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Editorial Introduction

Welcome to the fourth edition of this *Educational Research Quarterly*, and the first of the new school year. I hope you have had a good Summer break and have been able to recharge your batteries for the year ahead.

As we all know, educational outcomes are not just determined by what we do at school, or by learner characteristics like intelligence or motivation. They are influenced by home environment, social background, life experiences, trauma, peers, neighbourhood and so on. That means that schools in and of themselves are never going to be able to address attainment gaps and disadvantage that affect pupils. This has led to a growing interest in place-based education, in which schools work with the communities they serve and organisations within it, to ensure that education centres on community and the local environment. Partnership between schools, community organisations, charities, universities and other local actors are key to this approach. In Northern Ireland, the RAISE programme is a large-scale policy initiative that uses place-based, whole-community partnerships to improve educational outcomes for children and young people experiencing disadvantage. Operating across 18 localities, it funds locally designed projects intended to remove barriers to learning, raise aspirations and strengthen collaboration among schools, families, community organisations and public services. In this issue we look at data from RAISE, but also at a range of other programmes and initiatives inside and outside of Northern Ireland.

The first article takes us to Scotland, where Michalis Constantinides looked at place-based approaches in rural schools, a context of course very relevant to us here in Northern Ireland. Liam O'Hare and Laura Dunne then take us back to Belfast, looking at the Queen's University Belfast's Innovation Zones. Data from RAISE on children and young people's views on barriers to education and aspiration is then discussed by Karen Orr and colleagues. Finally, we go to California, where Ashley Ireland presents a programme in which simulation was used to develop practitioners in the use of Trauma-Informed Practice in a school-university partnership.

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Place-Based Approaches to Education: Insights from Rural Scotland

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Introduction

Rural schools play a vital role in sustaining their communities, yet they face distinctive challenges that are often overlooked in national policy. While Scotland's National Improvement Framework emphasises equity and continuous improvement, rural schools operate within unique social, economic and geographic contexts that shape what improvement looks like in practice.

This article summarises findings from a qualitative study of Scottish rural schools, exploring how school leaders build capacity, strengthen community partnerships and adapt national policy to local realities. Using a Place-Based Education (PBE) lens, the study highlights how rural schools can act as anchors for community identity, resilience and educational equity. It also shows that while rurality presents challenges, it offers distinctive opportunities for innovation, partnership and deeply contextualised learning.

These insights highlight the importance of understanding rural schools on their own terms and recognising the distinctive opportunities they offer for community-anchored, context-sensitive educational practice.

Understanding Place-Based Education (PBE)

Place-Based Education is an approach that positions the local environment, culture and community as central to learning (Smith and Sobel, 2010; Yemini et al., 2025). At its core, PBE starts from the idea that children learn best when their education is connected to the places they inhabit and the relationships that shape their daily lives. In rural settings, this means recognising the value of strong intergenerational ties, close relationships between staff and families and the rich natural landscapes that surround many schools. These features are not incidental, but they form part of the educational ecosystem and influence how pupils experience school.

Rather than viewing rural schools as disadvantaged, PBE reframes them as uniquely positioned to offer experiential, community-connected learning that strengthens pupils' sense of identity and belonging. Learning becomes grounded in the histories and cultural practices of the local area, helping pupils understand both where they come from and how they contribute to their community.

For practitioners, PBE is not a specific programme or set of activities but a way of thinking about curriculum, pedagogy and relationships. It encourages teachers to draw on local knowledge, community expertise and the physical environment as resources for learning. This might involve integrating local stories into literacy work, using outdoor spaces as extensions of the classroom, or collaborating with community members to

enrich pupils' experiences. In this sense, PBE supports a more holistic, context-sensitive approach to education, one that aligns closely with emerging conversations in Northern Ireland about the role of schools as community hubs and the importance of tailoring practice to local needs.

The Rural Context: Challenges and Opportunities

The study makes clear that rural schools operate within complex social and economic landscapes. Many communities in Scotland face declining populations, limited employment opportunities and fragile local services (Royal Society of Edinburgh, 2023).

These wider pressures affect schools in tangible ways. Recruiting and retaining teachers can be difficult, particularly in remote areas where housing is scarce or expensive. Access to specialist provision is often limited and staff may travel long distances for professional learning or collaboration. Weather and transport disruptions can also interrupt attendance and continuity of learning.

At the same time, rural schools benefit from distinctive strengths. Parents and carers are often deeply invested in the school's success and smaller class sizes allow for close relationships and personalised support. Staff frequently describe their schools as "family-like", with a shared sense of responsibility for every child. These strengths, however, can be vulnerable to staffing instability or policy decisions that do not fully account for rural realities.

Educational disadvantage in rural areas is also frequently hidden (Borbely et al., 2023). Standard deprivation measures do not always capture the lived experience of rural poverty, which may include fuel insecurity, high transport costs and limited access to services. As a result, some rural schools receive less targeted support than their levels of need would suggest.

This wider context provides an important backdrop to the study. It helps explain the conditions in which rural leaders and teachers work and why place-based approaches may be particularly valuable in supporting sustainable, community-anchored educational practice.

What Rural Schools Do to Thrive

Cultivating agency and sustainability through community anchoring

One of the strongest themes in the study is the way rural school leaders cultivate a sense of agency by anchoring their work in the local community. Leaders described how integrating Gaelic language, local crafts, oral histories and outdoor learning into the curriculum helped pupils develop a strong sense of place. These practices also strengthened relationships with families and community organisations, creating a shared commitment to the school's success.

Leaders also spoke about the emotional and relational work involved in sustaining these connections. In small rural settings, relationships extend well beyond the school

gates and staff often found themselves supporting families through wider social or economic challenges. This relational proximity created a strong sense of shared purpose but also placed additional demands on staff, who were deeply embedded in the life of the community.

In several schools, staff made deliberate efforts to live locally, believing that being part of the community enhanced their understanding of pupils' lives and strengthened trust. Leaders emphasised that these relationships were essential for sustaining improvement, particularly in contexts where formal support structures were limited.

Bridging place and policy through adaptive leadership

Rural leaders must constantly interpret national policy through the lens of local realities. The study shows how leaders negotiated specialist teaching time across clusters of small schools, advocated for improved digital infrastructure and worked creatively to meet the needs of pupils with additional support needs. They often found themselves balancing competing expectations from families, local authorities and community groups.

The study also revealed the organisational complexity of leading very small schools. Leaders frequently managed composite classes, fluctuating enrolments and shared staffing arrangements across multiple sites. This required constant adaptation, creative timetabling and a high degree of flexibility from staff. Leaders described “holding the system together” on a daily basis, often absorbing responsibilities that would be distributed across larger teams in urban schools.

A key insight is that rurality does not predetermine outcomes. Some schools in the study achieved strong results despite facing similar structural challenges to others. Leadership, culture and community engagement emerged as critical factors in shaping outcomes. However, participants also identified systemic barriers, including funding models that do not account for the higher costs of rural provision and professional learning opportunities that are difficult to access due to travel and staffing constraints.

Professional learning and pedagogical innovation

Despite the challenges of isolation, rural schools in the study demonstrated considerable pedagogical creativity. Teachers engaged in inquiry projects focused on local issues, developed digital communities of practice across remote areas and designed curricula that reflected the realities of multigrade teaching. Staff often took on multiple roles, supporting pupils with diverse needs while also leading whole-school initiatives.

Participants also described how the realities of multigrade teaching pushed them to think differently about curriculum design and pedagogy. Planning had to accommodate wide age ranges, varied levels of prior knowledge and diverse learning needs within a single classroom. Many teachers developed interdisciplinary approaches, project-based learning and outdoor pedagogies as practical solutions to these

challenges. These innovations were not framed as exceptional but as necessary adaptations to the rural context.

However, leaders expressed concern about the sustainability of such approaches without system-level investment in staffing, infrastructure and professional learning. Much of the innovation observed in the study relied on the goodwill, flexibility and resilience of staff, raising questions about how such practices can be maintained over time.

Implications and Conclusions

Although the study is situated in Scotland, its findings resonate strongly with rural education in Northern Ireland. These insights offer several implications for policy and practice.

First, rural schools should be recognised as distinctive educational ecosystems shaped by geography, community identity and local economies. Policy frameworks need to move beyond one-size-fits-all approaches and support context-sensitive improvement.

Second, leadership development programmes should include a focus on place-conscious (Sutherland et al., 2023) and ecological approaches to leadership (Constantinides, 2025; Toh et al., 2014), enabling leaders to work effectively with community partners and navigate the complexities of rural provision.

Third, there is a need for more accurate measures of rural poverty that reflect the lived experiences of families and guide equitable resource allocation. Alongside this, workforce recruitment and retention remain pressing concerns. Rural schools depend on stable staffing, yet many face persistent challenges linked to housing availability, travel distances and the professional isolation that can accompany working in small, dispersed settings. Incentives, travel support and shared specialist roles can help address these pressures, but they must be part of a broader recognition of the distinctive demands placed on rural educators.

Equally important is the need to ensure that professional learning is both accessible and rooted in local context. Rural teachers benefit most from opportunities that allow them to inquire into their own practice, collaborate with colleagues and engage in digital Continuing Professional Development that reduces the barriers created by geography. Networks that connect rural practitioners with one another are particularly valuable, helping to counteract isolation and creating space for the sharing of locally generated expertise that might otherwise remain unseen. Supporting these forms of professional learning strengthens both individual practice and the wider system.

Finally, strengthening school-community partnerships is essential for sustaining rural education. In many areas, the school operates as a cultural and social hub, supporting families, preserving local heritage and contributing to community wellbeing. These roles are not peripheral; they are central to sustaining rural communities and enhancing pupils' sense of identity and belonging. Policy can reinforce this by investing in

community-based initiatives and encouraging cross-sector collaboration, ensuring that rural schools are equipped to act as anchors for both learning and local resilience. Taken together, these implications highlight the importance of recognising rural schools as distinctive educational ecosystems whose strengths, challenges and community roles must shape future policy and practice in Northern Ireland.

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Innovation Zones as Learning Systems: How Place-Based Approaches Can Improve Educational Outcomes

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Background

Evidence from research carried out with the Queen's University Belfast (QUB) Innovation Zones (Innovation Zones, 2026) shows that educational outcomes improve when schools and communities adopt relational, place-based approaches supported by living evidence, rather than relying on isolated programmes.

The Innovation Zones are place-based partnerships between Queen's University Belfast, community organisations¹, schools and policy actors, working together to improve outcomes for children and young people in disadvantaged areas and form part of the university's Social Charter. The Charter is aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN, 2015) and sets out principles for engagement with local partners. Schools are central to this ecosystem, but the model extends beyond education, linking practice, research and policy within a shared learning infrastructure. Built on long-term relationships and shared goals, the Zones combine rigorous research with lived experience to co-develop place-based programmes and supports (Baker et al., 2023; Galway et al., 2025; O'Hare et al., 2022; O'Hare et al., 2026; Poland, O'Hare and O'Hara, 2022; Quinn, O'Hare and Redpath 2025). This approach is related to the Community Collaboration Model (CCM), which has been shown to improve a range of outcomes (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2022).

Rather than applying fixed interventions, the Zones operate as learning systems in which practice and evidence develop together. The Innovation Zones approach can be further understood through the “three Cs” model: **C**ollaborative partnerships linking schools, community organisations, research and policy actors around lived experience; **C**reative co-design focused on prevention, early support and shared goals; and **C**ritical thinking, i.e., two-way learning that recognises and redistributes expertise across the system. Together, these elements move beyond siloed, target-driven approaches by creating integrated, preventive and devolved systems in which knowledge is generated through interaction. As such, the three Cs provide the mechanism through which the Zones operate as learning systems, connecting design, implementation and evaluation as a continuous process. This creates what we refer to as “living evidence”: evidence that emerges through practice, informs ongoing work and shapes school-level activity and wider community and policy responses (Turner et al., 2023). This contrasts with more traditional models, where needs are assessed, programmes implemented and outcomes evaluated, often leaving a persistent gap between research evidence and classroom application (Allison, 2023).

¹ Specifically, the [Colin Neighbourhood Partnership](#) and the [Greater Shankill Partnership Zone](#).

This paper illustrates this distinction through examples from Northern Ireland developed over more than a decade of sustained collaboration. The *Crescendo* programme (O'Hare et al., 2026; Poland, O'Hare and O'Hara, 2022) is used as the primary example, supported by the *Conversations* process (O'Hare et al., 2022), illustrating how living evidence operates across different levels of the system.

Living Evidence in Practice

Living evidence refers to evidence generated through ongoing practice, relationships, evaluation and feedback, rather than being solely applied from outside (Turner et al., 2023). In many education systems, evidence is treated as external: research identifies effective approaches, these are converted into programmes and schools are expected to implement them, with evaluation following to measure impact.

This has been a familiar model in Northern Ireland, Ireland, the United Kingdom and internationally for many years. While useful, this model can struggle in complex settings (O'Hare & Gittner, 2020), particularly in disadvantaged communities. It can assume programmes can be transferred with limited adaptation and that evidence can sit apart from practice. As a result, programmes are often implemented alongside, rather than within, the day-to-day work of schools.

The Zones approach takes a different position, based on the belief that evidence is most powerful when generated through practice and community. Teachers, pupils, community partners, researchers and policy stakeholders all contribute, creating continuous feedback loops. Schools are not simply implementing evidence but helping produce it. Crucially, this occurs within a wider system that includes community and policy actors, ensuring learning informs decision-making beyond the classroom. This approach is illustrated most clearly through the *Crescendo* programme.

Crescendo as a Living Evidence System

Crescendo provides a clear example of how relational, place-based approaches supported by living evidence can improve outcomes. It contrasts directly with more typical models, where programmes are delivered in isolation, usually short term and evaluated separately from practice.

What it is

Crescendo is a sustained music and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programme (Newman and Dusenbury, 2015) delivered in primary schools in disadvantaged communities. All pupils take part over the full seven years of primary school, ensuring universal and sustained access. The programme combines whole-class musicianship in the early years with instrumental learning as pupils progress. Simultaneously, teacher-musician partnerships draw on developmental SEL models such as S.A.F.E. practices (Durlak, Mahoney, & Boyle, 2022), which emphasise sequenced, active, focused, and explicit learning experiences and focus on foundational skills such as self-regulation in the early years and peer relationship skills in later years.

Crucially, *Crescendo* is not delivered solely within schools. It is co-produced through collaboration between schools, community organisations, cultural partners (e.g. the Ulster Orchestra), the university and wider stakeholders, including policymakers. This ensures the programme is grounded in local context and aligned with broader systems of support, consistent with ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), which emphasises how development is shaped by interactions across nested systems, from immediate relationships (family and school) to wider social, cultural and policy contexts, over time.

What the evidence shows

Formal evaluation provides clear evidence of impact, including improvements in pupils' self-regulation and musical development (O'Hare et al., 2026). This is significant for classroom practice, as early years self-regulation is closely linked to behaviour, readiness to learn and a wide range of longer-term outcomes (Robson, Allen, & Howard, 2020).

Teachers report improved participation and engagement, while pupils describe increased confidence and motivation. School leaders highlight stronger relationships with families, supported by performances and community events.

These outcomes extend beyond academic attainment to the wider conditions that support learning relationships, confidence, including in areas where isolated programmes often have limited impact. There are also potential benefits for cross-community cohesion and peacebuilding.

Where the evidence comes from

The evidence base for *Crescendo* is generated through multiple, interconnected sources:

- cross-sector collaboration between schools, community organisations, researchers and policymakers through steering structures
- structured evaluation of key outcomes
- teacher and musician reflection on practice
- pupil and family feedback on experience, learning and aspiration

These forms of evidence are not separate. They operate as a continuous cycle in which insights from practice inform development and development generates further evidence.

Why it works

Crescendo works because it combines three key features:

Theory and evidence-informed design

Underpinned by social and emotional learning and ecological systems perspectives, the approach is co-designed with communities and evolves over time, drawing on both research and local assets.

Relational, place-based implementation

Learning is enacted through sustained relationships between teachers, pupils, musicians, families, researchers and policymakers and grounded in the needs and strengths of local communities.

Living evidence through continuous evaluation

Evidence is generated and used throughout delivery, enabling ongoing adaptation and improvement rather than fixed, end-point evaluation.

Together, these features show how design, implementation and evaluation are not separate stages, but part of a continuous, evidence-generating process.

Extending Living Evidence Across the System

The principles evident in *Crescendo* extend across the wider Zones approach, where evidence is generated at multiple levels. For example, exploring and supporting young people's aspiration in communities through the *Conversations* project (O'Hare et al., 2022) and looking at the health and wellbeing benefits of community led organisations through the *Common Health Assets* project (Baker et al., 2023 & Galway et al., 2025).

Conversations

The *Conversations* research (O'Hare et al., 2022) demonstrates how evidence can be generated through structured engagement with children and young people, aged between 6 and 19. Through one-to-one discussions, guided by a trained adult 'Pathfinder' it captures insights into aspirations, challenges and experiences of young people. This informs the development of an individual 'Story I Want My Life to Be', for each child or young person.

This produces a form of relational evidence often missing from traditional data sources, highlighting how young people understand their pathways in terms of wellbeing, belonging and aspiration. These insights inform community development, school practice and policy discussions.

Community partnerships

Work such as *Common Health Assets* (Baker et al., 2023; Galway et al., 2025) and *Conflict and Creativity* (NMNI, 2026) shows that community organisations act as core partners within learning systems, rather than simply as delivery agents. They provide essential social infrastructure that supports family engagement, wellbeing and community cohesion, while generating forms of evidence often absent from school-based models.

This reinforces that educational outcomes are shaped by wider social systems and cannot be addressed through isolated school-based supports. Community organisations extend school capacity by creating additional pathways for engagement and aspiration, particularly in disadvantaged contexts. They also generate critical forms of living evidence about how systems can better support children and families.

Synthesis

Across these examples, a consistent pattern emerges: evidence is generated through interaction between schools, communities, researchers and policy partners. It operates at multiple levels of pupil, programme and system and is used continuously to inform practice. This contrasts with models that rely on isolated programmes. Rather than applying external evidence to practice, the Zones demonstrate how evidence can be produced through it.

Local to Global

Our work with local communities has learning for others too and is being adapted for international contexts. For example, in partnership with colleagues in Stellenbosch University, the *Conversations* model (translated as lincoko) is being used with young people in the Khayelitsha township outside Cape Town to identify child and youth priorities for mental health, wellbeing and community development. Furthermore, a version of *Crescendo* has been piloted in the Chinese city of Yantai.

Implications for Schools

These findings highlight how relational, place-based approaches supported by living evidence can improve outcomes for pupils, particularly in terms of engagement, self-regulation and aspiration.

Better outcomes through relationships

Regular engagement with pupils, families, community partners and researchers generates insight that directly improves teaching and support. The *Conversations* project, for example, helps schools understand pupils' lives and aspirations beyond the classroom. This suggests that schools should engage with opportunities that strengthen school and community partnership. For example, initiatives such as the Department of Education's RAISE programme supports these forms of collaboration in disadvantaged communities across Northern Ireland (Department of Education, 2026).

Stronger impact through sustained approaches

Long-term, embedded work enables schools to build a deeper understanding of what works, leading to more consistent and lasting improvements. The *Crescendo* programme, for instance, supports pupils over multiple years, strengthening both learning and development.

The work of the Zones has attracted community and academic partners from the Republic of Ireland (Tallaght/Trinity College Dublin), United States (New Haven/Yale University) and South Africa (Khayelitsha/Stellenbosch University and Westbury/University of the Witwatersrand). Several PhD studies related to our work are currently underway. Nurturing these partnerships and research ensures a sustained and evolving programme of work.

Richer support through partnerships in learning systems

Schools do not need to work in isolation. By engaging in partnerships such as the Innovation Zones, they contribute to and benefit from shared learning across education, community and policy. In fact, collaboration with universities has been shown to facilitate school and community collaboration (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2022). Working with external partners expands opportunities for pupils and strengthens the evidence that informs practice.

Toolkit development

In addition, this work has informed a suite of practice-focused toolkits that translate co-produced research into accessible guidance. These toolkits act as a key mechanism for capturing and sharing living evidence beyond individual projects.

For example, the *Community Research Toolkit* (Quinn, O'Hare & Redpath, 2025) provides guidance on co-design, relational data collection and collaborative interpretation, supporting schools, communities and researchers to generate evidence collaboratively. The *Common Health Assets Toolkit* (Galway et al., 2025) offers structured approaches to identifying and strengthening community-led contributions to health and wellbeing within local systems.

Across these toolkits, a consistent approach is evident: they simplify complex research, foreground relational and place-based practice and support practitioners to generate and use evidence in context. In doing so, they extend the learning system, enabling wider uptake of Innovation Zones principles while remaining adaptable to local need.

Conclusion

Traditional approaches to educational improvement often focus on selecting and implementing programmes that have shown evidence of efficacy or at least promise in similar contexts. The selection of such programmes is often informed by resource availability and access to sources of high-quality evidence. While these certainly play a role, they are limited when applied to complex contexts and places. The Innovation Zones model offers a broader approach. The “three Cs” of the Innovation Zones approach: **C**ollaborative partnerships, **C**reative co-design focused on prevention and **C**ritical thinking, two-way learning across the system. These elements create the relational conditions in which living evidence can emerge and inform ongoing improvement. So, when schools operate within relational, place-based systems supported by living evidence, they become part of a process that continuously generates and uses knowledge. Evidence is embedded in practice, rather than external to it.

This enables schools and their partners to adapt, learn and respond to local need. It strengthens connections between practice, research and policy, supporting more sustainable improvement. Improving outcomes is therefore not simply about choosing the right programme. It is about building place-based systems in which schools, communities and partners work together to generate and use evidence through everyday practice. In this way, educational improvement becomes a continuous, collective process rather than implementing a series of isolated interventions.

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Place, poverty and promise: Children and young people's views on barriers to education and aspiration

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Background

The evidence is clear: education is a key (and arguably) 'neglected social determinant' (The Lancet Public Health, 2020). With strong associations to a range of later life outcomes, including employment and earnings (OECD, 2024), as well as health, morbidity and overall life expectancy (The Lancet Public Health, 2020), the importance of ensuring an equitable education system cannot be overlooked.

Despite this, often strong inequity is evidenced in education systems globally (OECD, 2022). Of particular interest to this paper is the inequity experienced by children living in poverty. Poverty presents a range of social and economic barriers pulling children further from educational opportunity, impacting on both their educational experience and outcomes. The educational disadvantage attainment gap is well documented, (see for example, Orr, 2023; Demie, 2021; Education Endowment Foundation, 2018; Purdy et al., 2021), whereby children from socio-economic disadvantage do not attain as well academically as their more affluent peers. In Northern Ireland, the attainment gap is commonly measured by the proportion of young people obtaining at least five GCSEs A*-C or equivalent, including English and Maths and compared between young people who are entitled to a free school meal (FSME) and those who are not entitled to a free school meal (NSFME). In Northern Ireland, this gap remained largely unchanged between 2005/2006 (where the gap sat at 32 percentage points) and 2018/2019 (where the gap reduced slightly to a 29-percentage point attainment gap [NIAO, 2021]). Further decreases to the attainment gap have been witnessed in 2023/2024, with a drop to a 25.3 percentage point difference between the proportion of FSME and NFSME young people achieving five GCSEs A*-C, including English and Maths (NISRA, 2025). Whilst there is evidence of some narrowing of the attainment gap, there remains a strong need to ensure equitable access to educational opportunity and outcomes.

The Department of Education (DE) in Northern Ireland has implemented a range of interventions/ programmes aimed at addressing this disadvantage, e.g., Sure Start, the Extended Schools Programme, Targeting Social Need and the WRAP programme. However, as recognised by the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) in their evaluation of such programmes, addressing educational disadvantage is a complex challenge that extends beyond the school gates and is a challenge involving a range of social, economic, family, as well as school level factors (NIAO, 2026).

Indeed, the premise that educational disadvantage is a complex problem rooted within wider systemic challenges (related to poverty, equity, culture etc) is well established (see for example Dyson & Raffo, 2007). Arguably, therefore, in order to address this challenge, it is vital, on a systems level, for government departments to work together (as per the Children's Cooperation Act, 2015). On a local level, it is important for

schools to work together with the community within which they operate, addressing this challenge using the lived experience, expertise and direction of all stakeholders involved (children, parents, teachers, community leaders, government officials etc.). This approach, i.e., a whole-community and place-based approach, was recommended by the Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement (and presented in ‘A Fair Start’, Purdy et al., 2021).

In light of this evidence base, DE has recently implemented the RAISE Programme, which is defined by DE as a whole community, place-based approach to tackling educational disadvantage in 18 localities across Northern Ireland². The RAISE Programme supports DE’s corporate vision that “every child and young person is happy, learning and succeeding.”³ Specifically, RAISE has two strategic objectives: 1) raising aspirations through a whole community approach to education; and 2) raising achievement and addressing educational disadvantage.

Scope of this work

This paper details the key themes emerging from consultations involving children and young people (CYP) held across RAISE localities (i.e., localities identified as experiencing significant socio-economic and educational disadvantage) as well as an Early Years consultation with babies/toddlers and their mothers. This consultation was commissioned by DE to inform local strategic area-level plans (to address educational disadvantage) in each of the RAISE localities. The article is a concise account of the fuller Final Report of the Consultation with Children and Young People (Orr et al., 2025), which should be read alongside this paper for the detailed context, sampling information, interpretation and limitations of the consultation findings.

Methods

These consultations (underpinned by the Lundy Model of child participation, 2007), conducted between January-March 2025, involved 235 young people, 27 babies/toddlers and their 16 mothers across identified RAISE. The participating young people were mostly recruited from community-based/ youth/ alternative education settings (n=15) rather than school-based settings (n=3). These young people tended to be particularly disengaged with school, which is reflected in the findings presented. The sample was intentionally weighted towards community, youth and Alternative Education Provision settings in order to hear from children and young people furthest from educational opportunity and most disengaged from formal schooling, and the results need to be seen in that context (Orr et al., 2025).

² <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/raise-programme>

³ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/every-child-de-corporate-plan-2023-28> 5

Findings: Key themes emerging

The key findings are presented below with exemplar quotes. Note Figure 1 portrays a graphic illustration/overview of the key findings emerging from this consultation.



Figure 1: Graphic illustration of key findings (Orr et al., 2025)

Aspirations held and expanding/contracting factors

The majority of children and young people (CYP) shared a range of aspirations for their education (e.g., to pass exams and to progress to further or higher education), employment (e.g., beauty, childcare, trade jobs, barbering, business ownership and youth work) and personal/ future family lives (e.g., owning their own home, travelling etc.). Similarly, the parents engaged via the Early Years consultation also expressed a range of hopes, spanning education, career and personal aspirations for their children. Unfortunately, for others, due to their current circumstances, there was a strong sense of hopelessness, with very little aspiration or forward planning.

“Love to learn, be confident, a critical thinker and most of all be happy” (Mother Early Years consultation).

“I didn’t know what I wanted to do when I was in school. I still don’t. I can’t even think to next week, to be honest. I don’t know what I want. Just to make it through today I guess” (Young person).

“I think I’ll be dead in five years” (Young person).

Additionally, there was evidence of a number of positive (expanding) and negative (contracting) influences impacting upon aspirations. These tended to relate to issues of ‘people’ (i.e., the role models in CYP’s lives, the support they provide, the expectations surrounding them [from family/ teachers] and the careers/ life choices visible to them), ‘place’ (i.e., where the CYP live and the perceived opportunity within their area) and life experiences (i.e., critical incidents in a CYP’s life).

“Childcare... don’t know how to do this...my auntie does it so I want to do it” (Young person).

“I think if you get the right support you can do anything... You just need people to believe in you and good teachers supporting you” (Young person).

“Nobody expects much of you here...” (Young person).

Perceived barriers to educational experience and outcomes

Several school-based barriers were identified, largely by those CYP from community/youth settings (where it should be noted the CYP were particularly disengaged from formal education). These school-based barriers included: a perceived lack of understanding from teachers; tension between authority and autonomy reflected as resistance towards school rules; perceived ‘boring’ pedagogy and issues regarding curriculum and practice; a lack of support (e.g., for SEN and mental health); and perceived poor facilities and resources.

Context is important when interpreting these comments. School-based barriers were cited more frequently and more strongly by these participants, who were recruited

through community/youth settings, than by participants in the school-based consultations (Orr et al., 2025).

"Teachers don't ... listen or even try to understand" (Young person).

"I think it's just that schools find it difficult to deal with young people with challenging behaviour...I got kicked out of school because they just couldn't handle me" (Young person).

"Class should be more like a conversation, and less like a lecture" (Young person).

"Have more choice in subjects that will actually benefit your future... Like practical skills for life and business" (Young person).

"Some of the schools around here are literally falling down" (Young person).

Additionally, a range of beyond-school barriers were also identified. These included factors related to: the individual child (e.g., SEN, mental health challenges, motivation); issues within their family/ home life (e.g., socioeconomic factors and physical space at home for facilitating quiet study); barriers related to their place or community and a perceived lack of opportunity, e.g., the CYP and the parents in the Early Years consultation recognised a lack of appropriate opportunities, facilities and resources available to them in their community; and also wider system-level barriers (e.g., poverty).

"People in this area lack confidence. That's the main barrier" (Young person).

"Say you're revising for an exam; it would be nice to have a quiet environment so it's easier to study" (Young person).

"Not enough job opportunities... not enough opportunities, especially for poorer families" (Young person).

"SureStart offers a lot of things but... We didn't even qualify and my friend did and she could well afford to pay. It is just so unfair" (Mother in Early Years consultation).

Facilitators to positive engagement in school

Whilst less commonly cited, there were instances and examples of facilitators to positive engagement with school. For example, school afforded the opportunity to see friends and for many there were insights into 'good teachers' that made school a more positive experience. Notably, a 'good teacher' was often defined by how the young person perceived the teacher's personality or disposition, rather than skill or qualifications. That is, a 'good teacher' was defined as being understanding, kind, respectful and approachable etc. Additionally, input from the youth sector was also cited as providing the support and encouragement needed to facilitate positive engagement in school.

“They (referring to a ‘good’ teacher) were so calm with me and so nice to me, and I would listen to anything they asked me to do because they were so kind to me, and they just got me” (Young person).

CYP’s priorities for overcoming barriers to aspiration/education

With regard to overcoming the barriers they identified, the CYP focused largely on those school-based barriers they perceive, with the recognition that broader societal challenges (e.g., poverty) persist, as well as the recognition of the role of other stakeholders outside of the school (e.g., youth workers). The key priorities identified by the CYP include:

1. **Enhanced teacher training (improving relational approaches to learning):** The CYP prioritised better equipping teachers, via enhanced teacher training, to understand children’s lives more holistically, with a more empathetic understanding of the complex interplay of barriers facing them. The CYP also suggested nurturing the ‘good teachers’, who care, listen, show respect, believe in CYP, enjoy working with CYP and who care about CYP and their lives.
2. **Enhanced curriculum and pedagogy:** This included the suggested provision of alternative pathways, enhanced careers guidance and improved course/subject offerings delivered through a more engaging and interactive pedagogy.
3. **Enhanced school day informed via a CYP’s lens:** The young people suggested a range of recommendations that would make school more enjoyable, e.g., a later start to the school day; varied timetables each day (i.e., not all ‘serious’ subjects like maths); relaxed uniform rules; longer breaks/ lunches/ more ‘down time’; and the inclusion of rewards, affirmation and incentives.
4. **Improved facilities and resources:** This included updating outdated facilities, as well as recommendations for universal financial support (e.g., Educational Maintenance Allowance and free school meals for all) and the provision of bespoke rooms or dedicated spaces for CYP with emotional regulation needs, e.g., sensory rooms.
5. **Additional academic and emotional support (including from beyond school, e.g. via youth services):** Across the localities was a recognised need for additional support, which included improved mental health support and bespoke supports for children with SEN.

Conclusions

The consultation findings confirm that educational disadvantage is shaped by far more than what happens within school and is instead shaped by individual, home, place and wider systemic issues (see Figure 2). Many of the children and young people across the RAISE localities described clear aspirations for their futures, but these are often constrained by poverty, limited local opportunity, difficult life experiences and school environments that can feel unsupportive or disengaging. At the same time, their accounts show that positive relationships, especially with understanding teachers and trusted adults, can play a powerful role in sustaining engagement and hope.

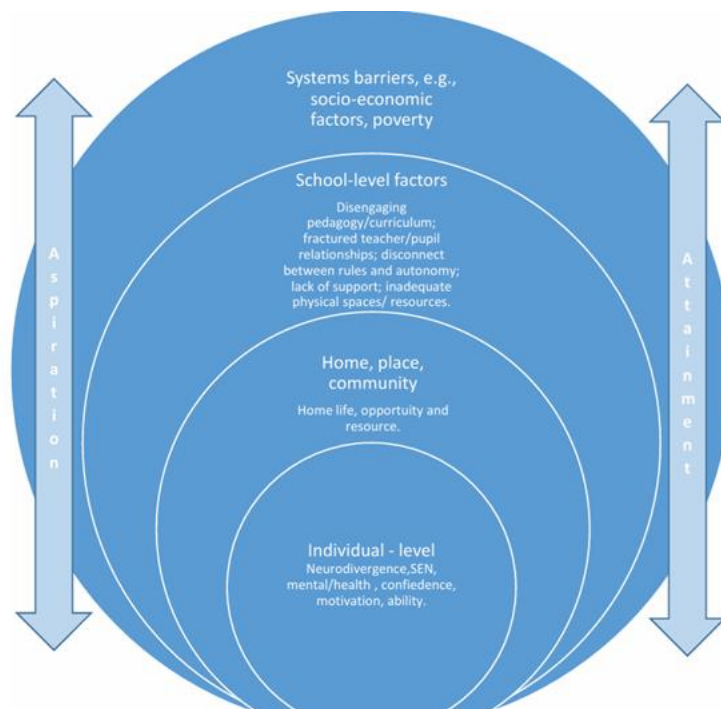


Figure 2: Barriers to educational aspirations, experiences and positive outcomes

Considering the complexity and interconnected factors contributing to educational disadvantage (with structural barriers rooted in issues beyond the school gates) arguably, school-based interventions alone or a narrowed focus on teaching and learning will be insufficient in addressing the needs of those most disadvantaged children and young people. Rather, the findings from this work strongly support the need for a more holistic, whole-community and place-based response to educational disadvantage, involving all relevant and necessary stakeholders (particularly children and young people). Improving outcomes will require not only changes within classrooms - including more relational practice, relevant curriculum, better resources and additional academic and emotional support - but also wider action across families, communities and government systems to address the broader barriers shaping children and young people's lives.

A further interpretive caveat is important. This was a consultation designed specifically to capture the voices and lived experiences of children and young people, rather than a multi-stakeholder evaluation of schools. These perspectives should be triangulated with those of other relevant stakeholders, including parents/carers and community leaders (Orr et al., 2025).

If you are interested in learning more about educational disadvantage and how you can use evidence to address these challenges in your own school setting, you might be interested in the Shared Island funded Teacher Professional Learning course - the T-REX Digital Badge, 'Using Evidence to Address Educational Disadvantage'. You can find out more [here](#), or feel free to reach out to Dr Karen Orr at Karen.Orr@mic.ul.ie.

Information on the RAISE Programme is available on the DE website at [RAISE programme | Department of Education](#)

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From Listening to Practice: A Partnership Approach to Trauma-Informed Teacher Development Through Simulation

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Introduction

Educators are increasingly asked to respond to student needs that extend beyond academic instruction. In many schools, teachers are supporting children and young people experiencing trauma, chronic stress, family instability, fear, dysregulation and uncertainty. These needs often show up in classrooms through withdrawal, emotional escalation, difficulty trusting adults, conflict with peers, or sudden moments of disclosure. For teachers, the challenge is rarely a lack of care. More often, it is the difficulty of knowing what to say and do in the moment.

Trauma-informed education offers an important framework for this work. It helps educators shift from asking “What is *wrong* with this child?” towards asking “What might this child have experienced and what support might they need?” It emphasises safety, trust, predictability, relationships, emotional regulation and responsive rather than punitive practice. Yet knowing trauma-informed principles is not the same as being prepared to enact them in real time. Educators may understand the principles, but still feel uncertain when a student discloses possible abuse, expresses fear about family separation, becomes dysregulated in front of peers, or resists connection.

This article describes a partnership-based project designed to address that gap. The project brought together Loyola Marymount University’s (LMU) Center for Trauma Informed Education (CTIE), the Innovation in Digital Education and Leadership (iDEAL) Institute and California State University, Northridge’s (CSUN) SIMPACT, with five Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. Together, the partners co-constructed a trauma-informed, simulation-based professional learning model grounded in the actual dilemmas educators were experiencing in their schools. The project used listening sessions, focus groups, individual interviews, a pre-intervention survey and written participant reflections from four mixed-reality simulation sessions. The central argument is simple: professional development is more powerful when it begins by listening to practitioners. In this project, educators did not primarily need more general information about trauma-informed practice. They needed structured opportunities to rehearse how trauma-informed practice sounds, feels and unfolds in high-stakes relational moments. The partnership made that possible.

Why Partnership Mattered

The project was situated in five Catholic schools serving communities with significant emotional, behavioral and relational demands. These schools included multi-age classroom structures and had limited access to embedded mental health supports.

Teachers and leaders were committed to caring for students well, but they were also navigating complex situations with limited time, staffing and support.

The partnership brought together different kinds of expertise. The Center for Trauma Informed Education contributed knowledge of trauma-informed practice, whole-person educator reflection and listening processes. The iDEAL Institute contributed expertise in simulation-based pedagogy and facilitation, instructional design and educator professional learning. CSUN's SIMPACT provided the mixed-reality simulation platform and avatar-based interaction model. School leaders and teachers contributed the most essential knowledge: lived understanding of their students, families, classrooms and communities.

This matters because the project was not designed as standardised training delivered to educators. Instead, it developed through the process of co-construction. The professional learning was shaped by what educators said they needed, what they identified as difficult and what they wanted more opportunity to practice. In this sense, the partnership was not only a logistical arrangement. It was the design infrastructure for the entire project.

Listening First: What Educators Identified

The first phase of the project centered on listening. Thirty-five educators participated in listening sessions, focus groups, reflective professional development activities, follow-up debriefings and individual unstructured interviews. These activities were designed to understand the emotional and relational realities of teaching in participating schools.

Educators described students carrying stress, fear, grief and instability into school. They also described the emotional weight of trying to respond well while managing a classroom, maintaining instructional expectations, communicating with families and staying within the boundaries of their professional role. Across the listening sessions, participants valued the opportunity to be understood as whole people rather than simply as implementers of strategies. They described the importance of sharing experiences with colleagues, reflecting on their own reactions and naming the challenges they often carried privately.

The listening process revealed that educators were not asking for generic trauma-informed content. They were asking for help with enactment. They wanted to know how to respond when trauma-informed values came into contact with real-time complexity. How do you respond to a child who may be disclosing abuse without asking leading questions? How do you validate a student's fear without escalating the group? How do you communicate with families in sensitive circumstances without blame, judgment, or avoidance? These questions became the foundation of the simulation design.

Baseline Survey Findings

The second phase of the needs assessment included a pre-intervention survey completed by all 35 participating educators.

The results suggested that educators entered the project with a strong sense of professional competence.

However, the open-ended responses and listening-session data complicated that picture. Although participants felt generally confident, they still identified specific situations in which they wanted more support. This distinction became important. The issue was not that educators lacked care, awareness, or broad confidence. The issue was that certain moments required specialised relational language, emotional regulation, legal and professional boundaries and quick judgment under pressure.

Three areas of need emerged most strongly. First, educators wanted practice with one-to-one student disclosures, especially those involving possible abuse or mandated reporting. Second, they wanted support with de-escalation during moments of student dysregulation or crisis. Third, they wanted guidance in communicating with students in sensitive contexts involving instability, fear, immigration-related stress, incarceration, or other difficult circumstances.

Designing the Simulation Sequence

The partnership translated these findings into a four-part mixed-reality simulation sequence. Mixed-reality simulation (MRS) is a form of practice-based professional learning in which participants interact with responsive avatar students in a simulated classroom environment. The avatars are operated in real time by trained simulation specialists, allowing educators to engage in realistic conversations while still working in a low-risk setting. Unlike a role-play or scripted case study, MRS allows participants to practice with dynamic student responses, pause the interaction, receive coaching or peer feedback and then re-enter the scenario with revised language or strategy.

In this project, the simulation was also intentionally facilitated as a collaborative learning experience. Participants did not complete the scenarios alone or in isolation; instead, the facilitator guided the group to observe together, pause at key moments, name what they noticed, consider multiple possible responses and collectively refine the educator's next move. This structure reflected the larger goal of the partnership: to use educator-generated data not only to identify relevant problems of practice, but also to create a shared space where teachers could make sense of those problems together. Each simulation was designed around a problem of practice identified through the listening sessions, survey responses and ongoing participant feedback. The goal was to create a safe, structured space where educators could practice, pause, reflect, receive feedback and try again as a professional learning community.

The first simulation focused on relational foundations through a "Getting to Know You" morning meeting. Educators interacted with five simulated students in a small-group setting. This scenario gave participants practice with open-ended questions, inclusive prompts, wait time, student voice and classroom flow. It also introduced the facilitation model, helping educators learn how to pause, reflect and collaborate around practice.

The second simulation focused on student fear related to immigration enforcement and possible family separation, a concern that had surfaced in the local context. This scenario emerged directly from educator descriptions of students experiencing family instability, sociopolitical stress and anxiety about safety. Teachers practiced responding to fear without dismissing it, overpromising, or rushing to fix it. The emphasis was on validation, deep listening, emotional safety and maintaining steadiness in a group setting.

The third simulation focused on a one-to-one safeguarding conversation, comparable to mandated reporting responsibilities in the United States. This addressed one of the clearest areas of need in the data. In the simulation, a student disclosed possible abuse only if the educator used appropriate, non-leading language. This allowed participants to practice calm presence, open-ended questions, emotional validation, professional boundaries and next steps related to documentation and reporting.

The sequence intentionally moved from relational groundwork to more complex trauma-informed interactions. Across all simulations, facilitation was central. Participants were invited to pause the simulation, discuss what they noticed, consider alternative responses and re-enter the interaction. This transformed simulation from a performance exercise into a collaborative learning process.

What Participants Reported Learning

After each simulation, participants submitted written reflections describing their major takeaways. Across the four sessions, educators consistently emphasised relational language, emotional attunement, validation and real-time decision-making.

Participant-Reported Learning Across Simulation Sessions

Simulation	Focus	Dominant Participant Takeaways
Simulation 1: Morning Meeting	Relational foundations	Psychological safety, calm tone, inclusive prompts, wait time, trust-building, teacher flexibility
Simulation 2: Immigration and Customs Enforcement Fear	Trauma-informed small-group response	Validation, deep listening, emotional safety, student-centred dialogue, awareness of lived realities
Simulation 3: Mandated Reporting	One-to-one disclosure and boundaries	Calm presence, open non-leading questions, empathy, reporting clarity, professional responsibility

The reflections showed that participants did not experience the simulations primarily as a way to collect new strategies. Instead, they described learning how to refine their responses. They focused on tone, timing, word choice, validation, emotional steadiness and professional boundaries. In other words, the learning was interactional.

Participant reflections also confirmed the value of co-construction. Educators found the scenarios meaningful because they reflected recognisable dilemmas from their own contexts. The professional development was not abstract; it was close to practice.

Ongoing Feedback and Iteration

The partnership process did not end once the simulations were created. Listening continued between simulation sessions. Participants offered feedback on the relevance of the scenarios, the usefulness of the facilitation and the ways the work connected to their daily practice. This feedback informed refinements to later sessions.

This iterative process is an important feature of the model. In many professional development efforts, educators are asked to respond to a pre-designed intervention. In this project, educator response continued to shape the intervention as it unfolded. The simulation sequence remained flexible enough to adjust emphasis, facilitation moves and reflective prompts based on what participants were learning and naming.

This ongoing feedback loop also helped sustain the partnership. The schools were not treated as sites where an outside program was implemented. They were collaborators in making the model more responsive, useful and grounded.

Implications for Practice

Several implications emerge from this project for schools, professional learning providers and organisations seeking to support trauma-informed practice.

First, trauma-informed professional development should begin with practitioner voice. Educators are often closest to the dilemmas that matter most, but their knowledge must be intentionally surfaced. In this project, listening sessions, focus groups and open-ended survey responses helped identify the difference between what educators already understood conceptually and what they needed opportunities to practice. This distinction is important. Teachers did not simply ask for more information about trauma-informed education; they identified specific moments where trauma-informed commitments became difficult to enact, such as responding to student disclosure, managing fear or dysregulation and communicating with families in sensitive circumstances. For professional development to be meaningful, it must begin with these lived problems of practice rather than with generic content.

Second, professional learning should create opportunities for rehearsal and professional peer dialogue. Trauma-informed practice depends on language, timing, emotional regulation and judgment. These are difficult to develop through presentation-based training alone. Simulation allowed educators to practice complex interactions

before encountering similar moments with real students. Just as importantly, the simulations allowed educators to think together. Participants could observe a colleague, pause the scenario, name what they noticed, suggest alternative language and reflect on how different responses might affect student safety, trust and belonging. This collaborative structure helped shift professional learning from individual performance to collective sensemaking.

Third, facilitation matters. The value of mixed-reality simulation does not come from the technology alone. It comes from the pedagogical structure around the simulation: pausing, reflecting, discussing, receiving feedback and trying again. In this project, the facilitator helped participants slow down high-stakes interactions, examine their assumptions and connect specific educator moves to broader goals. For example, a pause in the simulation could help the group consider whether a question was open or leading, whether a response validated the student's experience, or whether the teacher was trying to 'fix' too quickly rather than creating emotional safety. Facilitation transformed the simulation from a realistic practice exercise into a shared professional learning space.

Fourth, partnership improves relevance. Because the simulations were designed from educator-generated data, the scenarios felt connected to real school life. This increased the practical value of the professional development and positioned educators as co-designers rather than passive recipients. The partnership also allowed the work to remain responsive over time. Feedback gathered between sessions helped refine later simulations and ensure that the professional learning continued to reflect educators' needs.

Fifth, this project suggests that trauma-informed professional development should support adult learning and adult regulation, not only student support. Educators working in high-need contexts often carry the emotional weight of student trauma, family instability and limited resources. The simulation structure created a space where teachers could practice responding calmly, but also reflect on their own internal reactions. This matters because trauma-informed practice depends on the adult's ability to remain steady, curious and relational under pressure. Professional learning that gives educators time to rehearse, pause and receive support can strengthen not only skill development, but also professional confidence and resilience.

Finally, the project points to the importance of moving from awareness to enactment. Many educators are familiar with the language of trauma-informed practice. The harder task is translating those values into real-time interaction. What does validation sound like when a student is afraid? What does a boundary sound like when a child discloses harm? This project suggests that professional development should make those moments visible, discussable and practicable. Through partnership, simulation and guided peer dialogue, educators can develop shared language and stronger professional judgment for the relational moments that matter most.

In trauma-informed practice, the most important work often happens in small moments: the question a teacher asks, the pause before responding, the way fear is

validated, the way a child is invited back into belonging. These moments are too important to leave to chance. Through partnership and simulation, educators can practice them together.

Related Reading

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