Migrant parents were often unaware of denominational differences when enrolling their children at school and some found the parallel system perplexing. Families from other faith backgrounds were sometimes concerned about how to support their child at a school with a Christian ethos.
- **Children are often involved in the decision-making process when selecting a post-primary school.** Children considered factors such as the school's reputation, size, facilities and proximity to home, as well as the presence of friends and older siblings, when selecting schools.
- **Pressure on school places in some areas, notably Greater Belfast, means families are often prevented from exercising choice, particularly when migrating to NI outside standard admissions periods.** Refugee and asylum-seeking children often experienced a protracted wait to be allocated school places. Children of post-primary age who had newly migrated to or sought sanctuary in NI were typically allocated to non-grammar schools, which risked increasing sectoral and social inequalities. While most schools were accommodating, there were reports of schools declining to admit newcomer pupils where places were available, due to concerns including the timing of newcomer funding and, at post-primary level, the impact of additional newcomer pupils on the school's examination performance.
- **Current applications processes can be difficult for those with lower levels of literacy, lower confidence with online technologies and without English as a first language.** Some interviewees requested more widespread use of paper-based applications and more accessible language within admissions documents.
- **The transfer test for grammar school admissions presents particular challenges for recent migrants to NI.** The test was a source of considerable stress for children and families, particularly those who had recently migrated and had not previously learnt the content to be assessed. 'Special provisions' in grammar school admissions exempt children who have received most of their education outside NI from taking the transfer test and award a score based on other evidence of academic ability. However, most families whose children were eligible for this option had not taken it, while those who had reported that the way in which these applications were processed was opaque. Some parents felt that, as migrants, they had been disadvantaged in admissions decisions.

Day-to-day school life

- **Policies on school uniform, progression and homework attracted a mixed response.** Compulsory uniform in NI schools divided opinion and several participants commented on the high cost. Some parents were concerned by homework allocation, approaches to progression and schools' streaming practices, particularly at primary level. Homework clubs and school uniform banks were importance resources for new migrants and low-income families.
- **Schools provided an important source of friendships for children.** While some children reported having friends from migrant backgrounds only, others described a mix of friends from migrant and non-migrant backgrounds. Some children reported that they valued the shared experience of other minority ethnic friends.
- **Experiences of verbal and physical racist bullying were widely reported.** Examples of verbal racist bullying included name-calling, criticising children's schoolwork, intelligence and English language ability, and questioning their identity and residence in NI. While racist bullying was primarily instigated by white, settled Northern Irish/British/Irish children, there were accounts of bullying by pupils from other minority ethnic and migrant backgrounds.
- **Families report direct and indirect forms of discrimination from some school staff.** Some parents stated that teachers had lower academic expectations of certain minority ethnic groups. Black and Traveller pupils perceived that they were more likely to be disciplined than their white, settled peers. Exclusion from school communications, social activities and celebrations of achievement was reported, principally among Traveller and Roma families.
- **Families' responses to racism in school vary from taking action themselves to making excuses for perpetrators.** Some children retaliated to racist treatment, resulting in them rather than the perpetrator being punished by teachers; others excused perpetrators as 'joking' or lacking understanding. Parents attributed racist bullying to factors such as ignorance and the location of the school, particularly where this afforded few opportunities for cross-cultural encounters.
- **Racist bullying negatively impacts children's mental health and wellbeing, school attitudes and school attendance.** Children described that racist bullying had caused them to dislike school, want to change schools or not want to attend. Parents played an important role in supporting their children and sustaining their engagement with school, though some reported a negative impact of doing so on their own wellbeing or their relationship with their children.
- **Racist incidents are often inadequately addressed by schools.** While some parents reported being broadly satisfied with school responses to racist incidents, a larger number were dissatisfied. Parents expressed concerns about a lack of action, that action was not stringent enough or that schools disbelieved them when reporting racist incidents. Participants advocated more preventative practice to counter racism at school, such as anti-racist education, as well as anti-racism training to help teachers recognise racism where it occurs. An effective response from school management was considered especially important in reducing the prevalence and persistence of racist bullying.
- **Children characterise a 'good school' as inclusive, diverse and equitable.** An absence of bullying, opportunities for enjoyment such as extracurricular activities, and spaces which provide peace and calm were also important to children. They viewed a 'good teacher' as one who was not 'shouty' and punitive but calm and supportive, non-judgemental and able to make the teaching fun.

Curriculum issues and cultural responsiveness

- **Children and parents largely have positive views on learning and sharing about cultural and religious diversity at school.** This was seen to foster a sense of pride in one's heritage, impact peer relationships positively, and prepare young people for future work and travel beyond NI. However, some young people spoke of reluctance to discuss their heritage or religion, fearing that they would be mocked by peers. Smaller minority ethnic groups also reported that, where other cultures, countries and languages had been discussed at school, theirs were often overlooked.
- **Parents and children appreciate student-centred teaching approaches in NI schools.** These were often compared favourably with the approaches of other education systems of which participants had experience. However, parents criticised the perceived narrowness of the curriculum at primary level and, in some cases, the standard of maths relative to their home countries. Several parents who intended to return to their home country also expressed concern about their children transitioning back to more teacher-centred instruction or falling behind their peers due to differences between curricula.
- **Some parents and children suggest that the curriculum needs to be diversified and decolonised.** Participants argued for increased representation of minority cultures and languages, diverse histories, authors of colour, and the local contributions of minority ethnic communities. Some children demonstrated critical engagement with how religion, culture and history are represented in the curriculum and classroom. Discussions highlighted the importance of accuracy and sensitivity when teaching about culture, religion and political events.
- **Schools appear generally responsive to religious and cultural differences in respect of uniforms and diet.** However, access to prayer spaces for Muslim students varied across schools and stakeholders reported that a small number of schools had resisted adapting their uniform to accommodate religious beliefs. With an explicitly Christian ethos underpinning many NI schools, some children of other faiths described how their school had sought to make regular religious practices (such as prayers) more inclusive, or how they themselves had accommodated these rituals without compromising their beliefs.
- **Experiences of Religious Education (RE) and options for withdrawal vary across schools.** Communication of the right to withdraw pupils from RE appeared variable and some parents were unaware of this option. Alternative provision for children who were withdrawn from RE was generally limited, and parents and children advocated greater involvement of co-religionists in the development and teaching of minority religious traditions. Stakeholders were particularly critical of the intensive focus on Christianity in the RE curriculum in NI and argued that this should be reviewed.
- **An 'emergency response' approach dominates the provision of English language support for newcomer pupils in NI schools.** The withdrawal of children from mainstream classes for additional English language learning was widespread. Interviews with families and stakeholders suggested that primary school-aged children were generally more positive about withdrawal classes than post-primary children, some of whom perceived that withdrawing from regular class carried a stigma.
- **Classroom assistants, both bilingual and others, often become the principal English language teachers for newcomer pupils.** Parents were positive about the role of classroom assistants and keen that their children should receive support from them but were also aware of the precarity of

such provision. Stakeholders observed an absence of training in English language teaching among those with responsibility for supporting newcomer pupils' English language learning.

- **Peer support for social and language skills is valued by the parents of newcomer children.** Peer support was considered important for socialisation processes, particularly when formalised and organised by teachers.
- **Bilingual and multilingual parents lack support from schools or other statutory bodies in making decisions about home language use.** Some parents felt they had to choose between their home language and English, and parental resources affected decision-making concerning maintaining and developing home or heritage languages. One group of parents preferred that their children did not speak their home language at school, fearing it could leave them vulnerable to discrimination from peers or compromise their English language development. Another group of parents, however, expressed a wish for schools to provide classes in the home language and establish multilingual clubs.
- **Children can perceive that home languages are not welcome in class.** Some were deterred from using other languages due to embarrassment, though others wished to speak their home language at school if there were peers with whom they could communicate. Where afterschool provision and enrichment classes for home languages existed at school, these focused on gaining qualifications.

Home-school relationships

- **Most parents feel comfortable contacting their child's school with concerns or questions, but a minority of parents do not.** Perceiving a school as approachable, having a clear point of contact, and prior positive communication were factors that increased parents' willingness to contact their child's school. Barriers to school engagement among parents included a lack of confidence in communicating in English, concerns about seeming 'difficult' and working patterns.
- **Stakeholders offered examples of practices that schools had adopted to overcome barriers to home-school engagement, including conducting home visits and employing family support staff.** Such initiatives were considered vital for bringing parents into contact with the school and addressing difficulties that could impinge upon parents' involvement in education.
- **School communications, particularly via app, can be challenging for parents who have lower levels of English fluency or need support using technology.** Most parents were satisfied with school communications, but difficulties accessing information or initiating communication with the school were reported among English language learners and parents with less technological proficiency, particularly during the pandemic. Some schools had made efforts to reduce these barriers by arranging translation of school reports or using apps such as Google Translate for short or ad hoc communications. However, representatives of some community organisations expressed concern that schools were delegating to them the responsibility of relaying messages to parents.
- **Schools' knowledge, and use, of available interpreting services and the funding that is provided for this purpose appears variable.** Stakeholders praised some schools for their use of interpreting services but expressed concerns that other schools were avoiding the use of interpreters due to perceived costs. They reported that these schools instead relied on children or older pupils to interpret or expected parents to bring friends to the school to act as interpreters.

- **Communication about a child’s progress can be ambiguous for parents, and some parents perceive there to be a lack of information about the curriculum.** Parents and stakeholders reported challenges in understanding progress reports and sought more information on areas in which their children could improve. Parents who were familiar with more traditional teaching methods and a highly structured curriculum could be concerned about what they perceived as a lack of information about the knowledge content and skills to be acquired at school.
- **There were indications that minority ethnic families could experience additional challenges in identifying or accessing support for Special Educational Needs (SEN).** Some parents spoke about the risk of SEN being missed among children with English as an additional language or the difficulty of having concerns or diagnoses recognised by the school. Parents whose children had been identified as having SEN also described difficulties securing appropriate support, an experience that was particularly challenging for recent migrants who lacked knowledge of local services or who did not have English as a first language.

Recommendations

In the light of these findings, the following recommendations for policy and practice are proposed.

School admissions

- Review standard school admissions processes to address inequalities for minority ethnic and migrant families:
 - Explore options for an enhanced advice and support service for school admissions within the Intercultural Education Service. This should be done in consultation with minority ethnic support organisations, recognising the importance of community networks in navigating school admissions.
 - Strengthen processes to monitor, and prohibit, the use of admissions criteria that have been identified as detrimental to equality of access, including the use of criteria that prioritise familial connections beyond a sibling currently attending the school.
 - Review the use of ‘special provisions’ in grammar school admissions for pupils who have been educated outside NI for more than half their school career, including awareness and perceptions of special provisions among primary schools; the processing of special provisions applications by grammar schools; and the number and success rate of applications that are submitted through special provisions.
 - Review language use in school admissions literature and application forms, prioritising plain English to support English language learners and parents with low literacy.
 - Consider notifying schools that paper-based application forms remain available.
- Review the ‘in-year’ admissions process for families who migrate to or seek sanctuary in NI outside standard admissions periods:
 - Monitor and report on schools admitting/declining to admit migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking families and the reasons for declining.
 - Revise arrangements for the allocation of newcomer funding to schools to ensure that this is more responsive to new enrolments of newcomer pupils.
 - Consider increasing the capacity of the Intercultural Education Service to enable it to respond to growing demand, particularly in the period after enrolment.
 - Consider alternatives to requirements for schools to include current newcomer pupils within examination outcomes while ensuring no detriment to newcomer pupils’ education.

- Extend publicity of the Intercultural Education Service’s highly valued multilingual resources on school admissions.
- Consider existing school placements as a priority when rehousing asylum-seeking and refugee families to minimise disruption to children’s education; and ensure provision of school transport to maintain continuity of schooling.

Racism and racist bullying

- Introduce anti-racism and anti-bias training as a core component of Initial Teacher Education and in-service professional development to ensure sensitive and non-discriminatory treatment.
- Strengthen current arrangements for monitoring, reporting and responding to racist bullying in schools. This should include providing definitions and examples of racist bullying within schools’ anti-bullying policies and/or anti-racism policies.
- Support implementation of preventative practices to address racism before incidents occur, such as anti-racist education and teaching about other countries and contexts from which newcomers arrive.
- Make available resources to support teachers in addressing issues that may arise in the classroom, such as racism, cultural and religious responsiveness, and trauma.

Curriculum issues and cultural responsiveness

- Review representation of cultural and religious diversity in the curriculum, with particular regard to the key curriculum elements of ‘citizenship’ and ‘cultural understanding’. This should ensure accuracy, balance and sensitivity in teaching about different countries, cultures and events, and identify opportunities to:
 - address diverse global histories, the legacy of colonialism and the contributions of minority ethnic communities locally;
 - include contemporary literature, art and music from authors and artists of colour;
 - recognise Traveller culture, Roma culture and other minoritised cultures and languages;
 - develop collaborative links with local cultural groups and organisations that support minority ethnic and migrant communities; and
 - develop capacity for culturally responsive teaching through Initial Teacher Education and in-service training.
- Identify a single agency to have a remit for developing and promoting a diverse and inclusive curriculum and accompanying resources.
- Constitute an advisory group of representatives from minority faith traditions to review the current teaching of world religions in NI schools.
- Provide good practice guidance to schools on adapting school-level policies to take account of increasing cultural and religious diversity among the pupil population.

English and heritage languages

- Review English language provision to determine how schools in NI can be supported to move beyond ‘emergency response’.
- Establish clear progression pathways and resources for children who do not speak English or have not yet reached stated levels of proficiency in English.

- Standardise and assure the quality of English language provision for language learners, with equitable employment and remuneration for highly skilled language educators.
- Establish and fund comprehensive training in English language teaching and second language development for those responsible for English language improvement programmes/withdrawal classes.
- Provide support for parents to make informed choices about raising bilingual children.
- Consider school-based recognition of multilingualism at policy and practice levels and school-based support for the development of home language literacy.

Home-school relationships

- Prioritise investment in initiatives that support parental engagement in schools with large migrant and newcomer populations, including the creation of family support worker posts, the provision of regular ‘drop-in’ sessions for parents, and the further development of parent involvement projects through the Extended Schools programme.
- Consider opportunities for the co-location of family support services, including Family Support Hubs, with schools with high levels of need.
- Improve current practice in home-school communications:
 - Produce and disseminate multilingual training/guidance on apps and websites used for school communications and homework.
 - Distribute a Departmental circular to remind schools of the availability of the interpreting service and the allocation of funding for interpreting.
 - Prioritise the use of plain English in school communications.
- Utilise existing communications channels, including school apps and websites, to share regular information on the curriculum and current topic areas to help parents to support learning.
- Ensure that the response to the Independent Review of Special Educational Needs Services and Processes (Ipsos UK, 2023) prioritises equity in relation to identifying and supporting children with SEN from minority ethnic and migrant backgrounds and working collaboratively with parents in this process.

To improve understanding of the educational careers of minority ethnic pupils, and to strengthen the monitoring of actions to reduce inequalities, the Department of Education should consider reviewing current data collection practices. Specifically, consistent with the other jurisdictions of the UK, the Department should look at disaggregating data on white migrant pupils from other white (NI/British/Irish) pupils within ethnic minority statistics. This would enhance data regarding the circumstances and trajectories of these pupils to be commensurate with that available for other minority ethnic groups.

1. Introduction and research objectives

Northern Ireland (NI) has long been home to minority ethnic communities (Irwin 1998; Manwah Watson and McKnight 1998), but the period since the end of the conflict has seen considerable inward migration. This is reflected at school level, with the number of pupils designated as ‘newcomers’ – that is, who do ‘not have the satisfactory language skills to participate fully in the school curriculum’ (DENI 2009, iii) – increasing from 1,366 in 2001/02 to 19,471 in 2022/23 (DENI, 2023a). While children and families from minority ethnic backgrounds migrating to and living in NI face similar challenges to those elsewhere in the UK and Ireland, NI’s particular social and educational context may also impact their settlement and integration experience in distinctive ways. At school level, the legacy of ethno-national conflict is apparent in the parallel system of denominational schools, which continue to educate approximately 92% of pupils (DENI, 2023c), and a curriculum that has framed diversity largely in Catholic/Protestant terms (Niens, O’Connor and Smith, 2013). Academic selection, no longer a feature of state education in Wales, Scotland or most of England, also remains across NI.

With an estimated 8-10% of pupils in NI’s schools now being from a minority ethnic or migrant background³, research is required to understand their and their families’ experiences in the education system and to examine the effectiveness of current policy and practice in meeting their needs. However, such research has been comparatively sparse, arguably reflecting the ongoing marginalisation of issues of race and ethnicity in the post-conflict setting (McKee, 2016). Previous studies have examined welfare and wellbeing among minority ethnic and newcomer children (Jones *et al.*, 2018; Biggart, O’Hare and Connolly, 2009), teachers’ perspectives on newcomer pupils’ education (Kernaghan, 2015), and experiences of schooling among older minority ethnic students (Khaoury, 2012); however, no significant research examining both parents’ and children’s perspectives on education has been conducted since the work of Connolly and Keenan in 2002. Consequently, there remains a need for research that a) prioritises the directly-reported perspectives of minority ethnic parents and children; b) examines hitherto underexplored topics, such as school choice and admissions, school transition and the curriculum; and c) involves participants living in areas with differing levels of diversity across NI.

This study addresses these gaps through a qualitative exploration of the experiences of education among children and families from minority ethnic backgrounds in NI. Recognising that much educational research focuses on performance outcomes, this study examines the broader educational experience and addresses four main topics – school admissions, day-to-day school life, the curriculum and home-school relationships. These are central concerns in international literature on multicultural education and merit consideration in the context of the region’s post-conflict status and increasing ethnic, religious and linguistic pluralism. Encompassing the diverse experiences of both recent migrants and those from established minority communities, the study aims to contribute significantly

³ The nature of the data currently collected by the Department of Education means it is difficult to determine what proportion of pupils come from minority ethnic or migrant backgrounds. Data on ethnic minority pupils does not include numbers of students of white minority backgrounds, such as those of Eastern European heritage, while data on newcomer pupils includes only those who do not have sufficient ability in English or Irish to access the curriculum. Consequently, publicly available data is likely to underestimate the number of students with minority ethnic and migrant heritage in NI. Our figure of 8-10% represents a best estimate.

to the evidence base on education among minority ethnic groups in NI. To do so, it adopts the following objectives:

- 1) **To explore how minority ethnic families select schools for their children and the circumstances that inform these decisions.** Statistics indicate, for example, that children from newcomer backgrounds and particular ethnic groups are over-represented in low-performing schools (DENI, 2023b). This research seeks to understand how minority ethnic and migrant families navigate school admissions in a system shaped by denominational schooling and academic selection.
- 2) **To examine children's and parents' experiences of school life and school engagement.** Educational research in other contexts has highlighted ongoing discrimination and exclusion based on ethnic and linguistic background (Chapman and Bhopal, 2019; Tckacz and McGhee, 2016). This study explores participants' perspectives on day-to-day school life and school involvement, examining the intersecting influences of ethnicity, migration status and socio-economic background.
- 3) **To investigate minority ethnic children's and parents' views and experiences of aspects of the NI curriculum and its delivery.** In light of the development of culturally responsive and translanguaging pedagogies in other contexts (García and Li, 2014), we examine to what extent children and parents from minority backgrounds perceive the curriculum to be inclusive and relevant, and whether their multilingual practices are recognised and drawn upon to support learning at school.
- 4) **To provide evidence and recommendations for policy and practice to improve the educational experience of minority ethnic groups in NI.** In response to the findings from the research, we outline conclusions and recommendations to redress inequality and disadvantage within the NI education system.

2. Methodology

The research activity undertaken to fulfil the research objectives comprised five stages. These were as follows:

2.1 Appointment of advisory groups

At the project's outset, we appointed two advisory groups – one comprising professionals, the other young people – to provide insight and guidance on all aspects of research design, data collection, analysis and dissemination. The first group included representatives of public bodies with responsibility for education policy, education delivery and equality; academics with expertise in education, race, ethnicity and migration; and representatives of five community organisations and networks that work with minority ethnic and migrant communities. The youth advisory group comprised young people aged 16-21 from minority ethnic and migrant backgrounds who had completed at least some of their education in NI. Details of membership are given at the end of this report. Both advisory groups met three times over the lifetime of the project.

2.2 Analysis of current research, policy and data

To provide context for the study, we conducted a review of recent literature from NI, Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland on education among minority ethnic groups, focusing on the topics of interest to this research. Relevant literature was identified through educational databases (British Education Index, International Bibliography of Social Sciences) and citation searching via Google Scholar. As part of this, we collated relevant data from the Department of Education to understand the circumstances and trajectories of minority ethnic pupils in NI and reviewed regional education policy of specific relevance to this population.

We also conducted a review of publicly available school policies among a geographically representative sample of 35 primary and 15 post-primary schools to examine whether and how schools were responding to increasing cultural diversity. The sample of 50 schools comprised proportional numbers of schools from different sectors (Catholic maintained, controlled, integrated, 'other maintained' and voluntary) and a balance of schools from each of the Education Authority's administrative regions.

2.3 Focus groups with community organisations

We conducted five online focus groups with representatives of community organisations that work with minority ethnic and migrant communities, refugees and asylum-seekers, and specific cultural groups across NI. The purpose of the focus groups was twofold: to provide a breadth of understanding of the issues facing minority ethnic groups in education to complement the depth of insight offered by interviews with families; and to inform the topics for discussion with children and parents. In total, 20 participants were involved in the focus groups, representing 12 organisations.

2.4 Interviews with parents and children

The principal focus of this research comprised semi-structured interviews with 62 children aged 9-15 (30 female and 32 male) and 53 parents (41 female and 12 male) from minority ethnic backgrounds. The sample of participants was selected to reflect, broadly, the composition of the minority ethnic population in NI and to include participants residing in areas of low, medium and high diversity, which

were identified from the most recent census.⁴ The research team focused on children in the upper primary and lower post-primary years to permit exploration of experiences across both school phases and around school transition.

The child was the referent when recruiting participants and all met one or more of the following criteria: currently or formerly classified as a ‘newcomer’ by the Department of Education – that is ‘a child or young person who has enrolled in a school but who does not have satisfactory language skills to participate fully in the school curriculum and does not have a language in common with the teacher’ [(DENI, 2009, iii); a member of an ethnic minority community as recorded on the school census; and/or born to one or more parents who migrated to NI as an adult from a non-English-speaking country, before or after the child’s birth. As these criteria suggest, this study differs from previous research on this topic in NI as it includes not only children classified as newcomers, but also children from minority ethnic backgrounds who were born in NI or were proficient in English at the time of migration. This allowed us to include the perspectives of families who have been hitherto overlooked in research and to examine similarities and differences of experience.

To recruit participants, we contacted a range of organisations and networks across NI and invited them to distribute an information sheet giving details of the research. These included schools across selected areas, voluntary and community organisations, cultural groups, professional networks and local interpreting agencies. We also shared details of the study on social media. Prospective participants were invited to contact the research team and to complete a consent form to indicate their agreement to take part. Child-friendly versions of information and consent materials were produced for young participants. Information sheets were translated into eight languages, and interpreters were provided for interviews where families requested this.

Details of the composition of the final sample of children and parents are given below in relation to the ethnic categories used in the NI school census and the diversity level of the district of residence. Of the 62 child participants, 27 were born in NI and 35 had migrated to the region; among the latter, almost half (17) had come to NI as refugees or asylum-seekers from 10 different countries, including Eritrea, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine and Yemen. Twenty-six children resided in the Belfast district, reflecting the fact that a comparatively large proportion (37%) of NI’s minority ethnic residents live in the city (NISRA, 2022), and 36 lived elsewhere in NI. In total, participants were drawn from 9 of the 11 local districts of Northern Ireland, and two-thirds lived in what we have classified for the purposes of this study as ‘high diversity’ areas.

Two points are important to note. First, a limitation of this research is the under-representation of families of Chinese or Traveller heritage in the sample. Although we contacted several organisations that work with or represent these populations, we were unable to secure greater involvement. However, several Traveller parents, while not wishing to participate themselves, were willing for their children to do so, and this is one reason for the higher number of child participants relative to parent

⁴ The diversity level (‘low’, ‘medium’ or ‘high’) has been identified for each local government district by analysing the results of the 2021 census for categories of ‘ethnicity’ and ‘country of birth’. While we recognise that levels of diversity may vary within local government districts, almost all participants interviewed for this study lived in areas that reflected the diversity level of the district as a whole.

participants. The other reason is that, in six families, children elected to take part in an interview with a sibling who also met the participation criteria. Second, the higher number of parents than children belonging to the white, Chinese and other ethnic groups is explained by the fact that these groups include parents of children of mixed heritage.

Table 2.1: Ethnic background of participants

Ethnic group	Children	Parents
White ⁵		
- White NI/British/Irish		3
- White other	11	12
Chinese	1	2
Irish Traveller	5	1
Indian/Sri Lankan	5	5
Pakistani	2	2
Black ⁶	9	8
Mixed ethnic group	11	1
Other ethnic group ⁷	13	14
Roma ⁸	5	5
TOTAL	62	53

⁵ In Northern Ireland, unlike other parts of the UK, Department of Education data on ethnicity aggregates all white pupils other than those from Irish Traveller backgrounds into a single ethnic group. For clarity of interpretation, however, we have elected to distinguish between parents from ‘white Northern Irish/British/Irish’ ethnic backgrounds, who in each case were parents of children of mixed heritage, and parents and children from ‘white other’ ethnic backgrounds. All parents from the ‘white other’ ethnic group had been born in Eastern European countries and migrated to NI as adults; the children in this group had been born either in Eastern Europe or in NI after their parents’ migration.

⁶ In Northern Ireland, the Department of Education does not publish separate data on numbers of pupils from Black African and Black Caribbean backgrounds. In practice, the majority of Black pupils in NI are from Black African backgrounds. This was reflected in our sample: seven of the nine Black children who participated in this research had been born either in an African country or in NI to parents from an African country.

⁷ The ‘other’ ethnic group comprised parents who had been born in the Middle East, Southeast Asia or South America and children who had been born either in these regions or in NI to parents from these regions.

⁸ While published data from the school census does not record Roma pupils as a distinct ethnic group, literature suggests that Roma families experience distinctive challenges in education (Rutigliano, 2020; Sime, Fassetta and McClung, 2018). The Education Authority also identifies Roma as a community for targeted support and employs a dedicated Roma Support Officer. For these reasons, we include a separate Roma ethnic group in this study.

Table 2.2: Diversity level of areas in which participants reside

Area of diversity	Children	Parents
High	42	36
Medium	7	7
Low	13	10

Interviews were held away from school premises, either at families’ homes or at another location of their choice that offered appropriate privacy, so that participants could speak freely about their experiences of education. In general, the parent was interviewed first while their child undertook a creative task. This task invited children to represent ‘things I like about school’ and ‘things I would improve about school’ through drawing, writing or collage, for which stationery and craft materials were provided. Interviews with children subsequently discussed their responses to this activity and their views and experiences of school. Children could choose whether to have their parents in the room during their interviews; where they preferred to be interviewed separately, two Access-NI checked researchers were present for safeguarding reasons. Following the interviews, parents and children were each provided with a £20 gift card in recognition of their time and participation.

2.5 Interviews with stakeholders

The final stage of the research involved interviews with 23 educational stakeholders to examine their perspectives on minority ethnic families’ educational experiences and the effectiveness of existing policy for these groups. These interviews were intended to supplement and contextualise the data collected with children and parents, as well as revealing confluences and divergences of perspective between those delivering and participating in education. Stakeholder participants included teachers and educators (n=6), representatives from public bodies that administer, deliver and monitor education (n=9), school sectoral bodies (n=6) and elected representatives (n=2). Sampling was purposive, with participants recruited in their professional capacity following direct communication from the research team. Interviews were held on Microsoft Teams, at the participant’s workplace or at Queen’s University Belfast.

All interviews and focus groups were audio recorded, with participants’ permission, and transcribed for analysis; where participants did not consent to recording, one researcher took detailed notes of the discussion. Data were subjected to thematic analysis, which involves close engagement with the dataset to identify themes that represent the meanings and patterns within it (Guest, MacQueen and Namey, 2012). As a qualitative study, this research does not aim at statistical representation of the wider population. Rather, the analysis sought to elucidate the perspectives and experiences of research participants with lived or professional experience of the education system in NI, thereby highlighting issues for consideration in the development of educational policy and practice for minority ethnic children and families in the region.

All data were held confidentially in accordance with GDPR principles and are reported anonymously. For consistency, and to preserve the anonymity of participants from less numerous ethnic or cultural groups, the ethnic background of parent and child participants is recorded throughout the report using

the categories of the NI school census (with the addition of 'white other' and 'Roma' ethnic groups, described above). To protect the anonymity of participants from the statutory, community and education sectors, quotes from the focus groups and stakeholder interviews are reported within three categories – 'stakeholder – educator', 'stakeholder – community' and 'stakeholder – other'.

3. Overview of research, policy and statistics relating to minority ethnic groups in NI

3.1. Minority ethnic groups and education policy

The major educational policy responses to changing demographics and racial equality concerns have been the 'Supporting Newcomer Pupils' policy and the Traveller Child in Education Action Framework (DENI, 2009, 2013). At the time of writing, both were undergoing review. Supporting Newcomer Pupils commits to two measures to support children who enter school without the English or Irish language skills necessary to access the curriculum: additional funding, via the Common Funding Formula, for English or Irish language learning; and a regional service to provide curricular, language and pastoral support to schools. The Intercultural Education Service (IES), as now established, offers support with interpreting and translation, information on schools for newcomer families, and professional development for teachers (Education Authority, 2022). As well as formally designated 'newcomer' pupils, the IES has responsibility for supporting asylum-seeking, refugee, Roma and Traveller pupils.

The Traveller Child in Education Action Framework (TCEAF) was published in response to the 2011 report from the Taskforce on Traveller Education, which investigated the educational needs of pupils of Irish Traveller heritage. The policy outlines two areas for action: improving pupil attendance and increasing parents' engagement in their children's education. The TCEAF includes commitments to create a Traveller Education Support Service (TESS) to provide assistance to families and schools; to produce a regional strategy to improve Traveller pupils' attendance; and to collect data on pupils' enrolment, attainment and attendance to assess progress against strategic aims. The TESS was established in 2013 and forms part of the IES.

Like other public bodies, the Department of Education and Education Authority must comply with the Race Relations Order (1997) and the section 75 duties of the Northern Ireland Act to promote equality of opportunity and good relations. Schools must also comply with The Race Relations Order, though they are exempt from section 75 requirements. The NI Executive's framework for race equality, the Racial Equality Strategy 2015-2025, includes one provision relating directly to education – that the Executive Office will 'work with DE[Ni] to identify ways to tackle racist bullying in schools' (OFMDFM 2015, p.5). The Addressing Bullying in Schools Act (NI) 2016, implemented from September 2021, requires schools to report the motivation for bullying, including racism.

3.2. Equality and diversity within the curriculum

A common curriculum was first introduced in NI in 1990 and was revised in 2007. The revised curriculum aimed to transition from a 'one-size-fits-all' approach 'towards greater flexibility to customise learning within an agreed entitlement' (CCEA 2007a, p.1). The curriculum is divided into areas of learning (primary) and subject areas (post-primary), each of which contribute to 11 (primary) or 12 (post-primary) cross-curricular 'key elements' of learning. In curriculum guidance, two of these elements, 'citizenship' and 'cultural understanding', appear particularly relevant to addressing topics associated with an increasingly multicultural society.

According to curriculum guidance on the 'citizenship' key element, pupils at primary level should 'become aware of some of their rights and responsibilities' (CCEA, 2007b, p.4) and at key stage 3 'should have opportunities to consider issues of diversity and inclusion, equality and justice, human rights and social responsibility' (CCEA, 2007a, p.7). Under the 'cultural understanding' key element, teaching at primary level should enable pupils to 'understand some of their own and others' cultural traditions' (CCEA, 2007b, p.4), and at key stage 3, 'to experience cultural diversity in beliefs, customs,

dance, drama, food, language, literature, moving image and music’ and ‘welcome cultural diversity within our own and other societies for the contribution it brings’ (CCEA, 2007a, p.7).

While the revised curriculum allows teachers autonomy to tailor the content to their schools and communities, Religious Education (RE) is governed by a separate, more prescriptive syllabus defined by the Department of Education and the four main Christian Churches in NI (DENI, 2007). The content of this curriculum is almost exclusively Christian at primary level, with pupils introduced to two other world faiths at key stage 3. Parents have the right to withdraw their children from RE in accordance with their own beliefs (CCEA, 2014). In 2022, the High Court ruled that the RE syllabus at primary level in controlled schools contravenes human rights obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights, and recommended revision (BBC, 2022). At the time of writing, this was being considered as part of the Independent Review of Education in NI.

School types in Northern Ireland

All state schools in NI are grant-aided and follow the revised Curriculum (2007), but schools within different sectors operate different management structures.

Controlled schools are managed by the Education Authority (EA) through school Boards of Governors (BoGs). Primary and secondary controlled school BoGs include representatives of the Protestant churches (‘Transferors’) alongside parent, teacher and EA representatives. The pupil intake of these schools has typically been predominantly Protestant. The sector also contains a number of grammar schools. In 2022/23, 42% of primary and post-primary schools were in the controlled sector.

Catholic Maintained schools are managed by BoGs nominated by Trustees, who are normally selected by the Catholic Diocese, along with parent, teacher and EA representatives. The pupil intake of these schools is predominantly Catholic. In 2022/23, 42% of primary and post-primary schools were in the Catholic maintained sector.

Integrated schools were founded to educate pupils from Catholic, Protestant and other traditions within a single institution. Grant-maintained integrated schools are ‘greenfield’ schools with no religious representation on their BoGs. Controlled integrated schools are former controlled or maintained schools which have transformed to integrated status and include both Transferors and Catholic Trustees on their BoGs. In 2022/23, 7% of primary and post-primary schools were in the integrated sector.

Voluntary Grammar schools are selective post-primary schools, with places determined by performance in an exam (‘transfer test’) at age 10/11. They are managed by BoGs comprising representatives of foundation governors, parents, teachers and the DE. Voluntary schools are typically designated as Catholic or ‘other’. In 2022/23, 34% of post-primary schools were in the voluntary grammar sector.

Irish-Medium schools provide education through the Irish language. Irish-Medium education is also delivered through stand-alone units within English medium schools. There are controlled and maintained Irish-Medium schools and units. Maintained schools are Voluntary schools owned by trustees and managed by BoGs without religious representation. In 2022/23, 3% of primary and post-primary schools were in the Irish-Medium sector.

(DENI, 2019; 2023a; NI Direct, 2021)

3.3. Newcomer and minority ethnic pupils in NI: analysis of data

Data concerning the ethnicity of pupils by school type and newcomer pupils by school type is publicly available (DENI, 2023a). In addition, the research team requested data disaggregated by ethnic group and newcomer status for the year 2022/2023 for the following: enrolments by management type, free school meal entitlement, special educational needs and GCSE outcomes. These data are discussed below; data tables are available from the Department of Education.

3.3.1. Enrolments by school phase

In 2022/23 19,471 children from newcomer backgrounds were enrolled across all forms of state-funded school provision in NI, including pre-school, nursery, primary and post-primary education. This represents 5.5% of total enrolments (Table 3.1). Of newcomer pupils enrolled in years P1 to 14,⁹ 74% attended primary schools.

Table 3.1. Pupils by newcomer status, 2022/23

	2022/23 Number	2022/23 %
Newcomer pupils	19,471	5.5
Non-newcomer pupils	335,706	94.5
Total	355,177	100

(NI School Census)

A total of 21,762 pupils in NI were recorded as belonging to a minority ethnic group in 2022/23, representing 6.1% of enrolments across all forms of state-funded school provision in NI (Table 3.2). Of this number, 6,540 pupils (1.8% of the total pupil population) were from mixed ethnic backgrounds, 3,518 (1%) were Black, and 2,824 (0.8%) were of Indian or Sri Lankan heritage, with smaller proportions of pupils from Chinese (1,503/0.4%), Irish Traveller (1,086/0.3%) and Pakistani (569/0.2%) backgrounds. A further 5,722 pupils (1.6%) were from other ethnic backgrounds. Among those enrolled in years P1 to 14, the proportion attending primary schools was between 55% and 59% for all groups bar pupils of Chinese (48%) and Irish Traveller (67%) heritage.

⁹ This encompasses enrolments from age 4 to 18, which includes compulsory education (to year 12) and two optional years of sixth form study (years 13 and 14). Data on 16-19-year-olds enrolled in Further Education is collected separately and is not included in this study.

Table 3.2. Pupils by ethnicity, 2022/23

	2022/23 Number	2022/23 %
White (excluding Irish Traveller)	333,415	93.9
Chinese	1,503	0.4
Irish Traveller	1,086	0.3
Indian/Sri Lankan	2,824	0.8
Pakistani	569	0.2
Black	3,518	1.0
Mixed Ethnic Group	6,540	1.8
Other Ethnic Group	5,722	1.6
Total	355,177	100

(NI School Census)

3.3.2. Enrolments by school management type

Data on the management type of the schools attended by newcomer pupils are broadly in line with those for non-newcomers, with two exceptions: a higher proportion of newcomer pupils than non-newcomers attend Catholic maintained schools (48% compared with 35%); and at post-primary level, a significantly lower proportion of newcomer pupils than non-newcomers are enrolled in grammar schools (12% compared with 44%).

Examining data by ethnic group reveals variation in attendance by management type. Pupils from Chinese and Pakistani backgrounds are significantly more likely to attend controlled (38% and 45% respectively) than maintained schools (21% and 26%). However, the reverse is true for pupils of Black, Indian and Sri Lankan, and Irish Traveller heritage, a higher proportion of whom are enrolled in Catholic maintained schools (42%, 43% and 83% respectively) than controlled schools (39%, 28%, 11%). The data for the mixed and other ethnic groups are broadly in line with the average for all pupils in terms of numbers enrolled in controlled and maintained schools. Attendance at integrated schools is above the regional average of 8% among pupils from the mixed ethnic group (12%), broadly in line with the average among Black pupils and those of other ethnic backgrounds (9% each), and below average among all other groups.

At post-primary level, the proportion of pupils of Chinese, Indian/Sri Lankan and Pakistani heritage in the grammar sector is higher than average (76%, 76% and 56% respectively, compared with an average among all pupils of 43%). The proportion of pupils from mixed backgrounds attending grammar schools (45%) is in line with the average, but Black pupils and those from the other ethnic group are under-represented in selective education (27% and 32% respectively). Pupils of Irish Traveller heritage have the lowest rates of attendance at grammar school (8%).

3.3.3. Free school meal entitlement (FSME) and special educational needs

Data reveal little difference in levels of FSME between newcomer (28%) and non-newcomer (27%) groups (Table 3.3). FSME is higher among pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds as a group than among white pupils, but there is substantial disparity between ethnic groups (Table 3.4). Pupils of Indian and Sri Lankan heritage have the lowest FSME rates of all groups at 3%. FSME rates among pupils of Chinese (21%) and Pakistani (22%) heritage are also slightly lower than among white pupils

(27%), but among pupils from the mixed ethnic group are slightly higher (31%). The highest rates of FSME are among the other ethnic group (35%), Black pupils (37%) and those from Irish Traveller backgrounds (65%), indicating greater socio-economic disadvantage among these groups.

Table 3.3. FSME by newcomer status, 2023/23

	FSME %	Non-FSME %	Total
Newcomer	28	72	100
Non-newcomer	27	73	100

(NI School Census)

Table 3.4. FSME by ethnicity, 2022/23

	FSME %	Non-FSME %	Total
White	27	73	100
Chinese	21	79	100
Irish Traveller	65	35	100
Indian/Sri Lankan	3	97	100
Pakistani	22	78	100
Black	37	63	100
Mixed Ethnic Group	31	69	100
Other Ethnic Group	35	65	100
Average	28	72	100

(NI School Census)

A slightly lower proportion of newcomer pupils (16%) are recorded as having special educational needs than non-newcomer pupils (19%) (Table 3.5). Recorded levels of SEN are also lower among pupils from all minority ethnic groups than among white pupils, with the exception of those from Irish Traveller backgrounds (Table 3.6). Almost half of Traveller pupils (49%) are recorded as having SEN compared with 19% across all ethnic groups.

Table 3.5. SEN pupils by newcomer status, 2022/23

	SEN Statement %	SEN Stages 1-2 %	No SEN %	Total
Newcomer	4	12	84	100
Non-newcomer	7	12	81	100

(NI School Census)

Table 3.6. SEN pupils by ethnicity, 2022/23 ¹⁰

	SEN Statement %	SEN Stages 1-2 %	No SEN %	Total	
White	7	12	81	100	
Chinese	5	5	90	100	
Irish Traveller	19	30	51	100	
Indian/ Sri Lankan	3	3	94	100	
Pakistani	5	8	87	100	
Black	4	10	85	100	
Mixed Ethnic Group	7	11	82	100	
Other Ethnic Group	5	10	85	100	(NI School Census)

3.3.4. GCSE outcomes

Typically, small numbers of newcomers take GCSE exams in any one year, so outcomes should be tracked over time to take account of slight variations within individual cohorts. Given the disruption to examinations during the pandemic, comparable data are not available from 2019/20 onwards, so information is given for the pre-pandemic years of 2016/17, 2017/18, and 2018/19.

At GCSE, non-newcomers and former newcomers achieved virtually equally on the measure of 5+ A*-C grades in any subject: 84% and 85% attained this level respectively in 2016/17, 86% each in 2017/18, and 87% and 86% in 2018/19. However, current newcomers' grades were significantly lower than both groups', with 56%, 50% and 59% securing 5+ A*-C grades in the three years from 2016/17. The gap between current newcomers and non-newcomers increased further once the measure of 5+ A*-C grades included English and maths: 28% of current newcomers met this standard in 2016/17, 19% in 2017/18 and 25% in 2018/19, compared with equivalent figures among non-newcomers of 70%, 72% and 72%. Former newcomers achieved slightly less well than non-newcomers, but still significantly better than current newcomers, with 63%, 66% and 62% of former newcomer pupils attaining the benchmark over the three years.

Due to the low numbers taking examinations in any single year, data on examination results are aggregated for minority ethnic pupils. This likely masks significant disparity between groups. At GCSE, pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds achieve at similar levels to white pupils on the measure of 5+ A*-C grades: 84% of minority ethnic pupils and 84% of white pupils respectively achieved this benchmark in 2016/17, 82% and 85% in 2017/18, and 83% and 87% in 2018/19. For 2016/17, this similarity in performance remains when grades for English and maths are included in this measure, with 68% of minority ethnic pupils and 70% of white pupils achieving 5+ A*-C grades including these subjects. However, a more substantial gap emerges in the two subsequent years: in 2017/18, 65% of

¹⁰ Due to rounding, some totals may not correspond with the sum of the separate figures.

minority ethnic pupils reached this target compared with 71% of white pupils, and in 2018/19 the figures were 62% and 71% respectively.

3.4. Research on experiences of education among minority ethnic and migrant families in NI

In this section we summarise previous research from NI on the topics of focus within this study. A more detailed review, conducted as part of stage 2 of the project, is available as part of this study (Jiménez *et al.*, 2021).

3.4.1. School admissions

Prior research has highlighted the challenges that migrant parents face in navigating school admissions, particularly in NI where there exist multiple school sectors and a high proportion of selective schools relative to the other jurisdictions of the UK (Kernaghan, 2015). As well as developing an understanding of the school landscape, parents must also become familiar with differences in application processes and school starting ages, the latter being younger in NI than in other European countries, for example. Kernaghan (2015) observes that a lack of conversance with the system can lead to parents missing application deadlines, with such challenges most substantial for parents for whom English is not the first language.

Research with parents of Traveller children in NI has reported that, when selecting schools, proximity to home and the presence of other Traveller children are key factors (Knipe, Montgomery and Reynolds, 2005). Recalling their own negative experiences of school, Traveller parents were anxious to ensure that their children would not be subject to racism and could develop a positive ethnic identity (Hamilton, Bloomer and Potter, 2012; Knipe, Montgomery and Reynolds, 2005).

3.4.2. School life

Existing research indicates that racism from peers is a common experience among minority ethnic children in NI (Khaoury 2012; Connolly and Keenan 2002). In research for the Department of Education, half of Traveller child participants stated that they had experienced verbal and/or physical bullying related to their ethnicity (Knipe, Montgomery and Reynolds, 2005). This was identified by Traveller support groups in the same study as a major factor in the high number of Traveller pupils leaving education before compulsory school leaving age. Recent research has found, similarly, that newcomer pupils are subjected to racist bullying in the form of verbal abuse and aggressive behaviour (McMullan *et al.*, 2020). Teachers have also reported bullying between different newcomer pupils and among peers from the same linguistic group (Kernaghan, 2015). While schools can play a key role in challenging racist bullying, pupils and parents interviewed for Connolly and Keenan's (2002) study typically felt that teachers had not taken their concerns seriously or responded with action. There were also examples where teachers, even if well-meaning, had dealt with situations of racist abuse inappropriately, leading to further humiliation for children who had experienced racism.

Forming and maintaining friendships has been identified as a concern among newcomer pupils, particularly where they face language barriers (McMullan *et al.*, 2020; Kernaghan, 2015), and learning English has been considered important for making friends (Geraghty, McStravick and Mitchell, 2010). Newcomer and minority ethnic pupils also reported being eager to 'fit in' (McMullan *et al.*, 2020). In this regard, understanding and navigating NI's sectarian divide could pose challenges for these pupils that were not experienced by their counterparts elsewhere in the UK or Ireland (Kernaghan, 2015). In interviews conducted by Khaoury (2012), minority ethnic pupils reported that some peers attempted to draw them into a sectarian framework, requiring them to choose a 'side'.

Research in other contexts suggests that teachers may develop low expectations of the ability and behaviour of pupils from certain minority ethnic backgrounds (Chapman and Bhopal, 2019; Ní Dhuinn and Keane, 2021; Rhamie, 2012). In NI, previous research has suggested that this may affect Traveller pupils in particular. A survey by Knipe, Montgomery and Reynolds (2005) found that half of teachers believed their colleagues had lower expectations of Traveller children or justified why such assumptions were held. Children themselves could be aware of these perceptions and develop low expectations of their own academic abilities (Bloomer, Hamilton and Potter, 2014).

3.4.3. Curriculum issues and cultural responsiveness

While the representation of cultural and religious diversity in the classroom has been raised as an issue by community organisations (e.g., North West Migrants Forum, 2020), there has been little published research on this topic in NI. This has received most attention in literature on Traveller education, with research reporting the importance of teaching Traveller culture more widely at school to reduce prejudice (Knipe, Montgomery and Reynolds, 2005). Studies have also queried the relevance of the curriculum to the needs of Traveller children, recommending greater flexibility within learning structures to adapt to pupils' priorities, particularly by increasing access to vocational education (Bloomer, Hamilton and Potter, 2014; Knipe, Montgomery and Reynolds, 2005).

Other work on this topic has focused principally on the provision of Religious Education (RE) and citizenship education. With RE in NI being predominantly Christian in content, a 'simple "take-it-or-leave-it" opt-out process' for those of other faiths or none has been preferred by education officials, teachers and schools (Richardson *et al.*, 2013, p.248). While Richardson and colleagues note that this approach avoids the complex issue of addressing religious pluralism within schools, Khaoury (2012) reported a widespread endorsement of more pluralistic RE among her participants. Regarding citizenship education, research suggests that teachers regard NI's political and social situation, and the legacy of sectarian conflict, as having little relevance to pupils from minority ethnic and migrant backgrounds (Niens, O'Connor and Smith, 2013). This is despite studies indicating that existing divisions influence where minority ethnic families reside or enrol in school and their risk of experiencing racism (Vieten and Murphy, 2019).

Extant research on English language learning in NI has focused largely on the perspectives of pre-service and in-service educators regarding teaching newcomer pupils (Collen, 2022; Kernaghan, 2015; Purdy and Ferguson, 2012) or the implementation and evaluation of small-scale language learning interventions with children and/or families (e.g., Kane *et al.*, 2019; O'Boyle, 2023). Little published research has examined parents' perspectives on English or home language teaching. However, research with newcomer children (Kernaghan, 2015) has found that children feared being unable to make friends due to the language barrier and could feel frustrated at misunderstandings arising from language differences. Refugee parents in McMullen *et al.*'s (2021) study also cited language and communication difficulties as the barriers their children most commonly experienced at school. International comparisons of outcomes in English literacy (as well as numeracy) report lower scores among migrant-background children in NI (McGinnity, Laurence and Cunniffe, 2023).

3.4.4. Home-school relationships

Research with teachers in NI indicates that they perceive lower parental engagement in education among newcomer and Traveller families. Teachers in Purdy and Ferguson's (2012) study believed that some newcomer parents were unwilling to engage with their children's schooling, which they described as a source of frustration. Teachers interviewed by Kernaghan (2015) shared similar

sentiments and described engaging with parents with lower levels of English proficiency as challenging. Arguments have also been made that families' cultural backgrounds can determine the extent to which positive parent-school relationships are established (Jones, 2015). Research with parents, by comparison, offers insights into the challenges faced in engaging with schools. For example, while teachers in Knipe, Montgomery and Reynolds's (2005) study believed that Traveller parents' non-attendance at parent-teacher appointments was due to a lack of interest, parents themselves described finding these events highly intimidating.

Among parents with limited proficiency in English, language differences can impede home-school communications regarding children's learning and wellbeing (McMullen, 2021; Robertson, 2020). Where parents or carers do not have fluency in English, children are at times brought in to act as interpreters or translators in communications with schools, causing stress for some children (Geraghty, McStravick and Mitchell, 2010; McMullen *et al.*, 2020). To mitigate such difficulties, a number of schools report providing English language classes for newcomer parents (Kernaghan, 2015; McMullen *et al.*, 2020).

3.5. School-level policy review

During stage 2 of the research, we carried out a review of school-level policies across a geographically representative sample of 50 schools (35 primary and 15 post-primary). Policies were sourced from the websites of selected schools during the school year 2021/22, with the aim of better understanding school-level responses to increasing ethnic and cultural diversity. Analysis indicated that:

- In admissions policies, schools typically gave preference to siblings of children currently enrolled in the school, but 27 schools also included a criterion giving preference to siblings of past pupils, 14 of which included a further criterion giving preference to the children of past pupils. In view of the High Court ruling in 2021 that use of a parent's previous attendance as an admissions criterion constitutes indirect discrimination (BBC, 2021), the previous prevalence of this criterion is notable. Guidance published subsequently by the Department of Education 'strongly' recommends that schools do not use 'familial criteria beyond sibling currently attending the school' (e.g. DENI Circular 22/15). A brief review of updated admissions criteria for schools within the sample indicates that, while some schools have removed such familial criteria, others have retained them. Further analysis of this is required.
- Most schools did not reference racism in their anti-bullying policies, other than as one of a list of possible motivating factors behind bullying. However, one primary school's policy included a section dedicated to racist bullying, while another primary school provided a more thorough outline of their response to racist bullying in their equality policy.
- Four schools (all primary) had an equality and diversity policy, and five schools (four primary, one post-primary) had a dedicated newcomer policy. Newcomer policies typically focused on the support provided for pupils to learn English, though one school also emphasised the pastoral support offered to newcomer pupils. Another school had made their newcomer policy available in Arabic on their website.
- Only 1 in 10 schools displayed a policy on food on their website, but 19 primary schools made reference in school menus or other policies to provision for religious dietary requirements.
- The websites of nine schools featured a dedicated uniform policy (as opposed to information about uniform stockists, for example), seven of which were post-primary schools. Of the nine

schools' policies, three (one primary, two post-primary) included references to uniform adaptations or exemptions on the grounds of religious or cultural belief.

- Twenty-eight schools made available a policy on school attendance, of which eight (seven primary and one post-primary) included provisions for religious or cultural holidays celebrated among minority traditions.
- Eight schools (seven primary and two post-primary) provided information about the right of parents to withdraw their children from Religious Education.

This analysis suggests that schools have made limited adaptations to their policies to reflect the increasing cultural diversity in Northern Ireland. Twenty-nine schools across the sample made reference to cultural diversity in at least one document, most commonly concerning provision for religious dietary requirements. However, only four schools, all in the primary sector, referred to cultural diversity in as many as three policies – for example, in information on reporting religious dietary requirements, in their attendance policy and in a newcomer policy. This is notable given the role of a school's policies in establishing and maintaining an inclusive environment and providing information for prospective parents about the school's cultural responsiveness. The findings suggest a need for further guidance for schools on recognising cultural diversity and fostering inclusion through school-level policy.

This section has sought to provide information on the regional and school-level policy context that frames minority ethnic children and parents' educational experiences in NI, as well as offering an overview of current research and statistics pertaining to education among minority ethnic and migrant groups in this jurisdiction. In the subsequent sections we present the findings from the primary research.

Findings from primary research

4. Parents' aspirations for children's education

An overriding aspiration for parents is that their children receive a 'rounded' and quality education that both enhances opportunity and equips them with important life skills. Regarding the former, some parents referred to the importance of education in providing the foundation for children to fulfil their potential in life and in their careers or employment choices. Two parents also spoke of their desire for their children to 'do better' than them:

Well, the most important thing for me is to have a solid education or to have a solid ground which can be useful to them in life, through their adulthood, through their work later on, and as well, the education will lead them to be open-minded and work to achieve their object, to achieve whatever they want in life, in the future. (Father, other ethnic group, area of high diversity)

In very simplistic language, I want my children to do something in school, in their life. So that's why I keep sending them to school – I want them to learn. Because look at me, I have no education. I have no skills and no jobs, and I want them to be in jobs and in employment. I don't want them to be like us, I want better for them. (Mother, Roma ethnic group, area of high diversity)

Although educational performance was recognised as important by most interviewees, in only two cases did parents prioritise their children's academic achievements over other aspirations, and this was attributed by one to cultural norms that valorise academic outcomes.

Yes, probably my children say that I am like all South Asian parents who is so focused on academics. So it's like, yes, for me, it's the academics, yes. (Mother, Pakistani ethnic group, area of high diversity)

Where cultural or ethnic background was mentioned explicitly by other parents in relation to educational aspiration, this was most often regarding their own experience of discrimination and the hope that education would provide their children with a greater sense of equality and dignity.

I don't want them to feel the way I felt, I don't want them to feel inferior and I want them to be treated like the other children, not just because they're Roma or they come from Romania, I want them to be like their colleagues. I want them to be involved in all the activities that the school is organising for the kids, not the way we used to experience...when they were saying, 'No, they can't do it, they're Roma.' (Mother, Roma ethnic group, area of high diversity)

In respect of life skills, parents variously spoke of wanting their children to 'know how to relate to others', 'to be good citizens', 'to build emotional intelligence', to 'enhance their creativity', 'to be open minded', to 'understand their gifts and talents, and to implement it into life', to 'learn how to be sociable with other people and how to be kind with other people', and to 'develop their characters and personalities'. Endorsing the value attributed to schools adopting a more holistic approach to education, several parents highlighted the importance of school as an enjoyable experience and prioritised their children's well-being over academic achievement:

As long as she tries her best and she's happy there. I'm not looking for her to be academic if she hasn't got it. (Father, white British ethnic group, area of low diversity)

I don't ask him to achieve a very high grade. When he goes to school every morning I just, 'be happy at school', that's all. I don't want to force him, but I believe that when [Child] knows what is best for him, he will do his best actually. (Father, other ethnic group, area of high diversity)

Receiving an education delivered through the English language was referenced by a few parents as critical to their children being able to meet aspirations in later life, with one parent commenting, 'Of course, it's language is number one. It's why we're here'. However, there were mixed views on the extent to which schools were delivering on the inclusive aspiration referred to in the comments above, with some parents lamenting a lack of cultural responsiveness in the curriculum.

5. School admissions and transfer

5.1. Navigating the Northern Ireland education system

A common theme across the interviews was the challenge that parents experienced navigating the complex Northern Irish education system, particularly those who had not been educated within the system themselves. Parents spoke of struggling to know where to access information about schools and being confused by the intricacies of the system – difficulties that were especially pronounced for those without English as a first language. The existence of separate denominational school sectors, the explicitly religious ethos of many schools, and the bipartite system of post-primary education were particularly challenging or unexpected for migrant parents, most of whom had been educated in systems without similar stratification.

I actually had no clue about schools at all, you know, in Northern Ireland... It was everything new. And just talking about religion and everything. Like in Lithuania, most people are Catholics, you know. But with choosing [primary school], and then I find out later on it's a different religion school. (Mother, white other ethnic group, area of high diversity)

I don't know about the system here, it's so scary about the grammar school. Newcomers, they don't know about this system, and even if they know, it's hard for them to enrol. (Mother, other ethnic group, area of high diversity)

Families who had migrated to NI also spoke of their uncertainty about how to enrol children into school, how to apply for transfer between primary and post-primary schools, and – where children were older – how the qualifications and examinations system worked. The Education Authority has published resources on the NI education system in multiple languages, which one community sector stakeholder described as 'game-changing', but no parents interviewed for this study reported knowing about these.

5.2. Sources of information about schools

Parents cited four main sources of information when learning about or choosing primary and post-primary schools: friends and acquaintances; the child's primary school (for post-primary admissions); voluntary and community sector organisations; and published information and school visits. Friends, acquaintances and family members, particularly those with children already enrolled in local schools,

were the sources most frequently consulted. Parents described these direct experiences as highly valuable in informing school preferences or, where parental choice had been limited, providing reassurance over their child's placement. While information provided by schools was considered largely promotional, friends' experiences were deemed more authentic and reliable – though parents also weighed these against their knowledge of their own child and aspirations for their education.

Every time when I was going to [primary school] to collect him or drop my other children, us Roma would get together and speak there, waiting for our kids. And they were all saying that, 'Yes, they are a good experience and they teach them well, and...'- And that's when I made my mind up. I'm like, 'Oh, I'll send my son there as well.' (Mother, Roma ethnic group, area of high diversity)

We also asked a friend who also had kids studying in secondary school. So that's why. And also, it's the easiest to reach, considering the transportation. (Father, other ethnic group, area of high diversity)

There is [post-primary school] next to us and as well, from the parents' opinions, they are not really happy because it's not really much happening there, you know. (Father, white other ethnic group, area of high diversity)

The friends and acquaintances consulted by parents were commonly also from minority ethnic backgrounds. Among new migrants, refugees and asylum-seeking families, this reflected the networks to which they had access, comprising compatriots and other parents who had recently been through the same process. Among more established families, other minority ethnic parents were a valuable source of information regarding issues such as racism and inclusion at school. Exceptions to this were Ukrainian families, whose sponsors had been the principal source of local knowledge about the NI education system, and two recent migrants, who cited a landlord and an estate agent respectively as their points of reference. In the absence of other knowledge, these transactional relationships provided the principal source of information about schools.

Because I came here to study right, and of course I have a child. The landlord was connected to the university so she helped us out. She said that 'since your house is here, you have to apply to these two schools. One is [primary school] and another one is [primary school]', is it? And no other schools were mentioned so we applied for both schools and we got [primary school]. (Mother, Indian ethnic group, area of high diversity)

For post-primary admissions, the child's primary school was the second key source of information, via written communication and individual meetings with the child's teacher or the school principal. Support provided through these channels included information about individual post-primary schools, assistance with the application process, and assessments of the child's suitability for specific schools. Parents of three refugee and asylum-seeking children, whose education had been interrupted, reported that schools had also offered them the option to delay their children's transfer to post-primary education by a year. While the information provided by schools generally extended parents' knowledge of the local education system, one mother reported that her child's school encouraged and provided information on transfer to schools within the same denominational sector only. This meant that she and others had to find information about alternative options independently.

Because [primary school] is Catholic, they always will encourage the best pupils to go to [Catholic grammar school] and the average and lower to [Catholic non-grammar school]

... Always I know that he would try to give you [Catholic grammar school] or [Catholic non-grammar school] and not happy to go somewhere else. (Mother, white other ethnic group, area of medium diversity)

Information about schools and admissions, including application processes, was also obtained via voluntary and community sector organisations, particularly by new migrants, Roma families and refugee and asylum-seeking parents. While such support was undoubtedly valuable, stakeholders in one focus group suggested that some of the existing need could be met through the wider dissemination of information in other languages. This, in turn, would give migrant families greater agency in education processes:

There's very little information available for people and it forces migrant communities into a dependent role with support organisations. They can only access these things by going through a conduit, and that in turn puts an awful lot of pressure on support organisations, who are there really to work with families in crisis or who have really serious safeguarding or complex needs. These families don't have complex needs; they just have, in a lot of cases, a language barrier and a lack of understanding of the system. So the system actually disempowers families from being able to independently access these things for their children. (Stakeholder – community)

At primary level, only three parents reported consulting published material when choosing schools, including inspection reports, details of the school's curriculum, and the results of the school's pupils in the transfer test. Information published by schools in the form of prospectuses and admissions criteria, as well as information published *about* schools online and in social media, featured more prominently in parents' information-gathering at post-primary level. At both stages, parents with third-level education were most likely to report consulting this material. School visits and open days were also more widely discussed at post-primary level than primary, although recent migrants were less likely to have availed of these. In non-pandemic times, these were valued for providing intangible information – '*a feeling*' – about schools that could not be acquired in other ways.

In addition, published data reveals that very few children from minority ethnic or newcomer backgrounds are enrolled in Irish medium schools, which provide education through the Irish language, including none of the children interviewed for this study. Explaining this, one stakeholder offered reasons including a lack of awareness and information about Irish medium education among support organisations, as well as a perception that pupils' English language development would be impeded in an Irish medium school. This stakeholder advocated greater recognition of the expertise within Irish medium schools, particularly in immersion education, that could be employed in supporting newcomer pupils.

5.3. Influences on school choice and placement

5.3.1. Location of the school

In choosing schools, the most widely cited priority among parents at primary level was the distance between school and home. For families who did not have access to a private vehicle, a school within walking distance was strongly preferred, particularly during the dark and inclement months of autumn and winter. Working parents also expressed a preference for a nearby school to facilitate pick-ups by local family or childcare providers. At post-primary level, distance remained a key influence, but was more clearly weighed against other considerations, including school type and reputation. Parents who

spoke of prioritising distance over other factors had all enrolled their children in local non-grammar schools.

Well, it was mostly for location and what we've heard in the beginning. But it was location as well. I was pregnant. I was due in November and they started in September, so I was like, 'I won't be able to walk that far.' We didn't have a car back then. (Mother, white other ethnic group, area of high diversity)

It's the closest, even closer than the primary school. I've heard people say, yes, it's a very good school, the teachers are good, it's a brand-new school and the facilities are all there. (Father, white British ethnic group, area of low diversity)

As children became more independent, and particularly as post-primary transfer approached, the school's location assumed new importance for some parents. These participants expressed concern that their children should not travel too far or for too long, in part for reasons of safety, fearing that their ethnicity may make them a target of discrimination or violence. Stakeholders also recognised this, one commenting that it could be inappropriate to expect children to travel further to accommodate a shortage of school places.

Sometimes for parents, especially at post-primary, [there is] a fear of education and what might happen. There's still such a high level of prejudice and discrimination to the Roma community in Northern Ireland that sending your children that wee bit further away... it's just too outside of the family's comfort zone, so they need a lot of support. (Stakeholder – other)

5.3.2. Educational standards and reputation

Overall, parents placed less emphasis on perceived educational quality when choosing primary schools than they did during post-primary admissions. In part this reflected an assumption that there was little difference between primary schools in terms of standards. Most parents reported that they were satisfied with the educational quality of their child's primary school, though one parent had transferred his child to from one primary school to another that he perceived to have higher educational standards.

While academic reputation had greater influence in decision-making about post-primary schools, parents were split in the extent to which they prioritised this. Among those who placed importance on academics, some had consulted a school's exam results or required transfer scores as indicators of performance, but most relied on word of mouth to identify the high-performing schools. The comments of one parent exemplified this: *'that's the best school in [city], that's what they say. I'm here to find out what is the reason behind that.'* Present in comments about educational quality and reputation among this group were also judgements inflected by social class. Parents spoke of avoiding *'unruly'* or *'rough'* schools and favouring those where pupils were *'dressed smart'*, *'willing to work hard'* and *'well travelled'*. One parent acknowledged the role of social class in such decision-making:

There is that class thing, I suppose, maybe that comes into it as well. It's wrong for me to say that, but sometimes that does play a part. People who are well travelled, more exposed to other cultures might find certain schools, and this is something that we factor in when choosing a school. I wish we didn't have to, but we have to; I want my children to be happy at the end of the day. (Father, Chinese ethnic group, area of high diversity)

For a second group of parents, academic performance was important but only one of several considerations. Indeed, some of these parents actively avoided the most high-performing schools, concerned about the workload, the pressure placed on pupils, or stories they had heard of bullying. These parents targeted less high-profile grammar schools or non-selective schools and spoke of a desirable school as being one appropriate to their child. This could mean a school that would ‘stretch’ their child but also had other characteristics that they sought – good pastoral care, state-of-the-art facilities or a diverse student population.

5.3.3. Diversity of intake

An important criterion for a substantial number of parents was that their child’s school should have an ethnically diverse population. This was mainly the case in areas of medium and high diversity, where this option was more available, but there was an example of a parent from a low-diversity area enrolling her child in a school in a high-diversity area for its more multicultural intake. Participants considered such schools to be more welcoming to their children, with a lower risk of racial discrimination and staff skilled in teaching English as an additional language.

Also we have some friends from Indonesia, so we asked them which schools they send their kids and they recommend [primary school], and this is also multicultural. I noticed that the teachers are ready to teach multicultural students even with the minimum capacity of English proficiency. (Father, other ethnic group, area of high diversity)

I heard about [primary school]. At that time I was thinking it wasn’t that diverse. But afterwards I could see, you know like, children from different countries were there. So I went out of my way to take them to [primary school], because I wanted my kids to be comfortable and not to feel they don’t belong. (Mother, Indian ethnic group, area of high diversity)

For some parents, particularly those from newcomer and Roma backgrounds, the presence of children from the same community background was especially important for helping the transition to Northern Ireland or offering protection against racist abuse and violence from other children. For others, the priority was a school with a multicultural population, comprising pupils of diverse cultural and religious backgrounds, including those of settled, white Northern Irish/British/Irish heritage. These parents spoke about wanting their children to ‘be comfortable’ and to experience diversity, but also expressed concerns that the ‘wrong type’ of diversity, as they perceived it, could hinder the children’s integration into NI society or their academic progress.

But I had that question after many years here, not so many, a few years. I started questioning like why [primary school] is mostly for ethnic minorities... For me, I honestly think that people from a different country really need to mix with the locals, and school is where you need to start. (Mother, Indian ethnic group, area of high diversity)

It’s important to have other Roma children, but if there are too many, that’s a distraction. (Mother, Roma ethnic group, area of high diversity)

Some parents reported avoiding schools because of their cohorts, including newcomer parents who had chosen or transferred their children to schools with a low proportion of newcomer pupils. These parents perceived linguistic diversity to be a barrier to their children’s development of English, particularly where groups of children who shared their home language were enrolled.

In less diverse areas, where there was not the opportunity to choose between multicultural schools, families reported using other indicators to judge whether their child would be safeguarded from racism if enrolled at the school. These included the perceived approachability of senior staff and the openness to communication, which instilled confidence that parents could work with the school to address any racist bullying that might occur.

She's going to a secondary school full of children, and she is different. And I would be an absolute fool to think that there won't be any incidents involving her skin colour, because there will be. So I need to be confident that, if and when something arises, I can speak to and get to who I need to, to make sure that it can be dealt with appropriately. (Mother, white NI ethnic group, area of low diversity)

Also important were reports from friends and family about their children's experiences as a minority ethnic pupil in local schools. Through such measures, parents aimed both to reduce the likelihood of racist incidents and to ensure that the school's response to any bullying would be satisfactory.

5.3.4. Schools' religious character

For the parents in this study, an appropriate level of diversity or an inclusive ethos appeared more important than the school's denomination, and the majority said that the school's religious character had not been a factor in their decision-making. Indicative of this was the example of two families who had chosen what they perceived to be '*integrated schools*', due to their ethnically and religiously mixed intake, which were in fact controlled (predominantly Protestant) and Catholic maintained schools respectively. For recent migrants, in particular, a lack of awareness of the denominational sectors at the time of enrolment meant this had had no impact on their decision. Indeed, several parents reported that differences in the local school sectors were brought to their attention when acquaintances of Northern Irish heritage had questioned their choices – for example, when parents who had migrated from a 'Catholic country' had enrolled their children in a controlled school.

There were three circumstances, however, when the school's religious character had been a consideration in parents' choices. These were when they had formed an opinion of a school as having too pronounced a religious ethos; where a parent had grown up in Northern Ireland and had a preference for one denominational sector; or where a parent perceived that one sector offered a better quality of education. Moreover, though most parents had not chosen schools based on their religious character, this did not mean they were ambivalent about denominational schooling. Participants often expressed perplexity about the presence of parallel sectors, contrasting Northern Ireland's school structures with those in their home or other countries. A school's religious character could also be a source of unease for parents from other faith backgrounds, who described concerns about navigating a Christian school environment with their children:

I need to understand; I need to give support to my children. Okay, we need to respect the others, but your religion is your religion, our religion is our religion, we cannot mix them. So, I realise that there will be consequences if you want to apply for a specific religion school... (Mother, other ethnic group, area of high diversity)

5.3.5. Children's preferences

At post-primary level, the majority of parents reported that their child was involved in choosing their school. This reflected the child's greater maturity and, for some parents, a desire to share the

responsibility for the decision. In most cases, and particularly where parents sought a grammar school place, this choice was given within certain parameters – that is, from schools that parents had approved based on reputation, the reports of other families or what they had perceived from school open days. Parents seeking places in non-grammar schools were more likely to allow the child to lead the decision. Only one parent, who had been raised in NI and whose child had scored highly in the transfer test, reported switching her preference from a grammar to a non-grammar school following the child’s wishes – a decision she described as ‘going rogue’.

So the brochure arrived for [secondary school], you open it and what do you see? A couple of black children. [Child] was like, ‘Ooh.’ So she read it cover to cover, and she went, ‘I’d like to go here.’ And I was still ‘[grammar school] is going to be the place for you.’ Then I read it, and do you know what, the more I read the more I liked. (Mother, white NI ethnic group, area of low diversity)

The responses of children who were involved in choosing their post-primary schools revealed a range of motivations for their preference. The most common was that the school had a favourable reputation and was perceived as a ‘good school’, revealing children’s awareness of the nuances of school hierarchies at a young age. Similarly influential were that their friends planned to attend the school, the school was close to home, it had good facilities for subjects such as sport or science, and older siblings went there. The size of the school was also a concern, with children expressing a preference for schools that were not too big or ‘overwhelming’. As several of these factors suggest, mitigating anxiety about transfer was important in children’s post-primary preferences. One child from an Irish Traveller background, describing post-primary school as ‘scary’, reported that she hoped to leave school once she had completed her primary education.

5.3.6. Availability of places

With families typically juggling multiple priorities for their children’s school placement, a satisfactory outcome was one that met families’ most pressing needs and fulfilled at least some of their desirable criteria. The extent to which these priorities could be met within individual placements depended on the local school provision, particularly the availability of school places, and the point in the school year at which families sought entry to school. Those living outside Belfast and applying through the standard admissions process were more likely to describe ‘choosing’ a school that met their criteria. Even among this group, however, there were parents who reported that their options had been reduced as oversubscribed schools applied admissions criteria that had specific implications for families from migrant backgrounds. This is discussed further in section 5.6.

For families living in Belfast and/or arriving in NI after the start of the school year – including newcomer families, student parents and families seeking sanctuary – pressure on school places often prevented the exercise of choice. This pressure could be exacerbated by limited engagement from the Home Office concerning the arrival dates and accommodation sites of refugees and asylum-seekers. Given the restricted number of places, children arriving during the school year were typically enrolled in the first school with an available space, sometimes following a protracted wait. Among families interviewed for this study, children of post-primary age had waited between two weeks and six months to be allocated a school place. This wait was detrimental to the family’s wellbeing as well as the child’s educational and social development.

I was under stress because all the children got a place at a school but I was worried about my oldest daughter. She did not get a place, that’s why I was thinking too much about her.

Even my daughter was very sad because she didn't get a place. (Mother, Black ethnic group, area of high diversity)

Someone from [voluntary sector organisation], she came to me and asked me, 'What about your daughters? Why they didn't go to school?' etc. I explained all my troubles... Actually, I'm surprised about this process in UK, I didn't expect it like this... that's a surprise and shock for me actually that happened. It mustn't happen in a democratic country. (Mother, other ethnic group, area of high diversity)

Oversubscription of places is most acute in the grammar sector, which consequently accepts few newcomers, regardless of their academic ability. Consistent with this, children in our sample who had migrated to or sought sanctuary in NI during their post-primary education were all allocated places in secondary (non-grammar) schools. Stakeholder interviewees expressed ambivalence about this. On one hand, this resulted in certain under-subscribed schools developing highly diverse intakes and expertise in supporting newcomer pupils, which could make them suitable placements.

At the point of entry, you know they're getting teachers we would have been working with... Just a really good understanding of the needs of these children and we were very comfortable with placing children in there because we knew once they got in, they would get the support they needed... By and large, one of the issues is that you're looking for the most appropriate placement to meet the needs of that child. And a lot of the time that would be the closest school with a space... But also taking into account the fact that the majority of grammar schools would not have had experience working with newcomer pupils. (Stakeholder – other)

On the other hand, stakeholder interviewees also argued that the concentration of newcomer, refugee and asylum-seeking pupils in secondary schools could compound sectoral inequalities. They also observed that it could result in certain schools becoming known as, in one stakeholder's words, 'foreigners' schools', with deleterious consequences for pupils' integration and schools' positioning in the local education market as other families sought to avoid these schools.

The main reason probably is because grammar schools are over-subscribed. But that kind of annoyed me a little bit as well because it always meant that the grammar schools never had to bother with interpreters. They never really had to work that extra hard with those students. Just get all the local kids who speak English and they don't worry. And it's the secondary schools here already dealing with young people from impoverished communities. So it's just, I just think it's really, really unfair, the way the whole system works. (Stakeholder – community)

I mean my concern is you end up with a number of schools that are very heavily populated with newcomers... The children and young people are not mixing with others and they themselves become an 'other'. And because we're not investing in those schools, and we really aren't investing in those schools, actually, they're probably being disadvantaged. So there is no doubt we're not doing the right thing in spite of the fact that the schools are doing everything they possibly can. (Stakeholder – other)

5.4. Application process

The Education Authority manages a centralised online admissions process for standard entry to primary and post-primary school. Paper-based applications continue to be accepted, but this was not widely known among participants. Stakeholders reported that both the online process and the language within the application form could present specific challenges for families without English as a first language, with lower levels of literacy and with less confidence with online technologies. They highlighted the vulnerabilities of an online-first process for families and those assisting them:

[Online is] kind of easier for the people supporting, but not for the families because they can't see the paperwork in front of them. And I think the families have to put a lot more trust in you, you know, because you're uploading things and they don't see anything tangible in front of them as you're doing the application. They can't walk away with a copy of the forms. (Stakeholder – other)

Whenever children are transferring to post-primary school, that's all been pushed on to parents now. Parents can't do it, so I do that with them, but then you leave yourself open if somebody says, 'Oh, well, you filled in my form, you didn't fill in what I wanted.' You know, where do you go?... I think [the Education Authority] need to be more open to the paper applications. (Stakeholder – educator)

Outside this application period, the Education Authority does not oversee the allocation of places to the same extent. Consequently, most parent interviewees who had sought places at other points in the year had initiated applications by contacting schools directly by telephone or in person, including all recent migrants and just under half of the refugee and asylum-seeking families interviewed for this research. This was a challenging and often time-consuming process, particularly for families who had English as an additional language, lived in areas with a shortage of school places, or had children with additional needs. Parents reported contacting up to 10 schools before locating a place. More positively, once a place was identified, most parents spoke favourably of the short time between acceptance and their children starting school.

Where community sector organisations were involved in assisting asylum-seeking and refugee families' transition to Northern Ireland, there was considerable variation in the support provided for school applications. In one example, a support worker had provided a family with information about local schools and invited them to choose from among these. Other parents described being informed by support workers which schools the children would attend, with less involvement in the process. Half of the refugee and asylum-seeking parents within this study had received little or no information or support for school placements, including five who had largely navigated school admissions alone while in Home Office accommodation. Even when places had been secured, parents and stakeholders described cases of asylum-seeking families being moved to a new area and having either to move their children from schools in which they were settled or navigate school transport funding.

There were also reports from stakeholders of some schools being unwilling to admit newcomer, asylum-seeking and refugee children when places were available. These interviewees observed that delays in schools receiving funding for newcomers was a factor in this response. Under existing arrangements, funding for newcomer pupils is allocated to schools on the basis of the number of newcomer pupils on their roll in October each year, when the annual school census takes place. Where newcomer pupils arrive after this date, funding may not be received until the following academic year, creating difficulties for schools seeking to resource additional newcomer provision. A further barrier

was the difficulty schools experience in accessing support from the small team within the Education Authority's Intercultural Education Service. Where young people were older, the impact of additional newcomer pupils on schools' GCSE outcomes was also relevant. Stakeholders argued that, as the Department of Education requires schools to include the examination results of newcomer pupils in their GCSE measures, post-primary schools could be concerned about the impact of additional newcomers on their performance outcomes.

Because if you have a cohort of, say you had 100 pupils in GCSE and maybe some of them have joined in third year, maybe 10 of them are from an EAL background, potentially that's 10% taken away, that aren't going to get Cs maybe in their maths and English right away. It's a tragedy that we look at everything through the lens of grades. (Stakeholder – educator)

Moreover, racial discrimination emerged as a factor in schools' admissions decisions outside standard admissions periods. Several participants reported instances when schools were contacted, as an elected representative described, 'to see if they had a place for a child [of nationality] and they didn't. But then the same school which was contacted the next week looking for a place for a child [of different nationality] did have a place.'

5.5. Primary to post-primary school transfer

Northern Ireland remains the only part of the UK that maintains academic selection across all local areas, usually at age 10/11.¹¹ Although the state-sponsored transfer test was abolished from 2008, grammar schools continued operating selection via two private test providers – the Post-Primary Transfer Consortium (PPTC) in Catholic grammar schools and the Alliance for Quality Education (AQE) in other (predominantly Protestant) grammar schools. These tests were in place during the period of this research but are to be replaced by a single transfer test for all schools from 2023/4, also administered by a private company. Parents who wish their children to take the test register them directly with the test provider prior to the deadline in September of the final year of primary school. Tests then take place in November of the same year. Almost two-thirds of children report taking the transfer test in a normal year (ARK, 2023).

Among the parents whose children were enrolled in primary schools, or who had already transferred from an NI primary to post-primary school, the majority were aware of the transfer test and had been active in decision-making about their child's participation. As above, family friends and the child's primary school had been significant sources of information, the latter proving especially important in providing guidance on the transfer process. Most participants whose children had enrolled for the test reported that the primary school had provided advice on applications, test preparation and the child's suitability for grammar school education, in some cases informing parents of the existence of the test where they were unaware. However, two participants offered examples of schools, in their view, impeding participation in the test by withholding information about the exam or support for preparation. These actions were attributed by participants to racialised assumptions among teachers

¹¹ The exceptions are some schools in the Craigavon area, which delay transfer until age 14.

and formed part of a wider theme of participants reporting lower expectations of their children at school (see section 6.3.2).

Nobody told me about it, and I only found out two weeks after, because I wanted my daughter to sit the test, but apparently she's been pulled out of the class for the ones who are doing the tests. And I had no idea, so there was not enough information for me as a parent. Because, at the end of the day, I'm taking the decision, and I only found out two weeks after it happened... They assume that no Roma will sit the test. (Mother, Roma ethnic group, area of high diversity)

The way some teachers acted with me, some teachers – I think my country or something like that and a different religion, some teachers acted strangely. Because I asked 'how do I take the transfer?' I asked the teacher to help me and he was like, 'No.' (Child, other ethnic group, area of high diversity)

Children who have received more than half their primary education outside NI may apply for a grammar school place through 'special provisions', which exempts them from taking the transfer test and awards a score based on other evidence of academic ability. Only two parents in this study reported being advised of this option by their school; although eligible to apply through special provisions, several other children had taken the transfer test. This included two eligible asylum-seeking children, one of whom had attended school in NI for only six months prior to the test dates. The reason for this was unclear, though no parent reported that they had been advised of the special provisions option and chosen not to pursue it. It may be that schools are either unaware of special provisions or do not anticipate a high chance of success via this route and do not advise parents of it. Neither participating family who applied through special provisions was successful.

In making decisions about their child's participation in the test, one group of parents reported that their wishes had taken priority, while a similar number reported that their child's views were more important. Parents in the first group, who were typically educated to third level themselves, spoke of prioritising the long-term educational interests over the short-term preferences of the child, though some regretted having to do so. Parents in the second group described leaving decisions about the transfer test to their children, concerned not to submit them to a demanding process without their agreement. Some of these children had chosen to take the test; others had not, because of the stress involved and/or because they wished to attend a non-grammar school. Participants in both groups framed their actions in terms of good parenting.

Parents in this country, they don't push children too much, like to do transfer test. They're actually thinking if children doesn't want that, that's okay. But like I spoke to [child], I said, 'You need to go, you have to go and try transfer tests, to see how good you are in school.' And she did, she got it. (Mother, white other ethnic group, area of medium diversity)

I know she's clever but why I need make stress for her when she doesn't like need to go to [grammar school]? When she will be say, 'Mummy I want go to [grammar school],' I say 'Okay, that is important, you will need that transfer.' But when she said 'no,' I don't want to be like bad mummy, 'My mum said I need go there.' (Mother, white other ethnic group, area of high diversity)

In common with the wider population, attitudes to selection and the transfer test among parents in this research were mixed. Parents who favoured the status quo considered the transfer test valuable

in assessing progress and approved of differentiating children by ability and, in one parent's view, willingness to learn. Parents opposed to selection argued that it exacerbated inequality, negatively affected the curriculum in P6 and P7, and was detrimental to wellbeing, particularly for those who were unsuccessful.

A third group of parents expressed opposition to the current transfer system, but not necessarily to the principle of selection. The main objection among this group was that the test placed too much pressure on children at a young age. These parents favoured either delaying selection until later in pupils' school careers or using alternative methods – for example, allocating places according to end-of-year assessments at primary school or teachers' judgements of pupils' aptitude. A further objection related to the sustained pressure of testing over up to four weekends. The format of the revised transfer test, with exams over two weekends, may alleviate this.

5.6. Academic selection: preparation and outcomes

Most parents referred to the child's primary school as the main support for transfer practice, which began as early as the January of P6 and took the form of in-class preparation and/or after-school practice sessions. The support that schools provided for the test varied, however, and at least one parent had approached the school to request additional help with preparation. While school-based preparation dominated, some parents also described supporting children with practice at home or through the use of private tutors. The latter was more common among affluent and established families, though one asylum-seeking parent spoke of arranging additional tuition for her child. Other parents reported that the cost of tuition was prohibitive and considered this a barrier to their children's acceptance at grammar school.

Children's descriptions of preparing for and taking the transfer test revealed that nervousness and apprehension were pervasive, even among those who also spoke of the process as '*fun*' or '*a challenge*'. Children described the stress caused by the high-stakes nature of the test and the fear of doing badly, which among several participants had manifested in physical health problems and anxiety symptoms in the lead up to the test or on the day of the exam. While similar responses have been reported across the population (see O'Neill, 2022), additional challenges were described by children who had entered NI schools in P6 and P7 from other education systems which had not taught the content to be examined in the transfer test.

It was a bit of a struggle... They already had P6 to prepare for this. And when we were at school in [country] we hadn't even thought about doing it. (Child, Black ethnic group, high diversity)

Given the timing of this research, eight participants were among the cohort of pupils who, in 2020/21, registered for the transfer test that was postponed and subsequently cancelled due to the pandemic. These children described the stress associated with the uncertainty of this period and the combination of emotions that they experienced following the test cancellation: disappointment at not being able to demonstrate their knowledge, relief at being spared the humiliation of a low score, and anxiety about the selection criteria that would be used instead of the transfer test score. Some children among this group, who had older siblings already attending their preferred school, were admitted on this basis. However, other families suggested that the admissions criteria employed in the absence of the transfer test had been detrimental to their children's prospects of entry to the school of their choice.

These criteria included a parent's or older sibling's previous attendance at the school, the first of which has subsequently been ruled discriminatory on racial grounds (BBC, 2021).

But then the exam was cancelled, because of Covid. So I was really confused, because they started using other criteria. This is unfair as well for people, because they will use criteria like if your family studied in this school, your brother and sister. I'm not from here, I don't have anyone who goes to this school, okay? And then they will use all these criteria and I just think it doesn't really match. (Mother, Chinese ethnic group, area of low diversity)

So, she was doing very well in her exams, but she didn't get to do it because of Covid. And then they scrapped all of the things and they just put up very weird criteria in different secondary schools which I thought were very discriminatory against people that are not brought up here... One of the main criteria was they needed to have parents or grandparents that studied here. And I'm like, well, that's not really fair on us because we're not from here and that's going to be a detriment for us. (Mother, other ethnic group, area of high diversity)

Beyond this particular transfer year, some parents reported that schools' admissions criteria and decisions could be opaque. One family, for example, cited an instance of pupils with lower transfer scores being admitted to grammar school ahead of their child. Another mother reported being confused by the 'special provisions' process: having expected her child to be called for an interview to determine his suitability for a grammar school education, when this did not occur she struggled to understand how the school had reached the decision to decline him a place.

Another girl from [daughter's] classroom, she got C on her transfer test, you know, and she got a space in [grammar school]. But [daughter], because she got B1, she didn't get it. Her points were higher, but she never got a space in [grammar school]... Sometimes when you have situations like that, you're just thinking, oh, because you're from a different country, maybe that's why your children are not getting [a place]. (Mother, white other ethnic group, area of high diversity)

When I talked to the teacher that he might want to go to grammar school, and the teacher said, 'You didn't need to apply for AQE test, because your son has [less than three years'] education in Northern Ireland', so it means that he will get special provision.... I thought that they would call him for an interview and then they will decide according to his interview, so what is the point then from the special circumstances application? (Mother, other ethnic group, area of high diversity)

Such examples, as elsewhere in this section, point to the need for clear and consistent guidance and procedures to avoid either actual or perceived discrimination in school admissions processes.

6. Day-to-day school life

6.1. School policies and practices

Parents and children shared views on a range of school policies and practices relating to uniform, homework, holidays, approaches to streaming and progression, available pastoral support and levels of integration at school, at times comparing approaches with those in the countries from which they had migrated.

6.1.1. School uniform

According to the family interviews, newcomer children in various areas of diversity had received information from schools about uniform grants and where to source uniforms. In some cases, schools had provided uniforms to children to ensure they could start school. Compulsory uniform in NI schools divided opinion among participants, on one hand being viewed positively for helping families save money and instilling in children a sense of discipline; on the other hand, post-primary school uniforms were described by some children as uncomfortable, cold, expensive, itchy and ‘smelly’ if damp. Parents also commented on the expense of uniforms, citing uniform banks as vital when struggling to meet costs. One mother, ineligible for a uniform grant, recounted that she was only able to afford one school jumper for her second child until the school’s secretary informed her about pre-loved uniforms. Another described herself as ‘lucky’ to use the school uniform bank to source replacement school skirts after the school prohibited her initial purchase for being the wrong style. (For information on uniform policy in respect of cultural and religious diversity, see section 7.4).

6.1.2. Homework

Parents generally considered there to be less homework allocated than where they had been educated. For some parents, prior experiences also informed the importance they attached to homework: one father, concerned that his daughter had received less homework since going to post-primary school, argued that repetition at home helped to reinforce learning. Other parents questioned whether adults had been ‘conditioned’ to expect homework and claimed it was better to let children enjoy their free time and ‘be children’, a sentiment echoed by an educator whose school intentionally allocated minimal homework. The same educator also noted that some parents without English as a first language were unable fully to support their children to complete homework, citing this as a further reason to limit it. Where parents were English language learners or had experienced interruption to their own education, homework clubs organised by schools or community groups could play an important role:

I’m very happy for homework club. [Child] finishes at three but he’s complete at school around four, four and half. It’s keeps me relaxed because I know now [Child] doing well. He stays around six months. Actually, he’s very improved fast. (Mother, other ethnic group, area of high diversity)

Children themselves often listed homework as a negative aspect of school and wished they had less or none.

6.1.3. Streaming and progression

Some parents were concerned and, in some cases, confused when it came to schools’ streaming processes at primary level, such as the common practice of allocating pupils to tables based on aptitude. Reporting that this did not happen in their home countries, these parents observed that such practices could be unfair and detrimental to confidence, and they questioned that there could be so many levels within the same class. There were also reports from parents and stakeholders that newcomer and Roma children in some schools had been seated together at specific tables, irrespective of ability, to the detriment of their progress.

We were the first parents who went and said, ‘No, we want our daughters to be with less Roma children because we want them to study.’ Because they were all put at, you know, all friends at the same table, and they end up talking to each other and they don’t learn,

and they were coming home the way we were sending them. There was no progress, I couldn't see any progress in them. (Mother, Roma ethnic group, area of high diversity)

What they did, they had the students at the back of the class, the Syrian students, and they totally ignored them all the way through. It was just really heart-breaking. (Stakeholder – community)

Approaches to progression, which could differ from those in parents' home countries, could likewise be confusing. Exemplifying this, one mother expressed uncertainty as to why her son continued to progress though the school years when he struggled to master the same skills as his peers, commenting that in Poland he would have been kept back a year. While she was ambivalent about an inclusive approach to progression, noting that the child '*sensed that he wasn't catching up, that he was always behind*', other participants spoke about the difficulties associated with keeping children back. One mother, whose son had been held back a year without her agreement, reported that this had been detrimental to his friendships and subsequent school career. Speaking about the challenges of placing children who had gaps in their education, stakeholders also reported that the placement of newcomer pupils in lower year groups presented complexities in terms of safeguarding.

6.1.4. Holidays

The number and duration of school holidays in NI was a topic of discussion among some parents, who described these as more frequent and longer than they were used to. Child participants did not share their parents' concerns about the length of holidays, but some children of post-primary age disliked having to complete assignments or revise for exams during holidays instead of having a break. Some parents used the long holidays to travel back to their home countries so children could reconnect with families, culture and heritage languages; at other times, parents informed schools that they would need to withdraw their children during term-time to do this, with mixed response. One father reported that his daughter's school were accommodating when he withdrew her to visit family in Southeast Asia; however, another parent reported that her son's school was less accommodating when withdrawing her child to visit an ailing family member. She felt that the school's initial resistance to her request had forced her to divulge more personal information about the urgency of the visit than she had wanted. More favourably, parents who spoke of withdrawing their children for religious holidays, such as *Eid*, reported that schools were supportive of this.

6.2. Identity and integration

Participants offered perspectives on identity and levels of integration at school. While parents were generally keen for their children to forge diverse friendships, they also worked to foster children's confidence in their identity in anticipation of an environment where it might be questioned or disparaged. A Traveller parent described being content for her children to mix with settled children but encouraged them to '*move on*' if they were not accepted or were expected to transgress Traveller customs. Another parent described how he and his wife had '*worked hard*' to ensure that their son had an understanding of his Black African heritage and remarked on the differences between his own and his NI-born child's experiences:

He was always on his own, there was always no person who looked like him until this year, I think. Towards the end of the year there was another boy joined their class. But I think he already has friends. I kept saying, 'Do you know about this African boy?' 'I don't know him.' Unlike us when we got here, every Black person you see you're like, 'Hello,'

because you're trying to befriend them [laughs]. (Father, Black ethnic group, area of low diversity)

There were multiple examples from children's interviews of the pride they took in their heritage: some had enjoyed sharing information about their family history, teaching peers words from their home language and, in one girl's case, playing Indian music loudly with friends on the bus. However, parents also described the challenges that children in NI had experienced negotiating their cultural identity in a white-dominated and religiously divided society. One parent reported, for example, that her daughter, from a Hindu background, had remarked, '*we're Protestants, aren't we?*', which the mother considered to reflect the influence of denominationalism in schools and more broadly. Another mother described the difficulties that her NI-born son had experienced after he was targeted as one of the few Muslim children at his school.

Now he has like a variety of friends from here, from different countries. But at that time, five years ago, he felt lonely. So that was because of his religion, he felt lonely at that time because of his religion... his colour, the way he looked. So he was questioning his whole identity, his own being. So that's been hard. (Mother, Indian ethnic group, area of high diversity)

Newcomer and former newcomer children reported that they had been anxious about making friends at their new schools because of language differences. They described actions that had helped with friendship formation, which included being allowed to use Google Translate at breaktimes to communicate with classmates, being allocated a 'buddy', and playing games with other children that did not depend on language, with rock-paper-scissors given as an example. Some parents also reported that other children who spoke the same home language had helped their child to settle in and to engage better in school life – a finding that indicated the value of pupils speaking their home language at school. This contrasts with the perspectives of some educators, who saw English as the principal means of integration and pupils' home languages as a threat to this.

Some children reported that they had friends from migrant backgrounds only and others a mixture of friends who were and were not from minority ethnic and migrant families. Friends from minority ethnic and migrant backgrounds, in particular, appeared to offer a shared experience that children valued. A girl of mixed heritage remarked that her peers helped one another with homework, cheered one another on and could '*even have a conversation where they talk about their culture or whatever, like their family, what it's like for them*'. Moreover, a Traveller girl described a friend from a migrant family, who, unlike her white NI settled peers, did not treat her like '*an outsider*' and was '*not scared*' of her. These positive friendships enhanced children's educational experiences and they reported that moving with friends to post-primary school helped to make the transition smoother.

6.3. Racism at school

6.3.1. Racism and discrimination from peers

Experiences of racism and racist bullying were common among children and families interviewed. These primarily occurred in places where school staff's ability to witness discrimination was diminished, including the playground, the canteen, corridors, locker rooms, school toilets, during line-up and during shared education sessions. Racist incidents had also occurred during the commute to school on foot and on the bus. There was a sense that teachers lacked awareness about the extent of racism as a result:

There's no way that they're not getting racism, but in the school, it is dealt with. In our school it is dealt with, but it would just be, you know, I would say it's insidious, below the radar... No one's going to racially abuse someone in front of the teacher, they're not going to do that. They'll wait until they're in the corridor. And I would say there's microaggressions all of the time, but again, I don't know, and they don't report it. (Stakeholder – educator)

Many of the children and their parents shared experiences of verbal and physical bullying, spanning primary and post-primary levels. Verbal bullying included name calling, the use of common racial slurs, comments mocking skin colour and facial features, and insults directed at children's families. Such comments were intended to 'other' and exclude children and could take a sexualised form as they moved into post-primary school: one girl of Indian heritage reported being told by a male peer that he would '*never date a brown girl*' and by others that they would not be friends with her because of her skin colour. Verbal bullying also referenced and perpetuated negative images of particular communities. A Traveller parent reported that derogatory comments had been made about her children's cleanliness; and a girl of Traveller background commented that her classmates thought Traveller children were '*weird and spoiled*' and '*never be good*'. Other participants said that their children had been targeted by peers invoking tropes of Islamic terrorism and people trafficking.

Examples of physical bullying included one boy being pushed and receiving a head injury, another boy experiencing peers attempt to force a toilet door open to attack him, and a girl being '*beaten*' in the canteen in view of others. Two children also spoke of witnessing attacks where peers had been punched or, when travelling from school, pelted with stones. In at least two cases, physical bullying had led to hospital treatment or police involvement.

As well as overtly racist verbal and physical abuse, participants reported that peers had criticised their schoolwork, intelligence and language. This was experienced by newcomer or former newcomer children who were receiving English language support. For instance, children said that they had been criticised for making spelling mistakes, for their handwriting and for using their hands to help them communicate. One former newcomer commented that she had been called '*stupid*' and her peers had questioned why she had received higher marks than them at school. A mother also reported that other pupils, wishing to see her child punished by the teacher, had accused him of rule infringements that he had not committed.

Whilst the theme of exclusion was more prevalent when discussing ways that schools perpetuate racism, there were also examples of peers challenging the legitimacy of children's identity or residence in Northern Ireland or otherwise making them feel unwelcome. Two children of Syrian heritage said that, although some peers took an interest in their culture and language, there were others who '*just want you to get out... will be against you, they don't want you*'. These participants also felt that, in the area of low migration in which they lived, peers had established friendships and were not necessarily interested in making new ones. Similarly, a Polish father had noticed that his child and other children from migrant backgrounds were playing apart from the rest of the class. Concerned that the child was being excluded, the father had moved him to another school. Comparable experiences were shared by children who had been born in Northern Ireland. One child reported being continually asked, '*Are you from Pakistan? What did you do there?*' – questions that he found irritating:

Like I was born here [NI] but they still think like I'm from Pakistan, so it's not nice. (Child, Pakistani ethnic group, area of high diversity)

The word *'unwelcoming'* was used by one girl when describing how her classmates behaved towards her and other Travellers because of their ethnicity.

Whilst many perpetrators of racist bullying were reported to be white, settled Northern Irish/British/Irish children, there were accounts of perpetrators from other minority ethnic and migrant backgrounds. For example, a newcomer Ukrainian child recalled unkind jokes from boys of other European heritage. Two stakeholders suggested that racism was more prevalent among minority ethnic parents than among pupils, having witnessed racism between refugee and non-refugee families and between Roma and others.

6.3.2. Discrimination from schools

Parents and children recounted times they had experienced direct and indirect forms of discrimination and victimisation from educators. Speaking generally, one mother reflected that her child's teachers placed lower academic expectations on Black pupils compared with their white peers *'unless it's with sports'*; academically, she reported her son's school *'don't have any expectation of him'*. Similarly, a Roma mother reported that her child's primary school did *'not encourage participation'* from Roma children, who had been seated separately from their classmates until parents intervened. This theme was also recognised by stakeholders, who spoke of lower expectations arising from children's English language abilities or teachers' assumptions about the importance certain communities placed on education.

With the Syrian project, for instance, expectation is zero from these kids. Some of these kids are babysat in some of the schools and the kids would tell you, 'What's the point of me going to school when I'm not learning?... They're very basic, they're not challenged.' (Stakeholder – community)

It's the assumption certainly that within [Roma] families... education isn't valued. It's the expectation, 'Oh we're not going to really expect very much.' (Stakeholder – community)

Some participants reported that Black and Traveller children were more likely to be disciplined than white pupils, including for minor infractions such as making a noise in class or being late. Two parents reported, moreover, that their children had been subjected to excessive physical restraint from staff. One described a classroom assistant holding her child down; the other reported that her primary-aged child had been restrained in such a way that it had *'hurt [his] bones and stomach'*. Both ascribed these experiences to racism, asserting a belief that settled white NI/British/Irish children would not be treated similarly.

Adult and child participants also made references to their children's exclusion from communications, particularly photographs displayed on school apps or classroom walls. In one example, a parent described how her child had been left out of a class photo, the boy remembering *'they just left me on the edge. I was standing there in a corner watching them take the picture'*. Moreover, participants from Traveller and Roma backgrounds commented that their children had not been chosen for school plays, performances or choirs, despite signing the relevant consent forms, and felt their achievements were not acknowledged in the same way as they would be for other children. One Traveller child had won a category at a local cultural festival, the first from her school to do so, but her family expressed disappointment that *'they didn't celebrate in school very much.'* The impact of such experiences could be significant, a Traveller mother disclosing that she was left feeling *'that you are the bottom, to be honest'*.

6.3.3. Children and parents' responses to racism and discrimination

Children's responses to racism and discrimination varied. Several parent and stakeholder participants described instances of children taking direct physical or verbal action against perpetrators, particularly in the absence of an appropriate response to racism from the school, which had resulted in them being punished. Other children excused such behaviour as a 'joke' or the result of ignorance, a response which appeared to minimise their peers' malicious intent and thereby increase their own comfort at school. For instance, one child had been reluctant to tell the teachers of his experience and excused his perpetrators by commenting:

I understand that it's just a joke, they're just kidding, they are just joking. And they didn't mean to hurt me. (Child, white other ethnic group, area of medium diversity).

Similarly, a child speculated of the peers criticising his spelling that '*maybe they are joking, they don't mean it*'; another, who had been taunted by a serious racial slur, suggested that '*it wasn't really racist*' as the perpetrator had autism. There were other cases of children excusing racism when perpetrators had special educational needs.

Notwithstanding such attempts to mitigate the impact of racism, bullying had a profoundly negative effect on children. Participants reported that they felt '*scared*', had begun to '*hate*' school, did not want to attend school or wished to change schools. Parents also highlighted the impact on children's mental health, describing boys and girls crying at home, or, in one case, internalising the stress until it affected the child's physical wellbeing. Parents' descriptions were indicative of the strain the experience had placed on their children.

I am letting my child go to school to get education, not to be tormented and harassed. (Mother, Roma ethnic group, area of medium diversity)

We don't have any idea about schools, we have no understanding about schools. And the little bit that we know now, it's not necessarily that we would know which one would be a better fit. And [the children] are really quite terrified to go to another school, because it's a case of you can go from the frying pan into the fire, isn't it? So, what do you do? Take the child, or just suck it up? And that's a problem. It's quite terrifying. (Mother, Black ethnic group, area of high diversity)

Most of the children in this study had spoken to their parents or relatives when they had experienced racist bullying. Some children had contacted their parents whilst at school, via phone calls and text messages after an incident, though there were reports of others delaying telling parents for up to a year or more. There was greater reluctance to talk to schools for fears of being called a '*snitch*', making the situation worse or not being believed: exemplifying this, one mother explained that she and her husband had had to persuade their son to let them talk to the school.

Witnessing their children's distress and providing support could also have a significant impact on parents: one mother described the remorse she felt having chosen the school and experienced a decline in her relationship with her son. Beyond the individual family, incidents of racism at school could also have ramifications in the communities in which the victims lived. A mother described the challenge of not only having to encourage her child to return to school after being attacked, but also persuading other mothers from the Roma community not to be deterred from sending their children to school.

She was so afraid to go back to school. And it was difficult to give the message to the mums, you know, don't let these boys destroy your daughters' future. (Mother, Roma ethnic group, area of high diversity)

Some parents offered their views on the influences on racism at school. These included the geographical location of the school and pupils' exposure to diversity, the socio-economic profile of the local area, and the school management's response to racist attitudes and behaviours. Protective factors, by contrast, included the child's physical size and knowledge of self-defence: one mother described her son as 'lucky' because he was 'big for his age and knows how to protect himself'. Educators also speculated about the possible motivating factors behind racist bullying, some claiming that perpetrators repeated what they heard at home or in their community and were not always aware of the meaning or seriousness of the language they used. Living in an area of low diversity and having limited contact with other cultures were also noted as potential contributory factors.

6.3.4. School responses to racist incidents

Participants described schools enacting a range of responses to address racist bullying such as placing perpetrators in time-out, moving them to another seat, sending them to the principal's office, offering counselling for victims, phoning parents, holding face-to-face meetings and speaking with the parents of perpetrators. In one example, a child participant been given detention for singing a song that a minority ethnic peer reported as racist. Although his mother was 'devastated' at the thought of this, she was satisfied that the school had taken it seriously:

I think [the school] were making a point that, even though they didn't think it was racist, because the wee boy thought it was racist then that is what matters, and that is why they dealt with it. (Mother, mixed ethnic group, area of low diversity)

Several other families gave examples of school responses that they considered broadly satisfactory. In one case, parents who reported a racist incident to the police were invited into the school and told that the perpetrators' parents had been called in to discuss it. The school apologised for the children's experience, which the parents appreciated. In another school, teachers had asked a parent's consent to refer their child to a school counsellor and had spoken to the perpetrator, who subsequently wrote a letter of apology to the child. While the mother was satisfied with this response, she was disappointed that senior staff had not also informed the perpetrator's parents of the incident. She and other participants alluded to the close-knit nature of NI school communities, with schools being unwilling to upset the parents of perpetrators by informing them of their children's behaviour.

Many families reported, however, that racist bullying had been inadequately addressed by schools. Three concerns were prevalent: that no action had been taken; that the action was not stringent enough; and that schools either disbelieved children and parents who reported racist incidents or felt they overstated the problem. In the first case, one parent had reported an incident of bullying against her primary-aged son by children seated at his table in class. She described the (in)action that followed as 'making his life worse'. The child also expressed his dissatisfaction with the teacher's response:

Like get him away from me. He's literally right next to me... You at least put him like farther away... [Teacher] could have done a bit more than just tell them off. (Child, Pakistani ethnic group, area of high diversity)

Several examples were offered of a lack of stringency in schools' responses to racism. One parent contrasted the *'much more strict'* approach to bullying in her home country of Bulgaria with the approach at her child's school in NI, where the bullying *'never stops... no measures were taken at all.'* Several children similarly characterised their schools' responses as ineffectual, one commenting there ought to be *'more punishment'* for bullies. There were also reported instances of schools minimising racist bullying. For example, one parent stated that he had brought up a racist bullying incident at a parent-teacher meeting but felt the teacher had downplayed it as they requested no further details. Another described being shocked when a senior teacher compared the racist bullying of her son to the harassment of a child with red hair.

That reports of racism were disbelieved, or were given less weight than those of settled, white NI/British/Irish children and parents, was also a recurring concern. In at least five cases, families recalled that schools had responded to reports of bullying with claims that their children were *'telling tales'*, *'making stories'* or *'finding excuses'* for their own behaviour, or had accepted the perpetrator's version of events over their child's. This could leave children feeling that there was no point in speaking to teachers about bullying as they would not be believed. One mother spoke of the emotional labour it had cost her to convince the school to address her child's bullying, recalling that it was only after she asked the principal whether she was not being listened to because she was *'a different colour'* that she was taken seriously. She reflected on the role of race in schools' response:

Sometimes I feel like people of colour, I think sometimes their concerns are not heard as much as if somebody else had raised those concerns. And I think there should be more of an open approach when they are coming with their issues. (Mother, Pakistani ethnic group, area of high diversity)

Schools often seemed to avoid addressing incidents of racist bullying between peers as explicitly racist in intent, but rather framed these as bullying more generally. Stakeholders and educators acknowledged this, reporting that teachers were sometimes reluctant or unable to recognise racist intent where it was present and would consequently *'turn a blind eye'*. In this regard, one educator indicated the importance of anti-racism training to help teachers recognise racism and respond to it appropriately.

There's some antiracism [training] and so on... It's not for teachers, you know, to learn not to be racist; it's for them to recognise racism when they see it. Because when I've spoken about those incidents that I talked to you about, some of them used to say, 'Yeah, I just think it's a lack of understanding, isn't it? It's just they haven't thought. I don't think it's a racist thing. I don't think they're attacking them because they think-' Hmm, making fun of their afro hair is a racist thing, I'm sorry. So it's just that lack of awareness, really. (Stakeholder – educator)

Some parents called for preventative practices to be put in place by schools rather than waiting for incidents to occur before addressing issues of racism. These included proactive anti-racist education from primary level and teaching about the contexts from which newcomer children had arrived. One parent was encouraged by the fact that his daughter's school had discussed racism, particularly in response to the 'Black Lives Matter' movement, Covid-related Asian hate crimes and Brexit, though he felt that these conversations should occur routinely rather than reactively. A stakeholder interviewee relayed an example of good practice among schools in an area of low diversity that had prepared pupils

for the arrival of Syrian refugees by teaching them about Syria and the conflict. This seemed to have acted as a protective factor against bullying and increased pupils' understanding towards their new classmates.

Stakeholder interviewees suggested, moreover, that racism was or could be addressed in specific areas of learning such as Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (primary level) or Learning for Life and Work (LLW), English and History (post-primary level). Children reported that RE, philosophy and LLW were the subjects in which they had explored such issues to date. Assemblies were also suggested as a site for addressing racism, though one stakeholder involved in the delivery of workshops on racism and diversity suggested that a smaller group setting was often preferable. In terms of approach, one educator described how his school had consulted minority ethnic pupils on what they would prefer to be covered regarding issues of racism based on their own experiences, thus involving them in guiding the school's response. With specific reference to Irish Travellers, another stakeholder argued for the importance of addressing discrimination against Travellers through broader anti-racism work. Noting that materials on Traveller culture had been developed, this interviewee spoke of the need to evaluate the impact of these on pupils' attitudes.

6.4. Features of a good school

Asked what they considered to be features of a good school, children discussed important spaces within the school, a school that was inclusive and diverse, a school free from bullying, and one offering opportunities for enjoyment, including extracurricular activities. Important spaces within schools included those which offered peace and calm. For instance, a refugee child commented on his school's peaceful atmosphere and that he particularly liked spending time in the library, while another child listed the library along with a school garden as important features. Picking up this theme, a child suggested having a 'chill room' with a sofa for children who are upset to be able to spend time in. Many children commented on the cleanliness of the school, including the toilets, as being an important feature of a good school.

Inclusivity and diversity were listed as attributes of a good school by many children. One child described his ideal school as one that had '*all different people from different cultures*' and did not exclude pupils '*just because they're from different places*'. Several other children spoke also of good schools as inclusive places that offered pupils the opportunity to learn about other cultures. The word '*equality*' was used by one child, who stated that in her ideal school there would be:

Equality for everybody, and good lunches, and good facilities, and the fact that teachers could be supportive if you need help emotionally, physically, stuff like that. (Child, Chinese ethnic group, area of high diversity)

A school that is friendly and free from bullying was prevalent in children's descriptions, which included a '*good bond*' between educators and pupils, and an atmosphere of '*general warmth*'. The importance of supporting mental health and wellbeing was also cited by several children, one of whom shared her belief that the rhetoric on mental health was not matched by in-school support. Another suggested that access to mobile phone devices and applications in school should be limited as it had the potential to impact pupils' mental health negatively. Access to support of all types depended on a good teacher-pupil ratio and good channels of communication between families and schools, which were listed respectively by pupils features of a good school.

Opportunities for enjoyment and fun also characterised some children's descriptions of a good school. These took the form of school trips and 'fun rules' and rewards, such as 'star of the week' and 'golden time'. One child reported that these reward systems were most fun when the teacher ensured that everyone had a turn at being rewarded. Outside of class time, enjoyment took the form of a range of extracurricular opportunities, including different sports (girls' football, netball, basketball, rugby, cross-country running, dodgeball, cricket and hockey were all mentioned) and drama. Access to tasty school food was also a recurring theme.

6.5. Features of a good teacher

An attribute of a good teacher that children reiterated numerous times was not to be 'shouty' and punitive, but calm and supportive. This included not shouting at pupils if they needed to use the toilet, and not sending them to the principal, but rather helping them to find a solution to issues. Children also explained that a good teacher was one who was patient, available and caring. One child reported that she listened more and felt able to answer questions when teachers were not strict. Two children believed a good teacher was one who could 'give good advice' and build pupils' confidence. A recurring attribute of a good teacher was also to treat everyone fairly and without 'favourites'. For instance, two children commented:

A good teacher should not see the English ones and the Bulgarian ones, maybe, but bring the both sides... to be fair'. (Child, Roma ethnic group, area of medium diversity)

[A good teacher] supports your work and treats everyone equally and shines a spotlight on everyone. Just not on the teacher's pet or whatever. (Child, mixed ethnic group, area of high diversity)

Related to this, children also described a good teacher as one who was non-judgemental. This ranged from not making assumptions that pupils were misbehaving to not discriminating against individual pupils. One child described a good teacher as one who 'doesn't judge people by how they [pupils] look'. Other prevalent characteristics of a good teacher were humour and the ability to make learning fun. For instance, one boy spoke about how one of his teachers had been able to make reading fun – something he had previously not enjoyed but had come to love as a result. Two children also mentioned rewarding positive behaviour as an attribute of a good teacher.

7. Curriculum Issues and cultural responsiveness

7.1. Opportunities to learn about cultural and religious diversity at school

Participants shared examples of opportunities their children had received to learn about cultural and religious diversity at school. These opportunities were more often reported at primary school than post-primary school and most commonly involved learning about Chinese New Year and Indian culture. Less common but also listed by participants were classes about *Diwali*, *Ramadan* and American Thanksgiving. Opportunities to learn about different cultures typically also involved making and sharing food and wearing traditional clothes, with some parents being invited to showcase their cultural traditions. Participants recalled events where they had dressed in national costume and either made or brought in a traditional national dish. Interestingly, when asked about cultural diversity, some children responded by listing aspects of British and Irish culture or historical topics such as ancient

Egypt. The former may reflect the newness of these topics to children born outside Northern Ireland; however, it may also indicate that there was little teaching of content outside these topics.

Children described varying opportunities to share information about their own heritage at school. One newcomer noted that his class had been reading biographies of people discussing their heritage in Learning for Life and Work (LLW) and would be writing stories about their own heritage and culture. Another refugee child recalled that his class had been asked to introduce where they were from and what *'rules they have'*, and described the diversity among his peers as *'so new and exciting'*. Other children reported, however, that they had never been invited to share information about their cultural heritage at school. In this regard, some participants expressed a view that certain cultures were prioritised over others and featured more routinely in classroom teaching. For example, one Muslim child described learning little about *Ramadan* and *Eid* compared with Chinese New Year, while a Lithuanian mother observed of assemblies on cultural heritage that *'they're not talking about smaller countries'* such as her own. Other participants expressed similar concerns:

You learn so much about different cultures but you don't learn about Traveller culture and that's so weird...Ukrainians came here and everything was talked about. They were talked about for ages. We never get talked about. No one talks about us. (Child, Irish Traveller ethnic group, area of high diversity)

There's no harm in knowing other people, knowing other people's religion or culture or anything. But at the end of the day, you start thinking, like, when is the time for us to talk about our culture? (Mother, Indian ethnic group, area of high diversity)

Stakeholders speculated that this variation could arise from the flexibility within the curriculum. While this flexibility was regarded as a potential asset, allowing teachers to tailor content to their local population, it depended on teachers' confidence, willingness and time to pursue such opportunities. Stakeholders suggested that, without distinct guidance, teachers were likely to favour topics on which an abundance of resources already existed. Resources addressing Roma culture and stories of African heritage had been created to help address this.

Because those strands or those remarks in the curriculum aren't specific about different cultures, they're really open-ended, so the teacher can decide, well, this is the culture I'm going to celebrate here. It's more than likely not going to be the Roma culture, or it's not going to be- it might be the Ukrainian culture, I'm not sure, or the Somali culture, or the Eritrean culture, and those are the children that are arriving in such great numbers at the minute. (Stakeholder – other)

On the whole, there was a desire among children and parents to have more opportunities to learn about cultural diversity at school and share their own culture, with one parent suggesting this should be done in the early years to prevent prejudice. One of the widely perceived benefits of learning about cultural and religious diversity at school was that it fostered pride in children's heritage and, as one child described, made *'them feel positive about themselves'*. Learning about cultural diversity was considered to impact peer relationships positively, encouraging pupils to respect other cultures and be kinder to peers of different backgrounds. Children also suggested that it was good preparation for travelling and working beyond NI.

[Children] want to hear about contributions by their ancestors, their communities, and something to share our joy and celebrate together and be proud of it. It would be nice if schools did more of that. (Father, Chinese ethnic group, area of high diversity)

If we went to different countries, we would know what we were doing and it's fun to learn as well. (Child, mixed ethnic group, area of low diversity)

However, there were circumstances in which children expressed reservations about sharing aspects of their culture. Most commonly this was due to concern about being mocked by peers. Two Traveller children and a Roma boy described feeling 'uncomfortable' about discussing their cultural background at school, the latter stating that 'some people would tell jokes', though he reported feeling more confident if invited to do so by the teacher. Children also described an aversion to being put on the spot by teachers or asked to speak as an authority on a particular religious or cultural perspective.

There's another girl in my class who doesn't talk much at all and she was told to talk about her religion. She didn't want to talk at all. She just said, 'I don't want to talk about it.' Sometimes some teachers can be very nose-y or curious about the religion. But I think it's best, if the child doesn't want to do it, I think it's best just to give them space. (Child, white other ethnic group, area of high diversity)

Other children also described a reluctance to share different perspectives on religion at school. One spoke of concern that pupils might cause offence to others and raise tensions, while another felt it unnecessary for him because 'I have my own [religion]', though he saw benefits for others.

7.2. Comparisons between curriculum in NI and other countries

Parents and children tended to appreciate the student-centred, play-based and participatory pedagogical approaches in NI schools, comparing this favourably to other educational systems of which they had experience. Several parents suggested that the more holistic approach to education had benefited their children, one observing that greater positive reinforcement had increased her son's self-confidence. Another reported that her child, who found one subject challenging, had been able to thrive in other areas of the curriculum in a way that he might not have done in the Polish education system. Older children, particularly, spoke of valuing the opportunity for practical in addition to theoretical learning.

So in Ukrainian school, it's a bit boring when they just give the information to you and you need to learn it. Well, here it happens in a different way, and maybe through drawings, through presentations, a different approach to presenting information. Through a practical approach. (Child, white other ethnic group, area of low diversity)

Student parents who had come to NI for a fixed period from South and Southeast Asia and planned to return to their home countries expressed concerns about their children adapting back to these education systems, which included more rote-based learning and stricter forms of discipline.

Counterbalancing these positive perspectives, some parents drew less favourable comparisons between the curriculum in NI and the country in which they had been educated. One related to a perceived narrowness of the NI primary curriculum, where the focus was on literacy and numeracy. Several parents raised concerns about gaps in other important areas such as the sciences, history, geography and additional languages, and questioned how their children would adjust to a post-

primary schedule where these other subjects are included. A desire for more Physical Education and a wider range of sports was also prevalent among parent and child participants.

I think I'm just a bit afraid of him missing like history, science, this kind of thing. I'm afraid he might not really cover it so much. (Father, white other ethnic group, area of high diversity)

When we came here it's all literacy and numeracy. (Mother, Indian ethnic group, area of low diversity)

In addition to the standard subjects, participants offered suggestions for other elements to include or enhance in the primary and post-primary curriculum. These encompassed topics and skills such as moral studies, hygiene, budgeting, cooking, the economy (interest rates and cryptocurrency), meditation and mindfulness, parenting and the Irish language. One parent expressed the view that sex education was not taught early enough in NI.

A second comparison concerned differences in standards between NI and countries from which families had migrated. Parents from Bulgaria, Indonesia and Ukraine expressed dissatisfaction with the standard of maths, in particular, one describing it as '*on a much lower level... a tragedy*'. These parents spoke of concerns that their children were not being stretched in the subject, particularly where they had already covered the material in their previous school. Some families who intended to return to their home country after a period in NI expressed anxiety that differences in both standards and curriculum content might mean their children had fallen behind their peers. To mitigate such concerns, two Ukrainian families reported that their children were taking online lessons with Ukrainian schools around their NI schooling. Anticipating returning to Ukraine, one mother stated that this would avoid her son having to repeat a school year.

7.3. Diversifying and decolonising the curriculum

Calls to diversify the curriculum in general were articulated by several parents. One voiced concerns about the negative portrayal of Blackness and African countries and called for the curriculum to '*reflect the positive contribution of African people*' as a matter of routine, rather than only during Black History Month. While his perception was that local schools were receptive to this, he suggested that greater political will was required for curriculum change across the region, and he referred to recent efforts to diversify the curriculum in Wales as a model of good practice.¹² Another parent argued that the changing population of NI schools needed to be reflected in the development of the curriculum, noting that '*the audience is kids from all communities*'. Having completed his own education in NI, he reported that he had seen little difference in the curriculum his child was following.

History was the subject most discussed with respect to diversifying the curriculum. Both parents and children expressed a desire for the contribution of diverse groups to be reflected to a greater extent

¹² Wales has become the first UK nation to make the learning of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic histories a mandatory part of the curriculum.

and offered examples of how the existing curriculum could better do this. Several of these focused on the contribution of different ethnic and national groups during the First and Second World Wars, including soldiers of Indian, Chinese, African, Polish and Irish Traveller backgrounds. In this respect, one parent commented:

It would be nice if our kids or your own kids were taught about that, that everybody played a part. In a sense, it wasn't just the way they portrayed them in it, it wasn't just the white people as a warrior... that there were contributions made by a lot of people who believed in the same thing, who fought together, they sacrificed together. (Father, Chinese ethnic group, area of high diversity)

Two participants also referred to the depiction of the Irish Famine, arguing that the experience and contribution of different groups during this period should be acknowledged.

I remember the school was teaching the Great Famine... But they didn't mention that Turks helped them during the Great Famine. They sent food and supplies and everything during that time. And it's documented, and it's in the history, but it was never mentioned. It was never taught. (Mother, Pakistani ethnic group, area of high diversity)

The Irish Famine, like Travellers had it worse than others. It was hard enough but Travellers were worse off. The school has never taught about Travellers. (Child, Irish Traveller ethnic group, area of high diversity)

The representation of Black history within the curriculum was discussed as problematic. One educator acknowledged the current focus on experiences of subjugation and oppression through topics of slavery and the civil rights movement and suggested it would be preferable to explore the positive contributions of Black people throughout history. A parent observed, further, that inaccuracies in historical perspectives made their way into teaching, with implications for pupils' understanding of Black and African history.

But I think the issues that are lacking in the emphasis and the teaching of African or Black peoples' history is within the history itself. The history, it's distorted and then that distortion creates this negative perception and misinformation. But misinformation that's presented as the facts ... and a child grows up knowing those things that are not accurate. (Father, Black ethnic group, area of low diversity)

English, modern languages and geography were also among the subjects that participants referenced in discussions relating to diversifying and decolonising the curriculum. While English was considered well suited to exploring issues of diversity, one educator felt there remained a reliance on older texts or white-authored texts to do so, citing *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* and *Of Mice and Men* as examples, and advocated the inclusion of more modern books by authors of colour. Another educator commented on the missed opportunities to examine colonial histories within the French GCSE syllabus, noting that case studies were set in countries such as Guadeloupe or Senegal with no requirement to explore why French was the official language. In geography, it was apparent from discussions with children that colonial narratives about 'poor' countries and how to 'help them' remained prevalent. One child of African heritage criticised the depiction of the continent in the curriculum as 'poor, no water, no roofs and all'.

The latter observation was indicative of the critical engagement with representations of culture and religion demonstrated by some children in this study. The same child spoke about encountering partial histories, being taught about Columbus ‘*discovering*’ America and the British ‘*taking over*’ countries, but not about their role in ‘*colonising*’ or ‘*torturing and enslaving*’ the indigenous people, and commented:

I feel there’s more history to be taught than there is being told. (Child, Black ethnic group, area of low diversity)

Two girls also referred to silences or inaccuracies in the representation and teaching of their faiths in Religious Education (RE) at post-primary level. One girl reported that her RE teacher ‘*skipped a load of Islam*’, observing that the RE curriculum did not allow pupils to explore different religions because of the primacy of Christianity within it. Another girl of Indian heritage recounted that her RE teacher had marked as incorrect an answer about the Hindu *Ganesha* because she had added the mark of respect ‘*Ji*’. While this child reported that the teacher was willing to learn from her, the power dynamics between teacher and pupil meant that not all children felt similarly confident to respond to inaccuracies or insensitivities in teaching. Another child, ‘*hurt*’ by a teacher’s remark that compared Ethiopia unfavourably to NI, said he ‘*kept it in*’ because he had been told that he should not challenge teachers.

The points above speak to a wider need, identified by participants, for accuracy and sensitivity in the teaching of different countries, cultures and events. Incidents where this was not recognised could have a significant impact on children and their families. For example, one Roma mother called for greater cultural awareness after her child’s school dressed the child in traditional Romanian costume, causing confusion for the child and risking repercussions in the community if it was believed the mother had sought to ‘*pass*’ the child as Romanian. Another mother spoke of the need for sensitivity to children from minority ethnic and faith traditions when discussing her son’s experience of a lesson on the 9/11 attacks.

I was imagining my son sitting, his colour, and he’s more dark because of the sun... and then they are talking about Bin Laden, the way he dressed, similar to our culture, his colour is similar to our colour, and they are just talking and not thinking what he would feel. (Mother, Indian ethnic group, area of high diversity).

With respect to refugee and asylum-seeking children, stakeholders also noted that asking pupils to discuss past experiences – including, as in some schools, inviting children to ‘*tell us your story*’ – had the potential to trigger past traumas and should be avoided. Offering examples of good practice when addressing issues of diversity at school, stakeholder interviewees described teachers and schools which had worked in consultation with minority ethnic parents and religious leaders on how to approach specific cultural and religious issues. Interviewees also described strong relationships that had been established between some schools and local organisations that supported minority ethnic and migrant communities, including cases when schools had contacted the latter for guidance following specific incidents.

7.4. Responses to religious diversity in schools

With the exception of the Irish Medium sector, all school sectors in NI are underpinned by an explicitly Christian ethos. Discussions examined families’ perspectives of the accommodation of other faith

traditions within both the life of the school and the formal curriculum. Concerns about the challenges of an overtly Christian ethos were most pronounced among adult interviewees. One described some primary schools as being *'almost like a Sunday school'*; another questioned the impact of schools that broadcast prayers over the tannoy, which made an impossibility of parental withdrawal. Several parents also expressed anxiety resulting from the reported experiences of friends' children, such as being chastised for refusing to join in Christian prayers. Children themselves described finding ways to manage the rituals that characterised the school day or reported that schools had tried to help, though they also alluded to experiences of schools that were not inclusive:

Child: So, in some classes like French and things, they start a prayer and then everyone stands up and they say it, but I stand up with them—like out of respect to that. Then whenever they finish I just sit down as normal.

Interviewer: Okay. How do you feel when that is going on?

Child: I've got used to it because in primary school you have to pray every single day, in the morning, in the line, you have to stand and pray with them. (Child, other ethnic group, area of high diversity)

They don't all force you to be Christian, they don't all force you to sing Christian songs in assembly like primary school would be. They're more of, 'Let's do a prayer and you-' there wouldn't be like 'Amen' or anything. They'd just say, 'Pray this to whatever you believe in.' (Child, Indian ethnic group, area of medium diversity)

Parents and children reported that, with regard to school uniform, their schools had generally been accommodating of cultural and religious requirements, permitting longer skirts, trousers and hijab. Stakeholder participants endorsed this, though two described interactions with schools that had adopted a more inflexible stance to uniform changes to accommodate religious beliefs. While children could be self-conscious of differences in attire, with one child describing swimming classes as particularly challenging, they spoke of finding support within their friendship groups. One described how her friends helped her if her hijab slipped:

They would put the blazers on me so they cover me, so, they actually do help, sometimes. It's just that group that I'm in. (Child, other ethnic group, area of high diversity)

Access to prayer spaces for Muslim pupils varied by school, though no families spoke of using a designated prayer or multifaith room. Most commonly, prayer took place in a *'quiet space'* or in a sympathetic teacher's classroom, though one parent spoke of the inadequacy of this when the specific rooms were in use. Although some children preferred not to pray at school, others without access to a prayer space expressed a wish for one to be created. One parent reported that her daughter had stopped praying at school because of the lack of appropriate space.

School canteens offered *Halal* options where requested, and none of the families in this study reported difficulties obtaining appropriate food; there were, however, reports of children being excluded from in-class rewards in the form of sweets containing gelatine that Muslim pupils were unable to eat. Families reported, further, that their children's schools had been supportive during the month of Ramadan, allowing children who were fasting to be exempt from Physical Education and to sit elsewhere than the canteen during lunch time. One stakeholder had sought the advice of an *Imam* on how to facilitate children fasting at school in a way that was safe. Most children reported finding their peer group supportive when fasting.

Like school ethos, Religious Education in Northern Ireland is largely Christian in content. Christianity is taught exclusively at primary school, with other faith traditions only introduced at key stage 3 (11–14). Parents have a legal right to withdraw their children from RE, but among parents from other faith traditions who were interviewed for this study, only some had done so. One group of parents reported that they were unaware of the option to opt out, as this had not been communicated by the school. Others reported that they had been contacted about opting out and had chosen not to, either being keen for their child to learn about other religious traditions or having no strong objections to them doing so. Some had also opted for more passive or partial forms of withdrawal: for example, one boy commented that his mother was content for him to attend RE lessons *'as long as I don't take any of it in'*, while a father reported withdrawing his child from Christian instruction but permitting participation in Christmas activities.

The notification required by schools before they would permit a child to withdraw from RE also varied. Some interviewees reported that schools required parental consent for pupils to withdraw from RE, while other schools permitted older children to make this choice themselves. At least one school appeared to have taken decisions on families' behalf, placing children in the withdrawal group without contacting their parents to confirm this. There were also indications at post-primary level that some teachers were discouraging parents from withdrawing their children from RE as it offered an *'easy'* GCSE pass to boost both the student's and the school's outcomes. Where parents or the school had withdrawn children from RE, alternative provision typically comprised art, reading or activities on iPads. While children at some schools moved to another classroom or the library during RE lessons, several children reported that they remained in the class in which the RE lesson was taking place but sat in a different part of the room.

They give them to do art or sometimes they give them iPad. When they go to church all the Muslim pupils stay at class and do something like art or something. (Mother, Black ethnic group, area of high diversity)

Once I asked him, 'Do you do Religious Education here?' 'Yes, but we stayed outside or at the back side because the lesson is for Christianity so we Muslim students have to stay at the back.' (Father, other ethnic group, area of high diversity)

Several parents expressed dissatisfaction with this arrangement, particularly at primary level, and stated a preference for RE within their own tradition while other pupils were attending classes on Christianity. Among these parents, one father drew a contrast between provision in NI and his home country, where pupils attended RE with peers from the same religious group and were instructed by a religious leader from their tradition. While parents and children generally favoured greater involvement from co-religionists in the development and teaching of minority traditions in RE, their responses also highlighted the variation of belief within traditions and the challenge associated with appointing individuals as religious authorities in schools.

Child: I would say if they take RE they can get some other teachers to teach other students, for example, Arabic or Islamic.

Interviewer: Would you like that to be someone who's a religious leader or teacher, or a teacher who's a Muslim? What would you prefer?

Child: I would prefer a Muslim teacher, but not a very religious one because normally we would have really religious ones... They would tell you what you have to do which is

something I don't really like with really religious people. (Child, other ethnic group, area of high diversity)

Several stakeholder interviewees were particularly critical of the existing RE curriculum. One criticised the influence that the four major Christian churches maintained over the content of RE; while another described the need for a 'fundamental review' of RE and collective worship in schools so that pupils of different faiths felt included.¹³ Notwithstanding such criticism, there were also examples of good practice in RE within the interviews. These were characterised by an openness among teachers to learn from pupils of different faith traditions and recognition of the valuable perspectives they brought to the class.

The teachers were very keen to point out how important it was to have [Child] in the class and what a great benefit it was to have him there... I mean, I was just really blown away by that and how positive it was. And I was so happy that he was learning in that environment and he was confident and happy. I think he is one of the only Muslim children in his class but he is happy. (Mother, white NI ethnic group, area of low diversity)

7.5. English language learning

The existing NI policy that engages with responsibilities for and needs of newcomer children and their families (DENI, 2009) prioritises English language proficiency as key to children's access to positive and successful educational opportunities. Across the stakeholder and family interviews, there was a shared and uncontested belief in the importance of English language proficiency. English was regarded as a valuable resource to be gained from growing up in an English-speaking context, particularly when parents did not:

I think it's great for the kids to be able to do a language, to be able to speak a different language freely. Because for me to learn English, it took me a really long time. It was a real struggle for me. I didn't pick it up very quickly. So I was afraid that [child] might be the same. (Father, white other ethnic group, area of high diversity)

Every parent wants his child to speak English. (Mother, white other ethnic group, area of medium diversity)

However, despite the shared positive beliefs and attitudes about the value of English, reports on everyday practices and experiences of trying to develop English language knowledge and skills were much more complex and troubled. For both parents and educators, '*English language is a problem*' – specifically, the low or varying levels of English language proficiency of newcomer pupils and families. Parents expressed anxiety that low proficiency in English would impede their child's social integration, educational progress and ability to ask for help at school if needed. Concerns about children's social development were shared by educators, but they expressed particular apprehension about pupils' ability to access the curriculum.

¹³ A High Court judgement in 2022 ruled that, within the primary level curriculum taught at controlled schools in NI, 'RE is not conveyed in an objective, critical and pluralist manner' (Judicial Communications Office, 2022, p.3) Following this, existing arrangements are currently under review.

The main problem is language, of course... It was the greatest worry for me [...] you have this language barrier. (Mother, white other ethnic group, area of medium diversity)

The English language is the main barrier without a doubt. (Stakeholder – educator)

Some schools, you know there was nearly a sense of panic... this child's not speaking English. (Stakeholder – other)

7.5.1. English language support via additional classes and classroom assistants

There was evidence across the interviews of a variety of school-based practices aimed at supporting newcomers with language development. These included one-to-one or small group support from additional teachers and/or classroom assistants; teacher-directed homework focusing on reading, pronunciation and vocabulary development; peer support via buddy systems; and the use of technology, including iPads, for translation and interpreting. When parents and children spoke about support for language development, they commonly gave examples of children being withdrawn from their regular class at certain times of the week and taken 'to a quiet corner or a spare room' to 'do some English'. These practices were 'extra', involving an additional teacher or learning assistant, rather than part of their daily activities with their class teacher.

These 'extra' and out-of-class approaches to English language development were considered by some stakeholder participants as an immediate way of addressing the needs of children who had become immersed, or submerged, in an English language context in NI. Such approaches were also considered the most feasible where teachers were also 'trying to prepare the rest of the class for the [transfer test] or their key stage 3 exams'. Pedagogically speaking, educational stakeholders considered the 'extra lessons' as beneficial for providing more tailored support and direct feedback on language learning:

It's great to see that schools are investing in that way, you know, that they're not putting 10 new little children who do not speak English into a class and kind of hoping they get on okay... We'd hope to see more of that, just really strategic planning and how children can be withdrawn from class, have intensive language support so that they can get into the mainstream classroom as quickly as possible. (Stakeholder – other)

Among the parent and child participants, responses to this method of learning were mixed. Some children reported positive, 'fun' experiences of learning English at school in this way and parents discussed examples in which they considered the support had had a positive impact on their children. However, other children considered that the language support was too basic and did not meet their language learning needs. One parent recalled that her son had felt 'they treat me like a baby', while another child, describing how he had been taught to count to 10, stated 'they should teach us to count till a billion or at least to a thousand.' There was also evidence from interviews of some parents and children rejecting the idea of withdrawing from normal class for 'extra' support language classes. In some cases, this was because parents felt their children could communicate well in English and extra classes were unnecessary; in other instances, stakeholders discussed how children had avoided going to 'extra' lessons, perceiving there to be some stigma attached to doing so.

The [pupils] didn't want us to speak to their mother because they didn't want to come to the extra English lessons, because they would have to be separated from the class and everybody would think they were 'special needs'. (Stakeholder – educator)

Classroom assistants, both bilingual and others, featured prominently in participants' discussion of support in class and via withdrawal lessons. Educational stakeholders considered this support valuable but noted that it was contingent on the availability of resources and might not be equally accessible to all classes or children as a result. Parents were likewise positive about the role of classroom assistants and keen that their children should receive this support but were also aware of the precarity of such provision.

We do try to have as much classroom assistant support as we can, although this has dropped a wee bit in recent years because of finance. But there are a couple of classes that don't have a classroom assistant, so they find that more challenging. (Stakeholder – educator)

I know that a lot of [...] families, they wish to get a classroom assistant but, because the school has limited funding, they cannot offer that. (Mother, white other ethnic group, area of medium diversity)

Although often referred to as 'bilingual' classroom assistants or 'bilingual' teachers by schools, the first languages of the assistants and children were not always shared – though where they were, participants viewed this positively. Having bilingual classroom assistants could enable additional school-parent consultation practices to emerge through a shared language other than English. However, this tended to be the case only where there were large numbers of the same language-background pupils attending the school.

7.5.2. Capacity-building for English language teaching

In a number of cases, participants gave examples of existing facilities, such as sensory rooms, being repurposed for English lessons, and existing staff being deployed to support children with learning English. In the latter instance, educational stakeholders reported that existing learning support staff or English subject teachers were given responsibility for English language teaching, expressing concerns about the allocation of this work. In particular, the lack of specific qualifications or experience in English (or any) language teaching among those tasked with improving pupils' English language proficiency was highlighted.

It seems to fall on English and learning support. Sometimes I wonder... they don't know anything about teaching a language, like, if you're learning a language or you're learning a language as a second language. They always seem to get sent to the learning support or the English department. The English department haven't got any special training in teaching language, they don't know how to scaffold language learning. (Stakeholder – educator)

I do think that the person who teaches, who helps the kids with English as an additional language should have some formal training. (Stakeholder – educator)

Several examples of support for teachers and classroom assistants with responsibility for English language teaching were offered by participants, including specific EAL (English as an Additional Language) booklets and short courses or workshops provided by the Intercultural Education Service and other statutory bodies. This also included guidance on adapting classroom learning for children with different levels of English proficiency – *'how to make the material accessible for everyone, how they can be translated, or the use of graphics and images.'* However, while existing policy has identified a need to build capacity in the whole-school workforce to support newcomers, interviews indicated

that such capacity is largely built through experience, rather than guidance or training, with variations of knowledge and expertise across schools.

A lot of schools – for example, maybe those grammars who didn't ever have newcomer pupils before this year – would never have had to have known [about provision for English as an additional language] because they didn't have any newcomer pupils. (Stakeholder – other)

It was the greatest worry for me [...] this language barrier. But I spoke to the principal and [they] said that there are so many minorities at school and the teachers are very experienced to teach, to communicate with children from different countries with different background and languages. (Mother, white other ethnic group, area of medium diversity)

There was little evidence from the interviews of schools sharing good practices to support their pupils with English language learning, but more evidence that practices are shared within the same school. This was more so the case when the school had a newcomer policy; however, as discussed earlier in this report, school-specific newcomer policies are rare in NI. Further indication that capacity to support English language development has yet to be built systematically across NI schools is evident in educators' descriptions of what they see as excessive challenges.

Staff are trying their best, [...] staff have a heart for these kids, they have compassion. I've actually watched a female member of staff actually crying who just said, 'I'm trying my best here, but they don't get it, what else can I do?' And they're looking at me to wave a magic wand. We don't have one. (Stakeholder – educator)

7.5.3. Peer support for language and social matters in school

During interviews, children discussed their experiences of starting school in NI and identified what support they would have liked or would recommend for other new children. Recommendations included being partnered with someone who shares the same language or nationality, has experience of the school and can help them navigate the building and understand the school norms. Among parents, this kind of peer support, for both social and language assistance, was also considered important for socialisation processes, particularly when formalised and organised by teachers for their children.

I didn't talk a lot when I was in primary school. I did do quite a lot of unreasonable stuff because I didn't know what you were allowed... I did know like one person. We went to the same nursery and we are both Polish as well so it wasn't that bad. (Child, white other ethnic group, area of medium diversity)

Luckily there was another Indonesian student in the class who studied earlier than him, so that girl was good in English and so she became the interpreter for him, she helped a lot. (Father, other ethnic group, area of high diversity)

And they also found a buddy for him, there was a Filipino – you know it's quite close to us culturally, although we speak a different language, but culturally we are quite close. So he got a buddy and until now he still is a buddy. So that's the way for them to make my son adapt to the new atmosphere, the new surroundings. (Father, other ethnic group, area of high diversity)

For children providing or receiving this peer support, this is one of the relatively few occasions that they use (one of) their home language(s) in the school context.

7.6. Support for home and heritage languages

7.6.1. Decisions about language use at home

As their children moved into an English-speaking school environment, bilingual or multilingual parents made active decisions about their own language use and what to speak in the home. Some discussed deciding to speak to their children in English rather than their first language to help with their English language learning. Several also discussed their intentions to foster home language skills once English language skills had been developed, but this became difficult. Other parents considered that learning more than one language was too difficult or would interfere with their children's success in English, indicating a sense that languages were in competition with each other. There was little indication in the data of schools or any other statutory body supporting or advising parents in decisions about home language use.

It will confuse them if I speak English and Chinese... So I thought to myself, studying Chinese is important, but education is even more important. So I thought, just push the Chinese away, just let them focus on their study first. (Mother, Chinese ethnic group, area of low diversity)

As the length of time spent in NI increased and as children developed English language proficiency, a number of parents regretted using English at home and the decline or loss of their children's heritage language use.

During the first year we tried to prepare them or help them for school. So we started speaking English at home and didn't realise within a year they lost a lot of their vocabulary. (Mother, white other ethnic group, area of high diversity)

Where parents sought to develop bilingualism among their children, they demonstrated awareness and use of practices to support the learning of the home language. Parents spoke about using their first language in the home consistently; where there was more than one home language, they mentioned that each parent would speak in their first language to their children. Among those parents who communicated with their children in their home languages, there was a sense that home language skills, particularly in relation to vocabulary range, reading and writing, needed to be more developed. Parents and children both focused on oracy rather than literacy in the home language.

We would go to Arabic lessons but I don't really like to read it. I read Arabic but not fluently, I'm bad at it. Writing Arabic, I don't like writing Arabic. I would not prefer to be doing that because it's so hard to look for the letters and know which one's which, so I prefer English, it's better. (Child, other ethnic group, area of high diversity)

[W]e speak all the time in Polish at home [...] He didn't want to learn Polish writing [...] he said, 'No, I don't want to learn how to read and write,' so I thought okay I will stop it because he is here, he will do the transfer test and I have to focus on English [...] I think that maybe in time he will manage but for him now, I would like to focus on the English for his better outcome. Hopefully he will go to university, and he'll write then. (Mother, other ethnic group, area of medium diversity)

From the interviews with parents, it is evident that their wishes to maintain home languages are repeatedly challenged by the realities of living in Northern Ireland, in what they consider is an English-dominant context. Such challenges could come from the children themselves, with one parent noting that *'children just feel like, why do I need to speak in Spanish if everybody else is speaking only in English?'* Despite this, parents reported that they wished their children to develop bilingually and saw advantages for their futures in doing so, particularly where they still had strong familial and cultural links back to the parents' home country.

Most [parents] actually would like to have their kids be able to speak both languages fluently because they could go back any time and they could go to the [...] school [in another country] as well with no issues. (Mother, white other ethnic group, area of high diversity)

While out-of-school activities to promote home language use and literacy can include attendance at Saturday Schools or Language Camps during the summer holidays, there was little evidence from the parent interviews that they were aware of any support for home language development or maintenance in school.

7.6.2. Languages at school: multiple practices

Children reported diverse attitudes to using their home language at school. Some reported being reluctant and *'too embarrassed'* to use their home language even when directly invited to, while others were resistant to using their home language and preferred to use English as the language of communication at school. A third group of children suggested that they would like to speak their home language at school *'if there was another [speaker] in the room'* and there was the opportunity to do so. These children seemed to be of the view that speaking a home language in an English-dominant context was unique and uncommon, with benefits including impressing others, maintaining distinctiveness, and creating opportunities for privacy.

I either use it in school to show off or I just play a random game where I only speak [home language] the whole day and nobody can understand me. (Child, mixed ethnic group, area of low diversity)

We only talk it if it's really private, if we're with friends who know it, we would have a private talk, so people in our other class wouldn't understand. (Child, Indian ethnic group, area of low diversity)

Parents noted that children generally did not speak the home language at school. Some parents preferred this and were explicit about the reasons why their children should not do so, such as to avoid being a target of bullying or to avoid compromising their English language development. Exemplifying this, one Roma parent expressed the view that speaking the home language was *'where bullying starts from, because they'll feel separated'*. This concern was derived from her community's experience of not feeling *'safe to speak your language, so you don't get picked on'* and had not been allayed through contact with her child's school. Other parents were keen for greater provision for home languages at school, particularly through designated classes and multilingual clubs. Children also reported that they would like to see recognition in school of the diversity of languages spoken among pupils.

It would be a very good idea to have a class, like an hour at school with my native language, yes. (Father, white other ethnic group, area of high diversity)

They talk about [different languages] – but they don't ever talk about Cant at school.
(Child, Traveller ethnic group, area of high diversity)

In most cases, the speaking of other languages in class had not been explicitly censured by teachers, but some children perceived that it would not be welcome. Educators also offered examples of practices that were specifically intended to limit the use of languages other than English, such as seating pupils separately from same-language speakers to increase their English proficiency and thus their access to the curriculum. A number of children, however, felt that their languages were not only welcomed but endorsed within the school, one child giving an example of a teacher who practised numbers in different languages each week during registration. This diversity of practice in respect of recognising and supporting home languages was acknowledged by stakeholder interviewees:

I would be aware of some schools where most of the children are newcomer children and you hear all the different languages in that school [...] The whole ethos within that particular school is everyone's welcome [...] but then there are other schools where maybe there's a reluctance to let children speak other languages because maybe of fear because of their speaking in other languages. (Stakeholder – other)

In terms of school provision for home language development, educational stakeholders referred to enrichment classes or afterschool provision focused on preparation for qualifications in the home language. While stakeholders acknowledged that improving schools' GCSE performance was a motivator for this, it could also enhance pupils' self-confidence: *'those children feel fantastic: "Sure, I got an A*." And they are telling their friends.'* Beyond this focus on exam success, however, one educational stakeholder offered an insight into how children moved between different languages to support their learning at school. These observations of translanguaging practices demonstrate some educators' awareness of the benefits of multiple language use in an English-medium school context.

I let my students write in their own language and if they need to, to record- you know, to record meanings and so on, or if they want to write anything- Even the girl that's doing her GCSEs, I've noticed her when I've explained- you know, when we're talking about poetry or whatever, explaining something and she does make notes in [her home language]. (Stakeholder – educator)

While these individual examples of school practices which welcome multilingualism, respect translanguaging practices, and recognise achievements in languages are important, there was little evidence from interviews of school- or system-wide approaches to supporting heritage languages.

8. Home-school relationships

Effective home-school relationships depend in part on parents feeling confident to communicate with their child's school. Most parents reported feeling comfortable to do so, citing as facilitating factors the school's approachability, having a clear point of contact, and their own or others' positive experiences of communicating with the school. The phase of schooling was also relevant: parents generally experienced home-school relationships as more personal and welcoming at primary school than at post-primary school, due to the school's smaller size and the consistency of relationship with a single class teacher. The comparative informality of these relationships had surprised some parents whose expectations were informed by home-school interactions in their previous country.

I spoke to principal in [primary school]. I like her so much. You see, she's very, how is it in English? Not like in Ukraine, principals are very high and they a little bit underestimate parents... She was so plain. She was so simple. She was like, everything is very easy for you, you are welcome and so on. So, it was a big surprise for me. (Mother, white other ethnicity, area of medium diversity)

A minority of parents reported some reluctance to contact their child's school, however. One reason for this was a lack of confidence in communicating in English and a concern about being misunderstood. Another reason was that, as migrants, parents did not want to seem 'difficult' or, where they had a concern, did not feel entitled to complain and feared that doing so might lead to reprisals for their children. In this regard, fear of authorities was also a reported deterrent for more marginalised groups such as the Roma community.

Material factors were also influential in home-school relationships. Several participants reported that working patterns and, for those on very low incomes, additional travel costs could impede parents' attendance at school events. Stakeholder interviewees offered examples of practices that schools had adopted to overcome such barriers, including home visits for families for whom attending the school was difficult. In one area, local schools had also liaised with the factory at which a large number of parents were employed, sharing information via the company and making arrangements for parents to have time off work for school meetings. Another school had employed a family support worker to help newcomer families with housing and health issues. This type of initiative was considered crucial to bringing parents into contact with the school and addressing difficulties that could impinge upon engagement with education, but required adequate resourcing:

And so the school is really, really important because it's a safe haven not only for the children but for the families as well... And the school actually becomes a place where the parents come in and say, 'I don't know how this works. Can you help me?' Because, actually, the school is the friendly face and that's really, really important. And that's why having hubs is really, really important, but hubs take planning. Planning takes money. And all of that takes prioritisation at a government level. (Stakeholder – other)

8.1. Communication methods

When asked about the methods through which they interacted with their child's school and teachers, participants most commonly referred to school apps, followed by other online contact (email, websites and social media), in-person contact and telephone communication. While apps were particularly prevalent at primary level, email was more commonly used as a communication tool by post-primary schools. Telephone communication tended to be reserved for time-sensitive or high-priority issues such as illness or behaviour.

The use of apps, which was most prevalent at primary level, had increased during the pandemic, and apps remained the principal means of communication between schools and parents. While other methods were used for the two-way sharing of information, apps were principally discussed by parents as a tool for receiving information *from* school – announcements, details of pupils' learning and homework, information about attendance, and school reports. Several platforms were used, depending on schools' preference: this meant that parents with children at different schools could be consulting multiple applications. Most parents reported being satisfied with the information they received via parent apps, and those who had used the apps to communicate with the school spoke of

the ease and informality of communication. The opportunity for direct contact with the child's teacher also reduced the problem that several parents had experienced of telephoning or emailing the school and receiving no response.

Parents raised several concerns about apps, however. One was that they found it difficult to monitor the information delivered via the app and feared missing important details. Parents new to Northern Ireland reported that education systems in their home countries had used other communication methods, so it had taken some time for them to habituate to checking the apps regularly. Technical difficulties had also marred parents' use of apps: several had experienced delays in gaining access while one reported being unable to download the app on a phone purchased in her country of origin. Parents with more limited technological knowhow, which included those from the most marginalised communities, could struggle to use the applications and consequently missed relevant communications.

As a parent, we did not understand how that programme worked. Everything was in English, we didn't, we don't know how to work on smartphones. We did not know where to go, what to download. It was absolutely hell for us. (Mother, Roma ethnic group, area of medium diversity)

8.2. Experiences of intercultural communication

In all cases bar one, parents reported that written communication was available in English only. Those who did not speak English as a first language could therefore face distinct barriers in negotiating home-school communications, particularly without guidance on the accessibility of widely used tools. Apps such as Seesaw and ClassDojo, for example, offer the option to translate material received from the school, yet no parent reported using this. A requirement that parents contact the school via the app could also present difficulties for English language learners, as one parent described from her experience during the pandemic:

It was a little bit challenging... If you want to have an appointment they say, 'Just write it in Seesaw.' Seesaw is an application, but it's not enough, because I am also still learning how to write English, so sometimes it's misunderstanding, and then we will clarify, but we need to have an appointment. (Mother, other ethnic group, area of high diversity)

Parents who lacked confidence in English had developed strategies to manage written communication, sometimes approaching staff for information directly. School clerical staff, particularly receptionists, were often pivotal in sharing information and were key to perceptions of schools as welcoming and supportive places. Participants also reported that, where one partner was more confident in communicating in English, they were the point of contact with and for the school. However, as this might not be the parent who was most involved in the child's education, or the one usually dropping off or collecting the child from school, such arrangements were not always satisfactory.

Interviews also yielded examples of schools making efforts to reduce challenges in written communication – for example, using apps like Google Translate to communicate brief messages such as notification of school closure days; distributing important notices on paper rather than via app; or translating school reports into the parents' home language. Several parents reported that a staff member – often a classroom assistant – who spoke the same or a related language had volunteered as a point of contact for children and parents; in one example, a bilingual language assistant offered daily drop-in sessions for parents. Less favourably, while acknowledging instances of good practice

from some schools and teachers, stakeholders reported others misusing local community organisations as 'go-between's' to relay messages to parents. Interviewees argued that this placed an additional burden on such organisations to fulfil tasks that they considered to be the responsibility of the school. They described the need for care and creativity to tailor messages to local populations:

Even just that basic level of, you know, to bring in a book tomorrow for whatever the class, it's written in English. It just seems to me that there is no care to even think, well, they don't speak English. They don't understand English, I'm going to take that little bit of time to put it in their home language. I think, through my experience, that little bit of extra care and attention and decency is sometimes missing. (Stakeholder – community)

You can see sometimes when letters are sent home, say, for permission for a school trip, the parent doesn't understand it so doesn't send it back and then the child isn't allowed to go on the trip. But that's when it takes a good teacher to ring home and say, 'I've noticed you haven't sent this back and can we get permission maybe verbally over the phone?' (Stakeholder – other)

The Education Authority provides funding to schools for interpreting services at two face-to-face meetings per family per year and via telephone as needed. Most parents with limited English proficiency reported that their children's schools had offered interpreting services for at least some meetings, typically pre-enrolment and parent-teacher meetings. Among the three parents who had not been offered an interpreter, two stated that they now no longer attended meetings at the school because they could not understand the content. The third reported that the decision not to offer an interpreter had been made by the school based on her English language ability, though it was not her preference.

According to participants, interpreting support was less often available at meetings requested by parents than those initiated by the school. It was also not available for informal parent-teacher conversations at pick-up or drop-off times, where day-to-day information and emerging concerns were often first shared. While there was praise for the effective use of interpreters in some schools, stakeholders also raised concerns about practices across other schools with which they had worked. These included schools avoiding the use of interpreters due to perceived costs; using the child to interpret during meetings with parents; expecting parents to bring friends with them to interpret; or using older pupils as interpreters. This could result in breaches of confidentiality and embarrassment for families forced to share private matters with non-professionals, as well as selective interpreting from children reluctant to share negative reports with their parents. It could also place an additional burden on support organisations and individual members of sometimes vulnerable communities to act as interpreters.

From my experience, the schools in [town], all of them, they say to the parents to bring their own interpreter, a friend, family, someone. So I went to the school as a language support for one family and I spoke with the director and asked him why they don't provide an interpreter... And he said, 'Oh, it takes a long time to book an interpreter and we need to spend money to pay the interpreter.' But I explained, 'You have budget for that, I know'. 'But you are here. You can help us.' Yes, I was there, but for other families, they don't have [organisation]'s support. (Stakeholder – community)

I think also, you know, if this was a local child and the parent was being called in for something, would they say, 'Do you want to bring your neighbour in?' Absolutely no, they

wouldn't, because it's a confidential meeting between a teacher and a parent. And not only does it expose people's private family business to other members of their community, it makes people reliant on other members of their community. And it puts a burden on those members of the community that speak English. (Stakeholder – community)

Beyond language differences, parent participants offered some positive examples of schools engaging in ways that recognised the challenges they might encounter as migrants to Northern Ireland – for example, enquiring regularly if parents needed additional support or information and asking for their views on their children's education. However, there were also accounts of parent-school interactions that were culturally insensitive and discriminatory. Among these were examples of schools mixing up black siblings in communications with parents or making Roma mothers wait until last to collect their children. The implication in such cases was that teachers could not differentiate children or parents from one another.

8.3. Home-school communications about children's progress

Parents typically received information about their children's academic progress through formal school reports, parent-teacher meetings, the school's app and informal contact during drop-off and collection. Parents interviewed for this study were evenly split in terms of their satisfaction with the information they received about their child's progress, with no clear differences by phase or type of school. Those parents reporting satisfaction with the school's communication approved of the amount and format of the information provided and were confident that they would receive or could request additional information from the school as needed.

Other parents expressed three main concerns regarding communications about their children's progress. The first related to the frequency of parent-teacher meetings and school reports. While there was variation between schools, these were typically annual or biannual events, with meetings taking place virtually or by telephone during the period of the pandemic. The parents in this group generally wanted more frequent feedback, via formal or informal methods, which they could use to support their children. One parent suggested this was especially important for children who had recently moved to Northern Ireland and were adapting to a new school and education system.

Parent: More meetings, at least once a month or something, then we can get an idea about the progression and what are the weaknesses of the child.

Interviewer: Would that have been more common previously? When you were in Sri Lanka, would you have that?

Parent: Oh, no, Sri Lanka, is not like that. But I think we came to a foreign country, like at least these kids. (Mother, Indian ethnic group, area of high diversity)

Related to this, the second concern was regarding the length and format of parent-teacher meetings, particularly at post-primary level where parents had little time with individual teachers. One parent reported that, due to long queues and limited time with teachers, she had '*stopped going*' to these meetings. The move to online communications during the pandemic had caused additional unease for parents about navigating technology or the abruptness of the transition between appointments.

I said, 'It's ridiculous. A five-minute parents' meeting. What can you say? I've never met this teacher. I've never known her. Five minutes is not enough to do an introduction. How am I supposed to find out about my child's study and progress?' (Mother, Chinese ethnic group, area of low diversity)

The third concern addressed how information was communicated to parents, particularly in school reports. Both parents and stakeholders spoke of the challenges of understanding what was shared, describing what they considered to be excessive positivity in reports of children's progress: three parents expressed surprise that children's end-of-year results were not as good as teachers' reports had caused them to expect. Communications about their children's progress could thus generate anxiety among parents, who felt they were not given a balanced account of their child's performance, particularly the areas in which they could improve.

I would feel more secure if I know how my kid is actually doing. Like full feedback, not just the positive feedback. Not just, 'it's great, yes it's great.' Fine, well okay. Okay, that's great but and then suddenly the test starts, transfer tests start and now he's failed, yes. So was it that great, then? So maybe it wasn't, yes? (Father, white other ethnicity, area of high diversity)

You know they're always saying, 'Oh, it's very good.' 'The best, the best girls in the classroom,' you know. 'Reading very high levels, and the maths very good, spelling's very good,' you know. And then you get these results, at end of year, you know they get an envelope with results, and it's in the middle. Above, a little bit above. You're just like, why they said they're the best? Tell me what they need to improve somewhere, maybe they need to improve spellings, or maths, you know. (Mother, white other ethnicity, area of high diversity)

Discussions with parents and stakeholders suggested two reasons for what parents perceived as inflated assessments of their children's progress at school. One is a cultural difference in school communication styles: whereas teachers could seek to be polite and encouraging, parents expected and preferred a more accurate and realistic assessment of their children's attainment and potential. A second reason, discussed above, is that teachers may have different and potentially lower expectations of children from newcomer backgrounds or specific ethnic groups. Consequently, they may prioritise pastoral development over academic outcomes and be satisfied with lower attainment than they would accept from other pupils – and lower attainment than parents expected.

8.4. Home-school communication about the curriculum and learning

While knowledge of what children are learning at school is important for parents to be able to provide support and reinforcement at home, there was concern among some participants about what they regarded as a lack of information about what was being taught – the knowledge content, the skills to be acquired at different stages and the structure of the school day. For recent migrants, this was felt more keenly when compared with education systems in their previous countries of residence, in which the curriculum and school day were highly structured, and the use of textbooks was more widespread. Two parents reported that textbooks, particularly, were a source of reassurance for them, providing easy access to what their children were learning and where they could help. Without this reference point, they reported feeling anxious and confused about their child's learning and their role in it:

They really need textbooks. I feel safe, you know what the children are learning. They have something to refer to... If it's a textbook, at least I can read the textbook. If I can't find the answer there, I will go and find it online. But now everything's like you don't know what I'm so confused all the time. I'm so worried for him. What's he learning all the time? Why can they not have textbooks? (Mother, Chinese ethnic group, area of low diversity)

Over there, there are textbooks there and here there are no textbooks. So I didn't know from where to start. So I had absolutely no clue. (Mother, Pakistani ethnic group, area of high diversity)

The interviews provided examples of practice in sharing information about children's learning that parents had found useful. These included information meetings at the start of the autumn term that outlined the curriculum structure and expectations for the academic year, followed by mid-term parent-teacher meetings to discuss this further; and targeted information for minority ethnic parents to help them support their children at home. However, parents more commonly reported gathering information on their children's learning from a range of sources: conversations with their children about school, communications via Google Classroom and school apps, children's homework, the school's website, classroom wall displays and parent-teacher meetings.

Parents who sought more information about the curriculum wished to understand better its content and structure and how they could support learning at home. Two parents without English as a first language also wished that such information could be made available in translation or shared via interpreters. Specific requests included information on upcoming class topics, guidance on tasks to support English language learning and recommendations for appropriate reading books. One mother also suggested providing guidance on how to complete home learning tasks to avoid situations where *'things will come home in the book bag and it's just assumed [parents] will know what to do with it.'* Several parents reported that they had approached the school for recommendations of books or asked teachers to provide worked examples from which they could learn and support their own children; however, this required a level of confidence that was not shared by all.

In discussions about communications concerning home learning during the pandemic, participants expressed general satisfaction with the response of their children's teachers, even where they found home-learning an unsatisfactory experience more generally.

Primary school I have no like complaints at all, very, very good. Like Seesaw over Covid, you know, and it was very, everything was like explained, everything very easy, you know. (Mother, white other ethnic group, area of high diversity)

In the most positive examples, parents described receiving appropriate guidance on how to support their child with tasks, usually via the school app, and swift feedback from teachers to work that had been submitted. Several families had also received devices from the child's school to enable children to engage in home learning. Reported challenges among this group were typical of families across the region, such as managing home-schooling alongside professional duties.

For families with low English proficiency or low technological literacy, however, the experience was often less satisfactory. Several children without English-speaking parents described difficulties understanding work set via Google Classroom. Parents who were English language learners also spoke of uncertainty about how to support their children and expressed fears about their learning. One mother, having received limited support from the school and being concerned about her child's progress, reported using her Universal Credit to pay for additional tuition. Another mother described efforts to support her child during the pandemic but feared undermining his learning. For her, this had been a demoralising experience.

Where is the homework, I'm lost... Actually, I'm not do anything well because for me not good. I give him any mistake. I know this age is dangerous. If I give him any information, it stays in his

mind... I'm trying everything but he said, 'Mum, this mistake, this mistake.' I'm very shy because when I try to help him, he help me. I'm not happy. I'm sad and I cry. (Mother, other ethnic group, area of high diversity)

Existing gaps in technological knowledge became more pronounced during the Covid lockdowns, when the use of apps and online learning platforms became more widespread. Stakeholders reported that the impact of this was greatest among Traveller and Roma communities as they faced dual difficulties with both technical and 'traditional' literacy.

I have to be honest, the children did not learn anything. They lost a whole year because of that. We were not able to work through that system. It's completely new. You needed someone to call them or video them to explain you have to do that and you have to show them. (Stakeholder – community)

Across the interviews, the challenges of home learning during the pandemic appeared to be exacerbated by the loss of connection with the school, and specifically with the child's teacher(s), that accompanied school closures. While schools sought to retain links with parents through apps or online, parents regarded these as only a partial replacement. Teachers acknowledged this, too, one also commenting on the cessation of home and community visits during the pandemic, which were typically a link with more marginalised families.

8.5. Home-school communication concerning special educational needs

Approximately a fifth of the parents interviewed for this study reported that one or more of their children had special educational needs (SEN). While families described difficulties accessing SEN provision that are common across NI, there were indications that minority ethnic families could experience additional challenges in identifying or accessing support for SEN. Two participants spoke, for example, about the potential for SEN to go unrecognised among children with English as an additional language; one noted from clinical experience that indicators of SEN among migrant children were often misrecognised as shyness. Two parents also spoke about the difficulty of having concerns or diagnoses recognised by the school. One described feeling she had not been taken seriously when she raised concerns with the primary school that her child might be neurodivergent; subsequently, at post-primary school, the child was referred for assessment for autism spectrum disorder. Another reported that her child's teacher had dismissed a diagnostic report from a psychologist from the mother's country of birth.

I told her that [son] is dyslexic because I had a diagnosis from a Polish psychologist, but she said, 'Oh that doesn't matter. Probably half of the class are like this.' She didn't really acknowledge this. From my own experience and from the Polish assistant who works there, I know they wouldn't accept the Polish psychologist statement. (Mother, white other ethnic group, area of medium diversity)

Where children had been identified as having SEN, parents still experienced difficulties with support arrangements. Three families reported that they had had to contact schools repeatedly to access support or receive information on children's progress following intervention. While this was challenging for parents familiar with the system, it was additionally so for families new to NI, who lacked knowledge of their entitlements or local support services, or who did not have English as a first language. One family reported that they had received no response in four years to their requests for support for one of their children.

Parent: *I don't know this information, it's for some people in the school [daughter] has, or maybe bring some assistant helping. But because I am here with family, I don't know. Also, I don't have any friends to tell me what I do here...*

Child: *It was their job to know that [sister] needs an assistant, not our job.* (Other ethnic group, area of high diversity)

Additionally, interviews yielded examples of unsatisfactory communication between schools and parents of children with SEN, which could be detrimental to the home-school relationship and to the child's wellbeing. One mother reported being excluded from decisions by the school to keep her child back a year and subsequently refer the child to a special school; another stated that reports from the child's school continued to reproach him for behaviours associated with his diagnosis. A third parent regretted that all the communication she received from the child's school was unfavourable: *'the negative part is the only part I get to know'*. While it is difficult to determine the impact of ethnicity in shaping these experiences, the findings suggest a need for further research into SEN identification and support among minority ethnic and migrant families.

9. Conclusion and recommendations

Involving in-depth interviews with 62 children, 53 parents and 43 stakeholders from the statutory, community and education sectors, this represents the most substantial study of the educational experiences of minority ethnic parents and children in NI for more than two decades. Over that period, the demographics of the pupil population have changed substantially, with a fourteen-fold increase in numbers of newcomer children between 2001 and 2022 (DENI, 2023b). The policy landscape has also changed, with the introduction of policies to support newcomer and Traveller pupils and commitments by both the Executive Office and Department of Education to monitor and reduce racist bullying in schools. In this context, most parents interviewed for this research reported being largely satisfied with their children's educational experience in NI. However, challenges remain in the areas examined for this study – school admissions, day-to-day school experiences, the curriculum and language teaching, and home-school relationships – as well as in the collection and monitoring of data on minority ethnic children and young people at schools in NI. In this section we summarise these challenges and offer recommendations to enhance the experience of education among minority ethnic children and their families.

9.1. School admissions

Regarding school admissions, the research has again highlighted the particular challenges faced by migrant parents (see Kernaghan, 2015), which include understanding the intricacies of the stratified NI education system and navigating unfamiliar enrolment and transfer processes. Extending previous research, this study has explored parents' priorities for their children's education, identifying as key concerns a 'rounded' education that forges both academic and life skills, an inclusive school where racist incidents are minimised and, particularly among less affluent families, schools close to home. Equally, however, the findings have illuminated the limits on school choice, including the application of admissions criteria, such as parents' or siblings' prior attendance at the school, that can be detrimental to migrant parents. Challenges securing places are especially acute among families who arrive in NI outside standard admissions times and who live in areas facing significant pressure on school places. Parents in these circumstances typically applied to multiple schools and could encounter lengthy waits for places. Some asylum-seeking and refugee families navigated this process without support and expressed concerns that, even once a school place was allocated, it could be temporary pending relocation. There were also reports of some schools declining to admit newcomers despite available places, a risk associated with delegating admissions authority to school level.

Both at the time of admission and subsequently, the religious and academic divisions within NI's education system shape children's and parents' experiences in distinctive ways. Although most parents reported that a school's religious character had not significantly influenced their school preference, some expressed reservations about the overtly Christian ethos of schools. Several also spoke about the limitations of provision for pupils of minority faith traditions in NI schools – for example, the absence of traditions other than Christianity from RE at primary level and a lack of access to appropriate prayer spaces – though they reported that food and uniform policies were largely accommodating of religious and cultural difference.

Academic selection presented specific barriers for children arriving in P6 and P7 whose previous schooling had not covered the material to be tested. Although such children were eligible to be considered for admission to grammar school under 'special provisions', removing the requirement to do the transfer test, this option was not taken in most cases. Where parents had applied through

special provisions, they reported that the way in which these were processed was opaque. Of child participants who had migrated to NI during their post-primary years, all were allocated to non-grammar schools. This reflects a wider pattern of enrolments that risks exacerbating social and sectoral inequalities (Brown *et al.*, 2021; Hughes and Loader, 2022) and increasing segregation by ethnicity.

9.1.1. Recommendations: school admissions

- Review standard school admissions processes to address inequalities for minority ethnic and migrant families:
 - Explore options for an enhanced advice and support service for school admissions within the Intercultural Education Service. This should be done in consultation with minority ethnic support organisations, recognising the importance of community networks in navigating school admissions.
 - Strengthen processes to monitor, and prohibit, the use of admissions criteria that have been identified as detrimental to equality of access, including the use of criteria that prioritise familial connections beyond a sibling currently attending the school.
 - Review the use of ‘special provisions’ in grammar school admissions for pupils who have been educated outside NI for more than half their school career, including awareness and perceptions of special provisions among primary schools; the processing of special provisions applications by grammar schools; and the number and success rate of applications that are submitted through special provisions.
 - Review language use in school admissions literature and application forms, prioritising plain English to support English language learners and families with low literacy.
 - Consider notifying schools that paper-based application forms remain available.
- Review the ‘in-year’ admissions process for families who migrate to or seek sanctuary in NI outside standard admissions periods:
 - Monitor and report on schools admitting/declining to admit migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking families and the reasons for declining.
 - Revise arrangements for the allocation of newcomer funding to schools to ensure that this is more responsive to new enrolments of newcomer pupils.
 - Consider increasing the capacity of the Intercultural Education Service to enable it to respond to growing demand, particularly in the period after enrolment.
 - Consider alternatives to requirements for schools to include current newcomer pupils within examination outcomes while ensuring no detriment to newcomer pupils’ education.
- Extend publicity of the Intercultural Education Service’s highly valued multilingual resources on school admissions.
- Consider existing school placements as a priority when rehousing asylum-seeking and refugee families to minimise disruption to children’s education; and ensure provision of school transport to maintain continuity of schooling.

9.2 Racism and racist bullying

While schools are important sites of friendship for pupils, interviews with parents and children revealed that school-based racist bullying remains prevalent (see also Kernaghan, 2015; Khaoury, 2012). This was found to take multiple forms: verbal and physical abuse, criticism of children’s

intelligence and English language ability, and questioning of children's identity and legitimacy in NI. Some parents and children also perceived tacit forms of discrimination within school practices, such as exclusion from communications, school activities and celebrations of achievement. Although children sometimes sought to excuse racist behaviour, these experiences could have a profoundly negative impact on their and their parents' wellbeing. Schools' responses to racist bullying were often considered inadequate, a finding that echoes that of Connolly and Keenan (2002) two decades ago. One suggested reason for this was that teachers could fail to recognise racism where it occurred or be reluctant to attribute racist intent to pupils' actions. With the Addressing Bullying in Schools Act requiring schools to identify the motivation for bullying, this suggests the potential for racist bullying to be under-reported and indicates the importance of anti-racism training for staff.

9.2.1. Recommendations: racism and racist bullying

- Introduce anti-racism and anti-bias training as a core component of Initial Teacher Education and in-service professional development to ensure sensitive and non-discriminatory treatment.
- Strengthen current arrangements for monitoring, reporting and responding to racist bullying in schools. This should include providing definitions and examples of racist bullying within schools' anti-bullying policies and/or anti-racism policies.
- Support implementation of preventative practices to address racism before incidents occur, such as anti-racist education and teaching about other countries and contexts from which newcomers arrive.
- Make available resources to support teachers to address issues that may arise in the classroom, such as racism, cultural and religious responsiveness, and trauma.

9.3. Curriculum issues and cultural responsiveness

The curriculum provides a vehicle through which issues of racism, equality and diversity can be addressed, which some participants suggested could help to reduce incidents of racism and racist bullying at school. Examples of effective practice identified in the interviews included school-led discussions of anti-racist movements and invitations to parents to share aspects of their language and culture at school. While participants largely valued learning and sharing about cultural diversity, opportunities to do so varied between schools and were often limited, particularly at post-primary level. Some participants also considered the representation of diverse literatures, local and global histories, and minority faith traditions to be insufficient and identified opportunities within the curriculum for other perspectives to be introduced. Such opportunities can benefit all pupils, enhancing their critical understanding of recent and historical social developments and extending their knowledge of 'the richness and diversity of cultural influences in contemporary society' (CCEA, 2007a, 2).

While the flexibility of the NI curriculum is often lauded for allowing content to be tailored to local circumstances, this research points to a potential limitation within this: where responsibility for curriculum development is delegated to schools, teachers may favour topics with which they are familiar or for which resources already exist. This suggests that the development of a more inclusive and culturally responsive curriculum will require greater direct support from statutory agencies. At school level, moreover, analysis of documentation from 50 schools reveals a need for further guidance on adapting school policies to reflect cultural and religious diversity. This will help to ensure that

inclusion within the curriculum is complemented by inclusive practice in the wider school environment.

9.3.1. Recommendations: curriculum issues and cultural responsiveness

- Review representation of cultural and religious diversity in the curriculum, with particular regard to the key curriculum elements of ‘citizenship’ and ‘cultural understanding’. This should ensure accuracy, balance and sensitivity in teaching about different countries, cultures and events, and identify opportunities to:
 - address diverse global histories, the legacy of colonialism and the contributions of minority ethnic communities locally;
 - include contemporary literature, art and music from authors and artists of colour;
 - recognise Traveller culture, Roma culture and other minoritised cultures and languages;
 - develop collaborative links with local cultural groups and organisations that support minority ethnic and migrant communities; and
 - develop capacity for culturally responsive teaching through Initial Teacher Education and in-service training.
- Identify a single agency to have a remit for developing and promoting a diverse and inclusive curriculum and accompanying resources.
- Constitute an advisory group of representatives from minority faith traditions to review the current teaching of world religions in NI schools.
- Provide good practice guidance to schools on adapting school-level policies to take account of increasing cultural and religious diversity among the pupil population.

9.4. English and heritage languages

Schools largely adopt an ‘emergency response’ to pupils who do not speak English as a first language, prioritising withdrawal approaches that are often delivered by ‘additional’ teachers or classroom assistants. This raises questions about equitable employment practices and the standardisation and quality of English language provision for language learners. Stakeholders often referred to the absence of mandatory training in English language teaching and second language development for those responsible for English language improvement programmes/withdrawal classes, despite systematic research reviews confirming the importance of practitioner skills (Murphy *et al.*, 2020). Access to classroom assistance for English language development was also variable and locally dependent on decisions around funding and affordability. Among parents, there was a feeling of loss that the home language had not flourished because of the focus given to English and a simultaneous worry that their children’s language use (as an English language learner or a home language speaker) was a marker of difference that would leave them vulnerable to discrimination. There was little evidence in the interviews that schools or other agencies are allaying parents’ fears about these school-based issues or providing them with the information to make important decisions concerning English and heritage language development.

9.4.1. Recommendations: English and heritage languages

- Review English language provision to determine how schools in NI can be supported to move beyond ‘emergency response’.

- Establish clear progression pathways and resources for children who do not speak English or have not yet reached stated levels of proficiency in English.
- Standardise and assure the quality of English language provision for language learners, with equitable employment and remuneration for highly skilled language educators.
- Establish and fund comprehensive training in English language teaching and second language development for those responsible for English language improvement programmes/withdrawal classes.
- Provide support for parents to make informed choices about raising bilingual children.
- Consider school-based recognition of multilingualism at policy and practice levels and school-based support for the development of home language literacy.

9.5. Home-school relationships

Language differences also emerged as a challenge to home-school communication in multiple ways. A lack of confidence in English was one of the main reasons that some parents were uncomfortable contacting their child's school, along with concerns about seeming 'difficult' and working patterns. Written communications could be especially challenging for parents with lower levels of English fluency or literacy; and parents with less technological knowledge could be further disadvantaged where communications were primarily available online or via an app. While there were examples of schools seeking to overcome language and literacy barriers through the use of Google Translate and formal interpreting services, there remained among some schools an over-reliance on community organisations, other parents or children themselves to provide translation and interpreting for school communications. Some parents were also concerned by what they perceived as ambiguous or limited information about their children's progress and the curriculum. Thus, while prior research suggests that schools may problematise low engagement among some minority ethnic and migrant parents as an issue of lack of interest (Kernaghan, 2015; Knipe, Montgomery and Reynolds, 2005; Purdy and Ferguson, 2012), the current study identifies a high level of interest in education but a number of barriers to engaging with schools directly. Moreover, there were indications that minority ethnic families could experience additional challenges in identifying or accessing support for special educational needs.

9.5.1. Recommendations: home-school relationships

- Prioritise investment in initiatives that support parental engagement in schools with large migrant and newcomer populations, including the creation of family support worker posts, the provision of regular 'drop-in' sessions for parents, and the further development of parent involvement projects through the Extended Schools programme.
- Consider opportunities for the co-location of family support services, including Family Support Hubs, with schools with high levels of need.
- Improve current practice in home-school communications:
 - Produce and disseminate multilingual training/guidance on apps and websites used for school communications and homework.
 - Distribute a Departmental circular to remind schools of the availability of the interpreting service and the allocation of funding for interpreting.
 - Prioritise the use of plain English in school communications.

- Utilise existing communications channels, including school apps and websites, to share regular information on the curriculum and current topic areas to help parents to support learning.
- Ensure that the response to the Independent Review of Special Educational Needs Services and Processes (Ipsos UK, 2023) prioritises equity in relation to identifying and supporting children with SEN from minority ethnic and migrant backgrounds and working collaboratively with parents in this process.

To improve understanding of the educational careers of minority ethnic pupils, and to strengthen the monitoring of actions to reduce inequalities, a further recommendation is to review current data collection practices in the Department of Education. Specifically, the Department should consider disaggregating data on white migrant pupils from other white (NI/British/Irish) pupils within current ethnic minority statistics, in line with practice elsewhere in the UK. This would enhance information regarding the circumstances and trajectories of these pupils, including the schools they attend and the prevalence of Free School Meal Entitlement and SEN, to be commensurate with that collected for other minority ethnic groups.

9.6. Concluding remarks

In analysing data from families and stakeholders, this study has revealed the intersectional influences on minority ethnic parents' and children's experiences of education. Economic disadvantage, in particular, affected families in multiple ways – increasing parents' reliance on schools to assist with meeting uniform requirements, for example, and inhibiting access to the support used by more affluent families to prepare children for the transfer test, specifically private tutoring. Research indicates that minority ethnic and migrant residents in Northern Ireland experience higher than average rates of poverty (Edmiston, Begum and Kataria, 2022; Lucas and Jarman, 2016), and the challenges described herein were particularly pronounced among recent migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers. Thus, measures to address educational disadvantage across the pupil population will have important benefits for these groups. Likewise, while the recommendations in this concluding section aim to reduce inequalities experienced by minority ethnic pupils and parents, a number of the suggested reforms to school admissions and home-school communications are likely to benefit other families experiencing disadvantage in the education system.

Importantly, however, this research also reveals the challenges within education that remain distinctive to minority ethnic, migrant and newcomer families, including those who seek sanctuary in NI. These include: school admissions processes that may indirectly discriminate against children from migrant backgrounds; racism and discrimination at school, which is often not appropriately addressed (and is sometimes perpetuated) by staff; a curriculum that some experience as lacking representation of increasing cultural pluralism or diversity in literature, religion and historical perspectives; the absence of a coordinated, system-wide approach to the teaching of English as an additional language or to support for home languages; and ongoing barriers to home-school relationships, particularly in the form of language differences. In line with the recommendations in this section, action is required to redress the inequalities experienced by minority ethnic children and families and thus enhance their educational experience.

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