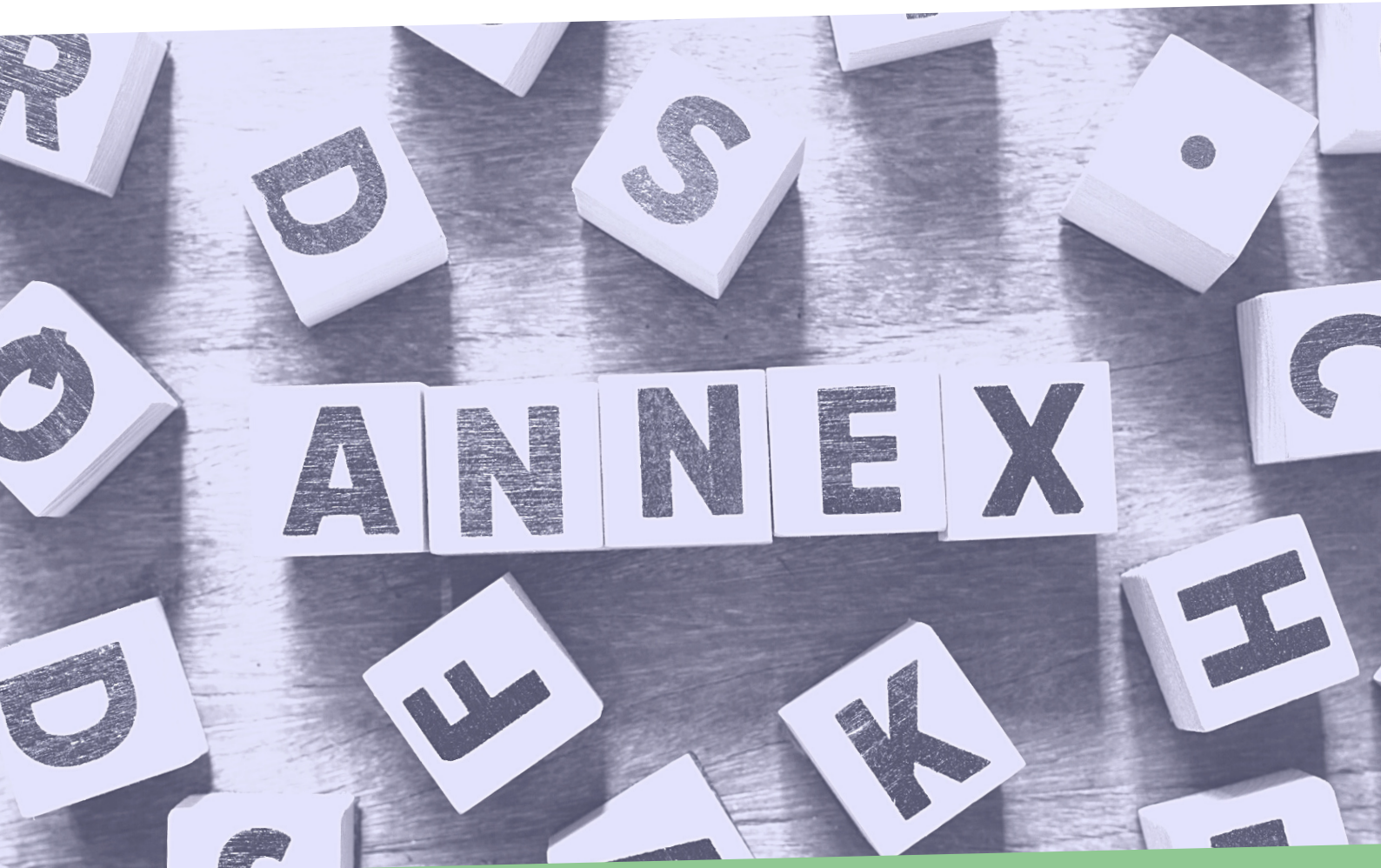


EXPERT PANEL ON
EDUCATIONAL UNDERACHIEVEMENT
IN NORTHERN IRELAND



a fair start.

ANNEX E

MAY 2021



Supporting the engagement of children
and parents:

NCB report to the Department of
Education Expert Panel on Educational
Underachievement

January 2021



**NATIONAL
CHILDREN'S
BUREAU**

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1. About NCB

1.1 NCB is a leading research and development organisation with a long and rich history of working in the children and young people's sector and, through a wide and varied portfolio of projects, aims to positively impact and enhance the outcomes for the most vulnerable children in our society.

1.2 We involve children and young people meaningfully in our work: we actively involve children and young people in all our policy, research and evaluation work and we are experts in the use of methods to do this.

1.3 NCB does not provide services directly to children and young people and is therefore uniquely positioned in the sector to bring our expertise in the synthesis of evidence to inform policy and practice.

2. Our understanding of your requirements and our approach

2.1 NCB was commissioned to support the Department of Education's Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement to seek, listen to and act on the voices of children and young people who have experienced socio-economic disadvantage, and explore the ways in which this experience has impacted their educational journey and outcomes. Our brief was to:

- a) Identify a sample of children who have experienced, or are likely to experience, socio-economic or other forms of disadvantage, within the age group 0-11.
- b) Facilitate a series of discussion groups to gather information from these children in relation to their views on education and learning, including: what works and doesn't work at home, in school and outside of school to support learning; challenges and barriers to effective learning; and plans and aspirations for education and beyond.

2.2 While we acknowledge that the focus of the Panel's work is on economically disadvantaged children, we also felt it was important to acknowledge the other groups of children and young people who,

evidence shows, experience unequal educational opportunities. A range of evidence clearly supports this approach, for example:

- Youth Scotland (2012) found that LGBT young people identified education as the environment in which they faced the most discrimination. 77% of transgender respondents had experienced homophobic, biphobic or transphobic bullying in school; 88% of those believed that it had negatively impacted on their education, and 42% left education as a direct result.
- CREU/Stranmillis (2020) reported that children from the Traveller community have generally negative experiences of school and many leave school with few qualifications and low levels of literacy.
- QUB (2015) reported persistently lower proportions of educational attainment for pupils with disabilities, pupils who have special educational needs, and pupils from a care background.

2.3 While our approach to the engagement of children and young people (detailed below) primarily sought to identify those in areas of social and economic deprivation, we also aimed to include children from the following groups in our sample:

- a) CYP with Special Educational Needs
- b) CYP identifying as LGBTQ,
- c) CYP from the Traveller community and Black & Minority Ethnic Groups,
- d) CYP who are care experienced or have experience of the youth justice system

2.4 Meaningfully listening to the voices of very young children (under four) requires a much more specific and hands-on research methodology, which was not possible in the timeframe and under the current COVID-19 circumstances. We therefore engaged with parents of 0-4-year olds as a proxy for very young children.

2.5 This report summarises the methodology undertaken, key findings from across the engagement activities, and details the key areas of importance which should inform the work of the Expert Panel.

3. Methodology

The following section details our approach to identification and recruitment of children and parents, the approach to engagement taken, and a summary of those children and parents who we spoke to.

3.1 Identifying and recruiting children and parents

3.11 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)

3.12 The table in **appendix 1** 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.

3.13 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.

3.2 Who did we speak to?

3.21 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.

3.22 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)

3.23 The table included in **appendix 2** provides a more detailed breakdown of children and parents who took part in engagement sessions, including demographics of the schools through which children were engaged.

3.3 Areas of focus for engagement activities:

3.31 All discussions were guided by age-specific topic guides, prepared in advance (**appendix 3**). Topic guides were informed by the following principles:

- a) While it was important to identify what didn't work well to support children's learning, we also felt it was important for children to tell us what does work, where they have learned best and under what circumstances. We therefore took a positive focus in the discussions with children where possible, to compliment the work done with adult stakeholders and support the next steps in addressing educational underachievement.
- b) In line with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, children and young people learn across a wide range of settings and systems, not just formal education. We therefore aimed to incorporate lessons from activities and approaches taken outside of formal learning, for example in the wider family, community, voluntary and statutory sector youth organisations.
- c) Learning begins from birth and even before, therefore in discussions with parents, we considered the antenatal period and home learning environment alongside more formal learning in the early years.



4. Key findings

The following sections summarise the key findings from discussions with both children and parents, and highlights areas which the Expert Panel may wish to consider in their work and reporting to the Department of Education.

4.1 Key findings: children

4.1.1 Learning at home: what works, and what would help more?

Children were asked to reflect on the things they enjoy doing at home, and that they feel help them to learn. Key themes include:

- a) **Technology:** One of the most common responses given involved activities undertaken on computers, smartphones, tablets or gaming devices. Many of the children mentioned specific apps, games or websites which they enjoy using and said helped them to learn (e.g. Mathletics, BBC Bitesize, Rockstars, Bug Club, myON literacy app, Education City) as well as educational TV programmes. These types of activities mirror the things they like to do in their spare time, therefore make learning more fun and allow them to work at their own pace.

Mathletics [commonly used maths computer game] helps you do maths related tasks and it is a fun way of learning.

Everyone can do Mathletics by themselves.

Children also mentioned using the internet regularly to look up information to support their learning and help do their homework. When asked what might further help them to learn at home (and in school- see below), technology was a common answer:

Playing maths games on your phone will help to learn better

Mathletics would help because sometimes I struggle.

- b) **The people around them:** Most children get help at home when they are doing their homework, with mum and dad most commonly supporting them. However, many children noted wider family members who spend time with them to help with learning, including aunts and uncles, grandparents, and older siblings.

My godmother helps me - she is a teacher

My granda (helps me learn) by walking the dogs with me

My older sister/brother help me with writing

This is an area where children felt they could benefit from more support. However, it is clearly a challenge for parents among their other priorities.

I think that my family would be able to help more if they didn't work as much

- c) **Reading:** Children specifically mentioned reading for pleasure as something that they enjoy and that helps them learn. This includes fiction and non-fiction books (e.g. Harry Potter, fairy tales, science books).
- d) **Relaxation techniques:** Several children said that they use relaxation techniques to help them learn better, and for many, there was an understanding that their mood affects how they work. Children also noted that exercising and playing outside with their friends has a contribution to make to learning.

Thinking of the ocean/sunsets or something to help you feel calmer and to focus.

Putting on music to help you relax

- e) **Homework:** While children aren't particularly happy with doing homework, they recognise that it is important and helping them to learn. Several children mentioned topics that they enjoyed, such as learning about the body, Egypt, learning the clock/time telling, and this, along with using apps, the internet, or worksheets printed off for them make homework more fun.

4.1.2 Learning at school: what works?

- a) **Staff support:** Teachers, classroom assistants and other school staff such as music teachers and playground supervisors were mentioned as being helpful and supporting learning. They support children in various ways, through listening and talking to them, helping them work through problems in class, or looking out for them in the playground. Children also reported having good relationships with teachers and helping them around the classroom.

Mostly teachers help you. And I help them - to clean.

You can ask your teachers how to help with work.

Putting your hand up and asking for help helps you to learn

The classroom assistant helps me do different stuff, like draw more

- b) **Making learning fun:** Lots of enjoyable activities were mentioned which also contribute to learning. When asked what subjects they enjoy, children reported a wide range, including maths, reading, spelling, writing and the world around us.

Some mentioned doing puzzles and quizzes, while others talked about the various computer games that they use to learn, as well as using the whiteboard which they enjoy. All of these activities make it feel like the children aren't doing work, yet they are still learning. Technology also brings some independence for pupils:

If everyone had a device to look things up like definitions, this would increase our independence

Extracurricular activities also contribute to the wider learning experience; activities mentioned included art, music, singing for Christmas, playing with friends and gardening.

We are learning when doing fun stuff e.g. learning the song.

[puzzles] help you learn, they are fun, and they make you think.

In the same way as at home, children also enjoy reading in school and would like to do more of this.

[I enjoy] reading books every day; we have class libraries but can't go into the big school library as much.

- c) **Techniques to focus:** As in the discussion on home learning, children recognise that they have to focus in order to learn, and they have various methods to help them do this. Several mentioned tapping their heads to bring them back to focus, while other techniques include using a fiddle toy to distract them, or thinking about other things.

Too much talk means we can't focus on work because there's too much going on around us and it's distracting. So I refocus by thinking of something nice.

Several children mentioned food at school as something that helped them to learn, and one mentioned having toast at school if they hadn't had breakfast at home.

- d) **Practice:** Several children noted that they know if something is hard, they can practice it enough and it will get easier. They also recognised that homework gives them an opportunity to practice what they've learned.

Practice makes you learn to do things better.

Doing things that you struggle with the most and doing them again and again [helps you learn]

Every time you do sums you learn more

4.1.3 Learning at school: challenges faced, and what would help

- a) **Teacher approach/attitude:** In the same way that strong relationships between staff and pupils provide support for the children to learn, children report poor relationships with teachers as a big challenge faced in learning. Some children reported stricter teachers who shouted at or disciplined children for reasons they didn't understand.

Lay back on the kids. Do not give them detention for no reason.

When teachers shout for no reason or give detention for no reason.

Teachers could help by giving a break to them [children] if they try hard and try their best.

If all the teachers could help you more than shout at you.

Others reported feeling like teachers do not listen to them, or ask about their home life. One girl said she was being bullied and the school had not helped to address it, which was impacting her work. Another noted that sometimes the teacher doesn't have enough time to support them if they are busy with someone else.

- b) **Difficulty focusing on work:** the classroom environment can be a challenge for some children. It can be difficult to focus on work when there is noise going on around them, other children are talking and/or the teacher is having to raise their voice.

When people shout, argue, or talk over each other it's hard to concentrate.

People tapping on tables during lesson, turning around to talk to me

During lessons I'd like to have no visitors e.g. opening and closing doors which is distracting

Others enjoy some background noise, or prefer a mix of quiet and noisy, demonstrating that not everyone works best in the same way.

I like a bit of noise, it helps me as it's a comfort that others are working

I would like them to play sounds of nature in class like waterfall, birds - helps me to concentrate

Another child mentioned struggling to sit still through the class, while another suggested that access to a 'time out' room would help them. One group noted that Friday afternoon is playtime, however they mostly take the opportunity to read a book quietly or colour in, and for some, this is quieter than usual and allows them to concentrate more.

Having a minute to think helps to learn

If on a Friday we had groups in different rooms for different work in class (not so many people in the room)

Several other activities were mentioned which help to focus:

Music countdown; before/after lesson to burn off energy e.g. high knees, fast feet/planks

Use Gonoodle [educational resource website] to do breathing exercises to get ready for learning

Technology was suggested as a solution for several of the issues raised above: noise-cancelling headphones to block out distractions, or laptops for each child so everyone could work at their own pace with earphones in.

4.1.4 Learning elsewhere: what works?

- a) **Extended family and friends:** When asked where else children learn, the most common response was from wider family, including parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles and older siblings, as well as friends and sometimes, girlfriends/boyfriends of older siblings. They support learning in two key ways; either by directly helping with homework, or by taking them out and about to involve them in activities.

My Auntie and cousin help me at their house/ my family members help when I see them/Your friend's house- your friends can help/ at my granny/grandad's house.

They help by doing homework with me

My Grandad has greyhounds and we take them to the track

- b) **Other key people:** Several children mentioned doing homework at their childminders, while another mentioned a social worker as being someone who helps them to learn. A few others noted that they learn by helping out at a parent's workplace (examples given include a shop and a hair salon).
- c) **Clubs, organisations and local facilities:** A wide range of sporting and exercise activities were noted, including football, golf, swimming, Gaelic, hurling, ice skating, riding bikes, judo and dancing. Children also mentioned attending art groups, speech and drama, youth clubs, church or mass, going to their local library, summer camps, and entering competitions such as a Feis.

Children learn several additional skills at these various groups and activities, such as online safety skills at youth clubs and groups, or CPR and survival skills at various sporting activities.

Entering the Feis - you have to learn a poem/song/musical instrument and perform on stage.

The activities are fun but you're also learning because you have to practice.

Within these, while the activities themselves are often educational, many children mentioned the staff, coaches or volunteers who work there and who help them to learn.

4.1.5 Hopes for the future

- a) **Hopes:** When children were asked to think about their hopes for the future, a wide range of career options were discussed. These included:

Teacher, principal, pilot, policeman, makeup and nails/beautician, YouTuber, musician, nurse, doctor, architect, interior designer, artist, life coach/therapist, electrician, baker, pizza man, hairdresser, work in Caterpillar (like my dad), detective, vet, space scientist, builder, rock star, librarian, footballer, carpenter.

Not everyone had a specific career idea in mind; one noted:

I'm not sure, it's just important to be yourself

- b) **What would help achieve these goals:** Children were asked to consider what might help them on the path to achieving these goals. Responses included going to university or taking part in further study, and getting help and support from other people (parents, teachers, wider family, other school staff). Most children recognised the importance of working hard and passing exams to help them.

Having someone who backs you up - family, teachers, friends;

Concentrating and doing exams

If I don't pass the first time I will try again until I get it perfect.

Complete college and be good at certain things; pass exams.

Study until you pass your course

- c) **Challenges and barriers to achieving goals:** There were also some common barriers and challenges foreseen. Several children talked about money being a barrier to further study, seeing this as something that can increase inequality and an area where more support is needed:

not having enough money, having to pay rent

not having enough time to do lots of jobs

[the government should] give out more scholarships for university, a lot of people can't afford this and it's not really fair, not everyone has the same opportunities as each other

Others mentioned the impact of missing school, through illness or for other reasons, and having to catch up on lessons.

If you are off one day and miss something really important - you might not get a job, you won't learn very much.

If you skipped school for a long time and you would just forget what you had learned.

Anxiety and confidence towards exams were also noted as a challenge they might face in achieving future career goals:

Getting nervous [before an exam] and feeling like you can't do it

I'd be new [in a job] and not know anyone

Another group discussed the potential impact that their actions as children might have later:

If you have a permanent record (doing something bad) it won't go away

4.1.6 General comments to the Expert Panel

Finally, children were asked for one key message to share with the Department of Education about what they thought would help children to learn. These messages are summarised under themes below.

- a) **Technology:** Children felt that technology plays an important role in supporting them in education, however also realise that not everyone has the same access to devices and internet connection to help them do this. This has been brought further into focus for them over the past months given the COVID pandemic and the use of online teaching that children have been experiencing.

iPads and phones in school for every child or to share would help

Have Zoom calls so you can ask your teacher for help if the schools are closed.

Virtual art class

If you don't have a computer you can't access online learning

Faster internet connection

Online dictation and spelling (to allow children to look up words they are struggling with)

- b) **Practical suggestions for schooltime:** Children discussed a number of ideas which they felt would make the school day better and therefore help them to better concentrate and do well. These focused on:

- the wider school environment, such as having a longer breaktime, adding flowers and decorations to the surroundings.

- the activities undertaken in class and outside, including more homework (a common response!) and having more silence in class.
 - approaches to pupil-teacher engagement, including finding new/different ways to explain things in class, and working on two-way communication, where teachers are listening to pupils as well as pupils listening to teachers.
 - Supporting wellbeing, for example running a pupil of the day scheme, asking how children are feeling, paying compliments, and implementing a 'rights respecting school' programme.
- c) **Practical suggestions for everyday life:** children also thought about the things that would help them to learn better outside of school, and again, comments here tended to focus on wider wellbeing issues, such as getting a good night's sleep, trying not to worry about the future, not being afraid to try new things, and working on good manners and behaviours.

Dream outside the box, to get there you have to go outside your comfort zone

Be confident! Put yourself out there and go after things you haven't gone for before

- d) **Support from people around them:** As in all areas above, the people around the child are a key source of support, and children's ideas for better helping them to learn include increasing capacity for those around them, both in a physical capacity sense, and in knowing what to say and how to better encourage and support children:

I would like an extra classroom assistant and more support from teachers

Somebody helping you and telling you what they did when they were younger

Support and encourage us! (adults, families, teachers)

People to believe in you, share your belief, then your dreams will probably come true!

4.2 Key findings: parents

During discussions with parents, a wide range of topics were raised. While the focus was primarily on education in the early years, parents were also asked to consider their longer term hopes

for their child/children, as well as any issues they felt stood in their own way educationally that they would like to be different for their children. While the target group of parents was those with very young children (aged 0-4), many of the parents who took part had older children, therefore reflected on their wider experiences in discussions. Responses are summarised below.

4.2.1 Learning at home: what works, and what would help?

Before coming into contact with formal education, children have already spent the very early years of their lives learning a vast range of new skills, and evidence shows the importance of this stage of learning in laying the foundations for later life. Parents were asked to reflect on their experiences of early learning, in terms of the home learning environment and the support and information they received in the antenatal period in regard to early learning. Common themes are highlighted below.

- a) **Activities and resources:** While not all parents were familiar with the expression 'home learning environment', all were aware that the activities and interactions with their child taking place at home in the early years will be contributing to their learning. Common activities considered useful for learning included reading or drawing, playing with blocks or bricks or doing puzzles.

I am just reading books. We are talking about what is there, what I am reading about. Or doing some puzzles, some blocks, something like that. Because he is too young. He's just two. I think that is good enough for him. Like playing with him and reading books.

My wee girl loves drawing. She couldn't draw at the start but after I asked her to follow my finger, she tried to follow my finger with the pen and now she can draw herself smiling face and she is drawing smiling face everywhere.

Parents interviewed came from a range of backgrounds, and discussed the differences in the toys and resources they had at home. Some recognised they were more fortunate than others, however all agreed that in reality, expensive toys are not necessarily required, and that children are happy to play with whatever is already around the house.

My wee girl had a tent of her own. I had to take it down. She never, ever played in it. And she made a tent from blankets and she played with this all day. Or even a box,

like Christmas tree box, she just went to it and she's playing with the box.

I am really aware that we are a resource rich family. And so we have lots of good things in our home to play with and to use. And I am very mindful of that. But I do think the thing that really struck me was the sheer satisfaction that she gets out of playing with things that are just pieces of rubbish.

Others reflected on how they are keen to get their children involved in helping them with everyday tasks as educational opportunities, rather than focusing on activities traditionally considered as play.

She wants to always wash dishes because she's seen how I wash dishes and she has her wee steps and I put her at the sink with a few plastic cups and she's washing dishes. She loves to do it.

Several parents discussed the importance of language in the early years in supporting children's communication and building on imagination, with common activities including singing, chatting and narrating everyday actions. However, parents also reflected on how the importance of this may not be common knowledge, and that it can be exhausting and time-consuming constantly chatting and interacting.

Along with activities comes the imagination of language. That language rich environment. So lots of time to talk. Lots of time to chat, sing songs, tell stories, building on the language.

I think that there's the motivation and the energy, and there's also the knowledge of knowing why you would do this and why it might be important. I think those are two things that are important.

Physical activity was considered important by most in terms of early learning, however some families do not have personal outside space. Rather, they make use of local facilities like parks and playgrounds to help their child get fresh air and exercise.

- b) **Knowledge and information:** Parents had different experiences in terms of the source and quality of information received to support home learning. Common sources mentioned include health professionals (midwives, health visitors, GPs), Sure Starts and antenatal education groups, however several parents noted they

received little information and have had to use common sense to work things out for themselves.

As a parent, I feel there's not enough talked about play and why it is so important. How fundamental to your child's learning it is. And it is not about getting them to read a book really early and it's not about formal stuff.

It is about just having your mind opened a wee bit to the things that are the quality things to do together, to play together, is important. There are messages out there about read more, do more numbers, do more... And I just think that that kind of 'do more' message is not what parents need to hear. They need to know what the quality stuff is.

The social interaction you get whenever you take your child out is really important... bring your baby out to introduce them to other people. That's not told to you by the health visitor. That's just something you're expected to know.

... I suppose there's things that you don't realise you are doing that are teaching them things. Like 'oh don't touch that, that's hot'.

Several parents noted that health professionals in the early weeks and months were primarily concerned with feeding and weight gain for baby, rather than supporting wider learning and social or physical development.

The health visitor would have told you to use building blocks and jigsaws, those sorts of things. But that would have been it.

The health visitor was very obsessed about feeding. So she was kind of on my case about weight gain. But not asking anything about milestones or about anything else.

One mum had been to Getting Ready for Baby antenatal group, which combines antenatal check-ups with educational sessions, and noted that the information provided there was very useful and covered many topics including home learning.

That was amazing, I have to say. Because obviously being a first-time mum, you don't know what to expect. And it was taking you through everything. And it was brilliant because it was all in one, so you weren't going to all separate appointments

Family and friends are a common source of information for new parents, however several noted that they didn't have this

opportunity and relied on existing friends or friends made through mother and baby groups to help them learn. This is a particular concern for newcomer families who do not have an existing support structure, and additionally do not speak the local language.

I've a close family, so I'm really lucky that way, because I've always got family and friends guiding me too. But there are a lot of vulnerable mummies out there that don't have a support structure with family and friends to give that guidance.

The provision of information is a key concern for families for whom English is not the first language. Much of the information available is not available in translations, therefore inaccessible. For those in Sure Start areas, more information and guidance were provided, and often Sure Starts working in areas with high numbers of BME families have support workers and translators to support these families.

For many families, despite the knowledge they have about home learning opportunities, time pressures in terms of work, looking after other family members and doing essential household tasks leaves parents unable to spend the time they would like to with their child to support learning.

I have found that I don't have the time to sit down and do blocks and shapes and things, unless I take myself out of the house.

I find it difficult to set that time aside without thinking I should be doing this or.. you know what I mean?

For refugee or asylum-seeking families, there are very specific needs and challenges in supporting home learning. Many of these families are homeless, living in a hostel or in a situation of overcrowded housing for extended periods, and have no space or resources to support learning. The opportunities to do all of the activities above, in and outside of the house, are limited as they struggle to cope with often complex living arrangements.

There is no proper learning environment. And there is poverty, and the child gets left behind in terms of things that other children take for granted like toys, a place where they can build Lego and all that kind of thing. And those things, all the children can have access to.. when you are an asylum seeker it's not available for you.

4.2.2 Learning at preschool

As the first experience for most children in terms of formal learning, the preschool or nursery experience is a critical one. All parents who took part in the focus groups had taken up places at preschool or nursery for their child, or intended to when their child reached the right age. None would have considered keeping their child at home until primary age. Issues discussed include the priorities for choosing a particular early-years setting, the hopes and fears of parents as their child takes their first steps towards formal education, and the activities that they feel contribute most to children's learning. These are summarised below.

4.2.3 Priorities for choosing preschool/nursery

When deciding on a preschool or nursery to send their child to, generally there were a number of options in the local area and parents were able to choose the best option to suit them. However, for others there was limited choice. One parent discussed her struggle to find a place for her daughter at preschool, noting the range of facilities available and the difference in quality, and felt she had had to settle for second best. Another discussed how asylum seeking and refugee families are often housed within a small area in Belfast, so find themselves competing with a large number of families to get a place for their child in the surrounding area.

For those who found they did have a choice of settings, the following were discussed in terms of priorities:

- a) **Location:** a preschool or nursery close to home or within walking or short drive distance was one of the most important considerations for all parents, in particular those who work full time and have to drop their child off on their way to work. One parent had a family member as a childminder, therefore she chose a preschool closer to the family member rather than home to allow them to be picked up directly by the childminder.

All mine [children] have just ended up being at the same school the whole way through because my childminder, it was one of her pickups and it was near and it was handy, plus it always had good reports.

- b) **Hours available:** several parents were limited by the preschools that had full time hours available, as this was the only way they were able to work and have their child cared for full time.

That was part of the reason why I picked the nurseries because they were full time and I couldn't afford childcare.

Several parents discussed the inequality created by this lack of full-time places available:

Nursery school isn't a given that everybody can get a full-time place. And the experience of full or part time children isn't equal, which shows when they're going into school.

For those who work full time, a part time preschool place means that further childcare arrangements must be made. This brings added complications in terms of practical arrangements (pick-up and drop-off), not to mention increased childcare bills to make up the shortfall in preschool hours.

I was thinking about the practicalities of trying to get them [children] from the preschool to the daycare and how's that going to work. I don't work in Belfast, I work somewhere else. And my other half doesn't drive. I have a thirty-minute commute each way. I can't do it. So one of the things I was looking at was a daycare that also had a preschool room.

- c) **Sure Start provision:** Most of the parents living in a Sure Start area had taken up the offer of Sure Start provision, and were pleased with this option. Again, these were close to home, and in addition, the parent (usually mother) and child/children were already familiar with the staff and setting, which brings an added layer of reassurance and general support for the family.
- d) **Primary school connection:** For some, the primary school they preferred for their child had a linked preschool which would guarantee entry to the primary, so they chose that option.
- e) **Family connections:** For those who still live in the area they grew up in, first choice is often the preschool or nursery they attended if it is still there (which for many it is). Several who had moved away expressed regret that they couldn't do this.
- f) **Educational approach and physical environment:** these were only mentioned as priorities by two parents. One chose a preschool primarily based on the quality of outside space available, as she didn't have outdoor space at home and felt her child was missing out because of it, however also felt the wider approach and leadership would be beneficial.

We have chosen a preschool that has lots of outdoor space, because we don't have that in our house. And as soon as I went to the preschool, I knew that that was the right environment that I wanted my kid to be in, because it was really nurturing, really green... And I could also see all the strategies. I knew that I was talking to two very well experienced nursery teachers who knew what they were doing.

- g) **Integration:** two parents specifically wanted preschool provision for their children that offered an integrated environment. They noted that this limited their options and required travelling a little further than the closest option would have been. They had the luxury of doing this, but know that this may not be an option for all parents.

We wanted somewhere that was more mixed, both religion wise and culturally. So that was probably one of our main motivating factors. But that limits where you can go.

One mother discussed how she had moved house after the school year had started, therefore had little option for preschool and had to take whatever was on offer- this meant taking a playgroup place rather than nursery (which she would have preferred).

Because of the move, my daughter was quite unsettled, and all that mattered to me was for her to be comfortable and settle in. But it was 'who has any spaces left' at that point. And it was really fortunate for me that their local playgroup had a space to be able to take her in. Later in the year, a nursery place came up, but I couldn't move her at that stage, you could see that she was happy, she was busy, she was learning, she was making friends.

4.2.4 Learning at preschool: What works, and what would help?

- a) **Getting settled:** Parents understandably had concerns before their child started preschool, given that for many, this is the first time a child is away from family for long periods of time. Concerns were commonly focused on how their child would fit in socially, if they would make friends, and be happy there.

I was afraid that she's not going to interact with other children or she wouldn't like the place. I had so many fears. But after that everything went so well and now I am very happy.

I think whenever the kids start school or preschool, everyone is afraid about their kids. How they are going to feel? Comfortable, or if they are going to have some good friends?

Several parents had a common concern around their child not being potty trained in time for attending preschool, and there were fears that this may impact the child's confidence.

For most, things worked out well, although a few found some initial difficulties in getting their child settled. Issues were resolved by working in partnership with supportive preschool practitioners. Overall, parents who took part in discussions were happy with the provision they had chosen for the children (for those with children of that age). There were a range of specific areas which parents felt are useful.

- b) **Activities:** The range of activities undertaken in preschool, and the creativeness of practitioners, was felt to really add to any learning taking place at home.

A lot of the exploratory play was really good. That's what he would have done in Sure Start. He wouldn't have got to experience stuff like that at home, because both my husband and I work full time and we wouldn't have had time to commit. They are great, aren't they. Playing spaghetti and stuff you wouldn't have dreamed of doing at home because you just didn't have the time.

However, there was some disparity between what individual parents felt should be happening at preschool, the types of activities and the level of learning. Some felt that their child should be having more formal learning, while others felt there was too much focus on 'teaching'.

Food provided at preschool/nursery was discussed as being an important factor, both for the social aspect in terms of children sitting down together and learning the routine of dining, and obviously for the nutritional value. Many parents would like to see this extended throughout the school years, as is the case in some other countries.

All of them having a wee meal. Even in the nursery, say it's lunchtime at twelve o'clock, you see them all coming in with their wee dinners and sitting down and having their lunch with the teacher. I think that's really important. I think a hot meal and them all sitting in a class, I think is important right up the whole primary school.

- c) **Uniform:** Parents generally like the idea of a uniform, even at preschool, and agree that it brings an element of equality to the children.

I think it's a very good idea because some children don't have enough money and don't have beautiful clothes, and other children have gorgeous clothes. So that's why it's better if everybody has uniforms and everybody looks the same.

Despite this, there were several issues raised. While most of the children wear tracksuits/jogging bottoms/tops rather than formal uniform at preschool, parents feel that the cost of official 'branded' sweatshirts can be prohibitive, and that a plain coloured jumper/jogger would be more affordable for all.

She's only three and a bit, and think it was £50 for her tracksuit, which I thought was awful dear. It had to be a branded tracksuit with the braiding up the side and school logo on. We could buy just ordinary ones out of Tesco. There's no need for braiding and stuff on them.

Several parents found it a struggle to get their child to agree to wear the uniform each day, and this adds to the stress of getting out in the morning. However, some also find that their child's preschool doesn't enforce the uniform policy, therefore undermining parents' efforts to comply.

4.2.5 Learning at Primary school

Some of the discussion below reflects the experiences of parents with older children already at primary school, while other parts reflect hopes and concerns of parents when their child reaches that age. Again, common themes are summarised below.

4.2.6 Priorities for choosing a primary school

- a) **Location:** As with preschool, choice of primary school is usually based on locality. Quite a few parents said their child would be attending the primary school they attended themselves, or a school that their cousins or friends are already attending. Many had chosen preschools/nurseries that were linked to a primary school so that they could ensure their child would get a place, and these are usually local.

- b) **Class size:** One key consideration for parents was the class size, with many thinking that a smaller class size would provide their child with a better educational experience. However, for many, this was an ideal scenario rather than a realistic option for them given the school choices available.

In the smaller school they have a small number of children in one class, so it's OK. Teacher knows what every child needs, but in the big school they have bigger classes. But I don't have that option.

My older son who was going to primary school, I choose the smaller school, and I will do the same with my youngest. It is better I think when there's not too many people, not too many kids in a class. The teacher will have more time.

4.2.7 Learning at primary school: what works, challenges and barriers envisioned

- a) **School starting age and school readiness:** Several parents who attended school in other countries noted the difference in school starting age there, and felt that children here are too young to go to school at age 4. 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.

I just feel that they were sort of left behind, that age group. Everyone was going on about kids doing their GCSEs, doing their A Levels and exams were cancelled. But the younger ones just lost out on so much.

The lack of flexibility around school starting age was a particular concern for one parent whose son was born several months premature, and who she feels is not at all ready to start school at 4, even though he is in the acceptable age range. The lockdown and missing out on the end of his preschool experience has added to what is already a stressful time.

I am really stressing about my wee son because I can see ... I can see my friends' children who were born the previous July, and these are big toddlers. My wee boy was born in the June so will be in the same year as those born the previous July, because it's based on 'born' date rather than 'due date'. But he's nowhere near the same stage developmentally. All I would like is to have the option to do a simple deferral. Just to go a year later.

Parents also had concern with the term 'school readiness', and were unclear what this means in reality for their child. They also noted that no child is the same, and given the diversity within a school year, felt it was unrealistic to expect all children to be at the same stage.

You've got children that are practically a year apart, apart from a couple of days. Children that are born maybe on the second of July and other children whose birthday is on the thirtieth of June. And suddenly they are all supposed to be 'school ready' at the same time.

- b) **The transfer test:** Although post-primary school is a long way off for the children of those who took part, parents are looking ahead and have thought about the issues their child might face. The transfer test 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 children are experiencing.

See the test now, I don't remember it being so traumatic. I sat my eleven plus. I don't remember it being this big thing, do you know the way it is now? Now I am looking at kids and I'm like, there's so much pressure put on them. Depending on what board the school is under, they have to sit so many different tests. I was like, how is that less stressful than what the eleven plus was?

One group of parents discussed the culture of additional tutoring for children to help them pass the transfer test, and felt this adds an additional layer of inequality to the education system, while also adding to the pressure on children. Parents feel it will inevitably be parents who are better off who can afford to pay for tutoring, and this will perpetuate inequalities in those who attend grammar school. One transfer tests (AQE) costs money to enter, which for some parents may prevent their child taking part.

Education is supposed to be free and equal for everybody and it's not. Because if you are going to grammar school you are from more of a privileged background.. Because you hear so many parents saying, oh my child has a tutor because she has to pass the AQE. But then I think as well, if it is not in them to pass it on their own merits, how are they going to cope with grammar school?

- c) **Homework:** Some of the parents in the groups had older children already at primary school, and had a discussion around the

amount of homework set. For some, this caused difficulties as they struggled to have time to support their child, leading to frustration.

Sometimes it's too much for the kids as well. Sometimes it's too much because the kids are getting overwhelmed. If you spend more than 45 minutes on the homework, I think the child can't really focus.

Others would prefer more homework; this was particularly noted by two parents who went to school themselves in Poland, and were comparing the Polish and Northern Ireland education systems:

But I will prefer more homework. Every time he comes back home he says he has no homework because he did it at school. In Poland, we had lots of homework. We were doing this for a few hours every day. Even on holidays and weekend, we always had homework. This is good, because it is training for our brain every day.

I agree... I would prefer more homework because the homework which my other son has, he does it at school and when he comes home he has nothing to do. So I have to tell him to read a book.

Parents agree that the type of homework given is important, with some discussing how perhaps just reading a book or helping around the house might constitute 'homework'.

It needs to be worthwhile. My wee girl, her homework is they've to read a book every night. Maybe a wee fairy story or whatever. So she does try to do that. But they don't be sitting slaving over history or anything. I don't think that would be useful.

- d) Extracurricular activities:** Parents are keen for their children to take part in extra-curricular activities, and feel that this contributes to a more rounded education. Primary school provides an ideal opportunity for them to try out new things. Sports were the most common activities offered, however not all children are interested in sport, and they would prefer a wider range of activities such as art or drama. Parents discussed the disparity in opportunities offered at each school, with some having a good range such as cooking, gardening, coding and film club, while others offer basic football or hockey.

I find as well there's a real lack of the arts in schools, especially at the minute, for children. When I was in primary school you got free lessons to learn an instrument.

Loads of us in our class played instruments. And I am a really big believer that that is key to an all-round education... it gave me lots more opportunities in life as I grew up, that I wouldn't have had otherwise.

Where schools do offer activities such as learning an instrument, the cost is a barrier.

I had wanted my daughter to sign up to play the flute. But it was something like forty pounds a month... no, more than that. Forty pounds a month for the instrument and then you had to pay for tuition on top of that.

There is a cooking club at school, but you have to pay extra, you know like a subsidy for ingredients and things.

4.2.8 Children with Special Educational Needs

Many of the parents who took part have had concerns or difficulties in terms of their child's development at some stage, and many were in the process of seeking advice or support for potential special educational needs. Again, some of this discussion focused on older children already at primary school.

- a) Assessment:** Common issues reported include speech and language delays, dyslexia, and autism spectrum disorders. Parents reported the assessment and statement process as being lengthy and complex, and discussed the disconnect between education and health services. Yet children cannot be provided with additional support until this process is complete, therefore children may spend a long time struggling, which can have much wider consequences on their education and wellbeing.

[my older daughter] was diagnosed with dyslexia and dyscalculia. But she would suffer really badly with anxiety and low self-esteem. But it was due to the dyslexia and it not being diagnosed and she always thought, I'm stupid. She went through most of primary school, and was only picked up for support in P7.

Often, parents or preschool staff notice a concern in the very early years, yet many children are still awaiting a decision well into primary school. One parent shared her early concerns about her child having dyslexia, and having spent several years trying

to have her assessed, paid for a private assessment. Despite this, her child still receives no additional support.

We paid for the assessment, got it done and then the Education Authority wouldn't recognise it. They'll only recognise it and give you support if the school psychologist gives you the report.

- b) Provision of support:** Other parents were concerned that the need for children with special educational needs to have support in the classroom, and the delays discussed in getting this support, means that the other children in the class are not getting their share of attention from the teacher.

There's a lot of children with special needs in the school and the school isn't given the funding to cope with them. And that absorbs a lot of the teacher's and the classroom assistant's time, to the detriment of the other kids.

You have a class of up to thirty-six kids and one person at times. That's ridiculous. And you might have multiple special needs children in that one room. That's just laughable. Nobody can do that.

My daughter, has dyslexia and she is now in P5. But she gets no support with it because there's no funding for it. The meagre funding that they get has gone to whatever other children there are with more special needs. And yes, they need that as well, but it still doesn't take away from the fact that my child needs it. So I think that's a major concern.

Parents recognise that one to one support is not realistic for all children who need it, but feel that the funding available could be used more creatively to support children.

But even if you highlighted a group of kids that were in the class that you thought, OK, this group of children is struggling. If you were to group those children together and take them out and give them, as a group, one to one. So then you could have six kids in one class. That's going to benefit six kids instead of one.

For those parents who had received support for their children, early intervention was a priority, and they felt that 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:

The classroom assistants need to definitely look out for these things a lot more, before it's too late.

4.2.9 Learning elsewhere: what works?

- a) **Outdoor space:** Outside of education, parents feel that parks are of particular benefit for young children's learning. This gives them the opportunity to exercise, get fresh air and try out equipment which may support their motor skill development, while also providing important social opportunities.

Well the likes of the park. It's anywhere where he can be social. That's what I like for my son. Because he is an only child. He does have cousins, but there's no one around his age.

My daughter would mix with anybody and talk to anybody. So even if she's in the park, she'll always have somebody to play with.

- b) **Community activities:** For parents of young children, activities happening in the community around them are of high importance. They provide a good opportunity for their child to meet and engage with other people, while also allowing parents (particularly mums) to meet others in the area and in the same situation as them.

Here in leisure centre in Dungannon there was loads of different programmes for the kids. There was one for example called Jo Jingles on Saturdays. And in the library there were activities every Friday, I think, or Thursday. I was in the library always.

I was actually going to every activity I heard about, because there is not much in this town. So whenever you hear, you just sign your child everywhere to make sure that she's going to play with other children and she will have fun and she will learn things as well.

4.2.10 Future hopes

- a) **Subject/exam options:** The educational opportunities open to children were thought to be limited in terms of subjects offered and career choices 'prepared for'. Some parents felt that the traditional route of GCSEs, A-levels, then university was not a 'one size fits all' model and that all post-primary schools should offer a range of options.

Rather than just focusing on all academic subjects, say by the time they are teenagers, there should definitely be more vocational subjects, say if they did want to go into electronics or plumbing or engineering, that they can do that. That it's not just all university, GCSE, A Level.

They just go to the primary school and if they do their transfer it's an academic path. And if they go to the secondary, I mean they can go on to university if they want, but there's not an awful lot of options for children who are maybe not as bright or not as academic. So we need a fairer system that way.

- b) **Child wellbeing:** 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. An educational career that supports their child's wellbeing is a priority, as is one that provides a range of options to help every child to do their best and to succeed in whatever they choose to do.

Well I basically would like him to go to a school where he's going to excel. I don't want him to go to a school and struggle.

I would love him just to be happy and to be happy with what he is doing.

They also felt it important that children are free to make their own decisions and mistakes, and to have the opportunity to change their mind in the future, and that their school/s were supportive of their choices.

If he feels that he made the wrong decision, ideally there's always options there. You can change your direction. If you picked something, it's not in stone.

Everyone says, oh I want my son to be a doctor or a lawyer. But if he was a binman, there's nothing wrong. Because some of my family are binmen. But if that was a career that he was happy doing, and was coming home and had a happy home, that's what I would want for him.

5. 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.

5.1 Summary of findings: children

5.1.1 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!)

5.1.2 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.

5.1.3 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.

5.1.4 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.

5.1.5 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.

5.1.6 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.

5.2 Summary of findings: parents

5.2.1 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.

5.2.2 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.

5.2.3 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.

5.2.4 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.

5.2.5 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.

5.2.6 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.

Appendix 1: Breakdown of those SOAs where over 30% of children under 15 are living in poverty

Council Area	Urban or rural	SOA	Rank	% children living in poverty	Proposed area to target
Ards and North Down (1)	Urban	Central Ards	22	30.5%	Central Ards
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon (3)	Urban	Church	9	35.2%	Lurgan centre
	Urban	Woodville_1	20	31.0%	
	Rural	Keady	23	30.5%	
Belfast (12)	Urban	Woodvale_3	1	48.0%	North & West Belfast & Botanic areas
	Urban	Crumlin_1	3	39.6%	
	Urban	Botanic_2	4	37.8%	
	Urban	Duncairn_1	5	37.7%	
	Urban	Botanic_4	6	37.7%	
	Urban	Woodvale_1	8	36.3%	
	Urban	Crumlin_2	11	33.9%	
	Urban	Botanic_3	13	32.7%	
	Urban	Duncairn_2	16	31.2%	
	Urban	Ardoyne_2	18	31.0%	
	Urban	Woodvale_2	21	30.6%	
	Urban	Legoniel_2	28	30.1%	
Causeway Coast and Glens (4)	Urban	Ballysally_1	12	33.4%	Ballysally & Central Coleraine
	Urban	Central	14	32.6%	Ballycastle town
	Mixed urban/rural	Glentaisie and Kinbane	24	30.3%	
	Rural	Castlerock_2	27	30.1%	

Derry City and Strabane (3)	Urban	East	7	37.1%	Creggan & Brandywell area
	Urban	Strand_2	17	31.1%	
	Urban	Brandywell	19	31.0%	
Fermanagh and Omagh (1)	Urban	Lisanelly_1	2	45.7%	Inner Omagh (Lisanelly)
Newry, Mourne and Down (5)	Rural	Crossmaglen	10	34.2%	Areas all close together, around the border.
	Rural	Silver Bridge_1	15	31.8%	
	Urban	Drumgullion_1	25	30.3%	
	Rural	Creggan	26	30.3%	
	Rural	Forkhill_2	29	30.0%	

Appendix 2: Demographic information relating to children and parents engaged.

Group	Location	Number	Group details (age, gender)	School Demographics
Parents	Online-parents drawn from Belfast, Omagh, Derry, Dungannon, Craigavon)	11	10 female, 1 male (4 EAL)	N/A
Parents	Lisburn	6	6 females (0 EAL)	N/A
School 1 (online-2 sessions)	Derry	20	P4 group (age 7/8) P7 group (age 10/11)	63.4% of pupils received free school meals 78 pupils (27%) have some special educational needs

			(13 girls, 7 boys - 2 EAL)	2.8% newcomer children
School 2 (Face to face- 2 sessions)	Dungannon	46	P4 (age 7/8) P7 (age 10/11) (26 girls, 20 boys)	19.6% of school pupils receive Free School meals 197 pupils (24%) have some special educational needs 85.2% newcomer children
School 3 (face to face- 2 sessions)	Belfast	20	P4 (age 7/8) P7 (age 10/11) (13 girls, 7 boys)	77.6% of school pupils receive Free School meals 29 pupils (30%) have some special educational needs <5 newcomer children
Youth club (face to face)	Lisburn	13	Age 10/11 13 girls	Mixed backgrounds

Appendix 3: Topic guides and session plans

Parent topic guide

Area of discussion	Questions and prompts
The home learning environment	You all have young children, so you know how much they grow, develop and learn in the first few years. The 'home learning environment' is the combination of spaces, resources (toys, books, objects), activities and interactions that your child experiences at home.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How familiar are you with what makes a good home learning environment? • What activities does your child do at home that you think helps them learn? • Have you been given support (practical support, information etc) to develop a strong home learning environment? • What are the challenges for you/your child that might impact learning at home? • What additional support would you find useful?
<p>The preschool environment</p>	<p>Nursery or preschool is obviously a really important part of your child's learning journey. If your child is at preschool:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What guided your decision as to where they went? Were you happy with the options? • What does your child enjoy doing at preschool? What activities/approaches do you think best support their learning? • Is there anything you think is missing in terms of learning tools or experiences at their preschool? (prompts: skills, resources etc) • What else would you like to see them engaged in? <p>If not yet at preschool:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you decided where your child will go? What has guided your decision? • What do you think are the most important considerations? What makes a good preschool? • Has anyone decided not to send their child to preschool? If so, what influenced that decision?
<p>The school environment</p>	<p>Your child will spend a significant part of their young life at school, so I want to get a sense of what will guide your decision on school choice and any hopes or concerns you might have about school.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you chosen where your child will go to school yet? What has/will guide that decision?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you happy with the options you have available? Why do you say that? • Do you have any concerns about your child going to school? If so, what? • What do you think are the most important considerations? What makes a school a good learning environment? • What if anything would better prepare your child to get the most from school?
<p>Learning elsewhere</p>	<p>Obviously, there are so many more people, places, organisations where your child has an opportunity to learn.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aside from preschool/school, what other organisations, people, places would you say have an important role in supporting your child to learn? • How do they support learning? What do they do well? What do they not do so well? • How could they better support your child to learn? • Are there any lessons from other organisations that could be transferred to school?
<p>Challenges and barriers, facilitators and enablers</p>	<p>Thinking more widely about education and learning opportunities, I want to ask you about your thoughts on any barriers to children's learning, generally and then for your own children, and anything that you think helps learning.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In general, what do you think the biggest challenges are for children to learn? • Do you think those issues are different in different areas/schools/groups of children? • Are there any specific challenges or barriers which you think your own children will face? • In general, what do you think makes for a positive learning experience for children? What helps them to learn? • For your own child/children, what helps them to learn?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What could schools do better/more of to give all children the best possible educational opportunity? • What could the government do better/more of to give all children the best possible educational opportunity? • What could others do better/more of to give all children the best possible educational opportunity?
Hopes and wishes for your child	<p>Looking ahead, we want to explore your hopes and wishes for your child, and how your own experience has influenced that.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there anything you would like for your child in terms of educational experience that you didn't have? • What would have better helped you? • What are your hopes for your child in terms of learning and education? Short term vs long term? • Is there anything you think might stand in their way? And anything that might help them?
General comments	<p>The Expert Panel will be sharing their findings with the NI Assembly to help improve the educational experience of all children and young people, but in particular those who have experienced disadvantage.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you had to give them one key message, what would it be? • Is there anything else you would like to add?

Child topic guide

Area of discussion	Questions and prompts
Learning at home	You spend lots of time at home (especially at the minute), doing lots of things like sleeping, watching tv, reading, playing games, doing homework.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me about some of the things you do at home that you think are helping you learn new things? • What do you like about these things? What do you not like? • Does anyone help you with these things, or do you do them on your own? • Is there anything that you think would help you to learn better at home?
<p>Learning at school</p>	<p>Does everyone here go to school?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you like to do at school? What are your favourite subjects and activities? Why do you like them? • Do you think you are learning things when you do them, or are they just fun? • What helps you learn best at school? Why do you say that? • Is there anything that you find difficult about learning in school? Why do you say that? What could help to fix that?
<p>Learning elsewhere</p>	<p>There are lots of other places that you go, and people that you meet, who also help you to learn new things.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me about some of those people or places. What/who are they? • What types of things do you learn there? • What do they do really well? What do they not do so well? • Is there anything that you think they could share with schools to help make school a better place to learn?
<p>Hopes for the future</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you thought about what you would like to do when you get older? Would you like to go to university or college? Or get a job? What type of job would you like? • Do you think that there is any reason why you couldn't do that? What do you think might get in your way? • What do you think would help you to do those things?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who do you think could help you better to do those things? What could they do?
<p>General comments</p>	<p>The Expert Panel will be sharing their findings with the government to help them decide how to make learning opportunities better for all children, no matter where they live or what school they go to.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you had to give them one big message about what would help children to learn better, what would it be?

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