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Equality of Condition? Exploring Minority Ethnic Group Experiences of Education in Northern Ireland

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ABSTRACT: The period since the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in 1998 has seen an exponential rise in inward migration to Northern Ireland, with around 8% of the school-age population now comprising children and young people from minority ethnic groups. In this paper, we examine the experiences of families from minority backgrounds, including recent migrants and those from generations previously settled in Northern Ireland, as they navigate school choice and the transition from primary to post-primary education in a system characterised by academic selection and denominational segregation. Drawing on an 'equality of condition' framework, relating to the purposes and processes of education (Lynch and Baker, 2005), and adopting a qualitative approach, our findings highlight the interplay between identity categories, accrued or accessed social, educational, economic capital, and formal and informal power structures in mediating school experience. We propose that dimensions and intersections within this dynamic may contribute to equality of condition deficit for some minority families as they seek to secure primary and post-primary school placement for their children.

KEYWORDS: School choice; minority groups; equality in education

1. INTRODUCTION

Minority ethnic communities have been present in Northern Ireland for many years (Irwin, 1998; Manwah *et al*., 1998), but the period since the end of the conflict has seen a considerable rise in inward migration. The challenges faced by children and families who migrate to any region in the UK are likely to be similar, but some distinctive features of the educational context in Northern Ireland may also impact settlement, integration, and 'equality of condition' (Lynch and Baker, 2005). These can be described in two-fold terms as the existence of a largely parallel system of education that continues to educate approximately 92% of pupils in 'separate' Catholic (Church maintained) and *de facto* Protestant schools (DE, 2023a), and a system of academic selection that filters children into grammar and non-selective post-primary schools largely

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based on their performance in high-stakes written tests at age 10 or 11. The latter is arguably the most controversial aspect of education in Northern Ireland. Proponents of academic selection argue that the system affords everyone an equal chance of a grammar school education, and therein a route to higher education, while research evidence points to a socio-economic skew in respect of those most likely to benefit (Cantley, 2024). Relevant to increasing diversity in Northern Ireland, recent research has also shown a tension between academic selection and the grammar school system, and efforts to promote social cohesion through primary and post-primary education. The concentration of children from the most marginalised backgrounds in non-selective post-primary schools, taken together with high levels of underachievement for this group, has been associated with destabilising sectarian and racist practices (Hughes and Loader, 2024).

While some previous research has explored the experiences of families as they engage with the complexities of the education system in Northern Ireland (Kelleher *et al*., 2016; Morgan *et al*., 1993), no recent research has focused exclusively on minority ethnic and migrant communities. This paper draws on data from a large-scale qualitative study and seeks to address this deficit.

2. A Theoretical Framework

Relevant to understanding the nature of challenges faced by minority groups, Lynch and Baker's 'equality of condition' framework (EoC) (2005) serves as a helpful conceptual device for examining *how* education systems generally can disadvantage or marginalise pupils according to particular social categories. They highlight four equality of condition problems in education:

Equality in Educational and Related Resources

This dimension relates to the relationship between education and the economy in capitalist societies, which is distinctive in two ways. First, access to and full participation in education are correlated with having sufficient economic resources to maximise the opportunity education presents. Second, schools as institutions of selection and stratification serve the labour market, therein mediating life chances for pupils. Schools are advantaged by parents who invest time and resources in their children's education (generally those from more affluent backgrounds), as this is likely to boost the performance of the child and consequent outcomes for the school. Schools as organisational entities within a competitive market contribute to inequalities through a complex range of mechanisms and processes, central to which are admissions procedures controlling school entry.

Equality of Respect and Recognition in Education

Inequalities of respect and recognition relate to patterns of interpretation, definition, representation, and communication that are associated with the differential status accorded to groups based on characteristics such as gender, age, ethnicity, language, religious belief, or disability. In education, responses towards such groups are often expressed in degrees of inclusion and exclusion, and cultural recognition, with the more marginalised groups treated as irrelevant or inferior. Lynch and Baker identify three sustaining practices of (in)equality of respect and recognition that serve to marginalise groups: silence or invisibility in respect of difference, systematic bias in organisational policies and practices, and segregation/differentiation by school sectors and/or within schools.

Equality of Power

Inequalities of power occur in the locus of educational authority and educational decision-making. This applies at the macro-institutional level and the micro-individual school level, manifesting in many forms, including exclusion, trivialisation, and misrepresentation of individuals or groups in decision-making. Relating to the processes noted above, power inequalities exist in aspects of the curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment that are culturally biased, and in processes of selection that classify and stratify pupils in a hierarchically ordered fashion.

Equality of Love, Care, and Solidarity

This dimension is based on the premise that emotions are central to teaching and learning and failure to recognise this denies the educational needs of pupils and teachers as emotional beings. The neo-liberalisation of education, which valorises grades and league tables over the process of learning, is seen to marginalise interest in emotions, distracting attention from how learning can be seriously impaired because students lack support or because of negative emotional responses to subjects or curriculum content.

Aligning conceptually with critical race theory (CRT)[1] , Lynch and Baker's framework underlines that rules, norms, standards, and assumptions that appear neutral in education can systemically disadvantage or subordinate racial minorities (Vargas, 2003). A significant body of corresponding empirical research highlights how for example, school-level factors such as exclusionary admissions criteria, ethnocentric curricula, teacher expectation, and deficit labelling based on ethnic stereotypes, harsher disciplinary practices for some ethnic groups, standardized tests that reflect the cultural and language orientations of the dominant group, and associated banding and streaming practices that separate students by race and class, can negatively impact educational experiences and outcomes for minority ethnic groups (see for example, Artiles *et al*., 2010; Chapman *et al*., 2014; Darmody and Smyth, 2018; Gillborn, 2006; Gillborn and Youdell, 1999; Lewis-McCoy, 2014; Modica, 2015; Strand, 2012; Trevena

et al., 2016). Research adopting a CRT approach argues that systemic racism in education is not accidental but serves to privilege the interests of white people and protect white supremacy. Gillborn (2008), for example, makes the point that assessment systems which have dominant group cultural reference points are deliberately employed to sustain race inequality, and that 'model minorities', who seemingly buck educational outcome trends, are created and used to counter anti-racism. At the national policy level, Gillborn also demonstrates how performance targets and assessment criteria can be set to ensure racial disparities persist. For example, changes in grading systems or the introduction of new performance metrics can be manipulated to maintain the status quo.

Also implied in Lynch and Baker's framework, and a principle of CRT, is the understanding that intersecting identities and lived experiences can serve to compound the marginalisation of individuals relative to interactions between social categories (intersecting identities), power relations, and broader macro-contexts (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016). This idea is explored in a recent OECD report (Varsik and Gorochovskij, 2023), which encourages consideration of the micro and macro-level influences that shape individual experiences. According to this perspective, intersectionality should not be understood as a sum of different oppressions, for example, racism and class-based discrimination, rather, *intersectionality aims to understand how dimensions of diversity interact, are shaped by multiple forms of oppression as well as forms of advantage, and create distinct experiences and outcomes* (Varsik and Gorochovskij, 2023, p. 199). In this regard, intersectionality relates not only to the dimensions of diversity experienced by an individual but also to their interactions within connected systems and structures of power (laws, policies, practices). A recognition of power inequality is key to intersectionality.

In defining EoC as the belief that 'everyone has roughly equal prospects for a good life', Lynch and Baker argue for the importance of equalising 'real options' in education to enable and empower all participants, irrespective of identity group characteristics. Taking account of their framework, and the related expositions offered by CRT and intersectionality, our research aims to explore if, and in what ways, the distinctive features of the education system in Northern Ireland may impact the equality of condition experience of pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds.

3. Background to the Research

Reflecting the significant increase in migration to Northern Ireland over the past two decades (NISRA, 2023), the proportion of pupils recorded as coming from minority ethnic backgrounds increased threefold between 2007/08 and 2022/23, from 2% to 6.1% (DE, 2008, 2023a). Data on ethnicity in Northern Ireland are subject to limitations, however, as – in contrast to equivalent statistics in the rest of the UK – they exclude white minorities other than Irish Travellers from the

'ethnic minority' category. The Northern Ireland Executive has produced revised statistics that include white minority groups in data on minority ethnic residents (Executive Office, 2023), but these are not available for school level. Drawing on existing figures for ethnic minority pupils and for those currently and previously recorded as 'newcomer' pupils – that is, those who 'do[] not have satisfactory language skills to participate fully in the school curriculum' (DE, 2009, p. iii) – we estimate that minority ethnic pupils, including those from white minority backgrounds, comprise 8–10% of the pupil population. We adopt this more inclusive understanding of minority ethnic group in our research project and this article.

Notwithstanding the limitations of existing school-level data, current figures reveal inequalities germane to Lynch and Baker's (2005) framework. In terms of pupil distribution, the proportion of the total school-aged population attending primary schools in 2022/23 was between 55% and 59% for all ethnic groups, except for pupils of Chinese (48%) and Irish Traveller (67%) heritage (DE, 2023a). The latter figure may reflect early school leaving age among Irish Travellers, which has been documented in previous research (Knipe *et al*., 0000), and is associated with social exclusion, unemployment and poverty (Smyth *et al*., 2022). Post-primary enrolments by school type also point to inequalities in school placement: while the proportion of pupils with Chinese, Indian/Sri Lankan and Pakistani heritage in the grammar sector was higher than average (76%, 76% and 56% respectively, compared with an average among all pupils of 43%), Black pupils and those recorded as 'other' (encompassing, for example, pupils of Middle Eastern, North African and South-East Asian heritage) are under-represented in selective education (27% and 32% respectively) (DE, 2023a). Pupils of Irish Traveller heritage have the lowest rates of attendance at grammar school (8%) (DE, 2023a). Free school meal entitlement (FSME) is also highest among pupils from the 'other' ethnic group (35%), Black pupils (37%) and those from Irish Traveller backgrounds (65%), indicating greater socio-economic disadvantage among these populations (DE, 2023b).

4. Methodology

The research for this article was conducted during 2022/23 as part of a study that aimed to address the paucity of research examining the experiences of minority ethnic children and families in Northern Ireland's distinctive education system. Funded by the Nuffield Foundation, the study's research questions focused on understanding families' experiences in four main areas: school admissions and access; the curriculum; day-to-day school experiences; and home-school communication. Whereas extant research on education for 'newcomer' children (e.g., Kernaghan, 2015) had largely relied on teachers' perspectives, this study sought to foreground the experiences of parents and

children, identifying how these were shaped by their migration background, location in Northern Ireland, and prior educational experiences.

In total, 62 children aged 9–15 (30 female and 32 male, of whom 27 had been born in Northern Ireland and 35 had migrated to the region, 17 as refugees or asylum-seekers) and 53 parents (41 female and 12 male) participated in the study. Families were recruited following the circulation of information about the research via schools, community groups, complementary language schools, and networks of interpreters, as well as through calls on social media platforms. Interested parents whose children met the participation criteria[2] were invited to contact the research team and were provided with an information leaflet and a consent form to return if they were willing to participate in a semi-structured interview. This material was available in translation in five languages and indicated that interpreting support would be available during interviews where requested. For sampling purposes, the children were the primary referent, and the ethnic diversity in the sample broadly reflected that in the wider pupil population (DE, 2023a). Approximately two-thirds of participants resided in areas of high diversity, as measured by 2021 census data on ethnicity and country of birth, with the remaining third residing in areas of medium or low diversity. Participants were drawn from 9 of the 11 council areas in Northern Ireland, ensuring a good geographical spread of experience.

In the majority of cases, one child and one parent from each family took part in the study; however, children in six families chose to take part in an interview with a sibling who also met the participation criteria. Parents from three Traveller families also elected not to participate but gave permission for their children to do so. Parents were interviewed separately from their children, to allow them to speak freely on sensitive issues relating to their children's education. Interview topics included experiences in securing school placement, educational aspirations, home/school communication, primary to post-primary transfer, and the day-to-day experience of education in Northern Ireland. Children were given the option of being interviewed with or without their parent present; where they preferred to be interviewed separately, two researchers were present for safeguarding reasons. Children's interviews were centred around the completion of a creative task, with participants invited to depict 'things I like about school' and 'things I would like to change about school' using a range of stationery and craft materials provided by the research team. Their creations then served as the stimulus for conversation with the researchers.

In addition to interviews with children and families, five focus groups were conducted with representatives voluntary and community sector organisations that work with minority ethnic communities ($n = 20$), as well as semi-structured interviews with educational stakeholders, including educators, education officials, civil servants, employees of school sectoral bodies, and elected representatives ($n = 23$). Potential participants were contacted directly by email and

invited to take part based on their professional role and experience. Interviews focused on the support available to minority ethnic groups and policy and practice in education. These were intended both to contextualise the data from the child and parent interviews and identify areas of agreement and divergence in perspective between the different participant groups. All members of the research team participated in data collection; three team members are themselves parents of children with mixed heritage and language backgrounds who have been or are currently at school in Northern Ireland. The research team also worked with an advisory group, comprising key stakeholders and representatives of support organisations for minority groups throughout the research. This collective experience helped inform the research questions and the development of data collection approaches. It also helped elicit insights into minority family experiences of education in Northern Ireland, as members of the research team were able to draw on their own experiences to prompt and probe during interviews.

All interviews were recorded, with participants' permission, and data were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis using the NVIVO software package. The coding framework was devised by applying both inductive and deductive approaches (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006) to a selection of transcripts, and was sense-checked by all members of the research team prior to full coding of the dataset.

5. Findings

Chiming with Lynch and Baker's framework, interviews reveal several ways in which equality of condition dimensions may interact to influence the educational experience of minority ethnic groups in Northern Ireland, potentially disadvantaging them relative to others from the settled majority White British/Irish/Northern Irish group. Within this and reflecting uneven experiences for pupils from different minority ethnic groups, several intersecting mediating factors emerged as significant, including recent migrant or refugee status, support available to minority ethnic families, schools' admissions criteria and academic selection, racialised and 'parochial' modus operandi in education, and educational and economic capital possessed by families and groups.

Migration Background

Reflecting recent migration patterns, a substantial proportion of minority ethnic parents in Northern Ireland are first-generation migrants, including more than three-quarters of parents in our sample, which shaped their experience of education in distinctive ways. While all interviewees had difficulty navigating the school system in Northern Ireland, this was particularly the case for those who had not been educated within the system themselves. The existence of

denominational education, the explicitly religious orientation of schools, and the bi-partite post-primary sector, mediated by academic transfer to assign pupils to grammar or non-selective schools, were most frequently mentioned as challenging for parents who had migrated to Northern Ireland. In addition, those for whom English was an additional language and recent arrivals to Northern Ireland spoke frequently of struggling to access information that might help them make sense of the system, and migrant families, most of whom had not experienced stratified education previously, expressed uncertainty about enrolment procedures, how to apply for primary to post-primary transfer, and how the qualification and exams system worked.

> 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)

In seeking support, and in line with previous research findings (Byrne and de Tona, 2012), the experiences of those who already had children enrolled in the system were highly valued by recent migrants over other sources of information. However, due to regional placement policies, networks to which recent migrants, particularly refugees and asylum-seeking families, had access were often limited to other relative newcomers. Moreover, due to pressures on school places in some inner-city localities, school options were also limited, frequently to schools that had the highest levels of pupil diversity. While some parents valued the opportunity for their children to attend such schools, anticipating that these would have expertise in teaching multilingual pupils and offer greater protection from racial and ethnic discrimination, a few expressed concerns that this might ultimately impede their children's academic progress, particularly the development of English language skills.

At post-primary level, second- and third-generation minority ethnic families generally expressed satisfaction with finding schools that met their aspirations. However, for those who arrived in Northern Ireland following the beginning of the new school year, finding a place could be a protracted process. Parents of post-primary-aged children described waiting between 2 weeks and 6 months to be allocated a school place, and many spoke of the emotional toll this had taken on them and their children.

> 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)

As well as residential settlement patterns for new migrants and refugees, and pressure on school places in some areas, a specific barrier to school admission for pupils included the funding process for those recorded as

'newcomers'. The Department of Education currently allocates funding to schools based on the number of newcomer pupils enrolled on the school census day in October each year. Where pupils register after this date, funding may not be received until the following academic year, creating potential financial issues for the schools in which they are enrolled. A further barrier, reflecting neo-liberal priorities in education (Lynch and Baker, 2005), is the concern among some schools that newcomer pupils could negatively impact schools' examination performance, where the Department of Education requires the post-primary GCSE results of all pupils to be recorded.

> 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 [English as an additional language] 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)

These challenges and the limited sectoral support for schools receiving migrant and newcomer pupils were highlighted by one stakeholder interviewee as potentially contributing a further division in the Northern Ireland education system, particularly at post-primary level as children migrating to Northern Ireland outside standard admissions periods are almost always placed in non-selective schools (as was the case for all post-primary pupils in our sample). As schools that have significantly higher numbers of pupils entitled to free school meals (a proxy for socio-economic disadvantage) relative to grammar schools, the concern is that children from more disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds *and* children who are recorded as 'newcomers' are concentrated in lower-performing schools, therein compounding known sectoral inequalities (see Hughes and Loader, 2024). Another stakeholder observed that high concentrations of newcomer pupils in certain schools could lead to them being labelled 'foreigners' schools', with negative consequences for social cohesion and schools' positioning in the local education market.

> I mean my concern is what you end up with is . . . .a number of schools that are very heavily populated with newcomers . . . . that results in a ghettoization. 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. (Stakeholder)

Resonating with Lynch and Baker's framework and CRT, it would seem that the stratified school system in Northern Ireland and corresponding market pressures within the grammar system exert exclusionary pressure on minority groups, particularly newcomers. The suggestion here is that intersecting variables relating to migration status, asylum seeking status, and English language level compound marginalisation when it comes to securing a school placement.

Accelerating the problem, placement policies for migrant families may have a destabilising effect on already marginalised communities. In a society where ingroup solidarity has been a mechanism of protection during the conflict years (Leitch *et al*., 2017), and where segregation between Catholic and Protestant communities, especially in more disadvantaged communities, has been associated with the perpetuation of group-based hostilities, perceived 'others' taking up residence has been met with hostility and, as demonstrated most clearly in summer 2024, racial violence (McKee, 2016; Telford, 2024).

Academic Selection

For migrant parents with children enrolled in the final years of primary school, Northern Ireland's unique system of academic selection posed a significant challenge. Where participants' children had enrolled for the transfer test, most reported that the child's primary school had provided advice and support on applications, test preparation, and the child's suitability for grammar school education. Two participants, however, reported that their or their child's primary school had impeded participation in the test by withholding information about the exam or support for preparation. Chiming with Lynch and Baker's theme, *equality of respect and recognition in education*, and resonant with systemic barriers posited by CRT, this was attributed in both cases to negative-racialised assumptions of academic ability on the part of teachers:

> 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)

On the same theme of racial bias, there was also a suggestion that academic progress for minority ethnic pupils approaching post-primary transfer could be inhibited by a parochialism in Northern Ireland, which is reflected in strong networks and connections among the settled White British/Irish/Northern Irish community. This community is inclusive of teachers, most of whom will have grown up in Northern Ireland and often within the communities that are served by their school. One parent spoke of feeling marginalised in respect of being able to work with the school to manage her child's academic progress by the preferential treatment given to children from generations of the same families known to the teacher, not just in school but also through community connections outside school.

> Maybe they're attending the same social community circle. Maybe they are different ways whereas we none of those, you know we're not attending the church. Our children are not studied from here and we're not from Irish background or a Northern Ireland background. Some of the time they know their parents, older parents they were with my daddy in the same church. So those are you know, I feel like they don't treat us the same way they treat the other children. Most of the parents like they would know the teacher and the teachers would only pay attention on their children. (Mother, Pakistani ethnic group, area of high diversity)

Our data suggest that a bias on the part of some teachers, taken together with a lack of preparation to deal with a more multicultural classroom environment (Eaton *et al*., 2015), may contribute to the marginalisation of pupils from a minority ethnic background. Not only are there indications that teachers may be motivated by familiarity, relating more easily to pupils who share the same community bonds as them, but in Northern Ireland's almost exclusively white, Christian teacher corps, pupils from a minority background are unlikely to feel themselves represented. CRT argues that while such bias on the part of teachers may be unconscious, it is not value-free and is often a reflection of dominant cultural narratives learned through socialization in societies structured by racial hierarchies (López and Sleeter, 2023).

Compounding the above problems in respect of the academic transfer system, the test is currently only available in English and Irish, and some parents spoke of their children being disadvantaged by this: '*Because sometimes they can't understand the language, so they can't understand the questions*' (Mother, Indian ethnic group, area of high diversity).

In common with the wider population, some parents considered the transfer test valuable in differentiating children by ability, while others argued that it exacerbated inequality and were concerned about the impact on their child's wellbeing, particularly those who were unsuccessful. Resonating with Lynch and Baker's, 'equality of love, care and solidarity' condition, which stresses the importance of emotional security in learning, the primary objection was that the test placed too much pressure on children at a young age. Among pupil interviewees, stress and anxiety regarding the test were frequently referenced, with many reporting the detrimental effect of such a high-stakes test on them and their friends, exacerbated by the fear of doing badly.

> She [the teacher] would feel that we were always sad if we got a bad mark because one of my friends, she's sensitive about everything, so every time she would get a bad mark she would just get really sad about it. (Child, other ethnic group, area of high diversity)

Beyond the transfer test, some parents perceived the lack of transparency in schools' admission decisions as a problem. In one case, a family reported that

pupils with lower transfer test scores were admitted to a grammar school ahead of their child.

> 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)

In another case, a mother described confusion around the 'special provisions' process, which exists to provide an alternative entry route to grammar school to children who have received the majority of their education outside Northern Ireland. Having expected her son to be called for an interview and to demonstrate his suitability for a grammar school place, she was surprised and frustrated when he received no such invitation and was instead allocated a place at a non-selective school. Across the sample, few children who were eligible for consideration under 'special provisions' applied to grammar schools through this route, often taking the transfer test instead. This may indicate limited knowledge of this option among primary schools and parents or a perception that it offered little chance of success; in either case, the effect was to disadvantage recent migrant pupils relative to their peers.

CRT critiques the belief that education is a level playing field where success is based solely on merit. It argues that systemic barriers – not just individual effort – shape educational outcomes. Aligning with CRT, it seems that minority group families may face additional barriers when it comes to academic transfer based on migration status (as those newly arrived), English language levels and related lack of adequate provision for those who are not highly proficient in English, and deficit perceptions on the part of teachers in terms of how these intersecting variables are perceived as relating to individual pupils' academic ability.

Educational, Social, and Economic Capital

The relationship between access to economic, social, and educational resources among migrant families and their potential to secure educational advantage was a recurrent theme in the interviews. Parents from the more-established minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland (mainly of Indian, Pakistani and Chinese heritage) and those of mixed heritage with one white, Northern Ireland-born parent tended to live in more affluent areas and spoke of using local knowledge, educational experience, and economic resources to maximise educational opportunity for their children. Many of these parents prized good-quality education, and their comments about the reputation of schools were at times inflected by social class. They spoke variously 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 school 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)

Parents' use of such class-inflected language is often code for preferring a grammar school education, and like their settled white British/Irish/Northern Irish peers (Hughes and Loader, 2024), more affluent minority ethnic parents deployed a variety of means at their disposal to secure preferred school choice, particularly at post-primary level. This included, for example, paying for transfer test tutoring, accessing literature relating to performance outcomes for schools, and working closely with teachers and the school to identify areas for improvement in their child's academic progress and put in place appropriate support mechanisms.

While there was some suggestion of poverty impacting opportunities for our interviewees, several parents with limited finances also spoke of sacrifices they had made to ensure the best educational opportunities for their children. These included taking on additional work to pay for tutoring or, in one case, giving up a job to meet the entrance requirements for a 'prestigious' primary school where a proportion of places were reserved for pupils from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. One such parent also spoke of her determination in trying to understand the complexities of the system so that she could maximise strategic advantage for her child, in this regard drawing on her educational resources to navigate the complexities of the system

> And I really wanted to send him to grammar school in [City], but they had like, this criteria like- If your father, uncle, brother, was in school or if- You know, these other things. And then there was one thing that- But I read it and I found it online. Honestly, I had to go really deep for that. That if he is- Because there was one criteria that he could be the oldest boy in the family. And I said, 'He's not oldest boy in the family, he has an older brother who didn't go to grammar school.' But then, whenever I was filling this form to apply for schools, I read that oldest boy is like- Even if there is another boy but there's at least 7 years gap. And it wasn't very obvious from the criteria that was put on the folder and everything. But I read it- And he got the place. (Mother, white other ethnic group, area of high diversity)

Another mother spoke of the lengths she had gone to enhance her son's chances of success in the transfer test after his teacher had advised that he would be unlikely to pass, including organising online tuition, taking him to the library every day to practise reading, and organising face-to-face tutoring through

a charity. In a further case, an asylum-seeking, single mother with low income, who had been a teacher in her country of origin, spoke of taking her son out of primary school for a year to home-school him, after being informed that he did not possess sufficient curriculum knowledge and English language skill to succeed in the transfer test. He subsequently secured a place at a grammar school.

Resonant in the above is the interplay between power and resources available to parents based on their educational and economic capital and status as recent or settled migrant, and the system-level transfer procedures and grammar system that ultimately serves to privilege those who can use resources available to them to secure access. Intersections between migration status, social class, and English language levels seemingly have the power to exacerbate marginalisation when it comes to accessing perceived educational advantage.

6. Discussion

Deploying Lynch and Baker's framework as an interpretive lens, our data seem to confirm processes that may contribute to an equality of condition deficit for minority ethnic groups in Northern Ireland. Many of these are generic to Western education systems that have evolved to reflect neo-liberal, capitalist concerns. They include stratification processes that filter pupils into more elite schools and higher academic bands that are influenced by the economic resource, social and educational capital possessed by families; the privileging of outcome, attainment, and league tables over the process of education as an emotional endeavour; marginalisation of minority ethnic groups through processes that are indicative of a majority group bias in the execution of education, such as 'othering', and racialised assessments of ability by teachers of pupils from different ethnic groups.

Aligned with the above, the unique features of the Northern Ireland education system and Northern Ireland as a society in recovery from conflict present specific challenges to equality of condition, which are reflected in our findings. School placement practices at the post-primary level for pupils designated as newcomers, housing policies that lead to higher concentrations of minority groups in some schools and areas, formal and informal power structures that privilege local established networks, connections and hierarchies in education, high-stakes grammar school entry tests that are only available in Irish and English, all serve to create an equality of condition deficit for some minority group children, particularly recent migrants, causing considerable distress to them and their families.

Juxtaposed with this and resonating with CRT and intersectional theory, there is also evidence that equality of condition relating to academic selection and school placement is experienced differently by families according to their relative positioning vis-à-vis intersecting categories of ethnicity, migration

history, and social class. Participants from second/third generation migrant backgrounds – who, in the Northern Ireland context, are most commonly from the Indian and Chinese communities who migrated from the 1940s and 1960s (Irwin, 1998; Manwah *et al*., 1998) – are better able to deploy economic resources and social capital from wider networks and connections, including with the settled white British/Irish/Northern Irish majority group, to mitigate the forces that seemingly limit educational opportunity. While our research found that some first-generation migrants were able to apply education and social capital in similar ways, new migrants, refugee and asylum-seeking families, the latter most commonly of North, East, and West African and Middle Eastern heritage, had few options to exercise choice. Statistics on school enrolment bear out the differential placement patterns and increasing ethnic segregation to which such dynamics contribute (DE, 2023a).

In general terms and illustrative of power inequality and systemic disadvantage resonant in the equality of condition framework, CRT, and intersectionality theory, our data point to a 'survival of the fittest' dynamic in the NI education system. In other words, families who can draw on the relevant social, educational, and economic capital are more likely to secure the best educational advantage for their children. Such a system inherently privileges some groups over others; whether in relative terms this relates to migration status, ethnicity, socio-economic background, or some combination of these and other variables, the point is that there is a built-in systemic disadvantage associated with academic selection processes and the grammar system. Aside from the obvious educational outcomes consequences for children, our data point to the emotional costs, where high-stakes testing and pressure to secure a grammar school place can negatively impact the education experience of young people. As reflected in Lynch and Baker's framework, *Equality of love, care and solidarity* is undermined by neo-liberal educational systems that valorise school-level educational outcomes over processes of learning and a holistic pedagogical approach to the child. More disquieting is the possibility that the system is perpetuated by those who have some vested interest. As noted in a recent paper by Hughes and Loader (2024), the abolition of state-sponsored academic selection in 2009 met with some significant resistance by parents and Grammar school lobbyists, resulting in the establishment of an unregulated testing system that has served the grammar schools since then.

Lynch and Baker (2005) offer some remedies for equality of condition harms. Concerning stratification, these include abandoning rigid academic grouping policies and reforming assessment processes to make them more reflective of a wider range of human intelligences. Regarding respect and recognition, they advocate more inclusive processes for respecting differences, not only at the institutional level in schools, but also in curricula, pedagogy and assessment systems. Of inequalities of power, they call for greater democratisation of relationships in schools; and in terms of a more holistic approach to

education, they argue that schools must recognise the intrinsic role that emotions play in teaching and learning processes.

Applying these proposals in the context of the Northern Ireland education system, and our findings, Lynch and Baker's recommendations might be adapted to include: reviewing the processes of academic selection for primary to post-primary transfer and school placement policies that are not only iniquitous but also place undue stress and pressure on some minority ethnic families and children, many of whom will already be dealing with the trauma associated with causes of their coming to Northern Ireland in the first place; examining how the legacy of conflict and 'homegrown' divisions have become embedded in the education system, acting as barriers to inclusion, equality, and diversity; and reviewing the extent to which a state-sponsored education system that disadvantages some children over others relative to an interplay between social categories, accrued or accessed capital, and formal and informal power structures is fit for purpose.

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10. Notes

1. CRT centralises 'race' and the pursuit of racial justice, whereas EoC employs a broader and more multidimensional approach that focuses primarily on elucidating sources of inequality in education. CRT arose from critical legal studies and has been also applied in other fields such as education and sociology as a tool to identify and challenge racism- often within specific national contexts. In contrast, education is the specific entry point for applying EoC and the emphasis is on how schools' systems and processes can disadvantage individuals and groups relative to a broad range of their identity characteristics, including race and ethnic identity.

2. Participants were eligible for the study if they or (in the case of parents) their child met one or more of the following criteria: currently or formerly classified as a 'newcomer' by the Department of Education; 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.

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