

EXPERT PANEL ON
EDUCATIONAL UNDERACHIEVEMENT
IN NORTHERN IRELAND



a fair start.

ANNEX F

MAY 2021

'EDUCATION AND YOU'

A report on the views of children and young people aged 11 and over on education and achievement in Northern Ireland

Prepared for the
Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement

Trása Canavan
Barnardo's Northern Ireland

1. OVERVIEW

1.1 Report summary

- 1.1.1 Barnardo's Northern Ireland was commissioned by the Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement to gather the views of children and young people aged 11-18 regarding the issue of educational underachievement. In particular, the Panel was interested in hearing the views of children who have experienced socio-economic disadvantage.
- 1.1.2 Barnardo's NI aimed to engage a broad range of young people across Northern Ireland on their experience and view of education and achievement, and to explore key themes in detail with targeted groups of young people identified through our services and partner organisations.
- 1.1.3 To achieve these objectives, we carried out an online survey with young people across Northern Ireland and broadened the age range of respondents to 21 years old to capture the reflective feedback of young people who may be in further or higher education. The survey ran for four weeks and we achieved 333 responses for analysis.
- 1.1.4 We also carried out a series of focus groups with young people who identified through our services and partner organisations to capture their experience and thoughts on education and achievement. Due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, a mixed approach was adopted and focus groups were carried out in person, online, and through 1-1 discussions. We spoke to 29 young people in five focus groups, and had 1-1 conversations with an additional five young people.

1.2 Who we are

- 1.2.1 Barnardo's NI is the largest children's charity in Northern Ireland. We work with approximately 12,000 children, young people and families annually across more than 40 different services and programmes. We believe that every child deserves the best possible start in life, and our service provision reflects that philosophy.
- 1.2.2 We have a long history of working with and supporting children, young people and families affected by social disadvantage and educational underachievement. A number of our services based both in schools and in communities across Northern Ireland seek to improve educational outcomes, particularly through promoting family engagement with education as well as literacy and numeracy support, resilience building, mental health and wellbeing provision, and social and emotional learning. We are committed to reflecting the voice of the child, with significant experience of using a range of engagement techniques to promote participation in our policy, research and service development work.

2. HEADLINES

2.1 Key themes

2.1.1 The impact of a 'good teacher'

The closure of schools during lockdown and the move to remote learning led many young people to reflect on the impact that face-to-face time with teachers has on their learning and education experience. In every engagement young people described a good relationship with teachers as one of the most important factors in having a positive education experience. Conversely having a poor relationship with teachers was one of the main reasons for a negative experience.

2.1.2 Mental health and wellbeing support

Support 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 participation in education and capacity to learn - good support was identified as critical for a positive education experience whilst lack of adequate support was linked to a negative experience.

2.1.3 Achievement and assessment

Many young people reported feeling that academic achievement is prioritised over supporting the mental health of young people in school. Furthermore, 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. Young people looked to other options such as coursework or teacher assessment to evaluate a young person's ability and reduce pressure and stress.

2.1.4 Subject choice

Young people talked about being able to choose subjects they like as a motivator for achievement. Some thought about 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 this as a key reason why they enjoyed going to school.

2.2 Next steps

2.2.1 We encourage the Expert Panel 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 and achievement in Northern Ireland.

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3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Aims

3.1.1 The purpose of this project was to provide an opportunity for young people to share their experience of education and achievement, understand their views and opinions, and share ideas they have regarding how to make education a better experience for all young people. The aims of the project were:

- Gain an understanding of the views on education and achievement among a broad group of young people; what helps young people achieve and what barriers they experience.
- Gain an understanding of what informs young people's views and attitude to education among targeted groups of young people, identified through Barnardo's services.

3.2 Objectives

3.2.1 The objectives of the project were:

- Gather the views of a large group of young people on education in Northern Ireland and ask them to share their thoughts on broader questions about learning and achievement.
- Talk directly to smaller, targeted groups of young people particularly those who may be marginalised in education or have experienced socio-economic disadvantage, to explore key themes regarding education and achievement, and give young people an opportunity to raise the issues that are important to them.

3.3 Context

3.3.1 This engagement project was carried out from November to December 2020. During this time, Northern Ireland was dealing with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Stricter social restrictions were placed on the general public when this fieldwork was initially scheduled to commence and children faced additional time away from school. The health and safety of children and young people was the first priority in carrying out this project, therefore the engagement methods were adapted to ensure no-one was put at risk and to ensure compliance with government regulations.

3.3.2 The challenge of gaining the trust of young people to share their personal experience was exacerbated due to restricted or no direct contact. However the impact of the pandemic also allowed young people to reflect on their experience of education, how it has changed, for better or worse, and what they feel makes a difference to their learning and ability to achieve and engage with education.

3.4 Methods chosen

3.4.1 In order to achieve both objectives of this project, a mixed methods approach was adopted to engage a range of young people. This would allow us to understand the general feeling and opinion among young people, while also providing the opportunity to explore key themes in depth with targeted groups.

3.5 Online survey

3.5.1 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.

3.5.2 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.

3.5.3 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.

3.5.4 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.

3.6 *Focus groups*

- 3.6.1 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.
- 3.6.2 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.
- 3.6.3 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.

3.7 *1-1 conversations*

- 3.7.1 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.
- 3.7.2 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.

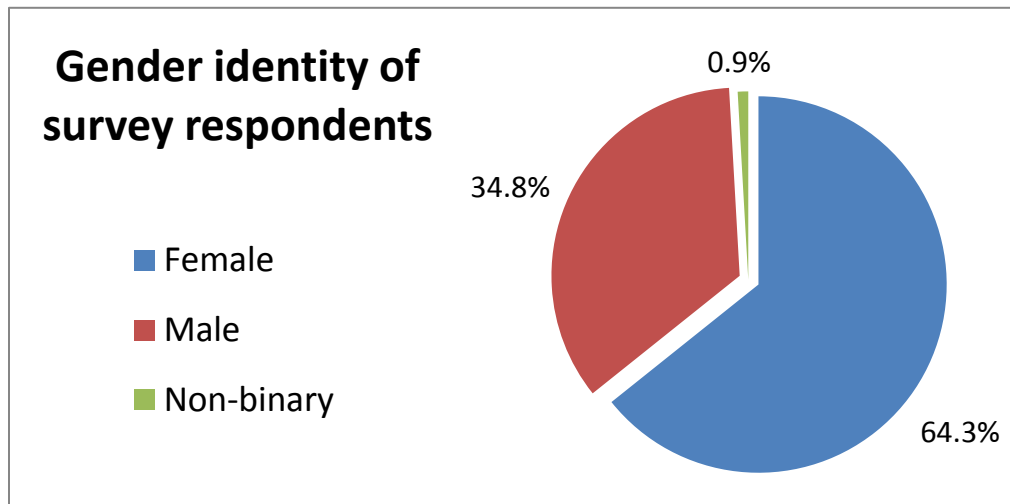
4. ONLINE SURVEY

4.1 Survey design

- 4.1.1 The online survey ran for four weeks from 5th November – 2nd December 2020. During this time we received 409 responses, 333 of which were suitable for analysis¹.
- 4.1.2 The survey was designed to maximise the opportunity for young people to share their thoughts and opinions on education and achievement. Therefore, the substantive survey questions were designed as open ended questions, with two multiple choice questions to ease respondents into the survey. During survey analysis the responses to open ended questions were coded into themes and key quotes have been selected to ensure the voice of young people is reflected clearly in this report.
- 4.1.3 The full set of survey questions is provided in Appendix 1. The full list of themes from open ended questions is provided in Appendix 2.

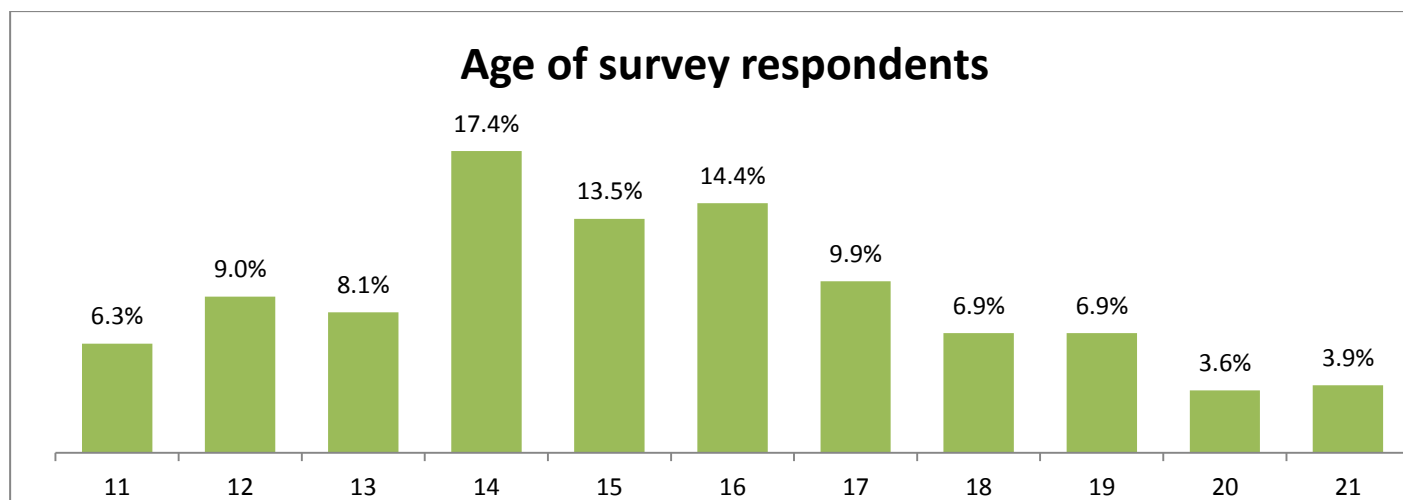
4.2 Demographics

- 4.2.1 A series of demographic questions were asked at the start of the survey. These were designed to allow for comparison of survey results between different demographic groups.
- 4.2.2 The majority of respondents identified as female (214 respondents), with 116 respondents identifying as male and 3 respondents identifying as non-binary.

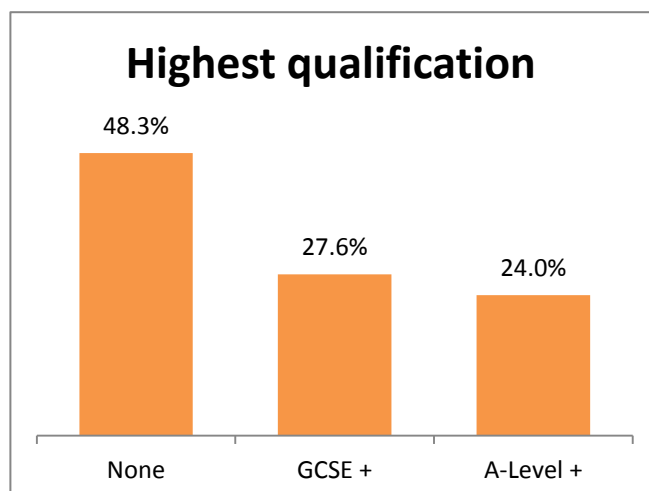
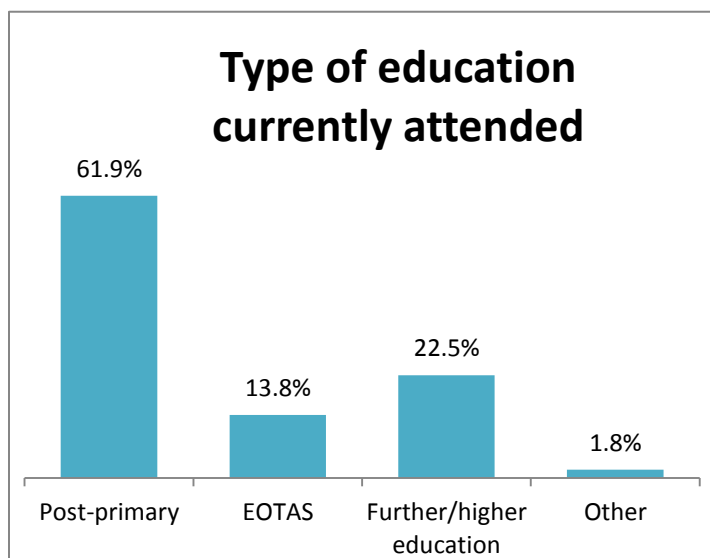


¹ 409 people accessed the survey and completed the demographics questions; of those, 76 respondents did not complete the substantive survey questions and therefore were not included in the analysis of results.

4.2.3 Respondents were grouped into three age brackets, with 136 respondents in the 11-14 age group, 149 respondents aged 15-18, and 48 aged 19-21.



4.2.4 As the scope of the survey was widened to include young people in further or higher education, it was necessary to ask respondents what type of education they were currently attending. Four groups were created with the majority of respondents (206) in post-primary school. 46 respondents were in Education Other Than At School (EOTAS), 75 in further or higher education, and 6 in 'Other'. 'Other' includes young people not currently in education.



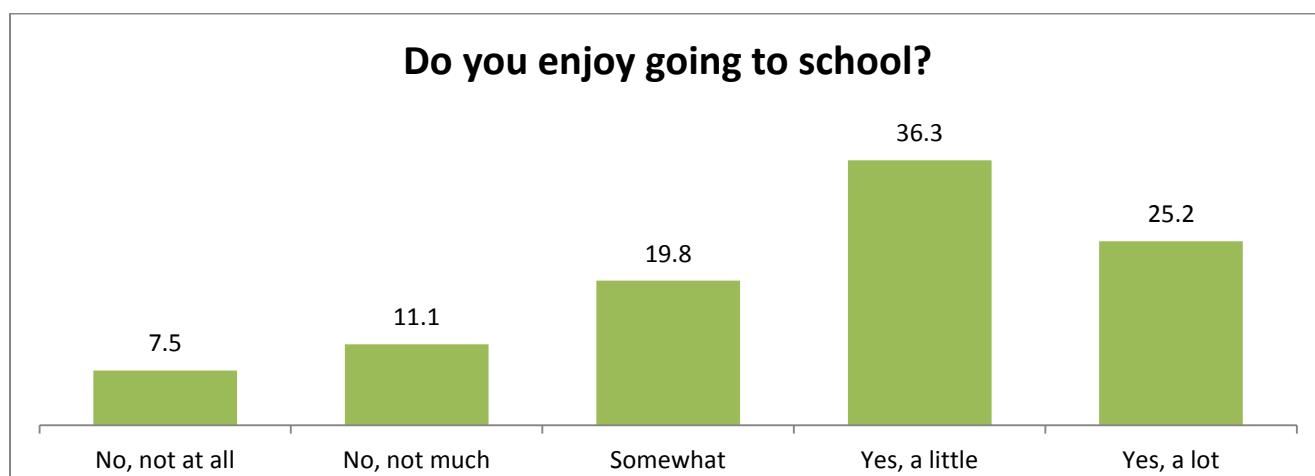
4.2.5 The final demographic question asked about the respondent's highest level of qualification. The majority of respondents (161) had no qualification. This reflects the younger age groups represented in the survey (11-16 year olds) that have not yet taken their GCSE exams. The remaining respondents were split fairly evenly between GCSE or equivalent (92) and A-Level or above (80).

4.3 Substantive survey questions

4.3.1 This section of the report will look at the responses to the substantive survey questions, providing both the overall results and a breakdown by demographics: gender, age, education type and highest qualification. This will provide an insight into differences between the demographic groups and also highlight common themes.

4.4 Do you enjoy going to school?

4.4.1 We wanted to understand how young people felt about the school environment and why they felt that way. Our first survey questions asked young people whether they enjoyed going to school and asked them to explain why they chose the answer selected. These responses were coded into themes which are analysed below.



4.4.2 The majority of young people said that they enjoyed going to school either 'a little' or 'a lot' (205, 61.1%), with a minority responding 'No, not much' or 'No, not at all' (62, 18.6%).

4.4.3 The top three reasons for enjoying going to school were:

1. **The social aspect of school** – including both friends and teachers (153, 71.8%)
"I loved the social aspect of school meeting up with friends, building relationships with peers and teachers"
2. **Learning** - They enjoy learning and like the subjects they are learning (85, 39.9%)
"Since starting EOTAS I feel that I am being listened to more and I have more opportunities to study subjects that suit what I want to do in the future"
3. **Good teachers** – both in terms of relationships and learning support (20, 9.4%)
"Teachers always willing to go the extra mile for the students; they made learning interesting"

4.4.4 The top three reasons for not enjoying going to school were:

1. **Workload** - There is a lot of work and it can be very stressful (58, 38.2%)
"Sometimes the work load is too much and this causes unnecessary added stress"
2. **Unengaging** - School can be boring and learning can be repetitive (28, 18.4%)
"The classes [are] boring, doing the same work over and over again"
3. **Mental health support** - There is a lack of support for young people's mental health and the impact of bullying (25, 16.4%)
"Little support for mental health, blame the victim for bullying"

4.5 Gender

4.5.1 Non-binary respondents have been removed from this analysis due to low numbers (three respondents). When the responses are broken down by gender, the results are consistent for the multiple choice question and the reasons for enjoying going to school. However, when looking at why young people do not enjoy going to school, there are notable differences in the top three reasons provided by girls and boys.

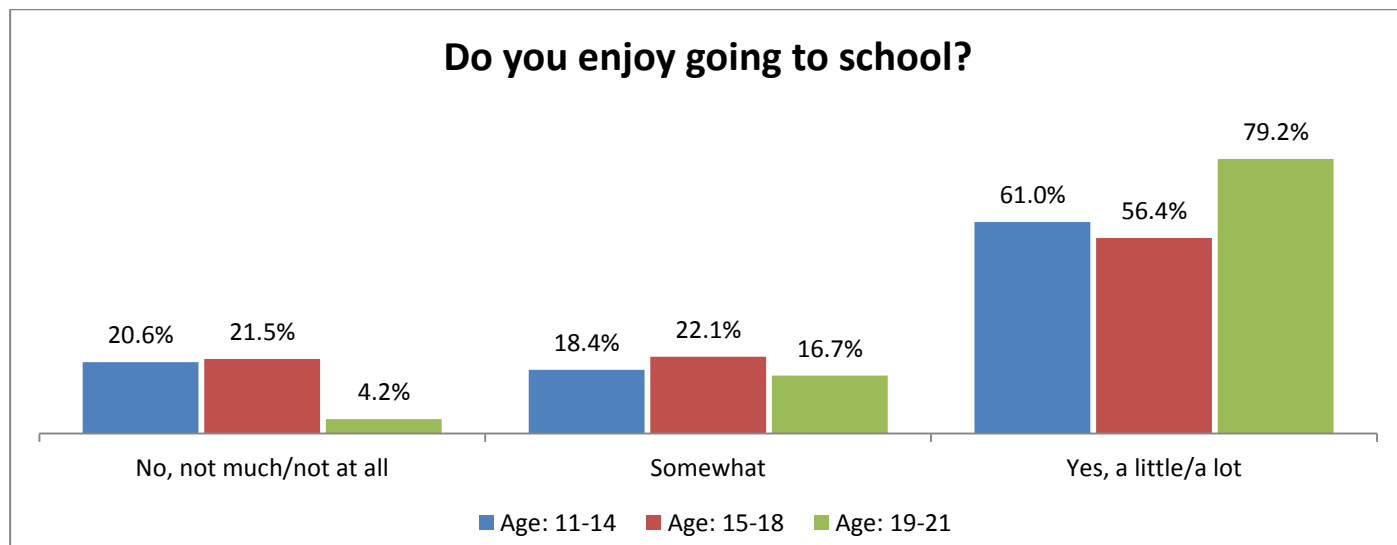
4.5.2 *Top three reasons for not enjoying going to school (by gender)*

<i>Girls</i>	<i>Boys</i>
1. There is a lot of work and it can be very stressful	1. School can be boring and repetitive
2. Early morning starts	2. There is a lot of work and it can be very stressful
3. Bullying and a negative impact on mental health	3. Bullying and a negative impact on mental health

4.5.3 The top concern for girls is the high volume of work and stress in school, followed by the negative impact of early morning starts; whereas the top concern reported by boys was that school can be boring and repetitive, while work and stress was the second concern. Bullying and the impact on mental health was the third concern for both girls and boys.

4.6 Age

4.6.1 Three age brackets were created to reflect the different stages in education: 11-14 for those young people in Years 8-10, who have not yet started GCSE preparations; 15-18 to capture Years 11-14, young people who are in their GCSE and A-Level years; and 19-21 for young people who have left post-primary school and who may be in further or higher education.



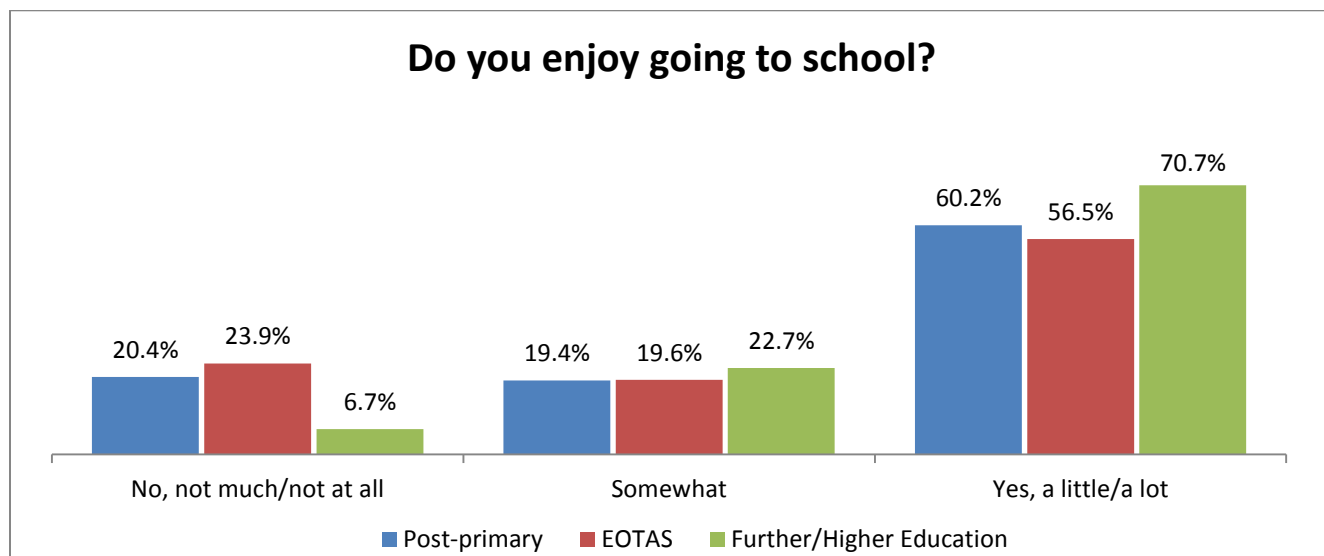
4.6.2 Young people aged 19-21 were much more positive about their experience, with 79.2% reporting that they enjoy going to school 'a little' or 'a lot'; this is the highest satisfaction across all demographic groups. Conversely, only a slight majority (56.4%) of pupils aged 15-18 said they enjoyed going to school 'a little' or 'a lot', with 21.5% saying they did not enjoy going to school ('not much' or 'not at all').

4.6.3 While the top three reasons given for enjoying going to school was consistent across all age groups, young people aged 15-18 were the only age group to mention their future goals as a reason for enjoying school in their responses.

4.6.4 When looking at why young people do not enjoy going to school, the high volume of work and stress was the top issue across all age groups. However, early morning starts were a more prominent issue for the 15-18 age group (second most common answer), and 11-14 year olds were more likely to mention studying subjects they do not like (third most common answer).

4.7 Education type

4.7.1 Four groups were created for the type of education currently attended: Post-primary, Education Other Than At School (EOTAS), Further/Higher Education and 'Other' (including those currently not in education). Due to the low number of respondents in the 'Other' category, that group is not included in the analysis.



4.7.2 Young people attending EOTAS reported feeling most negative about their experience attending school compared with all other demographic groups, with 23.9% of young people in EOTAS saying that they did not enjoy going to school ('not much' or 'not at all'), while only 6.7% of young people attending further or higher education said the same.

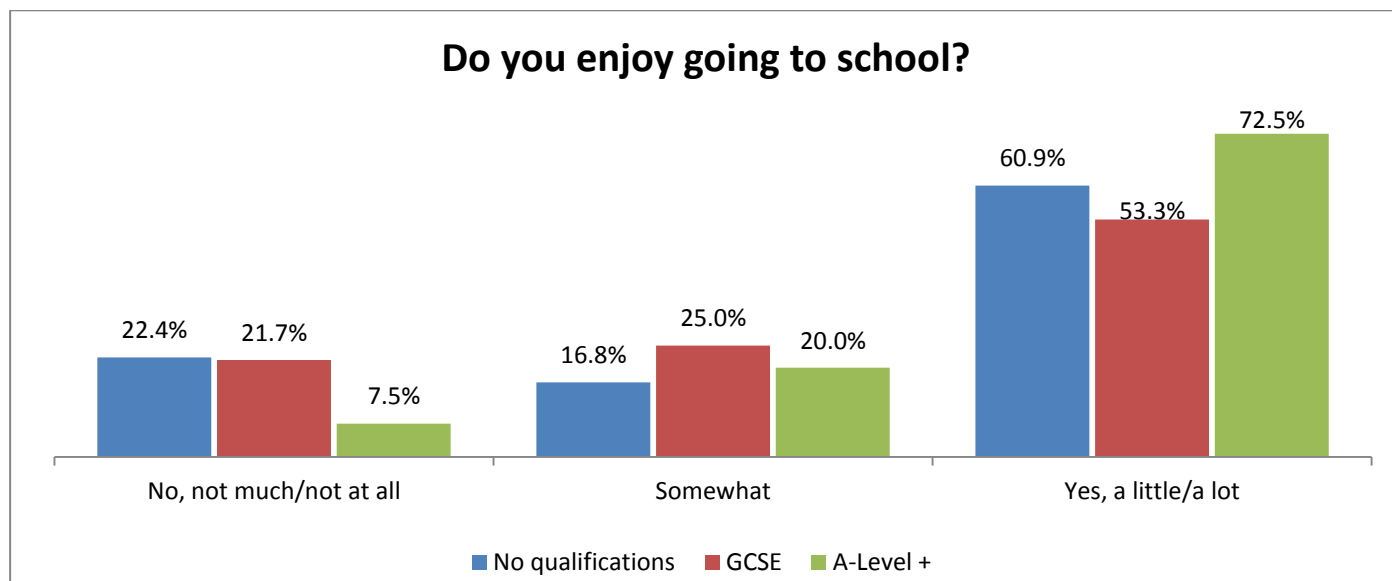
4.7.3 While the top reason for enjoying going to school was consistent across all education types (the social aspect of school), enjoyment of learning and subject choice was the second reason given for post-primary and further/higher education students, whereas young people attending EOTAS focused on good teachers. There were considerable differences by education type when young people outlined their reasons for not enjoying going to school with variation between all education types.

4.7.4 *Top three reasons for not enjoying going to school (by education type)*

<i>Post-primary</i>	<i>EOTAS</i>	<i>Further/higher education</i>
1. Lots of work/stressful	1. Boring/repetitive	1. Lots of work/stressful
2. Boring/repetitive	2. Lots of work/stressful	2. Bullying/mental health
3. Bullying/mental health	3. Early morning starts	3. Early morning starts

4.8 Highest qualification

4.8.1 Respondents were sorted into three groups based on their highest qualification. No qualifications (reflecting the younger age group of respondents), GCSE or equivalent, and A-Level or above, including qualifications equivalent to A-Levels and further or higher education qualifications.

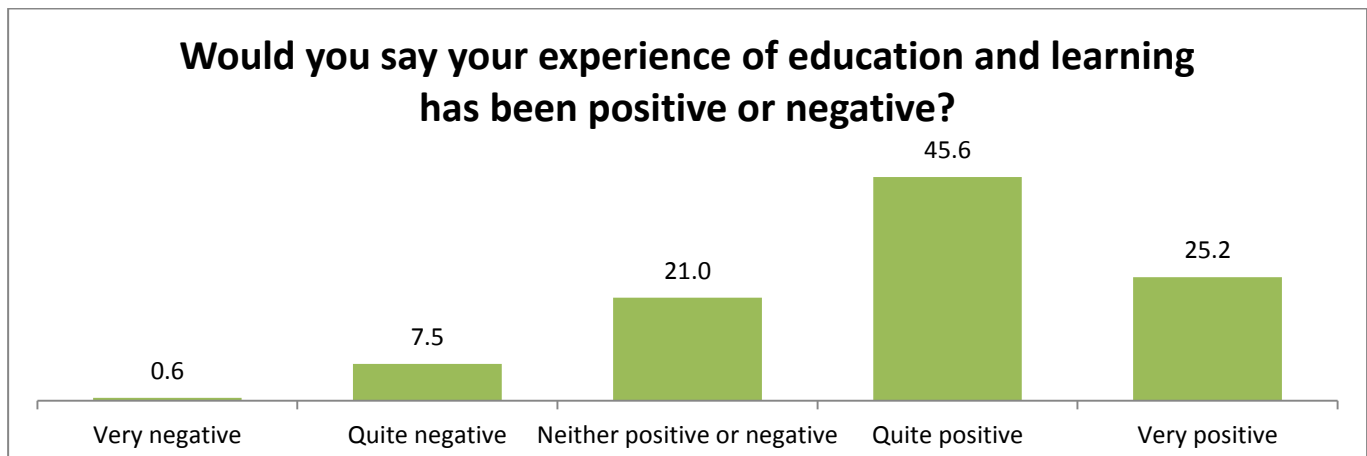


4.8.2 It is notable that the pattern of results analysed by education type, mirror those seen in the age breakdown.

4.8.3 The top three reasons provided for enjoying going to school are consistent across the different education types. However, the results were more mixed when looking at the top three reasons for not enjoying going to school. The top reason (high volume of work and stress) was the same across all groups, however bullying and negative mental health impact was the second reason given by those with no qualifications and those with A-Levels or above. For young people with GCSE qualifications, the second reason was that school is boring or repetitive.

4.9 Would you say your experience of education and learning has been positive or negative?

4.9.1 With this question we wanted to understand what young people's experience of education and learning in general has been like, rather than focusing only on the school environment. The question highlighted that learning can happen outside school, for example at home or extracurricular activities.



4.9.2 The vast majority of young people said that their experience of education has been 'quite' or 'very' positive (236, 70.9%). This is notably higher than the percentage of young people said they enjoy going to school (205, 61.1%). Furthermore, less than 10% of young people said that their experience had been 'quite' or 'very' negative (27, 8.1%). This is less than half the percentage of young people who said that they did not enjoy going to school (62, 18.6%).

4.9.3 The top three reasons for a positive experience were:

1. **Teachers** - Good relationships with teachers (110, 46.2%)

"My favourite teacher made an impact on me because she believed I could achieve more than I thought myself"

2. **Learning** - Enjoying classes in school and learning about new things (75, 31.5%)

"I enjoy learning new things and I have gained new skills throughout my time in education"

3. **School support** - The supportive school environment (28, 11.8%)

"Good environment and staff keep me safe so it's a positive environment and they help you get your GCSEs"

4.9.4 It is notable that while this question asked young people to think about their overall experience of education, and encouraged respondents to think about education outside school, the top three reasons for a positive experience all relate to the school environment.

4.9.5 The top three reasons for a negative experience were:

1. **Stress** - Education is stressful and the work is difficult (27, 28.1%)

"I associate learning with being incredibly stressed. That's the only reason I've got to uni is by nearly sending myself insane with revising"

2. **Teachers** - Poor relationships with teachers or poor teaching style (22, 22.9%)

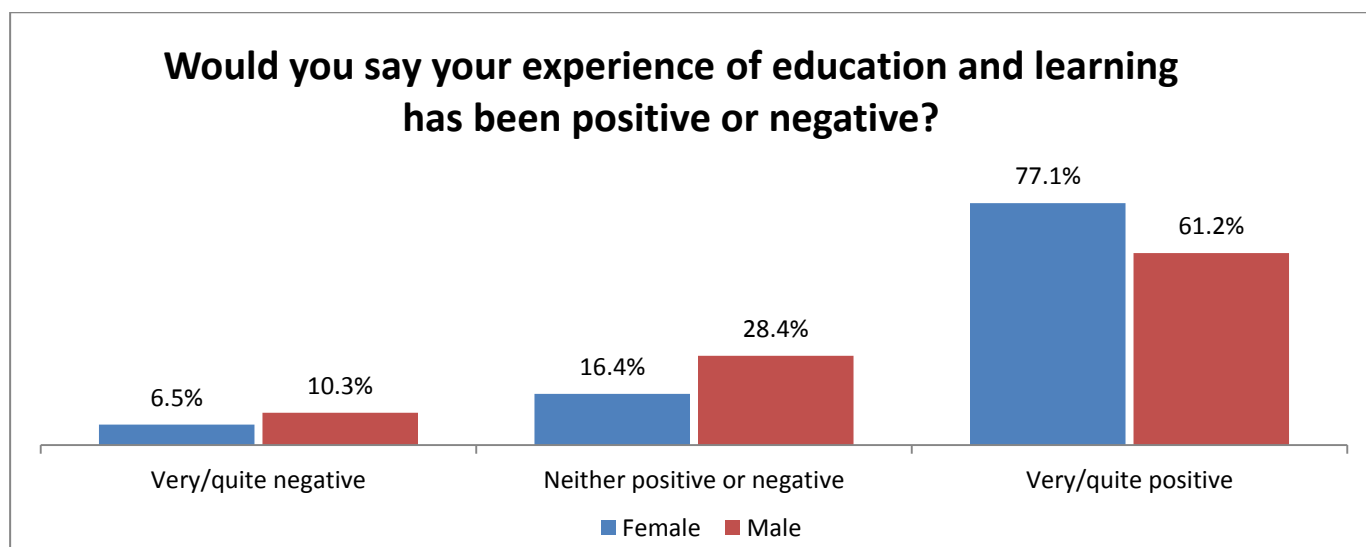
"Some teachers cannot help you at all and it feels like they don't actually care"

3. **Lack of support** - More learning support is needed (14, 14.6%)

"In secondary school they just put work in front of me and told me to do it without explaining. In EOTAS it gets explained properly and take their time to help me"

4.9.6 It is worth highlighting that the importance of the relationship with teachers and the level of support young people receive with their learning appears in the top three reasons for both a positive and negative education experience.

4.10 Gender



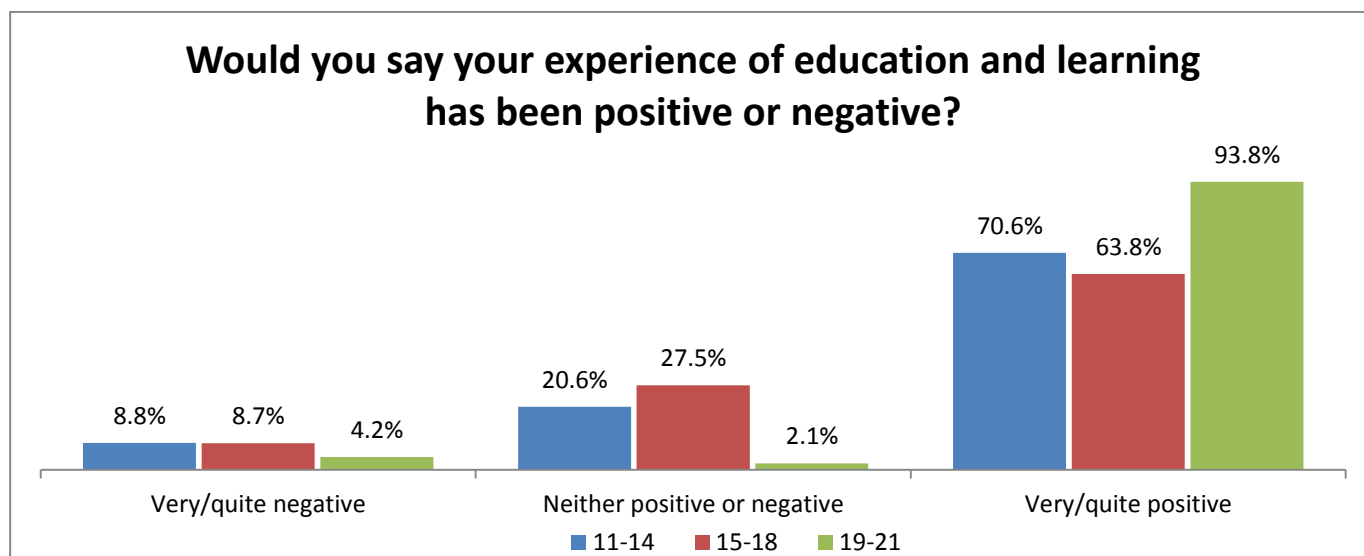
4.10.1 Girls reported a more positive experience of education and learning with 77.1% saying their experience has been 'quite' or 'very' positive. This contrasts with 61.2% of boys reporting that their education experience has been positive; a gap of 15.9 percentage points. This differs to the previous question, when respondents were asked if they enjoyed going to school, where the results were largely similar between genders.

4.10.2 The reasons for reporting a positive experience were consistent between girls and boys, however there were differences in the top three reasons for a negative experience. The top concern for girls was the stress and workload in school whereas the top priority for boys was the need for more learning support.

4.10.3 *Top three reasons for a negative education experience (by gender)*

<i>Girls</i>	<i>Boys</i>
1. Education is stressful and the work is difficult	1. More learning support is needed
2. Poor relationship with teachers or poor teaching style	2. = ² Poor relationship with teachers or poor teaching style
3. More learning support is needed	2. =Education is stressful and the work is difficult

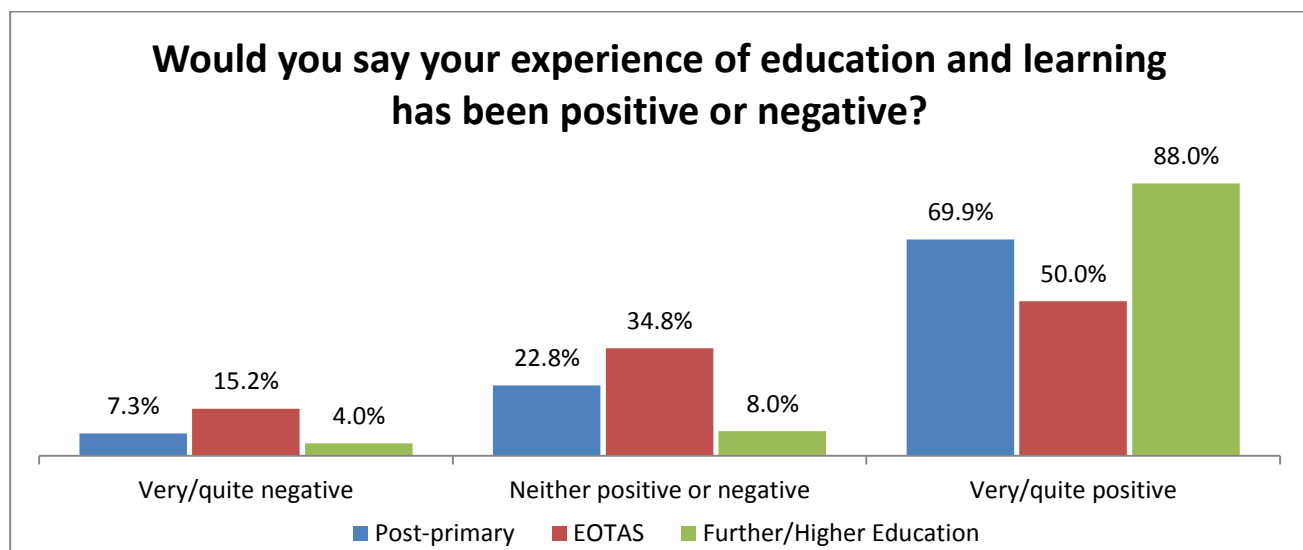
4.11 Age



4.11.1 Respondents aged 19-21 report the most positive experience of education and learning ('very' or 'quite' positive) across all demographic groups in this survey. There is a gap of 20 percentage points between those aged 15-18 (63.8%) and those aged 19-21 (93.8%). Given these differences, it is interesting that the reasons given by respondents are consistent between the age groups and also with the overall results.

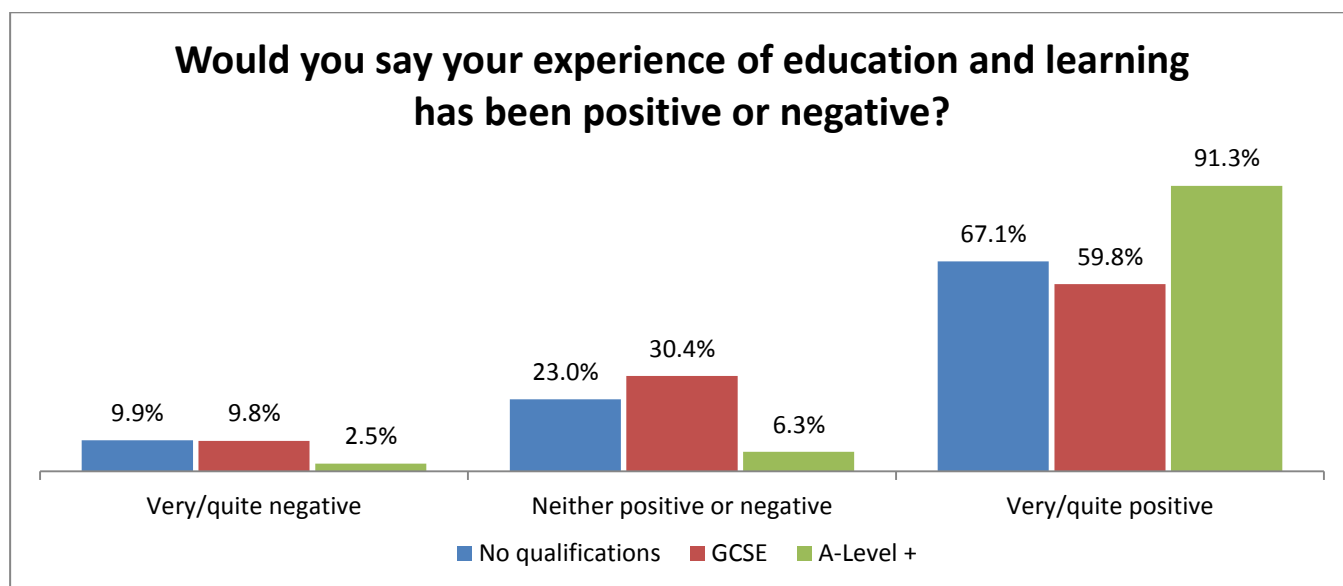
² '=' indicates that both reasons were provided by the same number of respondents

4.12 Education Type



- 4.12.1 Respondents attending EOTAS report the most negative experience of education across all demographic groups, with 15.2% saying that their experience has been 'very' or 'quite' negative and only half of respondents in EOTAS reporting a positive experience ('very' or 'quite' positive). This contrasts with 88% of those attending further or higher education reporting a positive experience of education and learning.
- 4.12.2 When providing a reason for a positive experience of education, young people attending EOTAS said developing a good relationship with teachers and a supportive school environment. The third reason was that the transition between education environments had been smooth and enabled them to continue and build on their learning. The top three reasons for young people in post-primary school and further and higher education were consistent with the overall results.
- 4.12.3 When looking at reasons for a negative experience of education and learning, the top reasons provided by respondents were consistent across education types, and with the overall results.

4.13 Highest Qualification



4.13.1 Respondents with A-Level qualifications or above reported the most positive experience of education with 91.3% saying their experience was 'very' or 'quite' positive. Young people with no qualifications reported a more positive experience of education (67.1%) than those who had GCSE qualifications or equivalent (59.8%).

4.13.2 When providing reasons for a positive experience of education, the top three reasons were consistent across the education types. When looking at reasons for a negative experience of education and learning, the top three reasons were similar but mixed across the groups.

4.13.3 Top three reasons for a negative education experience (by highest qualification)

No qualifications	GCSE or equivalent	A-Level or above
1. =Stressful/difficult work	1. Stressful/difficult work	1. Poor teacher relationship/style
1. =Poor teacher relationship/style	2. Poor teacher relationship/style	2. Stressful/difficult work
3. More support needed	3. Early morning starts	3. More support needed

4.14 *What are the things that you like about learning and education in Northern Ireland?*

4.14.1 This question was designed to give young people an opportunity to highlight the aspects of education in Northern Ireland that they feel works well. We wanted to hear about what young people feel makes education a more interesting, enjoyable and engaging experience. 286 respondents provided an answer to this question.

4.14.2 The top three areas that young people mentioned in their responses were:

1. **Relationships** with their teachers, friends and the school (92, 32.2%)

"The relationship between myself and my teachers has always been very good, I felt they cared about me and not simply what grade I may achieve"

2. **Good curriculum content** and range of subjects (56, 19.6%)

"I like the wide ranging curriculum and how it is not just Maths and English. I believe that there is a subject for everyone to excel at"

3. **Support** from school and teachers is provided when needed, including both learning support and mental health support (36, 12.6%)

"The support offered in school has helped me get through it"

4.15 Gender

4.15.1 When the responses are broken down by gender, the top two reasons given by both groups were consistent with the overall results above, however the third reason for girls was support from the school and teachers when needed, whereas having the opportunity to do practical or interactive work in class was more important for boys.

4.16 Age

4.16.1 There were no notable differences when the results were analysed by age group.

4.17 Education Type

4.17.1 The top three priorities were the same for young people in post-primary school and further and higher education, and consistent with the overall results. This was similar for young people in EOTAS, whose top two priorities were consistent with other groups, however the third priority for young people attending EOTAS was smaller classes and group work.

4.18 Highest Qualification

4.18.1 There is similarity in response between the groups in this category, however support in school was a higher priority for those with GCSE qualifications than the other groups.

4.18.2 *Top three things young people like about education (by highest qualification)*

<i>No qualifications</i>	<i>GCSE or equivalent</i>	<i>A-Level or above</i>
1. Relationships	1. Relationships	1. Relationships
2. Good curriculum	2. Support in school	2. Good curriculum
3. =Practical/interactive work	3. Good curriculum	3. Practical/interactive work
3. =Support in school		

4.19 *What would you change about education and school in Northern Ireland?*

4.19.1 Finally, we wanted to give young people an opportunity to talk about the things they do not like about education in Northern Ireland, what they would change and what would provide a better education experience. 286 respondents provided an answer to this question.

4.19.2 The top three responses given by young people were:

1. **Less work and pressure** on exam performance, therefore less stress (72, 25.2%)
"School should be an enjoyable part of growing up but unfortunately, many schools are too focused on league tables and statistics than caring for their students' wellbeing and ensuring that their time in education is enjoyable and rewarding"
2. **More choice and selection** with the subjects that are offered in school, including more practical classes and life skills content (46, 16.1%)
"Have more variety of subject choice and learn things that will actually benefit our life such as sex education, lifestyle and so on"
3. **Teaching style** of teachers should be adapted to suit the needs of pupils (21, 7.3%)
"Teachers who don't understand kids with problems. I think there should be someone to talk to when I'm having a bad day"

4.20 Gender

4.20.1 When the responses are broken down by gender, the top priority for girls was less work and pressure on exam performance, whereas boys wanted more choice and selection for the subjects that are offered. It should be noted however, that girls were more likely to specifically mention adding practical work and life skills content to the curriculum than boys.

4.21 Age

4.21.1 There were no notable differences between the two older age groups (15-18 and 19-21) and the results were consistent with the overall results. However some differences were noted with the youngest age group. The top response for 11-14 year olds was more choice and selection with the subjects offered in school, while the second most common ask was for less work and pressure on exam performance. The third priority was consistent across all age groups - teaching style of teachers should be adapted to suit the needs of pupils.

4.22 Education Type

4.22.1 There were clear differences when the top three priorities for change were broken down by education type.

4.22.2 *Top three priorities for change (by education type)*

<i>Post-primary</i>	<i>EOTAS</i>	<i>Further/higher education</i>
1. Less work and pressure	1. More subject choice	1. Less work and pressure
2. More subject choice	2. Shorter class/school day	2. Teaching styles adapted
3. More learning support	3. Smaller class size	3. More subject choice

4.22.3 Young people attending EOTAS placed a high priority on shorter duration of classes/school day and smaller class size, while these issues did not come up in the top three for either post-primary or further and higher education students.

4.23 Highest Qualification

4.23.1 The response to this question was similar but mixed in priority across the age groups. Young people with no qualifications were most concerned with increasing subject choice, whereas those with GCSE or A-Level qualifications emphasised reducing the amount of work and pressure in education.

4.23.2 *Top three priorities for change (by highest qualification)*

<i>No qualifications</i>	<i>GCSE or equivalent</i>	<i>A-Level or above</i>
1. More subject choice	1. Less work and pressure	1. Less work and pressure
2. Less work and pressure	2. More subject choice	2. More subject choice
3. Teaching styles adapted	3. More learning support	3. =Teaching styles adapted
		3. =More learning support

5. FOCUS GROUPS

5.1 Format and context

- 5.1.1 Following the rollout of the online survey, development began on a topic guide for the focus groups. This was informed by an interim analysis of survey results and by our knowledge and experience of working with young people.
- 5.1.2 Through conversations with our services we identified five focus groups with young people from different areas and backgrounds in Northern Ireland. We specifically targeted services and groups that work with young people in areas of high socio-economic disadvantage.
- 5.1.3 While our preferred approach would have been to carry out all focus groups in person, the context of the pandemic and social restrictions meant this was not possible. The approach adopted was that the sessions would be held online where possible, and in person by exception where it was safe to do so and that was the most appropriate method to meet the young people's needs.
- 5.1.4 The focus groups were held between 19th November – 2nd December 2020 and format was as follows:
- Barnardo's NI Leaving Care Service – 7 young people, *online*.
 - Peace Bytes: Carrickfergus Academy – 4 young people, *in person*.
 - Peace Bytes: Online group – 4 young people, *online*.
 - Monkstown Youth Works – 7 young people, *in person*.
 - Belfast Model School for Girls – 7 young people, *online*.
- 5.1.5 More information about each service or group is provided in Appendix 3.

5.2 Demographics

- 5.2.1 When organising the focus groups, we wanted to target young people who may have had a more challenging experience of education. The online survey highlighted strengths of the education system and also barriers and challenges; it was important to explore these themes with those young people who may be most impacted.
- 5.2.2 Our focus groups targeted care experienced young people and young people who may have experienced socio-economic disadvantage. In total we spoke to 29 young people in our focus groups; 22 girls and 7 boys. The age range for participants was 14-21 years old.

5.3 Themes

5.3.1 Following analysis of the focus group discussion, five key themes emerged:

- Learning from lockdown
- The Teacher
- Achievement and assessment
- Subject offering and teaching style
- Mental health and wellbeing in school

5.4 Learning from lockdown

5.4.1 All young people that took part in the focus groups experienced the impact of lockdown in education; particularly from March – June 2020 when learning moved online for the vast majority of children and young people. This experience allowed young people to understand the role that the school environment and face-to-face learning with a teacher plays in their education experience.

5.4.2 The vast majority of young people (22 of 29) said that they preferred learning in school, face-to-face with teachers rather than through Zoom and Google Classroom.

"I've learned more face to face than I ever have online"

"If I'm going to school I think I'm more in a routine"

"School's just better because you get to be with all your friends"

"I'd rather go to school because I need extra explaining"

5.4.3 Some young people felt the pandemic had a huge detrimental impact on their learning and were worried about the long term impact on their education. Young people talked about not getting the same learning experience online as they did when they were in school. The lack of face-to-face time with teachers was emphasised as a huge barrier to learning remotely, especially when learning new topics or difficult work. In addition, many young people felt they missed out on practical, hands-on work which was not possible to undertake at home. Through this conversation young people talked about the importance of having face-to-face time with teachers as communication online is very different and disjointed.

"I wouldn't understand at all, I need a teacher there"

"Cus there's just some things that you don't understand that you need reiterated in a different way"

5.4.4 Those young people that said they preferred learning at home (5 of 29), highlighted that there were less distractions when learning at home and you could learn at your own pace. Young people talked about wanting to do the work because if "you didn't do it, you won't know it" when schools started back. Young people felt that pressure

and expectations from parents were better motivators than teachers – they didn't want to disappoint their parents and they felt it mattered if their parents were annoyed at them for not doing the work. Some young people spoke about their parents being involved in their learning at home and how that helped them progress during lockdown.

5.5 *The Teacher*

5.5.1 When discussing remote learning, young people highlighted face-to-face time with teachers as a key enabler for learning. Young people discussed what makes a 'good teacher' and different factors were highlighted:

"Listening to the class more"

"If they [young people] need more help, then give them more help"

"Having fun makes a difference"

"If you make mistakes, they don't look down on you".

5.5.2 A good teacher was noted as someone that helps you, both through 1-1 time and also in the classroom when students ask questions. Many young people spoke about teachers being interested in their subject area and how that "helps you learn the subject better".

"If I needed something or if I was to ask a question, she wouldn't shout at me, she would be there, she would be beside me and explain it to me"

5.5.3 Mutual respect emerged as a key theme with many young people sharing experiences where they felt dismissed by a teacher. One young person talked about how the way in which a teacher enters the classroom generally sets the tone for the duration of the class. If a teacher is annoyed or angry with the class straight away, students switch off. However, young people also spoke about respect as a reciprocal relationship where students must respect the teacher to get that respect in return.

"There's some teachers that if you give them respect, then they'll give you respect back"

5.5.4 When asked how a teacher would show respect for students, young people talked about being listened to and given a chance to take part in class:

"Not sending you out of the classroom before you even step into it"

"Give you a chance"

"They just ignore you half the time"

"If you're having a bad day and the teachers treat you worse, it's going to put you in more of a bad mood anyway and you're not going to be able to do the work"

5.5.5 Some young people also spoke about class sizes and how it can be difficult for teachers to give attention to all students in the class and meet their needs when there are 20-25 students who all need help.

5.6 Achievement and assessment

5.6.1 How young people are assessed in education has always been an important discussion when considering educational achievement, however it has come into even sharper focus this past year due to the pandemic and the cancellation of exams. Young people were keen to share their thoughts on this topic. Many felt that exams were not a good way of assessing a young person's ability:

"There's so much more to life than exams"

"It's just more stressful"

"You can forget stuff even if you're good at it"

"[Exams are] ten times harder and they have more pressure on you"

"No, because I got very high grades and I was not good at the subjects"

"You have your good days and bad days, like that day you mightn't remember anything"

"I also had a lovely Maths tutor and she helped so much, but when it came to the exam it just went right out of my head"

5.6.2 The stress of performing well in one exam was emphasised by many young people. When asked about what alternatives might work better, young people looked to coursework and teacher assessment. Many highlighted that continuous assessment is a better approach for practical classes like PE and IT. Some young people spoke about trusting a teacher's judgement even if they didn't have a good relationship with them:

"[With coursework] you're building up what you deserve over time"

"There's people who are going to be better at coursework and showing that they're good at a subject"

"I like coursework, it's not as stressful. You can just work away at it whenever you want"

"If the job involves practical work then have a practical exam or something similar"

5.6.3 There were also a smaller number of young people who felt that exams were the best way of assessing ability and knowledge, and that exams were preferable to coursework or teacher assessment as they cut out potential teacher bias.

"I don't like them but you need them"

"[An exam is] one big thing, get it over and done with"

"I feel like exams might work because you could have a teacher that's really biased"

5.7 Subject offering and teaching style

5.7.1 The range of subjects offered in school emerged as a key theme in the online survey and we wanted to explore this topic further with young people in our focus groups. Specifically, what makes young people interested and work hard to achieve in different subjects and why they choose the subjects they are studying. Teachers were often cited as a key reason for young people enjoying a subject and wanting to do well in that class.

"The teacher is interested in it as well and teaches in a way that engages you"

5.7.2 Young people enjoyed being able to choose the subjects that they study. Many young people spoke about their future career goals when choosing their subjects.

"I looked at the subjects I liked doing, and then looked at the careers you could do from those subjects and so I picked them based on what career I would like the most and what subjects"

"You actually want to do them so you are more willing to do the work and put more effort into it all"

"You pick stuff you're interested in. It makes you want to do the work because you're interested in the topic"

5.7.3 Being able to choose subjects that would help with their future goals was a motivating factor for many young people to pay attention in class and achieve good grades. However some young people noted that students cannot pick subjects at A-Level if they haven't studied them at GCSE, and often students are not made aware of that when making their GCSE choices. Some young people said that having a goal helps them focus in class.

5.7.4 The opposite situation was also highlighted by a number of young people, where they were not able to study the subjects that they preferred due to lack of offering in their school.

"That was my problem because I was put into subjects that I didn't really like so I didn't feel as motivated to try and achieve"

"It won't get you where you want in the future"

*"In school you have all these different subjects that have nothing to do with what you want to do. You go to the Tech, you pick what **you** want to do and you just study that, rather than having these five other topics on top of you"*

"That's why I prefer college, because I can do something that I actually enjoy"

5.8 Future goals

5.8.1 Young people also spoke about the subjects they would like to see offered which are currently missing from the curriculum. Many young people highlighted Careers as an important subject which at the very least should provide young people with guidance before making decisions about GCSE subjects. In some schools only certain students can attend the Careers class while other schools don't offer Careers at all. Young people felt strongly that all students should have access to this support and guidance. One young person said that even a careers day or information night would help.

5.8.2 Another area that young people would like to learn about was life skills and practical work. Topics that were mentioned included budgeting, paying bills, mortgages, applying for jobs, writing a CV, car breakdowns and general life skills:

"When you leave school, you're kinda like - 'How do I adult? How do I be an adult?'"

"Well, yeah. Look at Maths - Pythagoras' Theorem, when have I needed that?"

"I'll have my own house now ... I have to deal with bills and stuff, and I never learnt anything about that"

"I think there should be more cooking classes because I can burn a pot noodle. There's a lot of stuff they teach you that you don't need, and the stuff you need to know, you just don't know"

5.8.3 One focus group spoke about their experience of gender stereotyping when discussing subject choices in their school – boys are guided towards car mechanics and girls are directed towards hairdressing. They felt strongly that this should not be the case.

5.9 Mental health and wellbeing in school

5.9.1 All young people, in every focus group, felt strongly that there was not enough support in school for mental health and wellbeing:

"It's just not really talked about"

"I've seen people suffer because of school ... there's not enough help"

"I feel like schools just ignore it"

"We do a whole lot for mental health week but when it comes to it, like a child goes up to one of the teachers, and then they pass it straight on to someone that's not even in the school"

"It's sorta like, 'You're going to be ok but get your homework done'"

5.9.2 One young person described being referred to CAMHS where there was a long waiting list and when they finally got an appointment, it was cancelled twice. Other young people in the group described a similar experience. This was a major area of concern for all young people and they felt that the lack of support from the school and teachers impacted on their ability learn in class and achieve.

"You can't focus because you just keep thinking about everything else that's going on"

"How are you meant to thrive as a person if you feel like you can't even function?"

"I think if you have loads to talk about, but no-one to talk to about it, because you're thinking about that stuff all the time you don't know how to learn, you can't take other stuff in"

"Sometimes you just get yourself into a mind-set, like I'm not doing this, it's just making it worse, I'm just going home, I'm not gonna learn. You're stopping yourself from wanting to learn and you don't do it"

"You can't concentrate when things are on your mind"

"I'm in the lower classes because last year I had really bad mental health and I couldn't concentrate. I can't concentrate now because of the classes I've been put in so I'm just failing class now"

5.9.3 Young people discussed what mental health support was currently offered in their school. Many young people said that they weren't aware of any support provided in school. Other young people were aware of counselling sessions available but weren't sure how to avail of them. Some felt that if you choose to go to a counselling session during school time, all the other students would know that you were going to counselling. Many young people felt that there is still a stigma attached to needing support with mental health.

"The only thing about the counsellors was like everyone knew where you were going. The teacher would come in and call you out and everyone knew exactly where you were going and what was happening".

"It was advertising like 'this person's getting counselling'"

5.9.4 One young person described how it worked in their school – if you had a panic attack, you are put in an empty classroom by yourself and told to calm down. There is no follow up support and you are expected to return to class. There was concern

among young people that academics and achievement is prioritised over their mental health:

"They're more worried about your academic progress than you as a person, like your mental health"

"Just concentrate on your work, you'll be fine"

"I explained loads of times about triggers in classes and he just would go 'it doesn't affect me so it's obviously not going to affect you'"

"[Teacher's attitude] If you can't concentrate, that's your own fault"

5.9.5 There were also some concerns raised around the way schools approach mental health support and the lack of confidentiality, especially if they did not want their family to know that they had asked for support. Some young people spoke about their feelings being disregarded when it came to referrals for support.

"I wouldn't trust telling my teacher something because they say they wouldn't pass it on but then you come in the next day and someone would be trying to talk to you"

"If you told one teacher ... it would get to all your teachers and then it would get to your house"

5.10 Additional themes:

5.10.1 **Transitions** – During the focus group with young people in Barnardo's Leaving Care Service, transitions between schools was highlighted as a key issue for care experienced young people. Most young people in the group had experienced moves between schools while they were in post-primary school and they discussed the challenges that can bring:

"When you're moving at GCSEs [it is difficult] because you're in that school from First Year and you learn what way your teachers teach, then you move to a different school and they teach differently so then you have to learn that way"

"It impacted me because once you move you're more interested in staying in socially, whereas when you're in the same school for so long you're already comfortable there so you can actually concentrate on learning. Whereas my concentration in actual class definitely dropped each time I moved."

"You are learning stuff the same but in different ways. It confused you and threw you off a bit"

"I think teachers should be understanding about us – care kids"

5.10.2 **Streaming** – The practice of streaming pupils into different classes based on their academic ability was discussed in a number of focus groups. Young people felt that streaming was a very divisive approach that often left young people feeling less capable than their peers. Some young people noted that students in the lower bands were only offered lower qualifications, therefore restricting their options and potential at the outset.

"The bands aren't fair because it makes people feel like they're stupid ... like you can't achieve what they can achieve"

"I know everyone learns at different levels but singling people out ..."

"If you're in the bottom class, you feel stupid"

"I stayed in the middle but I feel like teachers focused on the top band"

5.11 Recommendations for change:

5.11.1 Each session closed by asking young people to share their thoughts on what they would change about education in Northern Ireland. Suggestions included:

- Making Careers classes available earlier in the curriculum so that young people are better informed when picking GCSE subjects.
- Giving young people five minutes to unwind at the end of each class before going to the next.
- A room available to all young people to gather their thoughts (a wellbeing room).
- A limit on how much homework you can receive per week.
- Learning support should not be dependent on an official medical diagnosis of additional needs, as that takes too long and is often too late.

5.11.2 Young people were also keen to provide suggestions about what schools could do to support them with their mental health. Some liked the idea of incorporating mental health and wellbeing as part of the school day or week through a 20 minute session in class, talking and learning about mental health and wellbeing. Young people wanted to learn how to support their friends with mental health challenges, how to be more understanding and different coping mechanisms. One young person found their form teacher better to talk to about things that were going on, like bullying but they felt it should be clearer to all students that you could go and talk to your form teacher. Others suggested allowing all young people time out of class if they are feeling overwhelmed:

"There are some people that ask to go to the toilet because they are stressed"

"I think everyone should have their own time out of class, for at least 10 or 15 minutes a day"

6. 1-1 CONVERSATIONS

Traveller Transition Service

6.1 *Format and context*

6.1.1 We originally planned to hold a focus group with young people in the Barnardo's NI Traveller Transition Service, however due to the social restrictions in place this was not possible. We were still keen to engage young people from the Traveller Community in this project as they often face barriers and challenges in education, yet their voice is rarely heard in the conversation. Therefore, a topic guide was drawn up for staff working in the service to discuss during 1-1 conversations with young people.

6.2 *Demographics*

6.2.1 The Traveller Transition Service works with Primary 7 and Year 8 pupils from the Traveller community. The service focuses on preparing children for moving to post-primary school and supporting them through the initial years. In total, five young people took part in the 1-1 conversations with Barnardo's NI Project Workers. All of the young people were female and ranged from Year 8 to Year 11.

6.3 *Themes*

6.3.1 The themes covered during the 1-1 conversations were similar to those that emerged in the focus groups. Given the nature of this engagement and the context it was carried out in, this feedback should serve as a guide for further engagement, rather than a definitive reflection of the experience of Traveller young people in education.

6.3.2 **Experience of remote learning** – Most young people felt that their experience of remote learning had been 'ok', however one young person said that they didn't do any learning at home during lockdown. Only one young person preferred learning at home as they felt it was easier, while the other four preferred going into school, with most highlighting the help they receive from teachers in school. All young people felt that they learned more in school than at home, even if they preferred learning at home.

"I think I would prefer going to school to learn. I am able to see my friends and get help from teachers"

"I prefer learning at school as I study more as I felt I did not do as much at home"

"At home it's just reading, spellings and maths. I don't like maths. In school, we get to do other things like PE and Art"

- 6.3.3 **Teachers** – Young people felt that a good teacher was someone who listened, supported their learning and explained the work. All young people felt that they get enough support from their teachers in the classroom.

"A good teacher is someone who helps when you need it"

"A good teacher is someone who listens"

"All my teachers are really good and always help me"

- 6.3.4 **Assessment** – Exams were accepted as a good way of checking someone's ability as it encourages them to revise. Some young people noted that they did not have any experience of coursework yet as they had not yet reached that stage in school.

"It [exams] makes me revise and helps me remember stuff"

"I don't do coursework at present but I think I would prefer that over exams"

- 6.3.5 **Mental health and wellbeing** – All the young people who discussed this topic felt that they could talk to a teacher if they needed support with their mental health. Young people said that if someone is having a difficult time with their mental health, it can stop them learning in school. They also had some suggestions about things that schools could do to help young people with their mental health.

"If people are feeling sad or upset they should be allowed to sit with their friends and they should get more time at break"

"I think schools could do more regarding bullying as this can affect anyone's mental health"

- 6.3.6 **What needs to change in education:**

"Bullying definitely needs to change at schools and I think we could learn a lot more regarding this issue"

"Better afterschool clubs like science club"

- 6.3.7 **What is good about education:**

"Learning new things and meeting people"

"Making friends, reading, having fun learning"

"I really like education as it has made me smart and taught me how to study"

7. KEY THEMES

7.1 *The impact of a 'good teacher'*

- 7.1.1 The closure of schools during lockdown and the move to remote learning led many young people to reflect on the impact that face-to-face time with teachers has on their learning and education experience. 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.
- 7.1.2 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.
- 7.1.3 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.

7.2 *Mental health and wellbeing support*

- 7.2.1 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.
- 7.2.2 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.
- 7.2.3 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.

7.3 Achievement and assessment

- 7.3.1 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.
- 7.3.2 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.
- 7.3.3 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.

7.4 Subject choice

- 7.4.1 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.
- 7.4.2 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.
- 7.4.3 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.

8. NEXT STEPS

8.1 *Engaging children and young people*

- 8.1.1 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.
- 8.1.2 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.

8.2 *Large-scale research*

- 8.2.1 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.
- 8.2.2 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.

8.3 *Co-design with young people*

- 8.3.1 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.
- 8.3.2 We are happy to provide the Expert Panel with any further information or analysis they may need from the information collected throughout this project.

APPENDIX 1

Online Survey: 'Education and You'

Welcome to our survey on 'Education and You'

Thank you for taking the time to answer some questions from Barnardo's NI.

We want to know what young people in Northern Ireland think of education - what they like, what they don't like and everything in between. It's really important that we hear directly from young people before decisions are made that affect them. Barnardo's NI have been asked to talk to young people aged 11-21 about these issues by the government's 'Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement' and when the survey is closed, we will share the results with them. Your answers will remain anonymous. If we use any quotes from you, we will make sure that you cannot be identified from the information we use. If you have any questions or would like to find out more about this project, you can contact Trása Canavan, Policy and Research Officer for Barnardo's NI - trasa.canavan@barnardos.org.uk.

You and your education

We are going to start with a few questions about you and your education so far.

Which gender are you?

- Female
- Male
- Non-binary

What age are you?

Are you currently attending school/education?

- Yes
- No

What type of school/education are you in now?

- Primary
- Post-primary
- Special School
- Education Other Than At School (EOTAS)
- Further Education (e.g. Belfast Metropolitan College, the Regional Colleges)
- Higher Education (e.g. Queen's University, Stranmillis University College)
- Other (please specify)

What is your highest level of qualification?

- GCSE
- A-Level
- Further or Higher Education qualification
- None of the above
- Other (please specify)

How many GCSEs do you have (A*-C)?

- 1-4
- 5-7
- 8-10
- 11+

OR

How many GCSEs do you have (A*-C)?

- 1-4
- 5-7
- 8-10
- 11+

OR

What is the highest Further Education or Higher Education qualification you have obtained?

- Diploma
- NVQ, Levels 1-4
- Foundation Degree
- Undergraduate Degree
- Other (please specify)

Your thoughts on education

We want to find out what you think of education in Northern Ireland - what you like, what you don't like, as well as what works and what doesn't. If you are no longer in school/education, please think back to when you were.

Do you enjoy going to school?

- Yes, a lot
- Yes, a little
- Somewhat
- No, not much
- No, not at all

Why did you choose that answer? *Think about what makes school a place that you like to spend time in, or what you don't like about going to school.*

Would you say your experience of education and learning has been positive or negative? *Learning can mean classes in school, but also work you do at home or extracurricular activities.*

- Very positive
- Quite positive
- Neither positive or negative
- Quite negative
- Very negative

Why did you choose that answer? *This might be because a teacher has made learning a particular subject interesting, or maybe learning has been difficult because you feel you need more support at school or at home.*

What are the things that you like about learning and education in Northern Ireland? *Tell us about the things that have helped you improve in school, that have made learning more interesting or enjoyable.*

What would you change about education and school in Northern Ireland? *Tell us about the things that you do not like, and what you would change to help you get the most out of school.*

Thank you for taking the time to fill in this survey. We think it is important that young people have a voice in the decisions that affect them and we hope our report to the Expert Panel will do that.

If you have any questions or would like to find out more about this project, you can contact Trása Canavan, Policy and Research Officer for Barnardo's NI - trasa.canavan@barnardos.org.uk.

APPENDIX 2

Full list of survey themes

Below is the full range of themes that emerged from each open ended question.

Why do you enjoy going to school?

- Extracurricular activities
- Fun
- Future goals
- Good teachers
- Learning/subject choice
- Like/love school
- More help at EOTAS
- Qualifications
- Small classes
- Social aspect/friends
- Supportive school environment

Why do you not enjoy going to school?

- Poor teachers
- Boring/repetitive
- Bullying/mental health impact
- Don't like school
- Don't like some subjects
- Early mornings
- Exam focused/pressure
- Impact of pandemic
- Lack of support, especially Special Educational Needs
- Lots of work/stressful

Why has your education experience been positive?

- Enjoy classes & learning
- Future goals
- Good relationships with teachers
- Mixed experience
- Social aspect
- Supportive school environment
- Transition between schools was good

Why has your education experience been negative?

- Boring/repetitive
- Bullying
- Difficult transition between schools
- Don't like school
- Early mornings

- Impact of pandemic
- More support needed
- Poor teacher relationship/style
- Stressful/work is difficult

What are the things that you like about learning and education in NI?

- Autonomy
- Continuous assessment/coursework
- Don't know
- Learning in EOTAS
- Extracurricular activities
- Free time during school day e.g. breaks/to do homework
- Good curriculum/subjects
- Home learning
- Learning/study techniques
- Nothing
- Practical/interactive work
- Qualifications/future goals
- Relationships with teachers/friends/school
- Shorter school day
- Small classes/group work
- Support when needed including mental health support
- Technology

What would you change about education and school in Northern Ireland?

- Better school resources/facilities
- Change uniform policy
- Concerns re. pandemic
- Don't know
- Don't like school
- Earlier finishing time
- Everything
- Keep mobile phone with them
- Later start to school day
- Less work/exam pressure/stress
- More extracurricular opportunities
- More flexibility/autonomy
- More mental health support
- More support with learning
- More/different subject choices
- Nothing
- Shorter classes/school day
- Smaller classes
- Teaching styles adapted to needs

APPENDIX 3

Focus groups: About the services and youth groups

Barnardo's NI Leaving Care Service provides a range of accommodation, care and support services for 16-25 year old care experienced young people, in their transition from care to independent living. There are two supported living accommodation units, one in Belfast and one in Ballymena. Young people have their own flats and work with staff on an individual and group work basis to address their needs and to develop their skills. The Floating Support Service offers support to young care leavers living independently in the community who have previously lived within Barnardo's residential units, or reside within the shared tenancy home.

Peace Bytes, a programme run by the Bytes Project, provides a 30 week programme that combines tech, innovative youth work practices and one-to-one support to young people aged 14 - 24 in Northern Ireland and the cross-border region. Through both group work and mentoring, the project aims to help young people overcome barriers to their potential, build their confidence and develop links with their peers from different backgrounds, in a safe and non-pressured environment. Peace Bytes believes the use of technology enhances youth work methodologies, and creates the opportunity for greater engagement with young people, raising the capacity of not only young people but the community as a whole, leaving a legacy of future leaders who will promote peace and reconciliation.

Monkstown Youth Initiative works to involve young people in building a supportive community where they are given opportunities for discovering and living out their potential: physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. On Monday afternoons, Youth Works has a drop-in for Year 8 and up. These are opportunities to come together for some fun and games and to meet with others in a safe environment, hopefully have a laugh but to learn about and discuss the challenges facing young people today.

Belfast Model School for Girls is an all-ability post-primary school for girls aged 11-19 in North Belfast. Belfast Model School for Girls is a fully inclusive, full service extended school, which offers a broad and balanced curriculum at each key stage, providing pathways to success for each child.

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