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Education and Training Inspectorate

HISTORY MATTERS

Report of a Survey on

The extent to which the teaching of history in post-primary schools helps prepare young people to live in Northern Ireland's divided and increasingly pluralist society

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The extent to which the teaching of history in post-primary schools helps prepare young people to live in Northern Ireland's divided and increasingly pluralist society

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This report focuses on the extent to which the teaching of history addresses community differences in Northern Ireland, including identity, culture and contested history, as well as the increasingly pluralist nature of society in Northern Ireland as a consequence of inward migration. The report also considers the extent to which teachers of history take account in their planning and in their practice of "the history of the streets", that is, those manifestations of public interest in history such as street murals and the banners of the various marching organisations, all of which illustrate historical themes and events important to each community's historical memory.
- 1.2 The survey was carried out in May 2006 in 13 post-primary schools in the Belfast, North-Eastern and South-Eastern Education and Library Boards. Visits were made to history classes during which some 500 pupils were engaged in discussions about issues related to the survey. In addition, interviews were held with 132 pupils in year 11, and with the principals and the heads of the history departments. The written planning of the history departments was also considered to ascertain the extent to which it contributes to young people's understanding of the troubled history of Northern Ireland, and the consequences which flow from that, as well as issues related to historic and contemporary migration from and to the island of Ireland.
- 1.3 Over the many years of 'The Troubles', and since, teachers of history have had understandable concerns about addressing too directly sensitive and disputed perceptions related to certain social, historical, political and cultural issues in Northern Ireland. Against a backcloth of the violence of the last 37 years, and the strength of political opinion on the streets, their reluctance is not surprising. A too insensitive examination of contested issues, an unduly vigorous challenge to each community's interpretation of its history, especially of cherished aspects of that past, run the

- risk of offending those who do not welcome having their historical perceptions and presumptions questioned.
- 1.4 Partly in response, notably in the 1970s and 1980s when civil unrest was at its most intense, the educational sector in Northern Ireland offered young people a much-needed safe haven away from the violence and prejudice of the streets. Some three decades later, other considerations apply and schools are increasingly aware of the need to take a more proactive role in providing young people with opportunities to consider the nature of Northern Ireland's political, cultural and other divisions.
- 1.5 In recent years, Northern Ireland has become an increasingly pluralist society due to inward migration. Statistics indicate that racial crime in Northern Ireland exists at a higher rate per head of the population than in England and Wales. Sectarianism is now partnered by a growing racism, and both present a major challenge to education. Arguably, the concept of schools as safe havens, protected from the realities of the streets, is much less relevant now than in the violent days of the 1970s and 1980s.
- 1.6 The Chief Inspector's Reports for 2000-2002 and 2002-2004 drew attention to this challenge. The Report for 2002-2004 noted that "Research and other evidence point to continuing concerns in schools and colleges about exploring controversial issues relating to division, conflict and sectarianism, and about opposition from parents and others to what might be perceived as the undermining of community traditions and values." While acknowledging these concerns, and the well-recognised limit to what education can achieve when confronted with the powerful influence of family, peer and community pressure, the Report also noted that "... there remains the need for educationalists to help young people to develop a greater awareness of the importance of opposing bigotry, racism, and other damaging manifestations of intolerance, and to assist them to develop in Northern Ireland a society as free as possible from the tensions and prejudices of the past."

- 2. HOW WELL ARE THE CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES
 OF DIVISION AND DIVERSITY IN NORTHERN
 IRELAND ADDRESSED IN WHOLE-SCHOOL
 PLANNING AND IN PLANNING WITHIN HISTORY
 DEPARTMENTS?
- 2.1 In broad terms, division and difference are addressed in the whole-school planning of the schools visited, though little reference is made to the challenges posed by the increasingly pluralist nature of Northern Ireland. Typically, the whole-school planning highlights the need for pupils to acquire the vocational and political understanding to become active participants in society, to show tolerance and respect for others, and to understand the need for improved community relationships encompassing all traditions. In one of the schools, emphasis is given to the need for the pupils to demonstrate "understanding and respect for different creeds, cultures, race, class, gender or ability and to recognise and value their diversity." A second school intends that it "should be an island of healing in a divided society."
- 2.2 These aims reflect a genuine interest in helping young people adjust to life in a changing society. Despite this, how these aims are to be realised is rarely explained other than by reference to Education for Mutual Understanding and Cultural Heritage as ways of encouraging "the development of tolerance and mutual respect" and "the understanding of difference, and reconciliation."
- 2.3 In several of the schools, various initiatives also address directly division and diversity. For example, one school is linked with three others in a "Dealing with Diversity" project, and with the Spirit of Enniskillen's leadership programme that assists young people make a positive contribution to Northern Ireland society through the study of overseas conflicts and solutions. In a second school, some pupils have investigated emigration and the impact of migration in the local area through written work on topics such as "Is Ireland an island of empathy or exclusion?"

3. HOW WELL DOES THE WRITTEN PLANNING ADDRESS DIVISION, DIFFERENCE AND PLURALISM IN NORTHERN IRELAND?

- 3.1 In all of the history departments visited, the policy statements and/or schemes of work identify some opportunities to explore division in Northern Ireland. In contrast, and against the context of an increasingly pluralist Northern Ireland, almost no attention is given to migration from or to Ireland, other than as a component of a study of the Irish Famine of 1845-1850.
- 3.2 Most departmental policy statements indicate, in broad terms, how the study of history links the past to the present. In one department, it is noted that the "study of the past presents opportunities better to understand the issues raised in the present." A second department promotes an "enhanced understanding of contemporary issues; an awareness and understanding of cultural themes; and of opinions and beliefs." In a third department, the pupils are encouraged to develop "a critical view of the available evidence rather than hearsay and mythology" and to become "increasingly tolerant of other beliefs and attitudes as a result of studying controversies from the point of view of all participants."
- In several schools, reference is made to the Education and Training Inspectorate's guidance paper 'Evaluating History' (published in 2000), and to the need to consider how society has changed across time; for example, reference is made to "those influences, benevolent and malign, which have shaped its past, and which might influence its future." Several departments also note that "historical explanation is provisional, always debateable, and sometimes controversial." In one of the schools, the intention is noted to make "use of appropriate (historical) analogies to increase interest" and to identify the "historical determinants of cultural heritage and identity."
- 3.4 These references are helpful and appropriate, yet only limited attempts are made in the planning to establish the link between

past and present by considering how the history of this island, and of these islands, is manifested, positively or negatively, in differing community attitudes to history, identity, culture, religion and politics.

- 3.5 This is not to say that contested or sensitive events in the history of these islands are not identified in the written planning and considered in class. It is to suggest instead that they are addressed largely within a particular historical context as part of a chronological or thematic study of a defined period of history rather than as, say, a summative study of how the past is perceived and how it influences the present. Nevertheless, in all of the departments visited, at least some contested or sensitive events, notably from the 17th century and from 1916, are considered in relation to their impact upon attitudes in Northern Ireland today.
- 3.6 Despite this, the largely chronological coverage of Irish and British history in key stage 3 (KS3) means that, in the main, the association of past and present is addressed in a partial manner rather than as part of a more systematic view of how the past influences and even shapes community attitudes and events in Northern Ireland today. Indeed, a view expressed in the interviews held with the year 11 pupils is that the linkage of past and present occurs only or, mainly, in year 10. Furthermore, the claim was also made during the interviews that the year 10 programme (covering circa 1800-1920) is the only period of history which has contemporary relevance; this, despite the fact that other events, notably from the 17th and 18th centuries, are represented frequently on street murals, and on the banners of those marching organisations which reflect the traditions of the two main community groups in Northern Ireland.
- 3.7 In linking past and present, albeit in a limited manner, almost all of the history departments visited emphasise events in Ireland during the 17th century, typically the 1641 rebellion and the Williamite War of 1689 to 1691. Not every department addresses the current relevance of all of the major events of the 17th century;

surprisingly few, for example, consider directly the significance of the Plantation of Ulster in relation to identity and nationality in Northern Ireland today. Most highlight the past and present significance of the 1641 rebellion; reference to current perceptions of Cromwell varies considerably. In the main, the past and present significance of the battle of the Boyne in 1690 is noted; reference is made, for instance, to the "myths about the battle". A minority only address the Penal Laws of the 17th and 18th centuries and past and current perceptions of this legislation.

- In a minority of the history departments visited, the linkage of past and present is managed in a particularly explicit manner. For example, in the planning of one department the question is asked "Visually, how is 1641 commemorated in Orange culture today?" and the written planning also includes reference to "the role of street history in the study of Cromwell ... the influence of murals and different interpretations." This planning also links the battle of the Boyne with perceptions today, notably how the battle is portrayed on street murals and on the banners of the Orange Order. The written planning of a second department addresses the interaction of "history and myth" in relation to the events of 1689-1691.
- The Irish Famine of 1845-1850 also provides good opportunities to highlight modern perceptions of past events. In one school, in relation to the consequences of the Famine, the written planning refers to "their impact on today's events." Interestingly and unusually, this planning also compares the treatment of Irish migrants in 1848 to that of migrant workers in Northern Ireland today. The written planning of a second department also explores the "Legacy of the Famine" using, for example, songs to highlight issues and attitudes; a third directs attention to the manner in which the Famine has "affected attitudes towards the English."
- 3.10 The history of World War 1 also offers opportunities (not always taken) to consider sensitive issues relating to perceptions of the war then and now but, more typically, the planning focuses on the nature of trench warfare, and on the war in relation to the Home

Rule crisis of 1912-1914. It is uncommon to see planning which considers the extent to which World War 1 – especially the Battle of the Somme in 1916 – continues to be of particular importance to the Protestant and unionist community in Northern Ireland today, as reflected, for example, in the many street murals and banners which deal with the Somme and with other aspects of World War 1. Only a few of the departments visited address more challenging issues dealing with current unionist, loyalist, nationalist or republican perceptions of World War 1; one department, for example, considers changing attitudes to the sensitive issue of the Irish Nationalist contribution to the British Army during World War 1.

- 4. IN RELATION TO THE INCOMING REVISED CURRICULUM, TO WHAT EXTENT DO HISTORY DEPARTMENTS INTEND TO AMEND THEIR CURRENT SCHEMES OF WORK AND GIVE GREATER ATTENTION TO THE ISSUES HIGHLIGHTED IN THIS SURVEY?
- 4.1 The revised KS3 and KS4 curriculum, due to be implemented from September 2007, will give history departments an opportunity to reconsider their programmes. During this survey, teachers in some of the departments visited confirmed that they intend to take full advantage of this opportunity and amend, in some instances radically, their current KS3 programmes; in particular, there is an interest in "ditching the dull" and making a clearer link between the past and the present. Most of the departments intend to make some adjustments ranging from significant to slight; all express interest in exploring further the interface between history and citizenship.
- 4.2 In one of the schools visited, the head of department is already taking the opportunity to change the present curriculum that has been in place since 1991. Greater attention will be given to the interface between history and citizenship through a clearer linkage of citizenship concepts such as equality, social justice and marginalisation with specific historical periods or events. In

addition, more emphasis will be given to linking past and present by considering the impact of historical events on life today; for instance, how the plantations of the 16th and 17th centuries influenced culture and political developments in Ireland, and to the way in which street murals and banners highlight community perceptions of the past.

5. OUTCOMES FROM THE CLASSES OBSERVED AND ISSUES ARISING

- In addition to observing the teaching in classes across years 8 to 11, two key issues were discussed with the pupils in the classes visited. Firstly, their ability to link the past and the present was explored in relation to Northern Ireland's divided society and to differing community perceptions of history and culture. The pupils in years 10 and 11 were invited to consider, for example, why loyalist and republican street murals continue to address the battle of the Somme and the Easter Rising in 1916, and to explain the current significance of these events of ninety years ago.
- The pupils' awareness of street history is limited. In the main, their knowledge of how the past is perceived in the present is not secure. A minority can explain clearly the references to the Easter Rising and the Somme on street murals and on banners; a few can identify their current political significance and explain issues such as community pride and respect, and the importance of commemoration.
- 5.3 Some of the comments about street history and the commemoration of 1916 were especially insightful, and teachers of history may wish to provide all pupils with greater opportunities to consider these matters. One year 10 pupil noted that 1916 is "worth remembering but not worth fighting over." Another showed a significant awareness of street history and commemoration by suggesting that the murals "define a community and influence each generation". A third noted that they "preserve the memory of the community". Some suggested that, while the murals are mainly commemorative and cultural icons, they are also

intimidatory. Some argued that it is important to understand the images on the banners; one year 10 pupil made the challenging comment "What's the point of following the march if you don't know what is on the banners?" In one school, the head of department and the pupils have created an interesting display on the theme of "History is still around you". This vividly brings together flags, Orange and Masonic regalia, republican commemorative material, including material from the 1981 hunger strikes, and extracts from local newspapers highlighting aspects of Ulster-Scots history and culture.

- Secondly, in the context of current concerns in Northern Ireland in relation to migration, and the increase in racial attacks on migrant workers, consideration was also given to the pupils' knowledge of migration from Ireland in the 18th century (in respect of the Ulster-Scots migration to North America) and in the 19th century (in respect of post-Famine migration). In addition, they were invited to comment on how an understanding of migration from Ireland might help them understand the reasons for, and consequences of, inward migration into Northern Ireland today.
- The pupils have a limited understanding of migration. Most are aware of post-Famine migration; only a very few know of the other great migratory experience from Ireland, that is, of the Ulster-Scots to North America during the 18th century. In most schools, Ulster-Scots migration is not taught and pupils' knowledge of it tends to be based on their awareness of Ulster-Scots issues and events in their local communities.
- The extent to which the history departments address the causes and consequences of migration to and from Ireland is very limited, most often as part of a study of the Irish Famine and its aftermath. Migration, despite its current significance in Northern Ireland, is not addressed as a topic in its own right in any of the history departments visited during the survey. The pupils are conscious, however, of migration as an issue that currently attracts attention in Northern Ireland, or more significantly as an important element within their own families' recent history and

experience. During class discussion in all of the schools visited, it emerged that the families of a very significant percentage of the pupils have had a recent experience of migration to the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, to a wide range of European countries, to South Africa, Ecuador, Chile, and to a range of Asian countries.

- In the schools visited, and based on the experiences of some 630 pupils, an average of 69% have family members abroad, excluding the British Isles; the lowest percentage in any school was 55% and the highest 93%. Furthermore, many commented on the positive or negative experience of migration experienced by their families. In the main, the positives outweighed the negatives, but across the schools significant and, at times, distressing examples of negative experiences were offered.
- These outcomes suggest that history departments could find it helpful to address migration as an issue in its own right, perhaps in a modular form. Attention could focus on aspects of inward and outward migration in relation to the Ulster-Scots in the 18th century, and on the post-Famine experience of the 19th century, and these might be set against the late 20th and early 21st century family experiences that emerged during the course of this survey. History teachers may also find it useful to suggest to pupils that migration does not necessarily centre only on inward migration, for example, into Northern Ireland today, but is also an activity which has involved people from Northern Ireland in the past, and in which they continue to be engaged.
- During the classroom visits, controversial issues and their impact were also discussed, and opportunities were taken to explore with the young people their views on the relationship between the past and the present. In one school, for example, lessons were observed which focused on how printed material was used to heighten concerns during the 1641 rebellion in Ireland and during the Home Rule Crisis of 1912-1914. These lessons were challenging, well presented, well informed, and interesting. The pupils considered issues arising from the 1641 rebellion in Ulster,

the Holocaust, Rwanda, and Iraq. Some of the contributions offered by the pupils were insightful and interesting. One noted "man's inhumanity to man" and others agreed that they too could have been caught up unwillingly in the massacres of 1641. There was an awareness too of the "amazing number of people who die in wars."

- In a second school, there was evidence in the pupils' notebooks of an interesting focus on the extent to which the 1641 rebellion in Ulster is still remembered today, on perceptions about the battle of the Boyne in 1690, and on why it is still commemorated. In a third school, several pupils in year 9 made helpful comments about the methodology of history teaching, particularly in relation to sensitive issues in Irish history. One year 9 pupil pointed out that "By doubting, we are led to enquiry." Another, commenting on community traditions in Northern Ireland, suggested that "Behind the sectarianism, there is pride in the history and the culture, both on St Patrick's Day and on the 12th of July."
- 6. THE PUPILS' KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING
 OF DIVISION AND DIFFERENCE IN NORTHERN
 IRELAND, ON THE INFLUENCE OF EDUCATION, AND
 ISSUES ARISING
- During the visits, meetings were held with 132 pupils from year 11; most are taking history as a GCSE subject. Particular attention was given to the following:
 - their knowledge and understanding of division and difference in Northern Ireland;
 - the influence of education compared to that of family, peers and community;
 - the teaching of contested and sensitive issues in Irish or British history.

The pupils' knowledge and understanding of division and difference in Northern Ireland varies considerably. Based on what they had learnt in history in the first three (or four) years of post-primary school, each suggested a mark, or level, between one and ten, with level 1 representing a particularly limited, and level 10 a particularly strong, knowledge and understanding of these issues. The table below sets out their responses. The pupils suggested that a level 5 or 6 (there was a lack of agreement on this) indicates an unduly limited knowledge and understanding of division and difference in Northern Ireland. Given that 60% of the responses are at level 6 or below, and 42% at level 5 or below, a substantial number of the pupils believe that they are not sufficiently well informed about historic and current patterns of division and difference in Northern Ireland.

Figure 1: the pupils' knowledge and understanding of the background to, and nature of, division and difference in Northern Ireland as acquired through the teaching of history in the first three or four years of post-primary school

Level	Number of Pupils	Percentage	
10	0	0%	
9	7	5%	
8	24	18%	
7	22	17%	
6	24	18%	
5	21	16%	
4	21	16%	
3	8	6%	
2	4	3%	
1	1	1%	

- In broad terms, the pupils believe that they have a better understanding of their "own" community than the "other" main community in Northern Ireland. One indicated that he knew "enough to keep yourself right"; another suggested that he knew about "the main bits". A third pupil spoke for others in her group when she suggested that she knew "a wee bit about our own" community's history and culture. The pupils are aware, often very aware, of the changing nature of Northern Ireland as a result of inward migration but point out that migration and issues arising have not been highlighted in their history classes.
- Opinion varies considerably from school to school. In one school, the pupils are critical of what they perceive as the "sugar-coated" treatment of controversial issues. In two other schools, they are highly appreciative of the history teaching they have received, though they also wish to explore sensitive issues in more depth, including pluralism and migration. They are also broadly agreed that they do not know enough about "why events in the past are still so important" and that they would value knowing "more about the other side."
- The pupils' knowledge and understanding of community manifestations of identity and culture, reflected, for example, in banners and street murals, depend largely on the location of the school. A few have an adequate understanding of the historical and current significance of the murals. A majority have some awareness of the past and current significance of marching organisations but few understand much of the symbolism of the banners. One pupil, supportive of the need to do so, suggested that the banners represent "what we stand for."
- In several schools, the pupils claim that a link between the past and the present is not highlighted sufficiently in KS3, though many agree that this is more secure in KS4. A minority point out that, in contrast to year 10, their history programmes in years 8 and 9 contributed little to their understanding of division and difference in Northern Ireland today, or to the link between the past and the present. One suggested that the "teachers should try harder –

they have only one term (that is, term 3 of year 10) to do it." Given these misconceptions, teachers of history should place a greater emphasis in KS3 on developing in their pupils a better understanding of continuity and change over time in respect of British and Irish history, and identify more clearly how historical events can continue to pose considerable problems today.

- The pupils' views on the influence of education, compared to the influence of peers, community and family, differ considerably from school to school. Some 55% of the year 11 pupils interviewed believe that education could influence positively their attitudes on controversial and sensitive issues relating to diversity and difference in Northern Ireland; 45% disagree. Despite these differences, almost all believe that teachers have a role to play; as one put it, "teachers have to try." Another suggested that "you can only be educated if you know both sides of the situation." A third argued that people should "understand that everything can't go their way". A fourth believed that what really matters is "not what you are but who you are."
- A minority are much less optimistic. They believe that "schools can't really change society", that "education won't change minds or rather the majority won't change" and that education will not change those "in a fixed position." A few are concerned about speaking out in public, suggesting that it is "better to know but you are just scared to speak out for fear of what might happen." A few believe that it is counterproductive if, as a result of educational influences, a young person comes into conflict with family and friends. Most are acutely aware of sectarian influences in Northern Ireland and cautious about young people's ability to resist these.
- 6.9 The pupils also have strong views on how history is taught, especially contested and sensitive issues in British and Irish history. Most are supportive of teaching that challenges perceived certainties. Education is "about giving us a choice" was a typical response. One pupil pointed out the need to challenge fixed opinions "It's the way you have to do it a step in the right

direction – it will help people to think twice". A minority are uncertain if teachers can make a difference. One pupil suggested that "On hard issues, I would take it into consideration but I probably wouldn't change … but I would think twice." Another thought that "I might not be persuaded but I would use the knowledge to consider my options in a challenging situation".

6.10 Perhaps teachers of history can ask for no more than this but, across the schools, the pupils interviewed expressed considerable support for history teaching that links past and present more directly, provides them with a better understanding of "the history of the streets", and helps them question fixed positions and certainties on sensitive and controversial matters involving Irish and British history.

7. CONCLUSION

- 7.1 This survey focused on the extent to which the teaching of history in post-primary schools helps prepare young people to live in Northern Ireland's divided and increasingly pluralist society by considering:
 - how history helps them understand differences between the two main communities, notably those involving identity, culture and contested history, by making connections between the past and the present;
 - the extent to which history teachers draw young people's attention to "the history of the streets" such as murals, and the banners of the marching organisations, which collectively address events important to the historical memory of the two main communities in Northern Ireland; and
 - the extent to which history teachers address migration, as an issue in its own right, and also to help young people understand the increasingly diverse nature of society in Northern Ireland as a consequence of inward migration.

- 7.2 The findings of this survey indicate that the systematic linkage of the past and the present is not a sufficiently strong aspect of history teaching in Northern Ireland. It is considered instead largely in relation to a particular historical topic or issue, set within a defined chronological context, rather than as a matter in its own right to demonstrate how the past has influenced the present and might influence the future.
- 7.3 Furthermore, the manner in which controversial issues in Irish history are addressed continues to require attention. Contested events are (usually) noted within the written planning, but classroom practice varies considerably and issues relating to their current significance are often not explored in a sufficiently detailed manner.
- 7.4 In the departments visited, there is an increasing interest in "the history of the streets" and pupils have more opportunities to consider this phenomenon in KS3 and in KS4. Despite this welcome development, the evidence of this survey indicates that, to demonstrate better how the past continues to influence the present, the pupils would benefit from a clearer understanding of differing perceptions of Irish and British history within the two main communities in Northern Ireland.
- 7.5 Despite the current widespread interest in, and concern about, migration as an issue in Northern Ireland, there is little evidence that it is addressed sufficiently in the programmes of the history departments visited as part of this survey. Migration emerges typically as a sub-set of a bigger theme, usually the Famine. It is also unfortunate that, despite the growing attention given to Ulster-Scots identity and history in the wider community, so few pupils in the schools visited have any knowledge and understanding of Ulster-Scots migration and its consequences. Given the findings of this survey, history teachers might wish to help their pupils understand more about important aspects of historic migration, particularly to and from Ireland, draw their attention to patterns of migration reflected, for example, in the recent experiences of the pupils' own families, and compare these

- outcomes to issues linked to the increasingly pluralist nature of society in Northern Ireland today.
- 7.6 In the context of the revised Northern Ireland curriculum, and to offer young people more opportunities to discuss challenging and topical matters, history teachers should reconsider and amend their current programmes. The findings of this survey suggest that, in particular, they should highlight more systematically how the past has influenced, and continues to influence, the present, for example, in relation to "the history of the streets", address more directly controversial and contested topics, and take greater account of issues related to migration.
- 7.7 It is also important to be realistic. Teachers of history in Northern Ireland should take much credit from the work they have undertaken, over many decades of civil unrest, to help young people understand how events have shaped the history of Ireland and Britain. Much challenging and important work remains to be done to assist young people here to cope with life in a divided and increasingly pluralist society, but teachers of history cannot be held responsible, on their own, for resolving with young people the accumulated problems of centuries.

Appendix

SCHOOLS VISITED AS PART OF THIS SURVEY

Ballycastle High School

Belfast Model School for Girls

Carrickfergus Grammar School

Dominican College, Portstewart

Downshire School, Carrickfergus

Fort Hill Integrated College, Lisburn

Friends' School, Lisburn

Lagan College, Belfast

North Coast Integrated College, Coleraine

Slemish College, Ballymena

St Columba's College, Portaferry

St Mary's Grammar School, Magherafelt

St Pius X High School, Magherafelt



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