



Once again, **Catholic schools** dominate the top of the exam league tables. At A level, the highest performing non-Catholic school, Friends' in Lisburn, came 12th and other well-known non-Catholic schools such as 'Methody', 'Inst', Campbell and BRA came well down the table. At GCSE, only Dalriada, Friends' and Strathearn featured in the top ten.

There is no shortage of explanations for this academic supremacy. One Catholic principal has been quoted as suggesting that it is because Catholic schools are **faith-based**.

Yet we could hardly argue that religion does not feature in non-Catholic schools, and in any case research in England doesn't support this theory. There is absolutely no evidence that the success of Catholic schools there has anything to do with religious teaching, religious ethos, traditional discipline or traditional teaching methods. Rather, the key lies in their **admissions policies** which cream off children of ambitious and wealthier parents.

This factor is anyway hardly relevant in Northern Ireland where ‘Protestant’ grammar schools select largely middle class pupils but **still perform less well** than their Catholic counterparts.

What may be worth noting, however, is that the highest scores at GCSE in any faith schools in England occur in Jewish institutions. Indeed the **Jewish culture** has a long history of valuing education, with the result that Jews have generally been better educated than the average population in all the countries in which they lived.

One factor was their status as a persecuted minority. They realised that to compete and achieve **upward social mobility** they had to gain the best qualifications. But also relevant was the fact that their culture valued education because they knew that to take responsibility and affect positive change in the world, a human being needed to be educated.

Catholics have been a **discriminated minority** in Northern Ireland, and certainly in the past Catholic parents knew that their children needed higher qualifications to enter a Protestant biased workforce. Yet this bias has largely disappeared as have many of the traditional jobs for Protestants in shipbuilding, engineering and linen that needed minimal school attainment.

So we come to the conclusion that Catholics have also valued education for its own sake more than Protestants. A recent PUP report, *Firm Foundations*, acknowledges that “in unionist communities a change in culture to embrace education is needed”. Yet it failed to address the features of Protestant culture that hinder children’s educational progress.

There is a rich vein of Catholic culture in Ireland, but **what exactly is Protestant culture**? It is difficult to see beyond flags, military

murals, loud drums and effigies of hate figures on bonfires. Where are its great writers, artists, composers, philosophers?

The answer is that they did indeed exist, but they are largely written out of history. How many on the Shankill have heard of Louise MacNeice or John Hewitt or Frances Hutcheson? The fact of the matter is that the unionist/Protestant mindset has a **philistine indifference to culture** that is 'different' or difficult. It generally prefers country and western to classical music, mindless action movies to art films, pulp fiction to classic novels and the Nolan Show to Newsnight.

Yet the best culture helps us to understand the human condition, challenges and questions accepted values and opinions, inspires great emotions and uplifts the human spirit. The best culture thus encompasses the greatest works of literature, art, music, drama, philosophy and science.

There is another benefit of the highest culture. We come to understand that, despite different cultural traditions, our fellow beings are ultimately just like us, with the same hopes, fears, desires, problems and questions. **Our common humanity** is indeed more important than all the petty things that divide us.

Learning and knowledge also require diligence and effort. Contrary to the simple certainties of unionism and loyalism, the world is not laid out for us on a plate. It is often complex and multi-faceted, and we have to work hard to understand it. A liberal education is therefore not easy, but it offers ultimate rewards, not only in regard to a better career but also in terms of tolerance, understanding and an **expansion of mental horizons**.

The best culture is a widening of the mind and of the spirit, and unionism/loyalism, if it is to survive as a credible ideology in the

21st century, needs to offer young Protestants a **more positive and inclusive vision** that inspires them to have higher expectations, fulfil their potential and help to create a better future for all.