

EXPERT PANEL ON EDUCATIONAL UNDERACHIEVEMENT IN NORTHERN IRELAND



INTERIM REPORT
MARCH 2021

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Section 1 – Introduction / Terms of Reference

1. The Minister of Education, Peter Weir appointed an Expert Panel from 1 September 2020 to examine the links between educational underachievement and socio-economic background. The panel members were:

- Dr Noel Purdy, Director of the Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement, Stranmillis University College – Chair of the panel
- Joyce Logue, Principal of Longtower Primary School, Derry/Londonderry
- Mary Montgomery, Principal of Belfast Boys’ Model School
- Kathleen O’Hare, former Principal of St Cecilia’s College, Derry/Londonderry and Hazelwood Integrated College, Belfast
- Jackie Redpath, Chief Executive, Greater Shankill Partnership
- (Professor Feyisa Demie, Honorary Professor, Durham University supported the panel in a research capacity)

2. The panel was established under the ‘New Decade, New Approach’ agreement which set out the requirement “to Establish an expert group to examine the links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background and draw up an action plan for change that will ensure all children and young people, regardless of background, are given the best start in life”.

3. A link to the panel’s Terms of Reference can be found [here](#).

Expert Panel’s Schedule of Work

4. The Expert Panel met initially in August 2020 to discuss the programme of work and the scope of the work ahead. They agreed a stakeholder map and project plan which included a call for written evidence (from 14 September 2020 to 16 October 2020 which generated 401 responses) and a series of oral evidence sessions over the next six months.

5. During the series of oral evidence sessions, the Expert Panel met a total of 344 individuals across 24 days from September 2020 to February 2021. These sessions included the following:

- 61 school leaders from 59 schools across all regions of Northern Ireland, including pre-schools / nursery, primary schools, post-primary schools and special schools across all sectors (including EOTAS settings) in both urban and rural areas;
- 44 individuals from 33 voluntary and community groups across Northern Ireland;
- 29 parents from all regions of Northern Ireland;
- 57 Officials from 13 Government Departments and Agencies;
- 13 MLAs and officers from the 6 main Political Parties;
- Representatives from 7 ALBs/NDPBs; 10 Children’s organisations/charities; 5 Youth Groups; 5 Teaching Unions; 4 University Experts; 6 FE Colleges; 2 Medical Experts; and 11 other interested parties/organisations.
- Representatives from UK and ROI government departments.

6. The above included six regional sessions (for the areas of Ballymena, Belfast, Cookstown, Derry/Londonderry, Enniskillen, Newry), however due to the Covid-19 pandemic, these had to be conducted virtually.

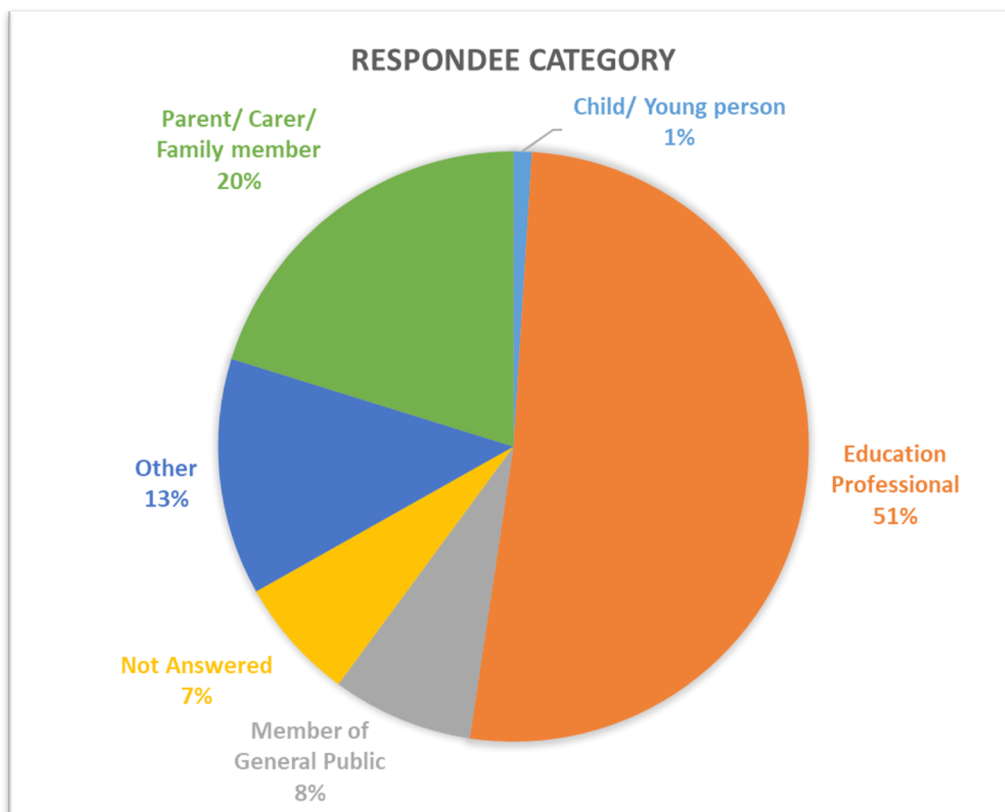
7. During February and March 2021, the panel have been considering the wide range of quantitative and qualitative oral and written evidence, which they have gathered to determine what areas of policy changes are needed and which will have the greatest impact on educational underachievement.

8. The following key areas have been identified within which we expect to develop a number of recommendations and actions (see Section 6):

1. Redirecting the focus to Early Years.
2. Championing Emotional Health and Well-Being.
3. Ensuring the relevance and appropriateness of Curriculum and Assessment.
4. Promoting a whole community approach to education.
5. Maximising boys’ potential.
6. Driving forward Teachers Professional Learning (TPL).
7. Supporting the professional learning and wellbeing of school leadership.
8. Ensuring Interdepartmental collaboration and delivery.

Section 2 - Findings from call for evidence

9. The Expert Panel launched an online survey seeking written views and evidence on links between educational underachievement and socio-economic background. The survey ran from 14 September 2020 to 16 October 2020 and generated 401 responses.



Respondent Type	Count	Percentage
Education Professional	206	51.4%
Parent/ Carer/ Family member	81	20.2%
Other	52	13.0%
Member of General Public	31	7.7%
Not Answered	27	6.7%
Child / Young person ¹	4	1.0%
Total	401	100.0%

10. An entirely separate and bespoke engagement process with children and young people took place to ensure that their views on the issue of educational underachievement were captured. See Section 5.

¹ Note: Children and young people have been excluded from individual analysis because of their very small numbers.

Six Key Questions Asked

11. The six main questions asked were:
- i. What would you say are the main causes of educational underachievement?
 - ii. In your view, what is the main impact of educational underachievement?
 - iii. From the list below please select five (only) interventions that you consider have an impact on raising educational achievement and rank in order with 1 being the most effective.
 - iv. In your experience what has worked to address educational underachievement?
 - v. How has the Covid-19 lockdown impacted on educational underachievement?
 - vi. Please add any other comments that you would like the panel to consider.

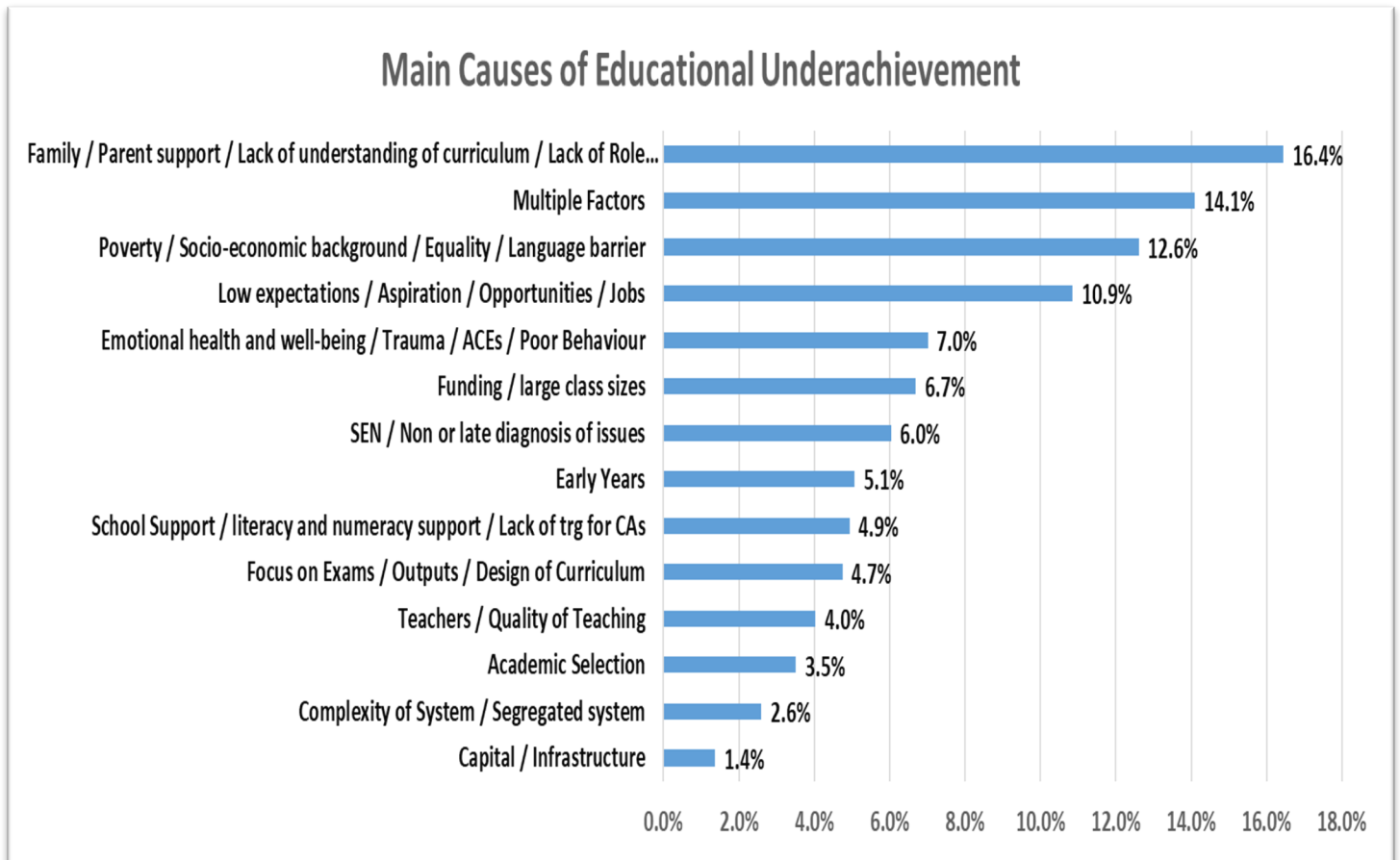
12. The main findings from the call for evidence are outlined below. The text-based responses were subsequently coded by theme and presented in a summary report. While the findings are interesting and insightful in many respects, there is no suggestion that this was a representative sample across Northern Ireland. That would have necessitated a much larger piece of research which was beyond the scope, budget and timeframe of the panel.

Main Findings

13. The responses to all the questions were wide ranging and generally very detailed. Respondents felt strongly about the issues and the comments about the “causes”, “impacts”, “what has worked” and “Covid-19” often generated lengthy responses for which the panel is very grateful. For that reason, we have categorised the responses in order to provide an overview of the views held.

14. In terms of “main causes” of educational underachievement, the following were the most commonly expressed:

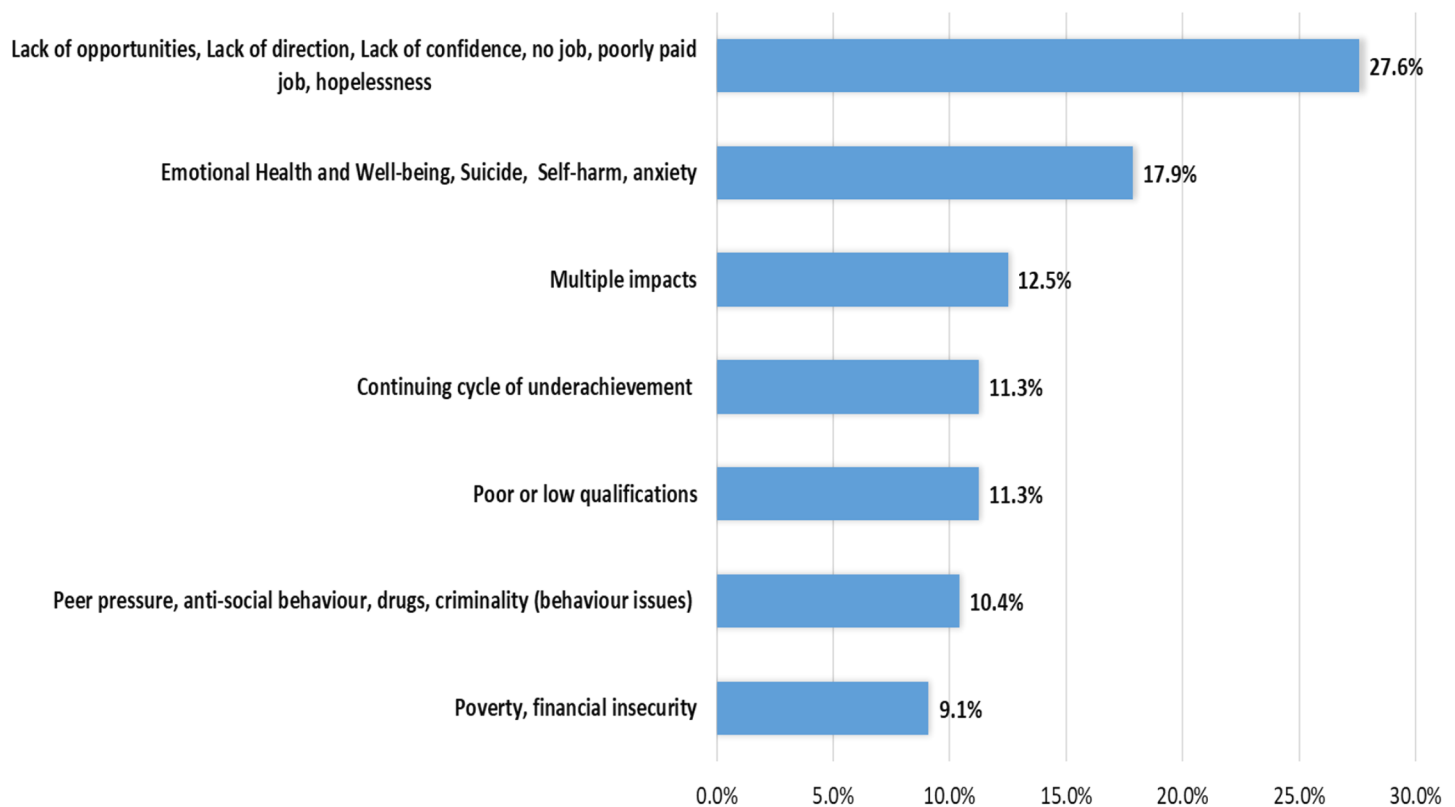
- “Family / parent support / lack of role models”, 16.4% (n=253);
- “Multiple factors”, 14.1% (n=217); and
- “Poverty / socio-economic factors”, 12.6% (n=194).



15. Responses to “Main impact” of educational underachievement were felt to be:

- “Lack of opportunities, Lack of direction, Lack of confidence, no job, poorly paid job, hopelessness”; 27.6%, (n=267);
- “Emotional Health and Well-being, Suicide, Self-harm, anxiety”; 17.9%, (n=173); and
- “Multiple Impacts”; 12.5%, (n=121).

MAIN IMPACT OF EDUCATIONAL UNDERACHIEVEMENT

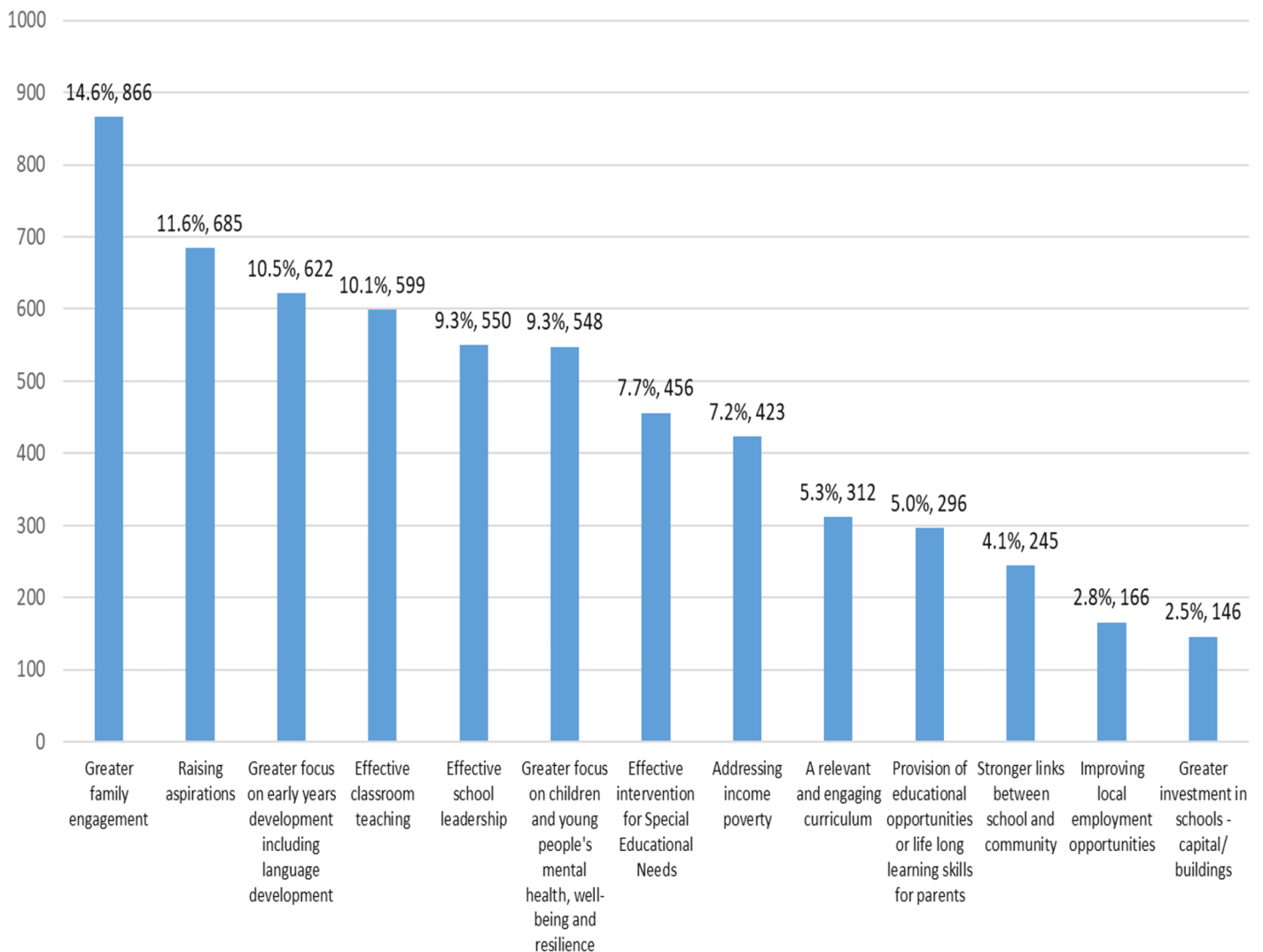


16. In terms of the “Top 5” interventions, the responses (from all respondents) were as follows:

Based on all responses received to this question, the top ranking responses were:

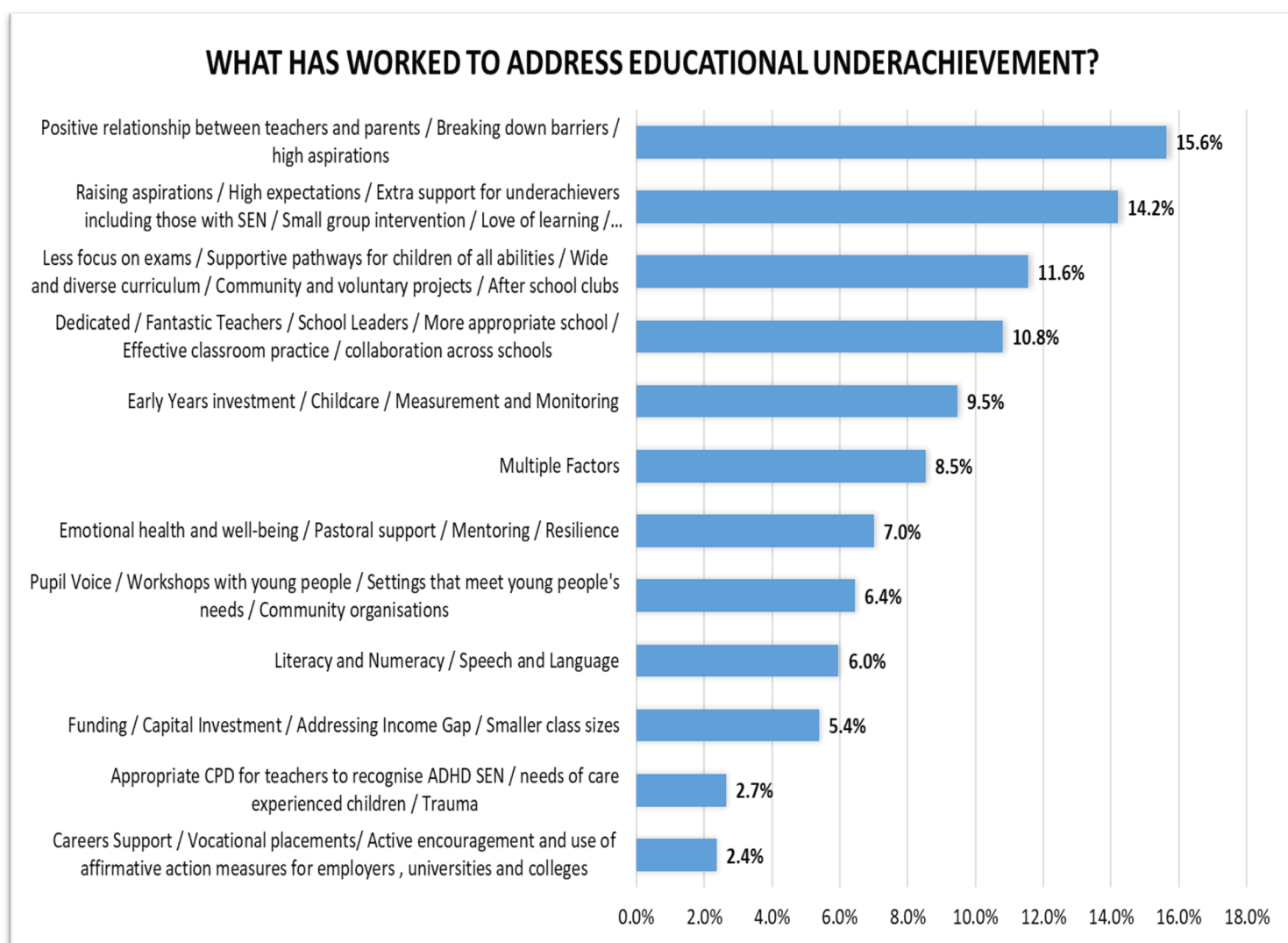
- a. “Greater family engagement”; 14.6%, (n=866)
- b. “Raising aspirations”; 11.6%, (n=685)
- c. “Greater focus on early years development including language development”; 10.5%, (n=622)
- d. “Effective classroom teaching”; 10.1%. (n=599)
- e. “Effective school leadership”; 9.3%, (n=550)

Educational Underachievement Responses - Rankings 1-5
All Respondees



17. Responses to the question “What has worked to address educational underachievement?” suggested the following:

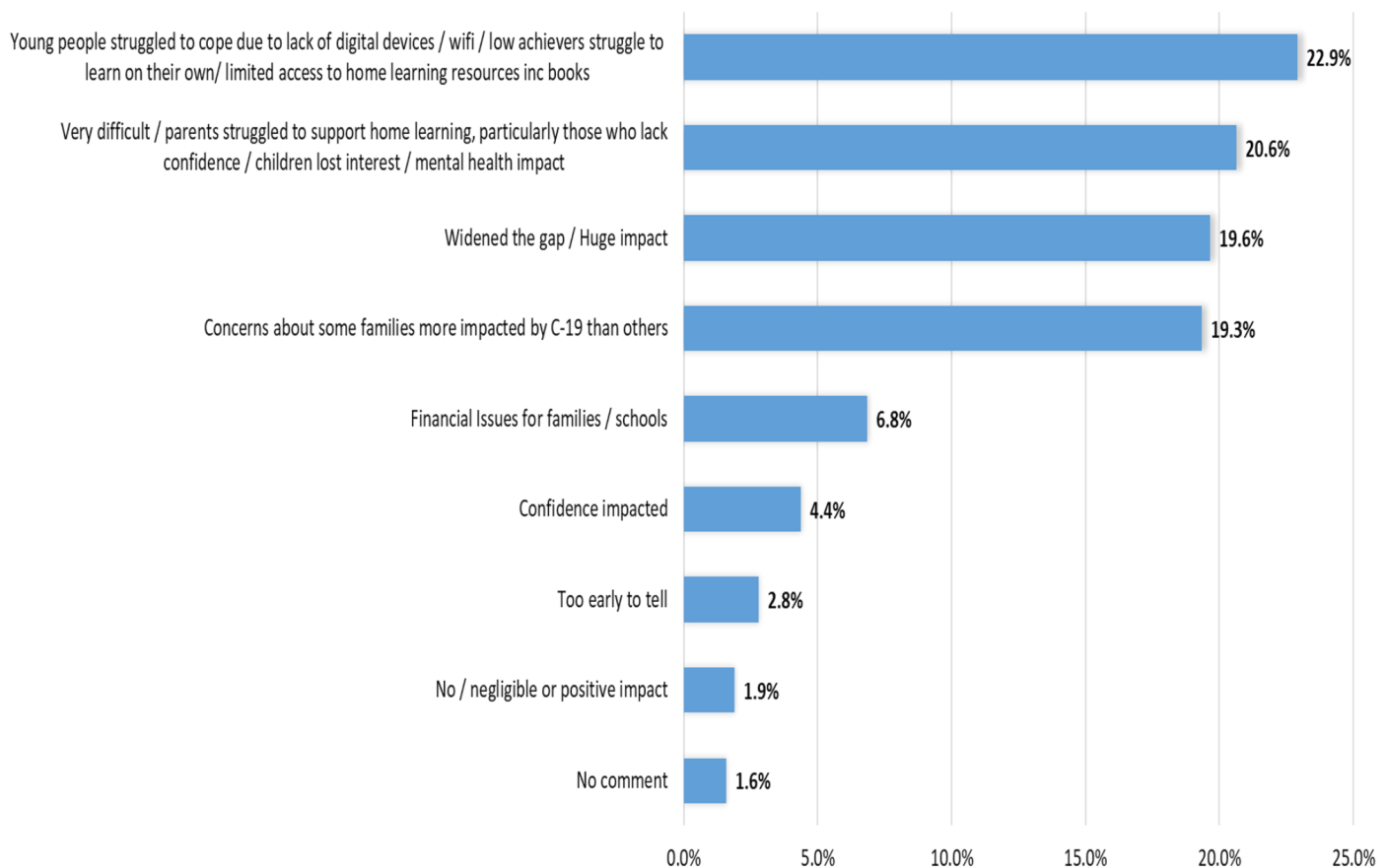
- “Positive relationship between teachers and parents...”;15.6%, (n=165);
- “Raising aspirations / High expectations / Extra support for underachievers including those with SEN...”; 14.2%, (n=150);
- “Less focus on exams / Supportive pathways for children of all abilities...”; 11.6%, (n=122);
- “Dedicated / Fantastic Teachers / School Leaders...”; 10.8%, (n=114); and
- “Early Years investment / Childcare...”; 9.5%, (n=100).



18. Respondents were asked, “How has Covid-19 impacted on educational underachievement?” The main responses were categorised as follows::

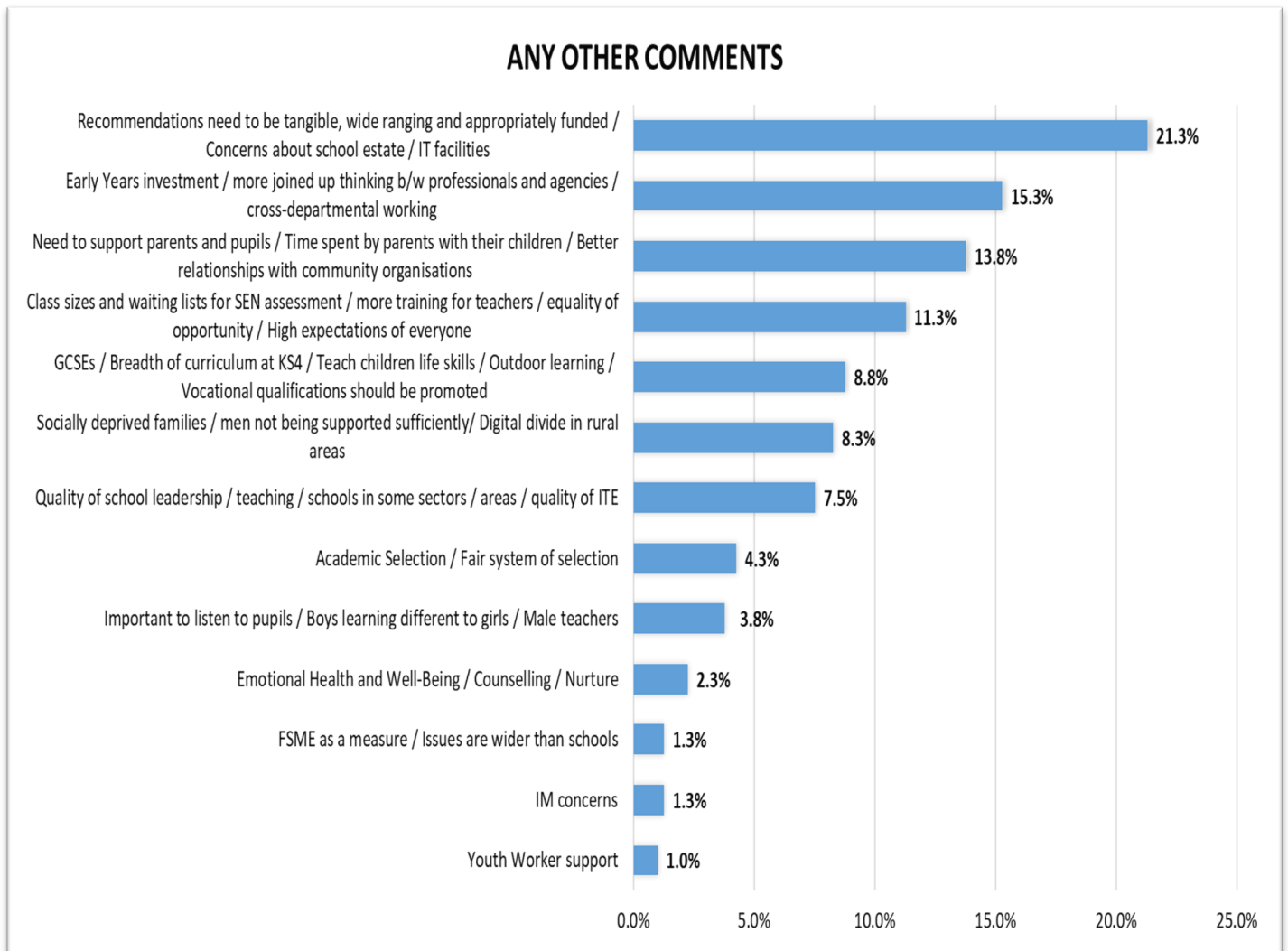
- “Young people struggled to cope due to lack of digital devices / wifi / low achievers struggle to learn on their own / limited access to home learning resources including books”; 22.9%, (n=231);
- “Very difficult / parents struggled to support home learning, particularly those who lack confidence / children lost interest / mental health impact”; 20.6%, (n=208);
- “Widened the gap / Huge impact”; 19.6%, (n=198);
- Only 6.3%, (n=63) of respondents said “No comment” or that “it had a positive or negligible impact” or it was “too early to tell”.

HOW HAS COVID-19 IMPACTED ON EDUCATIONAL UNDERACHIEVEMENT?



19. For the last survey question which invited “Any Other Comments” the breakdown of responses (of those given) was as follows:

- ““Recommendations need to be tangible, wide ranging and appropriately funded...”; 21.3%, (n=85);
- “Early Years investment / more joined up thinking between professionals and agencies / cross-departmental working”; 15.3%, (n=61); and
- “Need to support parents and pupils / Time spent by parents with their children...”; 13.8%, (n=55).



Section 3 – Children and Young People's Views

20. The National Children's Bureau (NCB) and Barnardo's NI were both asked to engage with children / young people and families from a socio-economically disadvantaged background.

21. The main findings from those two separate pieces of work are outlined below.

22. While the findings are interesting and insightful in many respects, there is no suggestion that this was a representative sample across Northern Ireland. That would have necessitated a much larger piece of research which was beyond the scope, budget and timeframe of the panel.

Findings from NCB Report (Children and young people aged 0-11)

NCB Methodology

Identifying and recruiting children and parents

*While recognising that the scale of activities would not constitute a representative sample, we nevertheless undertook a targeted approach to recruitment to ensure that those parents and children who took part in focus groups were, as far as possible, from areas of high deprivation. To do this, we used the **Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI)**, which ranks Super Output Areas (SOA) according to the % of children aged 15 and under living in poverty (defined as 60% of mean income or below); this is often used as a proxy for Free School Meal data. (NISRA)*

*The table in **appendix 1 (of NCB report)** details those areas with 30% or more children living in poverty (as defined above), and these were used as the target areas for recruitment. This does not provide a statistically representative sample, but does provide views from across NI, from the most deprived areas, and with a mix of urban and rural locations.*

Link organisations within these target areas were then identified and approached in order to recruit children and parents. These included schools and youth organisations (to engage children) and Sure Starts, Women's Centres and voluntary and community sector organisations (to engage parents). We also undertook some social media engagement to support identification of parents.

Who did we speak to?

Engagement took place via a series of focus group sessions, for both children and young people and for parents. Given the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, some of these discussions took place via Zoom while others were conducted face to face.

In total, we spoke to 99 children and 17 parents. To do this, we undertook the following specific activities:

- 4 x parent focus groups (3 online, 1 face-to-face) (16 parents)
- 1 x individual phone discussion (1 parent)
- 2 x online pupil focus groups in 1 school (Derry) (20 children)
- 4 x face to face focus groups in 2 schools (Belfast and Dungannon) (66 children)
- 1 x face to face focus group in a youth club (13 children)

Summary and considerations for the work of the Expert Panel

This section provides a summary of the key findings from the research activities undertaken. This is not intended as a set of recommendations for the panel, rather, reflects the current educational priorities of the parents and children involved. These findings should be combined with the wider work of the Panel to inform the next steps to better support all children to learn and achieve equally.

Summary of findings: Children

Learning at home: what works?

- a) Using technology makes learning enjoyable, as long as children have access to the necessary devices and internet.
- b) Having supportive family around children helps them to learn at home, by helping with homework and engaging in other activities.
- c) Sometimes family do not have enough capacity to support children due to competing pressures.
- d) Children enjoy reading for pleasure, but also feel this supports their learning
- e) Making use of relaxation techniques helps children to focus
- f) Children recognise that doing homework to embed learning is important (but it helps if it is fun!)

Learning at school: what works?

- a) Supportive relationships with teachers and wider school staff, including classroom assistants and playground supervisors
- b) Making learning fun, using technology and engaging activities
- c) Minimising distractions in the classroom and providing children with techniques to help them to focus:
- d) Allowing children opportunities to practice new skills and knowledge.

Learning at school: challenges to learning

- a) *Teacher approach to and attitude when engaging with children- a supportive, two-way relationships is important*
- b) *Distractions in the classroom mean some children have difficulty focusing on work.*
- c) *Not all children work in the same way and would like options such as quiet break-out spaces, time out, background music.*

Learning elsewhere

- a) *Extended family and friends support learning by helping with homework and by engaging in other learning activities. Other key people, such as childminders or social workers, can also support learning.*
- b) *Clubs, organisations and local facilities, including sports, art, religious and voluntary/community groups add to children's learning experience.*
- c) *Relationships with staff or volunteers within these are often key, rather than the activity itself.*

Hopes for the future

- a) *Children have a wide range of career aspirations, and recognise the importance of support from people around them, as well as working hard and passing exams to help them achieve their goals.*
- b) *Challenges and barriers to achieving goals include financial concerns, anxiety/confidence issues, or missing school through illness or other reasons.*

General comments: what would better support learning?

- a) *Children feel strongly that access to and use of technology, in and outside of school, would better help them learn.*
- b) *Practical suggestions for improving the school environment, such as focusing on pupil wellbeing, recognising and supporting two-way communication between teacher and pupil, would create a better learning environment.*
- c) *Practical suggestions to support wellbeing in everyday life, including helping children to get more sleep, worry less and build confidence, would also help them to learn.*
- d) *Enhancing the capacity of those around children to better support them, e.g. providing more classroom assistants and helping adults to better encourage children.*

Summary of findings: Parents

The home learning environment

Activities and resources:

- a) *Parents recognise the role of the home learning environment, and are keen to support their child's early learning.*
- b) *Common home learning activities include reading or drawing, playing with blocks or bricks or doing puzzles.*
- c) *Chatting, singing and storytelling are all important for learning, but can feel exhausting and time-consuming.*
- d) *Parents have differing access to physical resources, however know that children can play creatively with any materials.*
- e) *Parents appreciate that engaging children in everyday tasks around the house can be educational opportunities*
- f) *Physical activity is important but can be hindered by lack of outdoor space.*

Knowledge and information:

- a) *Parents had different experiences in terms of the source and quality of information received to support home learning, and often had to figure things out for themselves.*
- b) *They feel that not enough information is given on the importance of quality play for development, and what quality play actually means.*
- c) *Common sources mentioned include health professionals (midwives, health visitors, GPs), Sure Starts, antenatal education groups, family and friends.*
- d) *Health professionals prioritised information on feeding/infant weight rather than social/emotional or other developmental milestones.*
- e) *For families with EAL, information in native languages is scarce.*

Challenges and barriers:

- a) *Time pressures and competing priorities leave parents unable to spend the time they would like to with their child to support learning.*
- b) *Lack of consistent information for parents means some are ill-equipped to maximise early learning.*
- c) *For refugee or asylum-seeking families, the above pressures are multiplied- they often are housed in overcrowded areas with severe lack of space and resources.*

Learning at preschool and/or nursery

Priorities for choosing preschool/nursery include:

- a) *Location: close to home, family or childcare provider is the top priority for most parents.*

- b) *Settings offering full time hours are also prioritised- this is particularly important for parents working full time.*
- c) *Sure Start provision, if available, was the top choice for parents in Sure Start areas and brings the added benefit of a wider support package.*
- d) *Many parents still live in the area they grew up in, therefore had personal connections with a particular setting.*
- e) *Some parents had a preferred primary school, therefore chose a preschool that had links there.*
- f) *Educational approach and physical environment were only a priority for a few parents.*
- g) *A few also prioritised an integrated setting, however this limited options.*
- h) *A common concern was how the child would fit in socially, if they would make friends, and be happy there.*

What works well at preschool?

- a) *The range and quality of activities undertaken in preschool, and the creativeness of practitioners, was seen to add to home learning.*
- b) *Food provided at preschool/nursery or the opportunity to sit down together and eat builds social skills while also ensuring nutrition for all.*
- c) *Parents appreciate a uniform to provide equality, however this can be costly and prohibitive.*

Learning at Primary school

Priorities for choosing a primary school:

- a) *As with preschool choice, location is the top priority for parents and the criteria on which most base their decision.*
- b) *Parents feel smaller class size would mean their child gets more teaching support, however this is not always an option*

What works, challenges and barriers envisioned

School starting age and school readiness:

- a) *Many parents feel that four is too young for formal schooling to begin.*
- b) *This lack of flexibility is a particular concern for parents of premature children, who are already at a developmental disadvantage to their peers.*
- c) *Parents are unclear what 'school readiness', means for their child, and feel it is unrealistic to expect all children to be at the same developmental stage at the same age.*
- d) *COVID has increased concerns in this regard, with parents of children who started primary school in September 2020 concerned at the impact on learning of their child missing out on the last months of their preschool year.*

The transfer test:

- a) *This is a pressing concern, with many parents feeling this puts unnecessary pressure on children at a young age. The two separate tests (AQE and GL) also contributes to the stress and anxiety. The AQE has an entry fee, which for some parents may prevent their child taking part.*
- b) *The culture of private tutoring to prepare children for the test perpetuates inequality within the education system, as less well-off parents cannot afford this therefore their children are less likely to attend grammar school.*

Homework:

- a) *Some parents feel the amount of homework set in primary school causes frustration for children and can be a struggle. Others would prefer more homework.*
- b) *The type of homework given is important- perhaps just reading a book or helping around the house might constitute 'homework'.*

Extracurricular activities:

- a) *These add to overall learning, and are as important as academic learning.*
- b) *There is inequality in terms of what is offered at each school, with sport the main focus in many schools to the detriment of the arts and other activities.*
- c) *Where schools do offer activities such as learning an instrument, the cost is a barrier.*

Children with Special Educational Needs

- a) *This is seen as one of the biggest challenges facing children in education. Common issues reported include speech and language delays, dyslexia, and autism spectrum disorders.*
- b) *The assessment and statement process experience has been lengthy and complex, leading to delays in children receiving the support they need. This can have much wider consequences on their education and wellbeing.*
- c) *Early intervention is critical but in reality, hasn't happened for many. Some parents have paid for a private assessment; however, this has not been formally recognised therefore no support was given.*
- d) *Parents are also concerned at the impact on the wider class if additional support is not there for those who need it.*
- e) *Parents feel available funding could be used more creatively to support more children.*
- f) *Parents feel staff within primary schools could play a greater role in identifying issues and helping children to get on the path to diagnosis and therefore support.*

Learning elsewhere

- a) *Parks and public spaces give children the opportunity to exercise, get fresh air and try out equipment which may support their motor skill development, while also providing important social opportunities.*
- b) *For parents of young children, activities happening in the community around them are of high importance, providing social opportunities for both parent and child.*

Looking ahead and future hopes

- a) **Subject choices and exams:** *The traditional route of GCSEs, A-levels, then university is limiting for children; there cannot be a 'one size fits all' model and parents would like to see all post-primary schools should offer a range of options.*
- b) **Career options:** *Children should be free to make their own decisions and mistakes, and to have the opportunity to change their mind in the future, with school/s being supportive of their choices.*
- c) **Wellbeing:** *An educational career that supports their child's wellbeing is a priority. Above all, parents wished most for their child to be happy, confident, and free to choose their own path, rather than having specific career aspirations.*

Findings from Barnardos NI (Children and young people aged 11+)

23. Barnardos NI was asked to undertake engagement with children and young people aged 11+. As with the NCB report, while the findings are interesting and insightful in many respects, there is no suggestion that this was a representative sample across Northern Ireland. That would have necessitated a much larger piece of research which was beyond the scope, budget and timeframe of the panel.

Barnardo's Methodology

Online survey

An online survey was chosen as the best method to engage a large number of young people across Northern Ireland. This was the safest method of reaching a large number of young people during restrictions, eliminating the need for large scale in-person contact. We aimed to achieve at least 300 completed surveys, with a spread across age and gender.

An online survey was administered using Survey Monkey, a widely used online survey platform. The survey was distributed through Barnardo's services and shared with

Barnardo's partner schools and organisations. We wanted to ensure that the survey largely engaged children and young people who may have experienced socio-economic disadvantage. The survey was also distributed through contacts in EOTAS (Education Other Than At School) to ensure the experience and views of young people educated outside the formal school environment was captured.

After discussions with the Department of Education, it was agreed that we would extend the age range from 11-18 to 11-21 to capture the reflective experience of young people who have left post-primary education and are now in further or higher education. Therefore, the survey was also circulated to contacts in further and higher education institutions based in Northern Ireland.

The survey was designed to increase engagement and maximise the completion rate. It was important that the survey was accessible and easy to complete given the pressures young people have experienced in the past year due to the pandemic and disruption to their education. The final survey consisted of six demographic questions and six substantive questions; four of which were open ended questions, designed to maximise the opportunity for young people to share their opinion freely and clearly.

Focus groups

While the online survey was rolled out, we began to develop a series of themes that we wanted to examine in more detail with young people in focus groups. These themes were identified both through an interim analysis of survey responses, and from our experience and knowledge working with young people. This approach provided an opportunity to explore key themes in greater depth and allowed young people to provide a richer input into this engagement project.

We planned to conduct five focus groups with young people identified through Barnardo's NI services that work with those groups of young people most impacted by educational underachievement, including in areas of high deprivation. Our services have established good relationships with children and young people, schools and the local communities, providing a safe space for children who are often under-represented to talk and share their views. We aimed to speak to at least 25 young people in total with a target focus group size of 5-7 young people per session.

The preferred approach to carry out the focus groups would have been face-to-face in-person for all groups, with measures taken to ensure the safety of participants and facilitators. However with the Covid-19 restrictions brought in at the end of October 2020, our approach was adapted to facilitate some focus group engagement through online video platforms that young people are familiar with and have access to.

1-1 conversations

We also wanted to ensure that we spoke to those young people who may not traditionally engage in wider group activities; in these cases 1-1 conversations would be more appropriate. In particular, we were keen to speak to young people from the Traveller Community as research and evidence has shown that these young people often face barriers and challenges in education. Initially we hoped to have these conversations in-person, however due to the social restrictions this was not possible. Ultimately, we

designed a topic guide for Project Workers in our Traveller Transition Service to discuss the key themes with young people via telephone, to ensure children could engage whilst feeling safe and comfortable.

KEY THEMES

The impact of a 'good teacher'

In the online survey, young people felt that a good relationship with teachers was the most important factor in having a positive education experience. This was echoed in the focus groups where many young people shared stories of the impact one good teacher could have on their learning.

When describing a 'good teacher', young people focused on being listened to, supported with both their learning in class and 1-1 help, respect, and teachers that are interested in their subject. Many young people talked about becoming more interested in a subject because a teacher made it interesting.

Conversely poor teacher relationships were cited as the number two for a negative education experience. Young people in the focus groups described not being able to engage in class properly if they had a poor relationship with a teacher. Some advocated for the option to change classes as it has such a detrimental impact on learning.

Mental health and wellbeing support

Support in school for mental health and wellbeing emerged time and again throughout the survey responses and in the focus groups as a key factor in a young person's education experience. Young people clearly draw a link between poor mental health support and the impact this has on engagement with education and achievement.

Although mental health support provision in school was not mentioned anywhere in the online survey questions, it was raised in the answers given by many respondents. Young people in the focus groups were very keen to share their thoughts on this topic, with all participants emphatically stating that schools do not provide enough support.

Young people are worried about not only the lack of support for themselves, but also for their friends. Some young people wanted to learn how they could support their friends if they were struggling with their mental health and could not get support from the school. There were a number of suggestions from young people around mental health support, many of which would involve only small changes to current the school day or structure.

Achievement and assessment

Discussion around achievement and assessment was closely linked with the impact of stress on the mental health of students. Many young people reported feeling that academic achievement is prioritised over supporting the mental health of young people in school. Many young people felt that exams were not a good way of assessing a student's ability due to the high pressure situations that they create.

The pressure and stress that young people feel in school emerged as the top reason both for not enjoying going to school and not having a positive school experience. Reducing exam pressure and stress was also cited as the top thing that young people would change about education in Northern Ireland.

Young people looked to other options such as coursework or teachers' assessment to evaluate a young person's ability while also reducing pressure and stress. Many young people felt that these forms of assessment reduced pressure and allowed young people to progress and achieve. Coursework was considered to be a more preferable option, particularly for practical subjects such as PE and IT.

Subject choice

Many young people talked about being able to choose subjects they like as a motivator for doing well in school. Some young people thought about their future career or learning goals when making their subject choices, while others chose subjects they were interested in. In the online survey, young people highlighted enjoying their subjects as a key reason why they enjoyed going to school.

The range of subjects offered to young people varies greatly by school. In some instances, students are restricted in their subject choices if their school streams them into a lower band. Many young people describe this as de-motivating learning, achievement and future goals.

In addition to making subjects more readily available to all students, many young people highlighted the need for additions to be made in terms of practical subjects and life skills content. This was emphasised both in the online survey responses and focus group discussions. Young people are keen for education to prepare them for adult life and independent living, rather than solely focusing on achievement.

NEXT STEPS

Engaging children and young people

We welcome the Expert Panel's commitment to engaging children and young people as part of their work to develop a strategy to tackle educational underachievement in Northern Ireland.

We were pleased to receive a strong response to our online survey, particularly during such challenging times for young people and their education. The young people that we spoke to in the focus groups were keen to share their thoughts and ideas about education in Northern Ireland.

Large-scale research

We would encourage the Expert Panel, and the Department of Education thereafter, to continue engaging with children and young people throughout their considerations. This engagement project has been valuable in capturing the voice of young people and there

is an opportunity to explore these issues in more depth to gain an even richer understanding of young people's experience of education in Northern Ireland.

The online survey undertaken in this project could be used as a 'pilot' to inform the design and distribution of a representative research survey, engaging a much larger cohort of young people, which would allow for population-level conclusions to be drawn from the results.

Co-design with young people

Many of the young people we spoke to talked about addressing the problems now, so that students who are younger than them do not have to face the same challenges. A co-design process with a dedicated group of young people to develop a final strategy or action plan would ensure that any strategy going forward has the best interests of children and young people at its core. We would encourage the Panel to consider this as they develop their report and to examine the best way to ensure that decisions about young people are made with young people.

We are happy to provide the Expert Panel with any further information or analysis they may need from the information collected throughout this project

Section 4 - Findings from Departmental and District Council Financial Returns

24. The Expert Panel Secretariat contacted all government departments and District Councils in September / October 2020 to request details of any policies / programmes, which they had in place, which helped to address educational underachievement. All relevant government departments and District Councils responded. Their returns were reviewed by the Expert Panel Secretariat to include only programmes that were live in 2020, and subsequently analysed.

25. It should be emphasised that there is a degree of subjectivity to this process and decisions were made by Departments (and subsequently by DE) regarding what policies to include or exclude. The Secretariat also categorised the policies / programmes into those which directly or indirectly addressed educational underachievement. The following gives a general sense of the scale of expenditure in 2020. Further detail including a breakdown by Department / District Council will be provided in the final report

Central Government Expenditure

26. The total level of expenditure spent by central government on educational underachievement is almost £858m per annum (£808m Resource² / £41m capital / £9m Other). Whilst these amounts are significant, they reflect the fact that educational underachievement can be impacted in numerous ways and by multiple programmes throughout the life of a child.

27. In terms of the level of expenditure which directly relates to educational underachievement, the total investment by central government is estimated to be in the region of £334m direct and £524m indirect per annum.

² Note: this excludes £350m AME suggested by DfE which relate to Student Loans

Local Government Expenditure

28. The total level of expenditure by local government on educational underachievement is £6.4m (£5.5m Resource / £0.9m Capital). Approximately £3m of this total relates to Neighbourhood Renewal, the funding for which is provided by Department for Communities).

29. At local government level, the level of expenditure which directly relates to educational underachievement is estimated to be £4.4m and indirectly related is estimated at £2m per annum.

Section 5 - Professor Feyisa Demie's Review of the Existing Data - Challenges and good practice for tackling inequalities - Extract

30. The Expert Panel invited Professor Feyisa Demie (Honorary Professor, Durham University) to undertake a review of educational underachievement in Northern Ireland. His review includes an analysis of the NI data at primary and post-primary as well as internationally and outlines the good practice which he has identified through his research. The report will be included as an Annex to the full report in May 2021.

31. *Northern Ireland can learn from research to tackle the underachievement of disadvantaged pupils in schools. The lessons from the successful schools both here (England) and elsewhere suggest that it is possible to tackle the link between poverty and underachievement. The key strategies are ensuring access to high quality teaching for disadvantaged pupils, a strong and visionary headteacher committed to addressing inequality and diversity issues, and additional support for disadvantaged pupils through targeted intervention (DE 2020; Demie 2019, 2020; Baars et al 2016; Demie and Mclean 2016; Mongon and Chapman 2008, Ofsted 2009; Sammons et al 1995). A number of teachers and school leaders are now using 'what works?' research evidence to make decisions and to improve classroom practice both in Northern Ireland, England and elsewhere. The overall conclusion from the lessons learned from 'what works?' research on targeted interventions has relevance for practice and offers a worthwhile example of a success story that is worth learning from by schools.*

32. *However, we would argue that the choice of which intervention strategies to use will depend on the context of the school. There is evidence the use of effective feedback, meta-cognition & self-regulation and reading comprehension as intervention strategies, use of small group additional teaching, peer tutoring, early intervention, one to one tutoring, homework (secondary), mastery learning, phonic and parental engagement and attendance and behaviour interventions in secondary, collaborative learning, oral language interventions and outdoor adventures will deliver additional progress for disadvantaged children. All these intervention strategies, whilst being highly effective for disadvantaged pupils, are likely to need strong leadership and effective use of data for tackling pupils' attainment and progress, and whole school implementation rather than*

only using on disadvantaged pupils. Where these strategies are effectively implemented, disadvantaged children are likely to show gains in progress, leading to higher attainment and ultimately improved educational outcomes (Demie 2020; Morris and Dobson 2020; EEF 2019; Snyder et al 2019; London Councils 2015; Clifton and Cook 2012; Ofsted, 2006,2010).

33. The key challenge then is to find out what intervention strategies schools can use to make a difference to the achievement of disadvantaged pupils. The [NI] Executive [has now] established an expert group to examine and propose an action plan to address the links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background. The recommendations that emerged from the lessons learned from Northern Ireland, England and elsewhere research are:

1. Educational inequalities of disadvantaged pupils should be tackled not only at school level but also beyond the school gates.
2. Building on the lessons learnt from research and evidence gathered by the expert panel, the Department of Education needs to establish a Northern Ireland wide project for raising the achievement of disadvantaged pupils, with a focus on the long-standing issues facing working class Protestant boys.
3. It is suggested that policy makers and the expert panel should design strategies and programmes which would tackle the underachievement of disadvantaged pupils in Northern Ireland. This should include an estimate of the cost of targeted interventions needed and the implementation of the action plan.
4. There should be additional ring-fenced funding given to schools to tackle the underachievement of disadvantaged pupils on free school meals and to close the achievement gap between them and their peers.
5. The targeted interventions and support proposed by the expert panel, to tackle underachievement, needs to be based on available proven research evidence that is effective in closing the achievement gap and delivering increased progress for disadvantaged children.
6. Central to this, is using successful headteachers to support the improvement of disadvantaged pupils in other schools in Northern Ireland. Lessons from the London Challenge in England, and elsewhere, suggests that this strategy makes a huge difference in transforming schools in challenging areas. This would need to be costed as part of the initiatives for targeted intervention and support.

Section 6 - Key themes to emerge from the panel's work

34. The following main themes have been identified within which we expect to develop a number of recommendations and actions. The number and wording of these themes may develop over the remaining two months as the panel debates and tests its thinking with key stakeholders.

1. Redirecting the focus to Early Years.
2. Championing Emotional Health and Well-Being.
3. Ensuring the relevance and appropriateness of Curriculum and Assessment.
4. Promoting a whole community approach to education.
5. Maximising boys' potential.
6. Driving forward Teachers Professional Learning (TPL).
7. Supporting the professional learning and wellbeing of school leadership.
8. Ensuring Interdepartmental collaboration and delivery.

35. It is clear that whilst educational underachievement linked to socio-economic background might be perceived by some as quite narrow in focus, the evidence gathering, engagement and consultation with key stakeholders has revealed just how broad the factors are in influencing educational underachievement, and how multi-faceted any solution to the challenge of addressing educational underachievement must be. Many of these factors and solutions lie beyond education and the specific remit of the Department of Education.

36. As a panel we are conscious that many reports have already been written on the topic of educational underachievement in Northern Ireland, and that many millions of pounds are being spent already each year in efforts to address the problem. While there is some evidence of success in some areas, there is also evidence to suggest that, despite these previous reports, there remains a stubborn and persistent income-related achievement gap in Northern Ireland. We are therefore determined that this panel's work will bring real change to improve the outcomes for all children and young people, and to close the gap.

As we begin to formulate our final recommendations and costed action plan, it is already clear to us that addressing this long-standing and seemingly intractable problem, and

ensuring equality of opportunity for all our children and young people, irrespective of background, will require leadership, time, effort, determination, commitment, political consensus and funding.

Plans/Schedule for April/May

37. The panel will use the time remaining to consider the actions required within each key theme. This is likely to include further consultation and testing of ideas with key stakeholders to ensure that the areas identified are appropriate and the actions proposed feasible, realistic and deliverable.

