



**Ulster University**  
**Northern Ireland Parent Surveys:**  
**Experiences of Supporting**  
**Children's Home Learning**  
**during COVID-19**

UNESCO Centre, School of Education, Ulster University

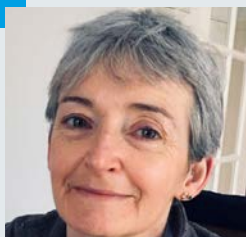
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# CONTENTS

04	Executive Summary
06	Introduction
07	Survey Aim and Objectives
08	Methodology
09	Findings
09	Parents of Primary School Pupils
17	Parents of Post-Primary School Pupils
25	Parents of Pupils attending a Special School
34	Key Messages
39	Acknowledgements and References

# MEET THE TEAM



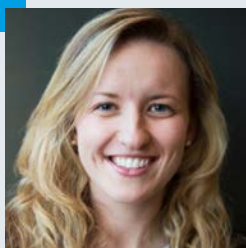
## Dr Una O'Connor Bones

Dr Una O'Connor Bones has teaching and research experience in the field of social inclusion, with a particular focus on disadvantaged groups of children and young people and she is currently involved in longitudinal data analysis of pupils with special educational needs. She is also working on a series of 'community conversations' on school provision in Northern Ireland.



## Dr Jessica Bates

Dr Jessica Bates is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and an experienced lecturer and researcher in the School of Education, Ulster University where she is Course Director for the Library and Information Management programme and undertakes research across Education and Library and Information Science. A key theme in her recent research is the importance of individuals and communities to have a voice in decisions that affect their lives.



## Dr Jayne Finlay

Dr Jayne Finlay is a Researcher in the School of Education at Ulster University. Her research interests lie across the fields of Education and Library and Information Science. She recently completed a doctorate which explored the role of libraries in supporting the learning experiences of people in prison.



## Dr Stephen Roulston

Dr Stephen Roulston, a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, was a teacher for many years and has been lecturing at Ulster University for ten years, currently as Course Director for PGCE Geography. His research interests include technology in education and the impact of a divided society on schools.



## Sammy Taggart

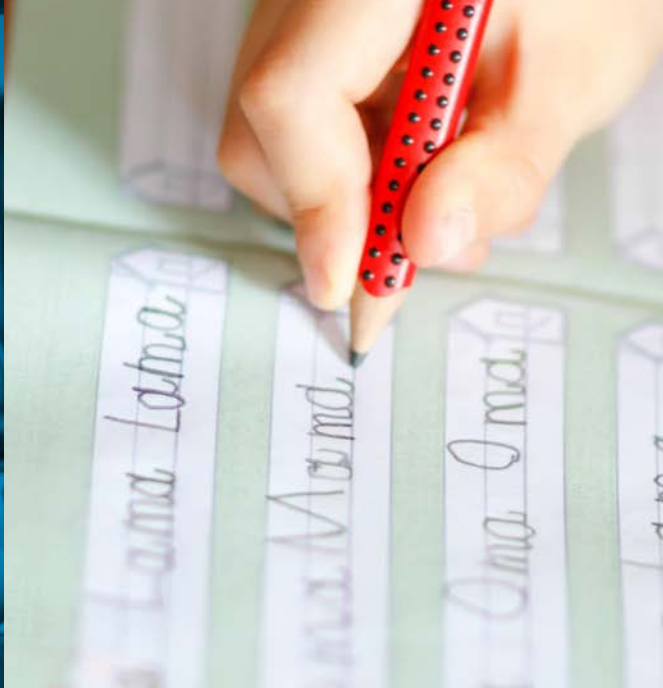
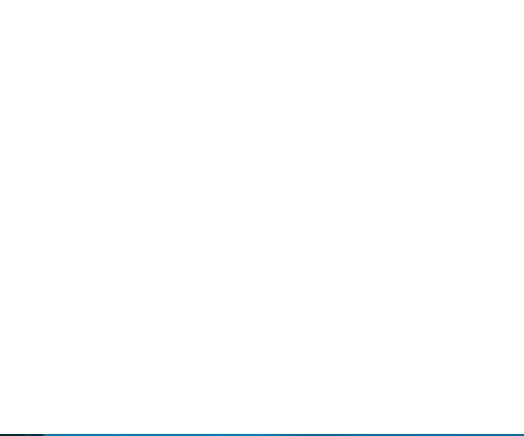
Sammy Taggart is an experienced classroom practitioner and teacher educator in Technology and Design Education at Ulster University, Northern Ireland. His research interests focus on the use of educational technology to enhance learning and teaching, particularly within Teacher Education.

# Executive Summary

- In response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, schools in Northern Ireland have been closed since 23rd March. As partners in the education process, parents have a pivotal role in supporting children's learning and a number of arrangements have been put in place to support home-schooling during this time.
- Three surveys were developed and distributed to parents of pupils attending primary, post-primary and special schools. The surveys sought to gather information on parents' familiarity with, and confidence in, supporting learning; communications between home and school; the challenges of home-schooling; and to identify key messages for education planning and decision-making moving forward. A total of 4,612 usable surveys, covering all post code areas, were returned.
- Parents' confidence in supporting the curricular learning of their child(ren) revealed varying levels of confidence across subject areas. Parents of primary school pupils were most confident supporting Physical Education but less confident supporting Religious Education and the Arts. Parents of post-primary pupils were most confident supporting English Language but less confident supporting Technology and Design, Music and Modern Languages. Parents of pupils attending special schools were most confident supporting Language and Literacy but less confident supporting Numeracy. Lack of confidence was also reported in other areas, including Speech and Communication and Behavioural Support.
- A consistent amount of material was provided by schools at the time of closure and in the weeks afterwards. Learning materials were supplied either in learning packs or via online platforms. While online resources were popular choices to support learning, a clear digital divide existed between households, with reports of poor/no internet access and a lack of sufficient devices for children to use.
- In general, a high level of contact between schools and parents was reported. Parents across all school sectors received updates from both Principals and teachers and most felt they could contact their child(ren)'s teacher if needed. A substantial number of parents stayed in touch with each other through social media as a means to support their child(ren)'s and their own well-being.
- The benefits of spending extra time with their child(ren) was noted by parents; however, a majority have also found the period of home-schooling to be a stressful and challenging time. Key challenges were identified in relation to meeting the different learning needs of children, particularly those with Special Educational Needs (SEN); managing workloads with home-schooling; and supporting the physical and mental well-being of themselves and their child(ren).
- In all three surveys there were notable relationships between Free School Meal Entitlement (FSME) and: parent confidence supporting their child(ren)'s learning; parent understanding of subject content; use of resources to support learning; internet access; and, managing health, well-being and household budgets.
- Parents of children with SEN in mainstream schools were more likely to experience difficulties in all aspects of home-schooling. Parents of children attending special schools were more likely to identify the challenges of home-schooling.
- Key messages emerging from the surveys are indicative of cross-cutting opportunities for educational transformation that blend existing and new knowledge and skills. These include fresh consideration of the shape of the education system; effective school-parent partnerships; the skills base of teachers; digital and communication networks; pupils with special educational needs; assessment; and the role of educational research.







# Introduction

The relationship between home and school is pivotal in supporting children's learning and well-being. Parents are rightly recognised as partners in the education process; instinctive knowledge of their child's interests and abilities, combined with regular formal and informal educational input, enhances the learning he/she receives in school. In the spring of 2020, over the space of several weeks, this collaborative partnership has been tested like never before. As the global impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic became clear, unprecedented steps were taken by governments nationally and internationally to limit the spread of the virus. In Northern Ireland, as elsewhere, the 'lockdown' of society effectively restricted all non-essential movement and travel, minimised contact with people outside immediate households and closed most businesses, amenities and places of worship.

Schools in Northern Ireland have been closed to most pupils since 23rd March (the 10 special schools in Belfast closed a week earlier) and, in response, a number of arrangements have been put in place to support children's learning and well-being during this period. The Department of Education (DE), Education Authority (EA) and Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) have provided a range of online resources and linked websites for parents and teachers; this has been supplemented by materials provided by individual schools as well as information, guidance and advice from the wider non-statutory, community and voluntary sector. Additionally, a small number of schools have remained open to provide educational supervision for vulnerable children and children of key workers up to Year 10 where alternative arrangements cannot be made, and a Free School Meals Payment Scheme has been introduced, providing direct payments to eligible families.

Decisions have also been taken on formal post-primary examinations and the post-primary transfer test. GCSE, AS and A Level exams will not take place as normal in the summer term. Instead, a combination of previous performance data, school or college assessed grades and student ranking will be used to determine individual results. Post-primary transfer tests, however, are scheduled to take place in November and December of this year.

It has been announced that schools in Northern Ireland will reopen in late August. This will be a phased, part-time return, requiring extensive planning and preparation for the re-organisation of classrooms and wider school environment - including canteens, playgrounds, sports facilities and transport - if social distancing is to be observed.

It is, of course, too early to gauge the longer term educational and wider social implications of the COVID-19 pandemic; however, it is reasonable to speculate that education as we know it may not return to what it was. It is intended, therefore, that the findings of this research will be of interest to parents and families, schools, teacher educators, education bodies and policy-makers, and that it will also offer some insights to inform the shape and delivery of education in the months ahead.



# Survey Aim and Objectives

The overall aim of the surveys was to explore the experiences and perspectives of parents of children attending primary, post-primary and special schools as they navigated and supported their child(ren)'s home learning during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

More specifically, the objectives of the surveys were to:

- establish parents' familiarity with, and confidence in, supporting curricular learning;
- establish the nature and type of communication between home and school, including access to resources for teaching and learning;
- identify the key challenges experienced by parents in supporting their child(ren)'s learning;
- identify key messages that contribute to education planning and decision-making moving forward.

Between April 20 and May 15, three surveys were available online to parents across Northern Ireland. A total of 4,612 usable surveys, covering all post code areas, were returned.

## A breakdown of the surveys by school type

**2,509**

returns from parents of primary school pupils

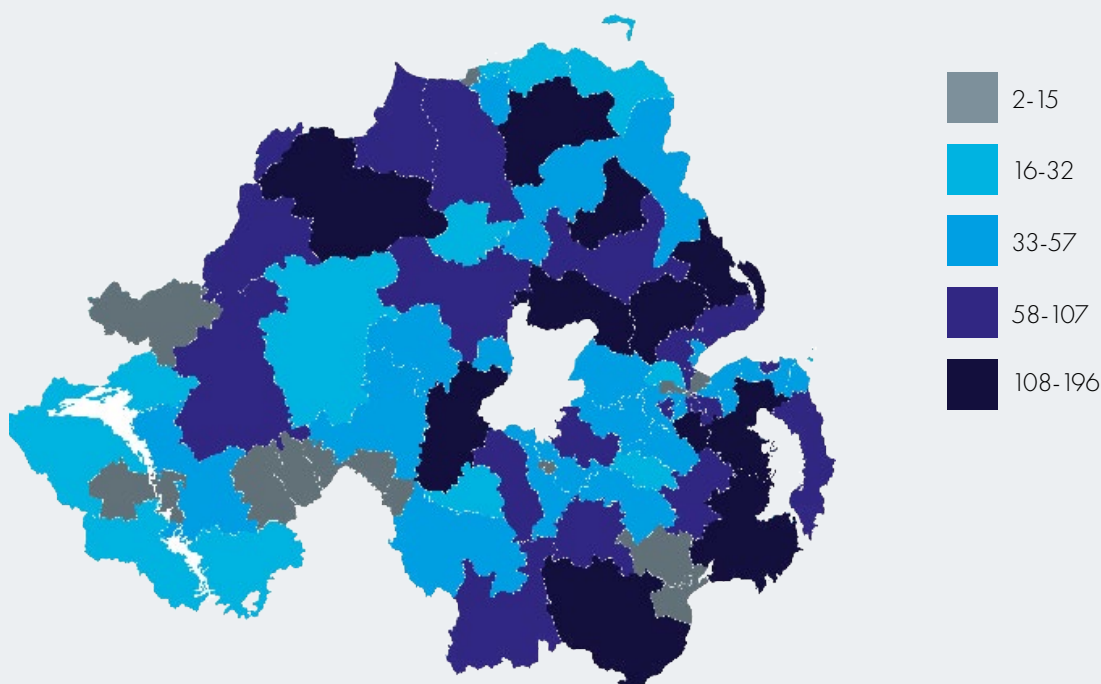
**1,905**

returns from parents of post-primary school pupils

**198**

returns from parents of pupils attending a special school

Figure 1 illustrates the numbers of responses across the region.



# Methodology

A quantitative research approach was employed for the collection of data. Acknowledging the restrictions and limitations of the lockdown period, the three surveys were designed to be as accessible as possible for parents to complete online (on a computer, iPad or phone using the online survey platform Survey Monkey). Developing individual surveys for primary, post-primary and special schools was an important consideration; the voice of parents is crucial if we are to fully understand the educational response to COVID-19, and should, by necessity, inform the pathway as schools begin to move out of the pandemic.

Each survey comprised mainly closed questions and a small number of open-ended questions that provided parents an opportunity to elaborate on some of their responses; there was minor variation in the wording of a few questions, reflecting the particular profile of each school type.

## Each survey had five sections:

- 1 Background Information**
- 2 The Curriculum**
- 3 Learning at Home**
- 4 Staying Connected**
- 5 Overall Perspectives**

The three surveys were piloted with a sample of parents from each school type before the final version of each was uploaded to Survey Monkey. Ethical approval from Ulster University was provided in advance of this, in line with standard University protocol. The surveys were live from 20 April to 15 May 2020.

Information about each survey, including the relevant web link, was emailed to all Principals of primary, post-primary and special schools using the school email address listed on the Department of Education (DE) website<sup>1</sup>. The email included an information letter detailing the purpose of the survey and a request to share the link with parents through whatever means the Principal felt was most appropriate (email, text, social media). Social media was also used to promote the surveys across appropriate Facebook pages and groups and on Twitter.

Participation was voluntary, with parents having the opportunity to decline to take part or to withdraw up to the point of submitting their completed survey response. The design of the survey ensured that parents had to indicate their consent to participate before they could begin the survey. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured and no personal information was requested.

All survey responses are presented as total responses (or percentages) for each question. However, in each survey, it was also possible to analyse responses by a process of cross-tabulation; this showed a relationship between certain questions and specific characteristics, notably, children entitled to Free School Meals and children with Special Educational Needs (SEN). Where analysis revealed notable differences, these are highlighted in each of the surveys.

1. <http://apps.education-ni.gov.uk/appinstitutes/default.aspx>



# Findings: Parents of Primary School Pupils

## Background Information

- The survey of parents of primary school child(ren) gathered **2,509** responses from parents across Northern Ireland.
- **92%** of respondents identified as mothers, with fewer fathers (**7%**), foster carers (**0.2%**) and other guardians (**0.9%**) completing the survey.
- Just under half of respondents (**46%**) had more than one child at primary school, and so were responsible for supporting the learning of children in different year groups. All year groups were represented in the study.
- Representation of school sectors showed responses from parents of children attending Controlled (**50%**), Maintained (**30%**) and Integrated (**15%**) schools.
- **17%** of parents reported having one or more children with a diagnosed SEN.
- **20%** of parents were not working due to COVID-19, with a further **38%** now having to work from home. **23%** of parents identified as essential workers and **20%** of parents were not working for other reasons.
- Additionally, **11%** of parents had to take unpaid leave to care for their children, with a further **30%** noting that this was potentially a future eventuality.

## The Curriculum

Figure 2 shows the level of familiarity indicated by parents in relation to the Northern Ireland primary curriculum, with the biggest proportion (**40%**) reporting they were somewhat familiar with the curriculum.

In a subsequent question, most parents (**84%**) reported they were somewhat confident in supervising their children's learning, with **16%** stating that they were not at all confident. Figure 3 shows the varying levels of confidence in supporting different subject areas. Overall, parents expressed most confidence in supporting Physical Education (**65%**) were either *confident* or *very confident*. Parents felt less confident supporting the Arts (including Music, Art, Drama), with over a fifth (**22%**) stating that they were *not at all confident* in this subject area. A further **21%** of parents were *not at all confident* in providing support for Religious Education.

***Parents of children entitled to Free School Meals were slightly less confident in supporting curriculum areas than other parents.***

Figure 2: How familiar are you with the NI Primary Curriculum? (%)

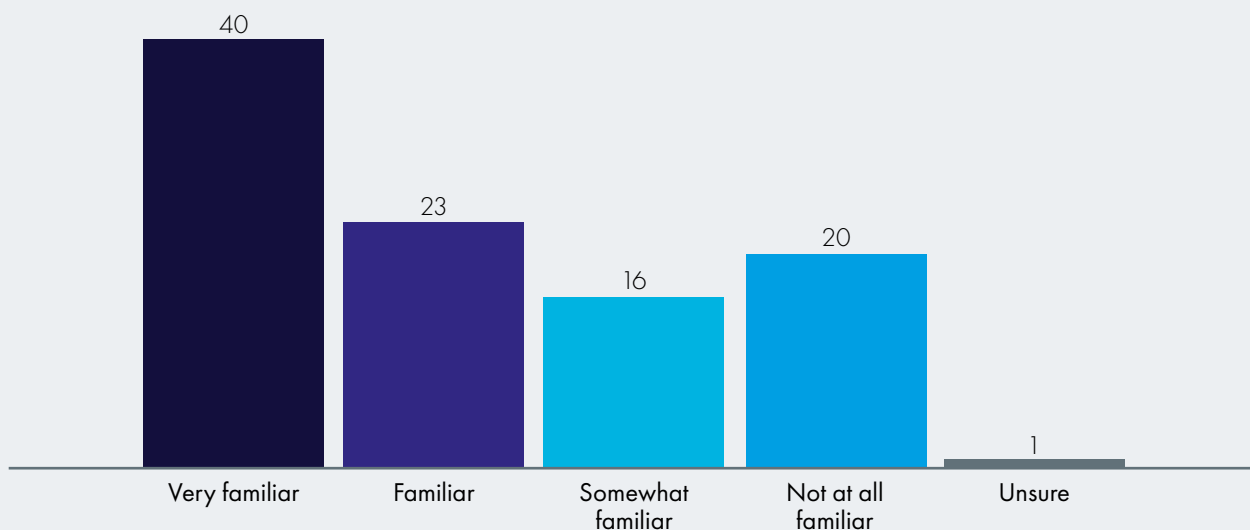
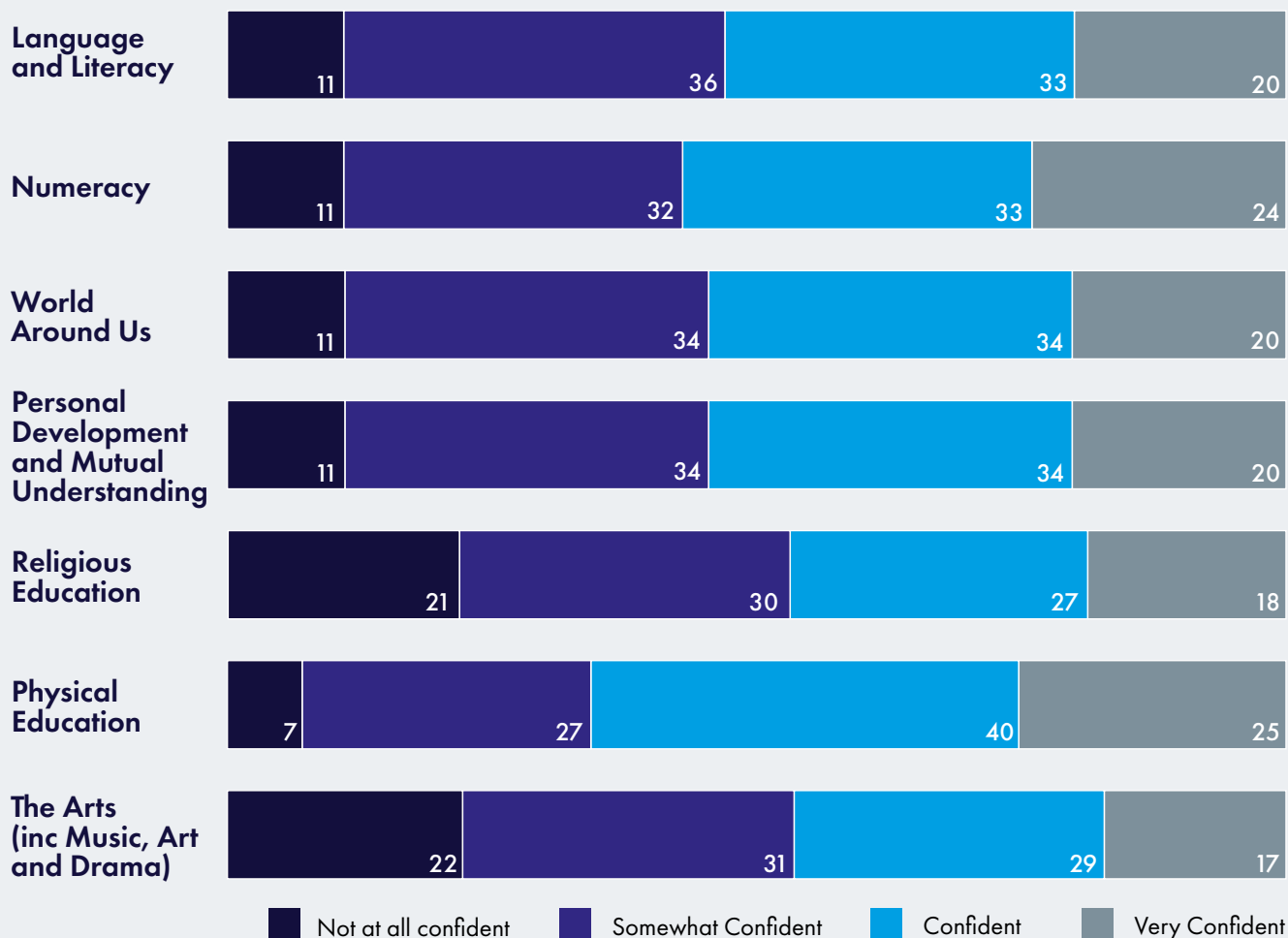


Figure 3: How confident are you in supervising your child(ren)'s learning in each of the following? (%)



## Home Learning and Home-School Communications

Parents were asked about the information and resources provided by their child(ren)'s school at the time of closure, the materials they were currently using to support their children and any challenges associated with this.

Survey responses revealed that initial information provided by schools included instructions on how to access online materials (82%), guidance on using learning materials (69%), a timetable for children (50%) and advice on how much time to spend on learning each day (31%). Additionally, contact details for teachers (62%) and the school Principal (55%) were provided. The majority of parents (84%) indicated a curriculum information/ learning pack was provided before the school closed and 28% received follow-up packs from their school. A further two thirds (67%) of parents received curriculum information through an online interface such as Google Classroom or Seesaw, just over a third (35%) through the school website and a smaller proportion (28%) through regular emails.

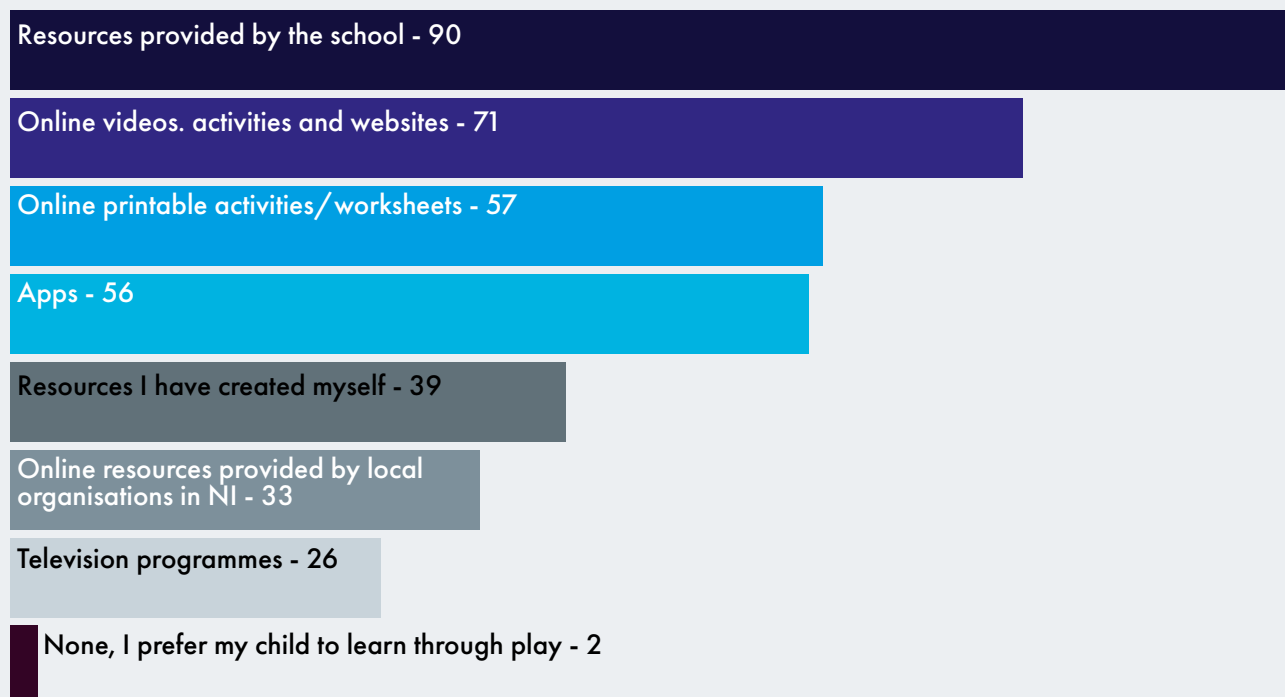
The majority of parents (90%) stated it was very important or important for them to be able to keep in touch with teachers. Most parents (88%) were continuing to receive regular communication from teachers and felt they could contact their child's teacher if they needed to.

Only 5% of parents reported that they were unable to contact their child's teacher, and a further 7% were unsure. Reasons for contacting teachers included: clarifying learning tasks, seeking advice on suitable reading material, sending samples of pupil learning, informing teachers if their child was struggling, queries on the use of online resources and general teaching advice.

Almost three quarters (72%) of parents had a daily set time for school work, spending somewhere between 1-3 hours per day on learning; only a small percentage (1%) reported not spending any time on school work. Approximately two thirds of parents (68%) were marking their own child(ren's) work / providing feedback without teacher input and just under one third (30%) were marking it / providing feedback alongside a teacher.

Figure 4 shows the range of resources used by parents to support their child(ren's) learning. A small percentage of parents (2%) reported they were not using any resources as they preferred their child to learn through play.

**Figure 4: What resources have you been using to support your child(ren)'s learning? (%)**



## Challenges in Home Learning

While many parents spoke positively about learning through apps and online activities, others described difficulties in navigating so many online resources. Often, there were insufficient devices in the home, particularly if the household had more than one child(ren) and/or parents needed a laptop to complete their own work. A small but significant proportion (7%) of parents stated they had little or poor internet access, whilst printing multiple worksheets was described as both time-consuming and expensive by a number of parents, illustrative quotations on page 13 show.

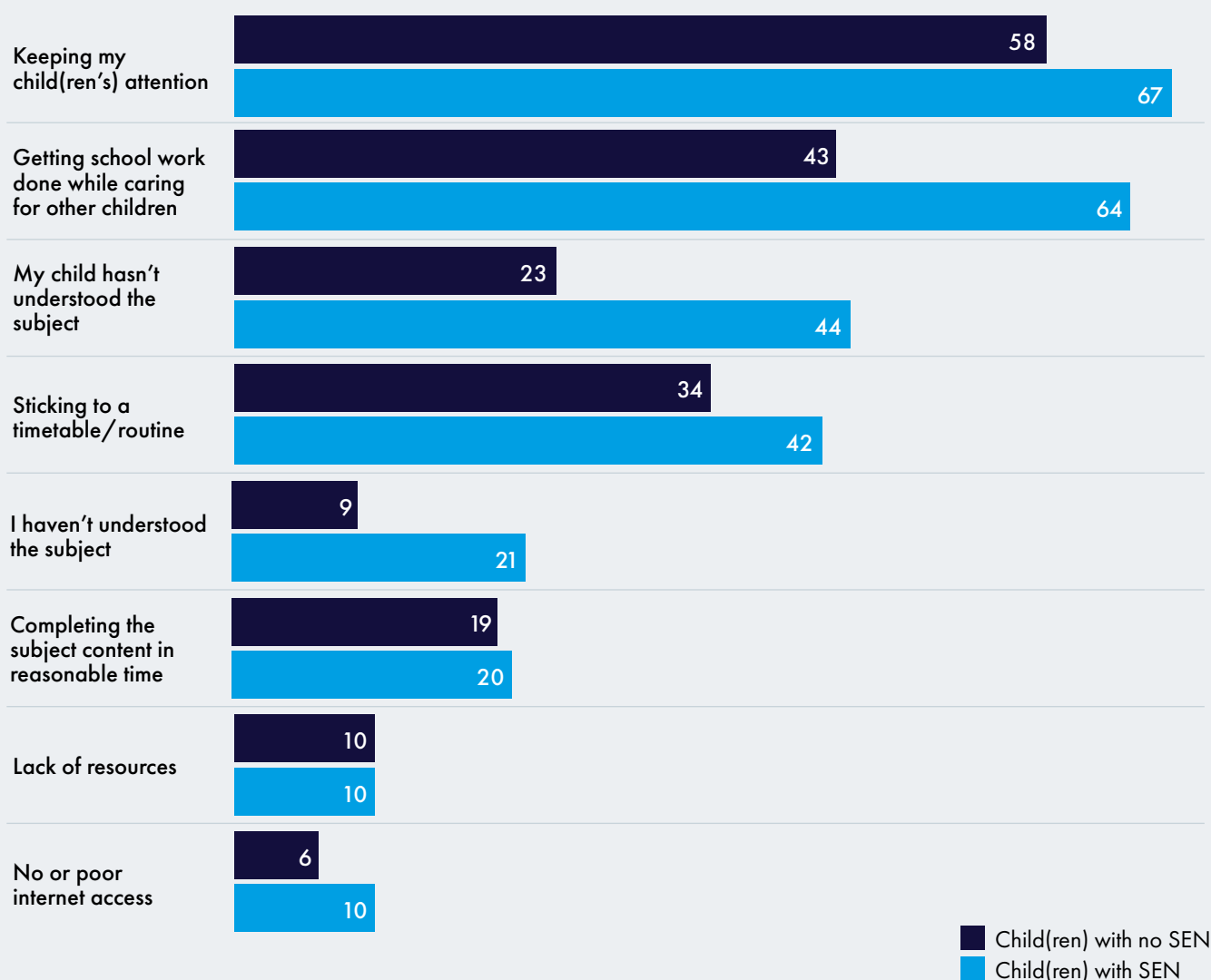
Three quarters of parents (75%) experienced difficulties during this period of school closure. The most common challenge was trying to balance working from home and supporting their child(ren's) learning, with over three quarters (77%) of those currently working from home experiencing difficulties organising their own work.

Many of these reported the pressure of unrealistic expectations, both from their managers in terms of what is possible to achieve whilst home-schooling and from schools in terms of how much work should be completed by children. Consequently, some parents felt a sense of guilt, both about managing their own work and in not providing enough support for their children.

Just under a quarter (23%) of parents identified as essential or key workers, and open-ended responses clearly illustrated the challenge of providing home-schooling when one or both parents held these jobs. There were also concerns that uncertainty around the re-opening of schools could increase the risk of children falling behind in their learning, leading to further stress and anxiety by a number of parents (as shown by the illustrative quotes on page 13).

Figure 5 highlights the difficulties expressed by parents.

**Figure 5: Have you experienced difficulty in any of the following areas? (%)**





Parents of children with SEN are more likely to struggle with sticking to a timetable/routine, keeping their child(ren)'s attention, understanding the subject area (both parent and child) and getting work done while caring for other children. Additionally, parents of children entitled to Free School Meals are more likely to struggle with understanding the subject content, are slightly less likely to use online videos, activities and websites and less likely to use other printable activities.

"No access to a printer at home - have to print in work so we're always behind."

"We have no laptop or tablet, my children share my phone which is not ideal given the small screen and means they have to work at two separate times."

"No access to printers, having to share laptop between whole family."

"I feel very guilty that I have not been able to give them the home schooling that their peers may be getting."

"We didn't have a printer to print resources and had to buy one and lots of ink and paper! I know that lots of parents are in the position of only having a phone, no laptop, no tablet, no printer. Impossible at our school to use the resources provided unless you have any of these."

"Feeling guilty when my child needs attention and my focus has to be my work."

"To expect parents who are also key workers to be able to work from home and provide a timetable for school work is impossible. This is adding to more stress and anxiety that us parents do not need. I am worried that my son will now be behind by the time he goes back to school. We are not lucky enough to be able to be furloughed and able to focus on the school work."

"School not opening for key workers and delaying with the decision was the most difficult and stressful time of the COVID-19 along with no childcare attached to the school closing."

## **Staying Connected**

The survey sought to find out how parents were staying connected both with schools and the wider community and to gauge the importance of this engagement:

- **71%** of parents noted that their child(ren)'s school had a social media page, with most posting updates several times a week.
- Just over half of parents (**51%**) said they were a member of a parents' group on social media (WhatsApp or Facebook); they typically used this for advice on child(ren)'s learning, suggestions for online resources and for sharing concerns around the mental and physical well-being of their children.

***Parents of children entitled to Free School Meals are less likely to be part of a parent social media group than other parents.***

## **Overall Perspectives**

Just over half of parents (**52%**) considered their role in home-schooling to be teaching their child(ren) as much as possible during this period; over a third (**39%**) considered that learning through play was more important than formal schoolwork, and a further 12% indicated that supporting their child(ren)'s education at this time was not their main priority. Many parents expressed the importance of prioritising mental and emotional well-being, particularly to alleviate their child(ren)'s fear and anxiety during the uncertainty of lockdown.

Lockdown also impacted on parents' own mental health. Over a quarter (**28%**) of parents found managing their mental health to be somewhat difficult, with a similar proportion (**27%**) describing it as difficult or very difficult.


Open questions on parents' experiences provided significant insights into their main concerns surrounding their child(ren)'s well-being and education. Key issues that emerged included:

- Parents with children in Primary 6 were concerned about plans for transfer tests; this uncertainty had led to anxiety among both parents and their children.
- Parents of children with a diagnosed SEN did not always feel supported, with some parents describing learning packs as generic and therefore not always appropriate to the learning needs of their child.

- There were concerns over inconsistencies in learning experiences and a fear that their child(ren) could fall behind others on the return to school.
- Concerns were expressed about children's social isolation and there were suggestions for weekly live video links so that children could see and interact with their classmates.
- There was uncertainty over next steps in emerging from lockdown, particularly how the education system may change going forward. This included fears about staggered school times and the implications of this for parents' own work schedule and job security.

Despite the difficulties posed by the lockdown, there were also reported benefits in spending this time with their children, including talking and listening together, enjoying new activities, learning together and finding out new things about their children.

***Parents of children entitled to Free School Meals are more likely to experience difficulty in managing both their mental and physical well-being and are more likely to experience difficulty in managing household budgets. Parents of children not entitled to Free School Meals are more likely to have difficulty in juggling caring for their children with their own work. Additionally, parents with more than one child at primary school are struggling to get work done while caring for others, with this figure rising exponentially with the number of children.***



***"This has made me bond with my child more than I ever have."***

***"The impact of the lockdown on the children's mental and emotional health hasn't been fully taken into account and I worry what this means for their development."***

***"I don't think I could cope mentally or physically juggling working at home and schooling if it continues in September...I will have to stop working, I don't see any other option. I don't want to stop work."***

***"I am concerned about mental health implications of trying to do everything all the time. If this is to continue for mid-long term childcare and support for those working needs to be addressed more clearly and with higher priority."***

The following word cloud (Figure 6) gives an overview of the words used by parents to describe their experiences of home-schooling during this period. Although there was a mix of both positive and negative sentiments expressed by parents, the top two words used by parents were *challenging* and *stressful*.

Figure 6: Words used by parents of primary children about their experiences





# Findings: Parents of Post-Primary Pupils

## Background Information

- The survey gathered responses from **1,905** parents of post-primary pupils across Northern Ireland.
- The majority of respondents were mothers (**90%**), with a smaller proportion of fathers (**9%**). Foster carers and other guardians comprised the other 1%.
- All school sectors were represented, with pupils attending Controlled schools (**41%**) Maintained schools (**23%**) and Voluntary Grammars (**29%**). Integrated (**2%**) and Irish Medium (**0.3%**) schools were also represented.
- 12% of parents reported having one or more child(ren) with a diagnosed SEN.
- 44% of respondents had more than one child(ren) attending post-primary schools and all post-primary year groups were represented in the study.
- 23% of respondents reported that they were not working at the moment due to COVID-19, with a further 36% working from home. 26% of parents identified as essential workers.
- Additionally, 6% of parents had to take unpaid leave to care for their child(ren), with a further 18% noting that this was a potential future eventuality.

## The Curriculum

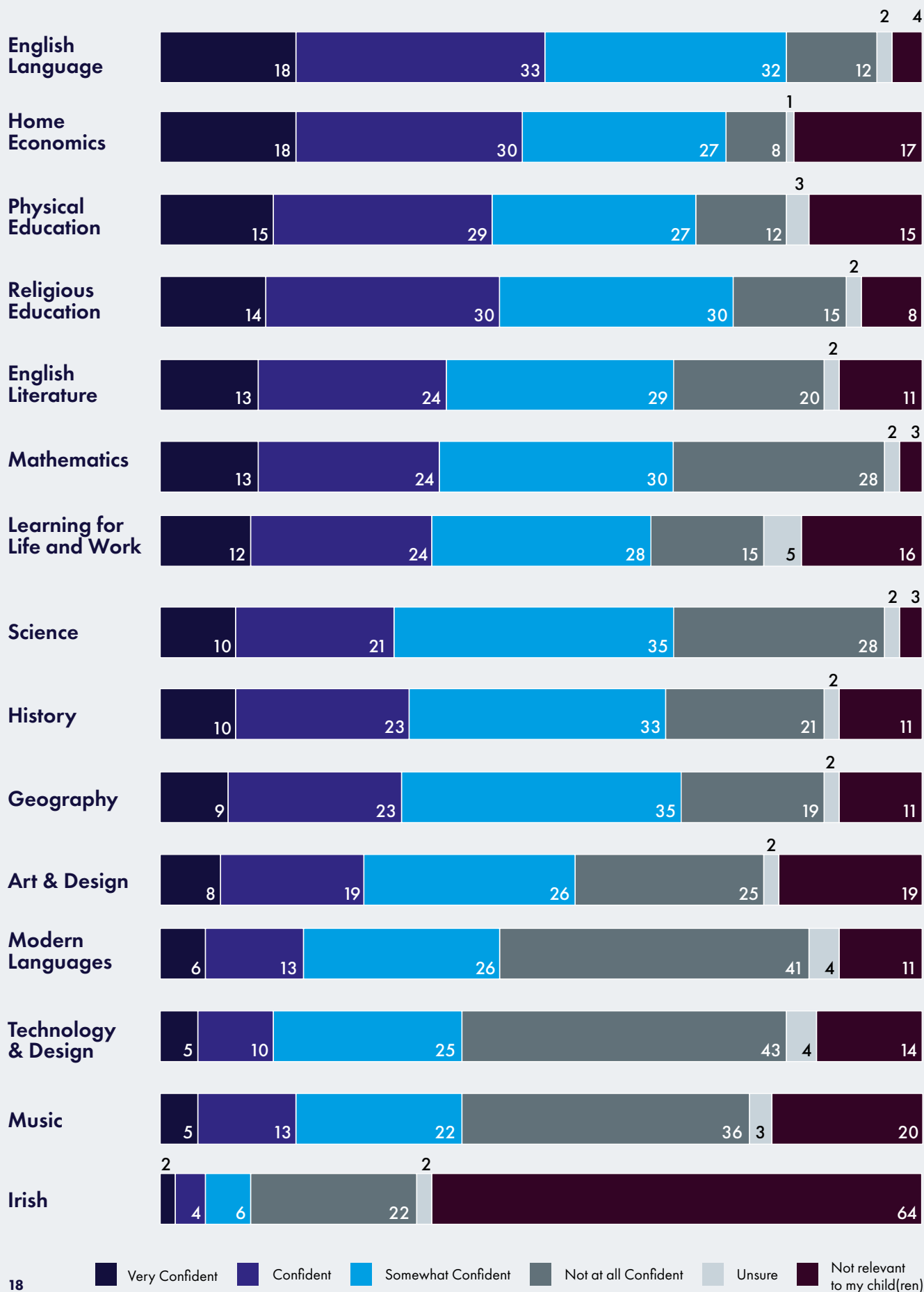
Most parents stated they were familiar with the Northern Ireland curriculum although a significant minority (**18%**) were not at all familiar with it. Figure 7 illustrates parents' confidence in supervising subject areas. Nearly 80% of parents reported they were somewhat confident in supervising their child(ren)'s learning, but there was considerable variability in confidence levels across subject areas. Lower levels of confidence were reported for supervising Technology and Design (**40%**), Music (**41%**) and Modern Languages (**45%**), compared to 83% of parents who were somewhat confident or confident in supporting English Language (**83%**). Parents also reported they were somewhat confident in supervising Home Economics (**74%**), Physical Education (**71%**) and Religious Education (**74%**). For those parents whose children were studying Irish, most reported that they were not at all confident in supporting learning in this area. Parents of pupils in an Irish medium setting could sometimes be at a particular disadvantage, and one parent lamented her inability to help fully as

***“some subjects are taught in Irish and as I’m not fluent I am unable to assist with these subjects”.***

The individual circumstances of parents often had a bearing on how well they were able to support the learning of their child(ren). Those parents who were key workers described particular challenges, including leaving children who were old enough at home unsupervised.

***“I haven’t really needed to supervise my children. They just get on with it themselves and ask if they have a problem”.***

Figure 7: How confident are you in supervising your child(ren)'s learning in each of the following? (%)





## Learning from Home and Home-School Communications

Curriculum materials have been provided to post-primary students using a range of media. 13% of parents reported that hard copy packs of curriculum materials were distributed prior to school closure, with 4% receiving a follow-up pack(s). Over 80% of parents are continuing to receive regular updates from their child(ren)'s school(s). Digital communications are reportedly used most frequently across the post-primary sector, with 46% of parents getting regular emails from their children's school, while 23% obtained information from the school website. Most parents (87%) used virtual learning platforms to access curriculum materials and learning resources. Similarly, 85% of all parents received instructions from their child's school explaining how to access online materials, but just over half (54%) reported being shown how to use the materials. Many parents commented that they lacked the skills to effectively teach their children. While this prompted a number of favourable comments on what teachers achieved with their children - "Respect for teachers" and "Thankful for teachers" were not uncommon sentiments - there is also a recognition that there were limitations in what can be achieved by parents at post-primary level.

Understandably then, continued communication with teachers was valued and 60% of parents reported being able to contact their child(ren)'s teacher if they needed to. However, direct contact with teachers was a reported challenge for 12% of parents, and the amount and quality of contact between teachers and learners varied greatly from school to school, and even between subject areas in the same school. Expectations for learning also differed between schools. Some parents complained that schools expected too much work to be completed while, for others, their child(ren)'s school appeared less engaged after an initial period of support.

Approximately two thirds (65%) of parents reported having difficulties with supporting learning during this period, with over one third (38%) reporting their child(ren) did not understand subject content. The majority of parents (75%) were using resources provided by schools, and websites were also popular (46%).

Apps, online resources and printable worksheets were used by 25%, 24% and 22% of parents respectively, while a smaller proportion (9%) reported using television programmes to supplement school resources. A sizable proportion of parents (15%) reported that they are not using any resources, preferring that their child(ren) take responsibility for their own learning.

Checking of the work completed by pupils was a point of notable variability. Over a fifth (22%) of pupils' work is being checked by parents alone, 31% by teachers alone, and more than 1 in every 10 pupils (11%) were completing work that was checked by neither teachers nor parents. More than 1 in 5 (22%) parents identified workload issues for young people, including challenges in completing subject content within a reasonable timeframe. One parent summarised the tensions between well-being and home-learning, complaining that her children received

***"emails/messages telling them they hope they are well but consistently putting them under pressure to return work. Sometimes emails with bold red writing. Not happy about this at all. This has been a very stressful and overwhelming experience with teachers setting far too much work".***

Pupils were generally experiencing variable workloads during this pandemic, with parents identifying that over a quarter (27%) were spending 2-3 hours per day on schoolwork, 18% spending more than 4 hours per day and a minority (8%) completing no schoolwork on a daily basis. Contrastingly, despite engaging with learning materials, one parent stated her children were not being taught during this period and trying to keep up.

Another parent who opted out of any daily school work explained her decision:

***"We are learning together and bonding as a family. There has been no reference to school or schoolwork. We are out walking playing games reading and having fun outside. I am not a teacher nor am I equipped to teach my daughter who has multiple diagnosis of special needs. I'm just glad she's happy, safe and coping with her new reality".***



*"my children are not being taught during this period, they are trying to keep up."*

*"My child is largely unsupervised because both my husband and I are still working. I have started taking a day per week off holidays/unpaid leave now that it has gone on so long"*

*"However - as I am not at home all day - it is difficult to ask them to take out work again in the evening to check it and then get them to reengage"*

*"We are learning together and bonding as a family. There has been no reference to school or schoolwork. We are out walking playing games reading and having fun outside. I am not a teacher nor am I equipped to teach my daughter who has multiple diagnosis of special needs. I'm just glad she's happy, safe and coping with her new reality."*

*"We can support learning by encouraging and helping structure and organise but we cannot replace the value, knowledge and expertise brought by a teacher with specialist knowledge and the skills to convert that knowledge to learning."*

*"To expect parents who are also key workers to be able to work from home and provide a timetable for school work is impossible. This is adding to more stress and anxiety that us parents do not need. I am worried that my son will now be behind by the time he goes back to school. We are not lucky enough to be able to be furloughed and able to focus on the school work."*

*"emails/messages telling them they hope they are well but consistently putting them under pressure to return work. Sometimes emails with bold red writing. Not happy about this at all. This has been a very stressful and overwhelming experience with teachers setting far too much work."*

## Staying Connected

The majority (81%) of parents reported that their child(ren)'s schools have social media pages or groups, with 30% of schools providing updates several times per week. Other schools are providing updates daily (5%) or several times per day (10%). 19% of parents were members of a parents' social media group on Facebook or WhatsApp, used mostly to seek advice on their child(ren)'s learning or to garner suggestions for online resources or classes.

As schools have migrated to support distance learning using educational technology, this too presented challenges for parents as they managed their child(ren)'s home-learning. One parent expressed her concerns about limited access to technology in some homes.

Identifying the opportunity for schools to learn from the current situation, one parent who had experience of the education system in the USA advised:

*"I realise schools had no time to prepare, but this situation should drive all schools to investigate and invest in technology solutions that make [this] more efficient not just for this lockdown but once we get back to normal. The software is there. Find it and use it!"*

The increased digitisation of learning at post-primary, however, was challenging for many. Internet connectivity and general lack of resources at home are presenting difficulties for more than 1 in every 8 (13%) of households surveyed. One parent crystallised the inequity and practical implications of this for their child.

## Parents of children entitled to Free School Meals are more likely to have no or poor internet access compared to other parents and are less likely than other parents to use online videos and activities to support learning.

Another parent summarised her family's experience stating:

*"All three children receive information each day. Sitting to organise this for each them and then get started takes up a lot of time. 3 children need 3 laptops. We only have one, materials also needed printed. We've already spent £50 since lockdown on ink and need to buy more."*

In terms of their own well-being, approximately half of parents reported difficulties in managing their own mental (51%) and physical (48%) well-being; a greater proportion identified the importance of reaching out to other parents to share concerns about their child(ren)'s mental (70%) and physical (65%) well-being.

## Parents of post-primary children entitled to Free School Meals are more likely to have difficulty in managing their mental well-being compared to other parents.

### Overall Perspectives

Figure 8 illustrates parents' reported difficulties with child(ren)'s learning categorised by those with a child with SEN and those without. Most prominent were: keeping attention, maintaining a timetable/routine and their child(ren) not understanding subject content. The last of these is particularly understandable given specialist subjects studied at post-primary level, a difficulty compounded by parents' own limited understanding of subject content. To a lesser extent, lack of resources and no or poor internet access were identified as difficulties.

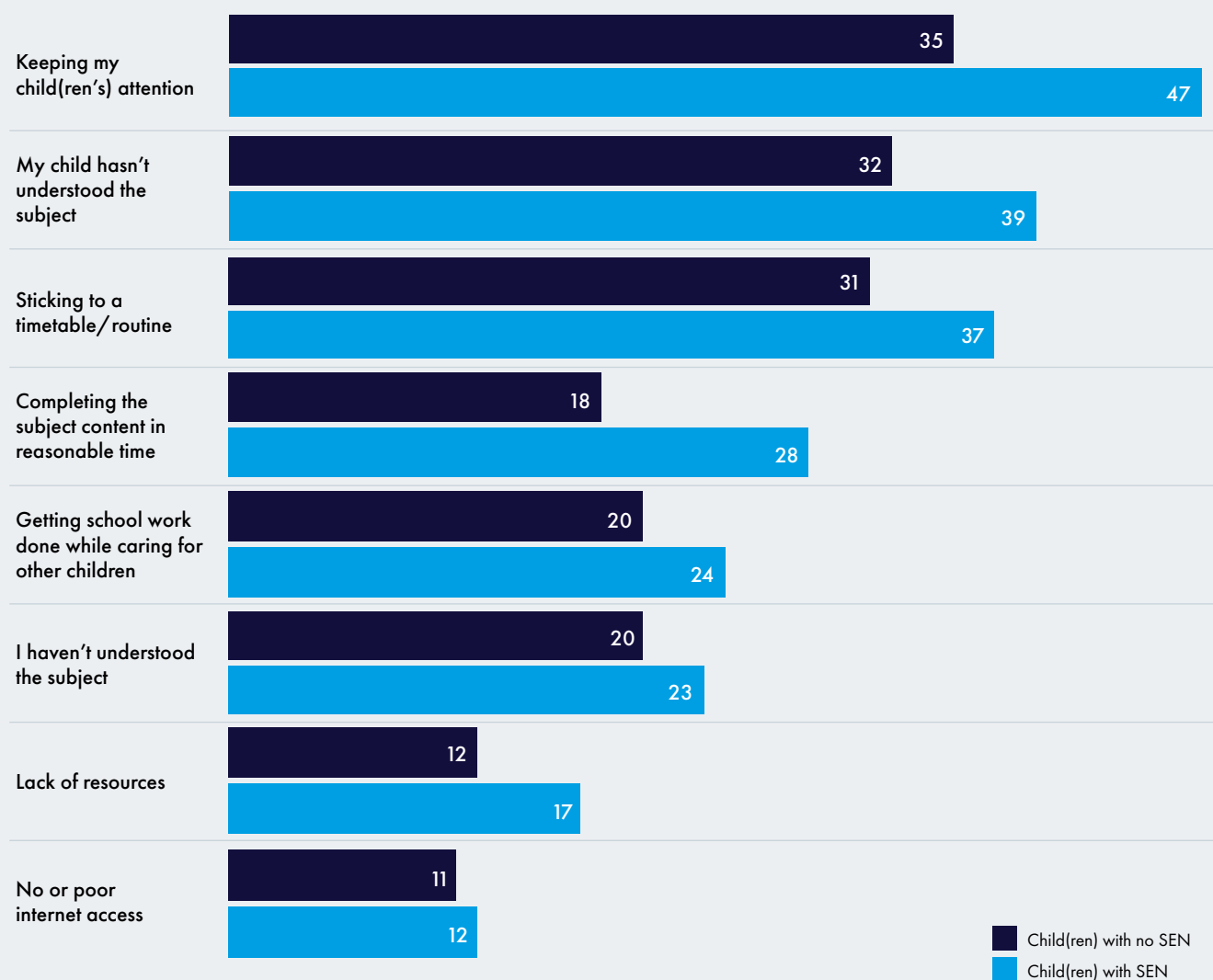
## In all instances, parents of post-primary children with SEN reported greater difficulties than parents of children with no SEN.

Almost three quarters (72%) of parents identified their role was to support their child(ren) as best they can at this time; smaller proportions of parents identified their role was to teach as much as possible during this time (17%) or that helping their child(ren) with their education was not a priority for them (15%).

Despite the many challenges associated with managing learning from home during this period of school closure, parents reported the positive impact of home-learning. Benefits identified included: talking and listening with their child(ren) (46%), enjoying new activities (40%) or finding out new things about their child(ren) (39%). One parent reflected:

*"My child has gained so many new skills ... i.e baking, joinery, construction, farm midwifery etc. This has been his education! ...His father has been at home all this time (the longest ever spent at home with his children) and the bonding of father and son has been so important...this whole experience is a life learning experience for our children. I want them to remember positive things from this event."*

**Figure 8: Have you experienced difficulty in any of the following areas? (%)**



*"Sharing 1 computer with 2 children (other child is Y5) and trying to work from home is difficult. No home printer."*

*"Poor internet means we can't take advantage of online resources as the Yr 11 child needs to access the online resources and everyone else [in the household] needs to be offline."*

The word cloud (Figure 9) gives an overview of the words used by post-primary parents to describe their experiences of learning at home with their child(ren) during this period. For most, it has been *challenging*, *stressful*, *difficult* and *frustrating* but, for many, also *rewarding*, *interesting*, *enjoyable* and *fun*.

Figure 9: Words used by parents of post-primary children about their experiences





# Findings: Parents of Pupils attending a Special School

## Background Information

- The survey of parents of pupils attending special schools gathered **198** responses across Northern Ireland.
- The majority of parents were mothers (**89%**), with smaller representation from fathers (**6%**), foster carers (**3%**) and other guardians (**2%**).
- The age range of children spanned 3-19 years, with the most common ages given as 10, 12 and 14 years (**9%** respectively), followed by 13 and 7 years (**8%** respectively), 6, 5 and 15 years (**7%** respectively), 11 years (**6%**), and 16 and 8 years (**5%** respectively).
- The diagnosed SEN of children is reported in line with DE categorisation. It should be noted that in most instances, parents reported more than one SEN for their child. The most commonly reported SEN were Autism Spectrum Disorder (**n=97**), Cognitive and Learning Difficulties (including Moderate Learning Difficulties, Severe Learning Difficulties, Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties) (**n=76**). Other SEN reported included

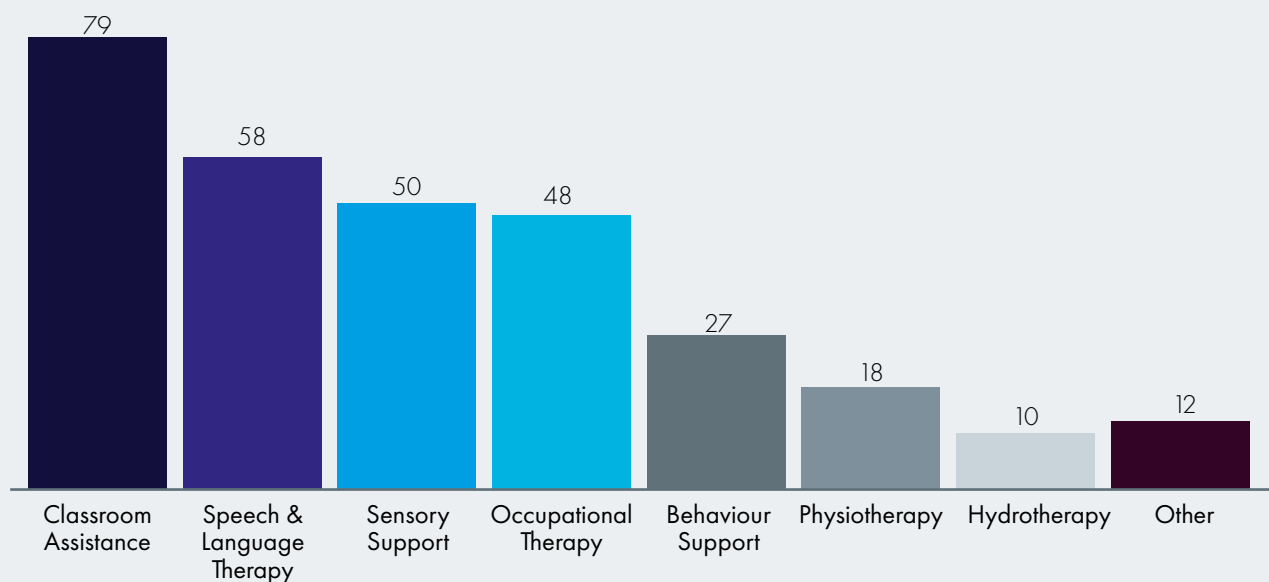
Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (**n=23**), Global Developmental Delay (**n=16**), Down Syndrome (**n=15**), and Other conditions/syndromes (**n=12**).

- Over three quarters (**78%**) of parents indicated they had other children at home.
- Just under a fifth (**16%**) of parents reported they had to take unpaid leave from work to care for their child.

## School Support

Figure 10 shows parents identified classroom assistance (**79%**) as the most common support that their child received at school, followed by Speech and Language Therapy (**58%**), Sensory Support (**50%**), Occupational Therapy (**48%**), Behaviour Support (**27%**), Physiotherapy (**18%**), Other (**12%**) and Hydrotherapy (**10%**). Other forms of support included music therapy, sign language, assistive technology, and learning tools such as magnifiers. In qualifying their responses, some parents cited the small class size and pupil-staff ratio as an important form of support. The majority of parents (**89%**) overwhelmingly indicated that support provided in school was important in meeting their child's needs.

**Figure 10: What type of support does your child receive in class? (%)**



The majority of parents (60%) indicated it was important they kept up their child's learning at this time; 31% indicated it was somewhat important, 7% indicated it was not at all important and 3% were unsure. When asked how confident they were in supervising their child's learning, just under half (47%) of parents were somewhat confident, just over a quarter (28%) were not at all confident, just over a fifth (22%) were confident and 3% were unsure.

Parents were asked which subject areas they felt most confident supervising and which subject areas they felt least confident supervising (Figures 11 and 12). Parent responses were collated around curriculum areas and related areas including life skills, play-based learning; speech and communication; therapies; motor skills; sensory support; and behaviour support.

**Figure 11: Which areas of learning do you feel most confident supervising? (%)**

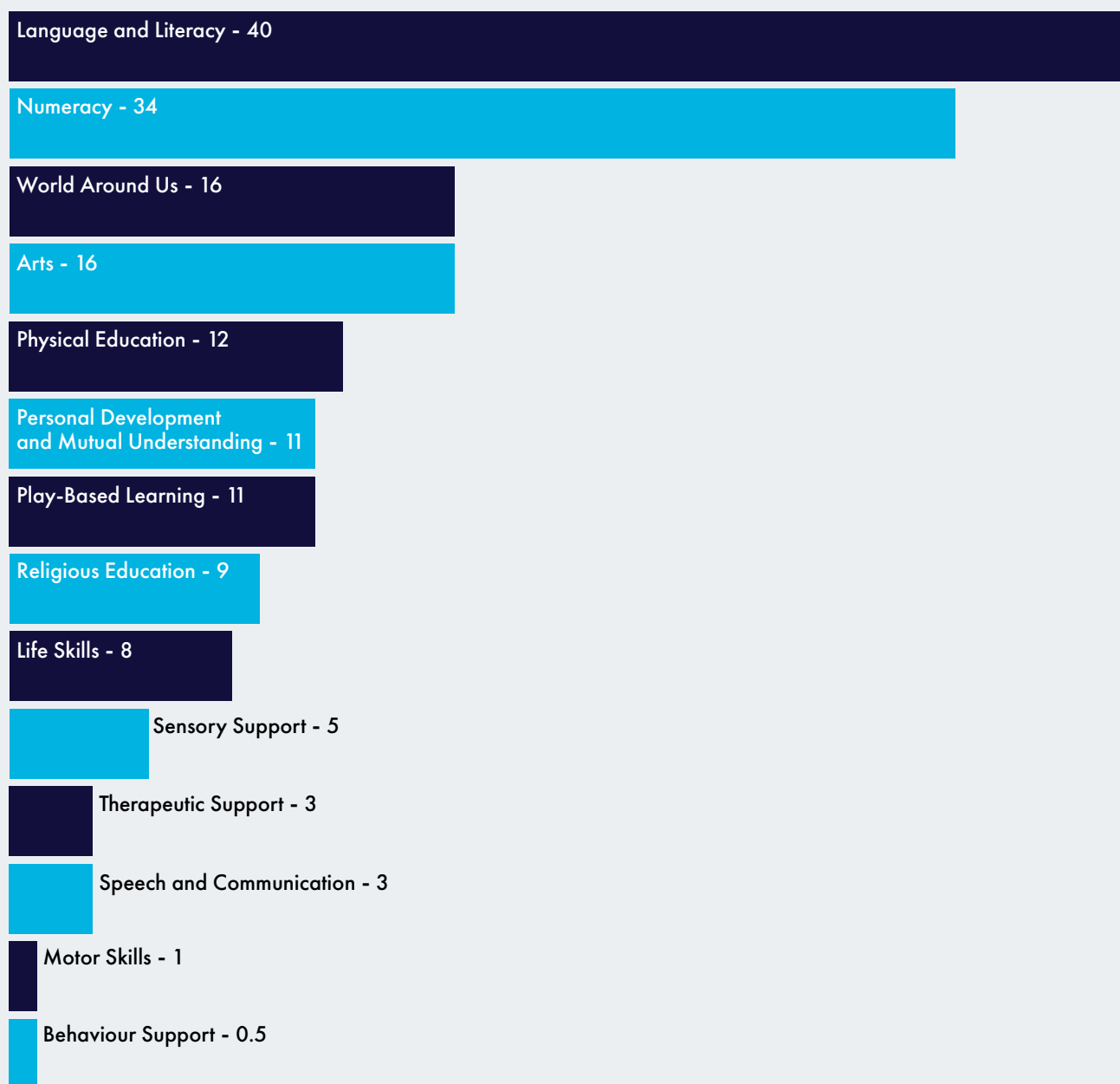
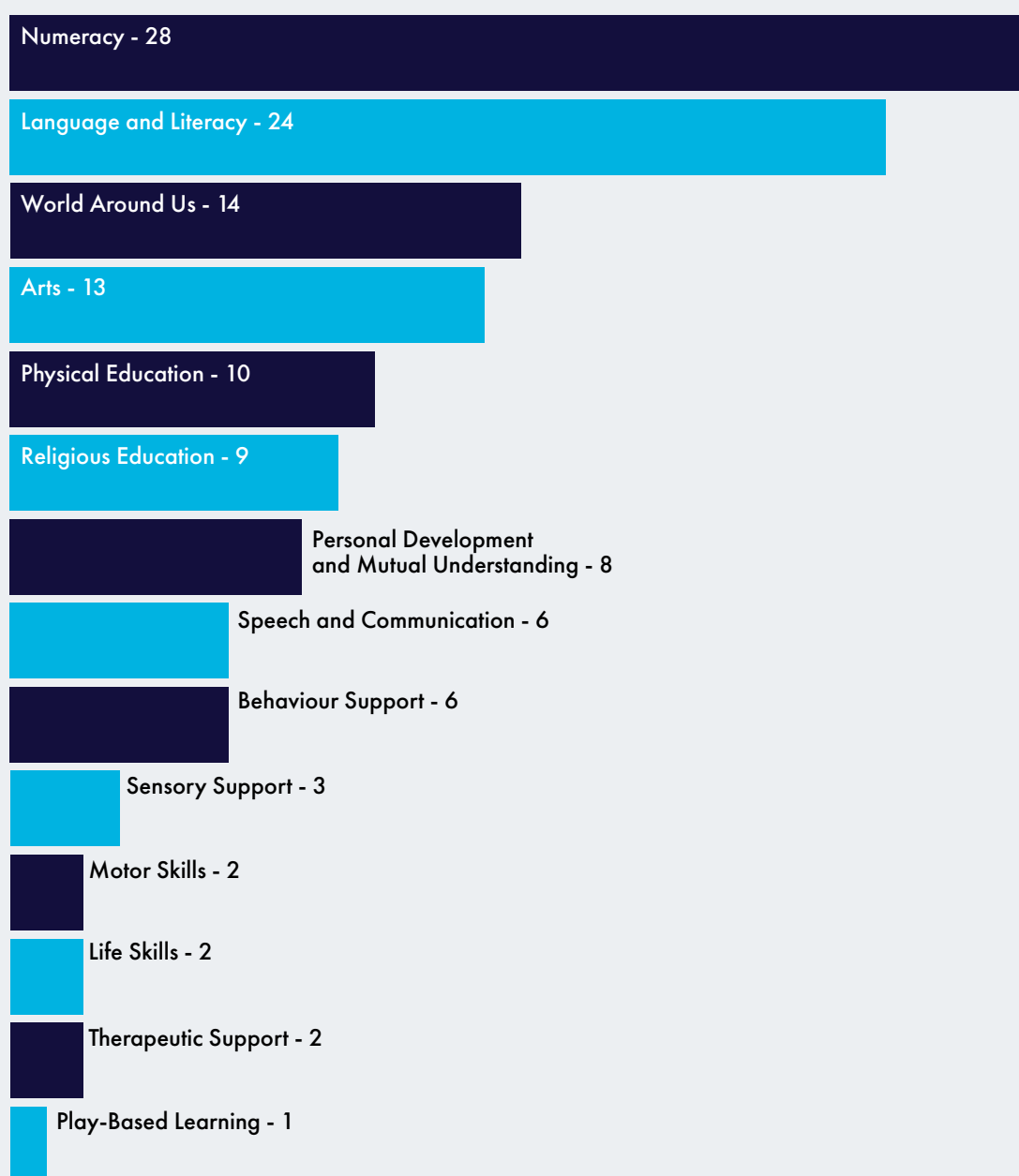


Figure 12: Which areas of learning do you feel least confident supervising? (%)



## Parents of children not entitled to Free School Meals are likely to have more confidence in supporting their child's learning than other parents.

### Learning from Home and Home-School Communications

Parents reported that their child's school provided information via a range of methods. The most commonly reported was how to access online materials (80%), contact details for teacher(s) (60%), how to use learning materials provided by the school (57%) and contact details for the Principal (43%).

Overall, parents' comments on school support were positive, although a few described less satisfactory experiences.

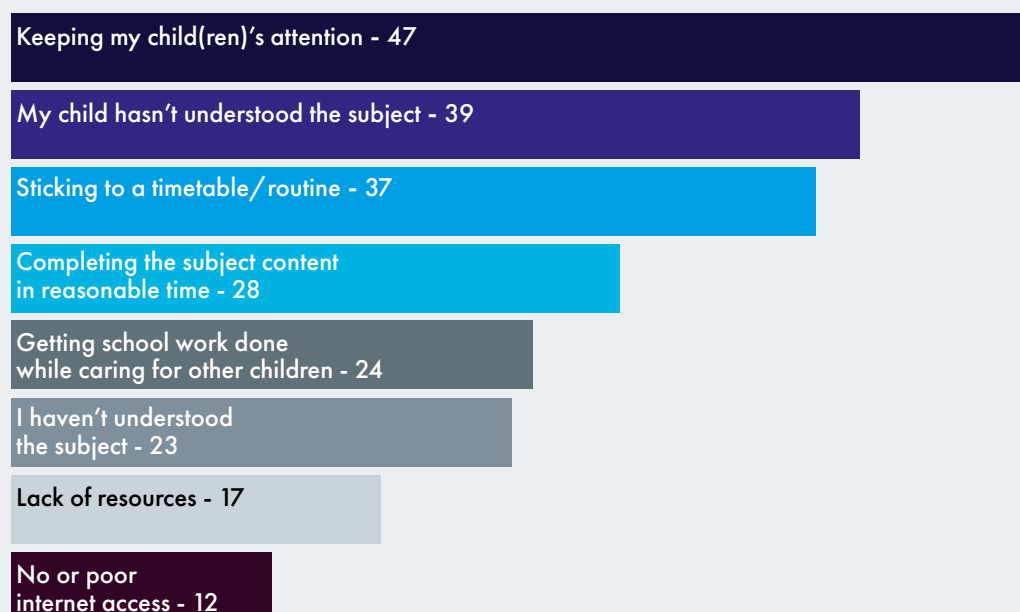
Almost three quarters (74%) of parents reported their child's school had provided curriculum materials in a range of formats, including a pack distributed before the school closed (49%), through an online interface, such as Google Classroom/Seesaw (40%), through the school website (39%) and through regular emails (31%). Other options (12%) included provision of Occupational Therapy equipment, work trays and class dojos. The majority of parents (83%) reported they received regular updates from their child's school. Updates generally took the form of emails, teacher contact, Principal email, videos, and through social media, including Facebook, Zoom and Seesaw.

Over three quarters (79%) of parents indicated they were able to contact their child's teacher if they needed to. A range of reasons were given for making contact with the teacher; these included clarifying their understanding of how to approach learning tasks, sharing and getting feedback on completed work, getting feedback on work set, seeking advice on when therapeutic support/advice would be provided, support for attention and behaviour, requests for additional material e.g. visual supports, reading material, sharing pictures of children's work.

Most parents (49%) reported that their child, on average, spent up to an hour per day on school work; 23% of parents reported spending 1-2 hours per day and 13% reported more than 2 hours per day. 15% of parents reported not spending time on school work each day.

A majority of parents (84%) stated they had experienced difficulties with their child's learning (Figure 8). The most common reasons were managing their child's attention (74%), managing their child's behaviour (56%), managing their child's needs with those of siblings (48%), sticking to a timetable/routine (41%) and completing the work (35%). To a lesser extent, challenges were also identified in relation to their child not understanding the subject content (23%), managing their child's health needs (15%), lack of appropriate interactive resources (15%), no or poor internet access (8%), parents not understanding the subject content (7%).

Figure 13: Difficulties with Child(ren)'s learning from home during this period (%)





Parents of children entitled to Free School Meals are more likely to experience difficulty in managing their child's behaviour, are more likely to struggle understanding subject content, are more likely to have no/poor internet access, are more likely to use television programmes to support child's learning and are more likely to prefer their child to learn through play. Parents of children not entitled to Free School Meals are slightly more likely to struggle sticking to a timetable/routine, slightly more likely to have a lack of appropriate interactive resources, slightly more likely to use online videos, activities and websites, slightly more likely to use online resources provided by local organisations, slightly more likely to use other printable activities and more likely to use resources they created themselves.



*"My child has shown many signs of emotional distress over this period, she has communicated sadness at missing school her teachers and friends and extended family, she has also expressed fear of "the bug" and so there are times when responding to her emotional needs has to be prioritised over learning needs. In addition I am an essential worker and am continuing to work a full time job both in work and working from home when possible, my husband is a keyworker and continues to work a full time job from home, we do not have any childcare for our one year old and due to risks to my daughter they cannot attend provided day care for essential workers, in addition to this her learning and therapy needs would not be met in such a setting and so I feel it would increase pressure on home to provide such."*

*"My son behaves differently in school and home. I spend all day trying to stop him squealing. From morning to night."*

*"No resources or equipment at home. My child's education programmes involves specialist input, therapies & equipment, none of which are currently available."*

Resources used by parents to support their child's learning included those provided by the school (74%), online videos, activities and websites (51%), Apps (51%), resources created by parents themselves (49%) and other printable activities/worksheets (45%). To a lesser extent, parents also reported using television programmes (25%), resources provided by organisations such as Makaton NI, Mencap, Autism NI (20%). A small proportion (8%) of parents reported they were not using resources, preferring their child to learn through play. Parents who selected the 'other' option identified resources such as jigsaw puzzles, Twinkl, YouTube, physical and sensory resources provided by the school, meditation and yoga.

For those parents who were working, 40% stated they had experienced difficulties organising their work. In identifying the difficulties they experienced, the most common was managing their work around the health/behaviour needs of their child (28%), followed by getting their own work completed (23%), interruptions to their work (20%) and organisation a work schedule for themselves (14%).

### Staying Connected

Over two thirds (68%) of parents stated their child's special school had a social media page, with most posting updates several times a week.

Just under half of parents (48%) said they were a member of a parents' group on social media, most of whom (30%) used it at about once a week. Parents used this to share concerns around their child's mental well-being (58%), concerns around their child's behaviour (55%), concerns around their child's physical well-being (52%), advice on their child's learning (42%), suggestions for resources or classes (41%), to reduce feelings of isolation (40%) and to chat to other parents generally (35%).

The biggest difficulty experienced by parents was keeping their child entertained (43%), managing limited opportunities for outdoor activity (42%), managing social isolation (36%), managing their own physical well-being (31%) and their own mental well-being (30%). To a slightly lesser extent, other challenges included juggling caring for their child with work (23%), managing household budgets (20%), keeping their child safe and healthy (18%) and answering their child's questions on COVID-19.

***Parents of children entitled to Free School Meals are more likely to be part of a parents' social media group, more likely to struggle with managing their own mental and physical well-being, slightly more likely to struggle to manage household budgets and less likely to struggle juggling care of their child with work. Additionally, parents with other children at home are more likely to experience difficulties managing their child's needs with those of siblings, more likely to have difficulties managing their child's health needs, behaviour, attention, more likely to have difficulties maintaining a routine, more likely to have difficulties juggling caring for their children with work, and slightly more likely to manage household budgets.***

### Overall Perspectives


Describing their role supporting their child's learning at this time, most parents (81%) strongly agreed it was to support their child as best they can and in whatever way he/she needs. Smaller proportions of parents strongly agreed that learning through play was more important than formal schoolwork during this period (30%), their role was to teach their child as much as possible during this period (18%) and that helping their child with their education was not a priority at this time (10%).

The majority of parents found the time spent with their child to be beneficial; overall responses show the most common benefits are: finding out new things about my child (63%), talking and listening with my child (63%), enjoying new activities with my child (62%), learning together (58%) and seeing how my child has adapted to a new routine (56%).

The word cloud (Figure 14) summarises the words used by parents to describe their experiences of learning at home with their children during this period. In contrast to parents of primary and post-primary children, four out of the top five words listed by parents of pupils attending special schools could be considered as reflecting a negative sentiment (*Difficult, Challenging, Stressful, Rewarding, and Hard*).

**Figure 14: Words used by parents of children attending special schools about their experiences**





*"Expectations that you are available to join in things like zoom meetings. Lack of understanding re: disability and personally from a safeguarding point of view who do employers think are supervising children whilst meetings sometimes for the sake of saying doing are taking place. Virtual coffee mornings via phone with team!!"*

*"I'm working from home and as a key worker (though not frontline) worker I still have a full schedule of work to do but have to find time for child with special needs as well as a P6 primary school child who's being given transfer test preparation work."*

# Key Messages

The findings from the three surveys are representative of a strong parent voice across primary, post-primary and special schools in Northern Ireland. The reported experiences of parents during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has vividly demonstrated the nature and extent of issues affecting home-schooling of their child(ren). Undoubtedly, this period has been a significant learning curve for parents, teachers, Principals and the wider school community, and important lessons can be gleaned from school closures during this time. Many of the experiences reported by parents were universal themes and the key messages are informed by findings across the three surveys unless otherwise stated. The experiences reported by parents – positive and negative – are reflective of the inevitable challenges that arise at a time of global disruption and uncertainty; for this reason, they provide a rich evidence base from which to reflect on lessons learned so far and how this might inform planning in the weeks and months ahead. The ongoing impact on teaching and learning, alongside the physical and mental well-being of parents and pupils, is unsustainable and could well add to the calls for radical educational transformation in the longer term. Key messages emerging from the surveys are presented, therefore, as opportunities for transformation.

## Opportunities for Transformation

As decision-, policy- and home-makers continue to react to the challenges imposed by COVID-19 and move to reflect on the emergency actions they have taken as leaders, educators and parents in this rapid, largely improvised, shift to remote home-schooling, this report provides an evidence-base to synthesise the lessons learned and shape the blueprint for schooling in NI, at least, to be built back better.

Recent events have thrown schools and many families into survival mode; seeking to minimise the deleterious impact of a sustained absence of normal school provisions with the broad goal of returning to schooling with the least amount of learning loss as possible. Normal, however, in a post COVID-19 educational landscape is difficult to predict. Post-pandemic pedagogy, in the short and medium terms at least, looks decidedly unfamiliar at system, institution and personal levels. System-leaders will be expected, if not compelled by society, to demonstrate learning and preparedness that has been unavailable to them during this potentially first stoppage.

Schooling across NI in recent months cannot truly be characterised as online learning and teaching, rather it has been a reactive form of emergency remote-education. While few schools across Northern Ireland were unacquainted with online learning tools and provisions prior to COVID-19 pandemic, there has been significant variability of learner and parental experiences of home-schooling. This may be aligned, to some degree, in how much digitalisation was integral to a school's strategic planning. Post-COVID-19 schooling should see such digital integration as central to school and system resilience and academic and pastoral continuity. Crises are frequently incubators for innovation and this crisis has every potential to serve as the inflection point for a transformative approach to education in Northern Ireland in the months and years ahead.





## 1. Effective schools working in partnership with parents

Undoubtedly, expectations placed on school communities in the accelerated period leading to public lockdown affected the nature, extent and quality of preparation for home learning, and some schools responded more effectively than others. Parent responses suggest the period of home-schooling is an opportunity for collective, collaborative learning that, if harnessed, could inform planning for capacity-building as schools prepare for a phased return. In particular, survey findings confirm the need for consistent planning and communication from statutory authorities to ease the fears and concerns of parents as schools move towards re-opening. The findings clearly reveal that, overall, parents welcomed and valued the guidance and support provided by schools before and during lockdown; survey results further suggest that flexible and creative teacher/Principal communication with parents/learners provided a much needed point of educational stability and reassurance. Bitesize overviews of curriculum areas, virtual assemblies, online teaching segments and virtual opportunities for home-school interaction were all identified by parents as valuable supplementary resources in addition to curriculum content. It was also clear, however, that many children struggled to follow a routine timetable at home and missed regular engagement with their classmates. Further development of good practice could seek to maximise synchronous learning opportunities, for example, online collaboration software such as video conferencing tools, providing children with the ability to interact with others in the class and with their teacher.

*An overall framework of advice and training for all parents should be provided centrally, for example by DE, EA, and CCMS rather than being the responsibility of each individual school. Individual schools could supplement such structural guidance with specific tailored support appropriate to their learners.*

## 2. Skills of teachers in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and Continued Professional Development (CPD)

Research at Ulster (Roulston et al., 2019; Shannon et al., 2019; Bates et al., 2017) has sought to explain why digital skills of teachers are not universally high, and recent events have reinforced the urgent need for skills related to online teaching and learning to be a major component of Initial Teacher Education and a focus of Continued Professional Development for all teachers. Teaching effectively online requires different skills than face-to-face teaching and should be much more than merely putting digitised paper exercises online for pupils to access.

The evidence would suggest that these skills are embryonic at best in most schools in Northern Ireland. The impact of COVID-19 has re-defined how children are currently taught and will be taught in the future. In this context, the option for schools to provide more online teaching, creatively utilising and building on existing expertise is one that merits active consideration. Teachers are typically trained for experiential classroom-based practice and the concept of online teaching could be an unsettling prospect for some. However, there are a few precedents that could inform the development of a new teaching skills base.

Firstly, micro-teaching<sup>2</sup> offers an opportunity at pre-service and CPD to practice teaching skills and share good practice in the constructive environment of university or in-school settings. Secondly, the option for co-operative teaching<sup>3</sup> is a less explored dimension of practice in NI that could provide a supportive teacher partnership model in moving towards online teaching. Finally, PGCE primary tutors at Ulster (McGill and Park, 2020) have been working with students at Ulster University who were unable to complete their classroom-based practice due to school closures. Students developed instead a series of parent learning resource packs that, in addition to the lesson plans of a thematic unit, included teaching tutorials to maximise engagement with children, parents and schools. Lack of instructive guidance to support teaching content was a common observation in the surveys. This intervention has been widely welcomed by parents and the interactive tutorials have been particularly popular, and as an exemplar it offers a template that could be rolled out on a larger scale. In homes where technical equipment has to be shared, it means that children have flexibility in accessing the lesson content and do not lose the opportunities for direct learning. The role and input of school library staff, particularly where there is a professionally qualified school librarian, should also be considered in relation to how school staff, pupils and families can be supported in terms of their digital skills.

*There is a need for strategic direction and impetus to help develop these digital and online skills in Initial Teacher Education and with qualified teachers.*



### 3. Digital divide and robust communication networks

A digital divide has been long known but the move to emergency online teaching and learning has thrown it into sharp relief. The findings indicate issues related to broadband access in some homes and the availability of sufficient devices in the home, particularly where multiple children (often in addition to their parents) require access, exacerbate an already well-documented digital divide, impacting the extent to which children and their parents have been able to engage with home learning. The Department of Education has begun to address this, with proposals to lend devices to disadvantaged groups of children, with priority given to those in certain year groups and categories, including FSME, SEN, Newcomer Children, Looked after Children and other children considered as vulnerable. Whilst this is a welcome intervention, expectations in how material is shared and used necessitates more effective incorporation of ICT so that children are not placed at a disadvantage – for example, the time and money involved in printing emailed worksheets, and the volume of worksheets emailed. The level of digital literacy among parents also needs to be considered if they are to confidently support their child(ren)'s learning. Even with access to reliable broadband and sufficient devices, many parents find it difficult to understand and navigate the vast amount of available online resources and activities. A number of programs which offer connectivity to teachers and learners are available, but there are concerns over their suitability for use with children. There needs to be further guidance for parents on data privacy and child protection. C2k<sup>4</sup> provides some centrally procured software which is robust and secure, but sometimes the workflow with such programmes is considered cumbersome and the learning curve is perceived to be steep.

***The digital divide needs to be recognised and addressed to remove inequity and to ensure all those in the education system have access to learning and teaching materials. The lack of an ICT strategy in Northern Ireland has led to early gains in this area being lost. There is an urgent need to develop a strategic view and to regain some of the lost ground.***

### 4. Pupils with Special Educational Needs

The routine of school provides consistency for parents and children alike. Its particular significance for children attending special schools was reported by parents in terms of the detrimental impact of school closure on their child's behaviour, physical and mental well-being as well as the loss of vital respite for parents themselves.

Crucially, these parents' experiences of supporting their child's learning were described in more challenging terms than the experiences of parents of children attending primary and post-primary schools. Options for re-opening special schools should be a priority consideration in the educational transition from lockdown. A return to school may not be immediately feasible for all pupils, including those with complex medical needs, particularly where allied health professionals working in special schools have been re-deployed within the health service. In the interim, regular access for parents to online support, including guided behaviour, sensory, communication and therapeutic techniques should be explored. It is also clear that for many other children and their families (notably, but not exclusively, those with ASD), the regularity of a school day and access to various therapeutic support will bring valuable educational, social and psychological advantages. The established structure of small class sizes, higher staff-pupil ratios and accessible school environment lends itself to strategic planning that may take longer for mainstream schools to co-ordinate, although the staff expertise within Nurture Units or Sensory Rooms are a transferable option for some groups of pupils. Forward planning should also include serious consideration of the role of classroom assistants in supporting pupils with SEN. Although not a specific focus of these surveys, research at Ulster (O'Connor et al., 2017; Logan et al., 2018) has reinforced the reality of a key workforce whose duties frequently exceed their prescribed role. The DE (2009) has noted that classroom assistants can make a meaningful difference to the progress of pupils with SEN, recommending they should have access to relevant professional development alongside teachers. Arguably, their input may assume increasing importance as schools navigate a hybrid of classroom and online learning, for example, in developing appropriate range of differentiated learning resources.

***In the short term, the particular educational and health profile of pupils attending special schools requires co-ordination within a multi-disciplinary framework that meets their diverse needs whilst maximising parents' options for guided educational and therapeutic support. In the longer term, critical review of the role and contribution of classroom assistants should be prioritised as part of a workstream in the Education Transformation Programme, for example, within the SEN Learner Journey Project<sup>5</sup>.***

2. Micro-teaching is a teacher training technique that records a teaching session, allowing students to experiment systematically with teaching techniques and to receive constructive feedback from tutors and/or peers on what worked and what improvements can be made to their practice.
3. Co-operative teaching is typically two teachers working together. It is based on a model of collaboration and communication to meet the diverse needs of all learners.
4. The C2k project provides the infrastructure and services to support the use of ICT in schools in Northern Ireland. It is managed by the Education Authority on behalf of Department of Education.
5. <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/sen-learner-journey-project>



## 5. Assessment

For post-primary schools in 2020, the local examinations and assessment board (CCEA) has had to make decisions to ensure that candidates are awarded grades in high stakes examinations in a manner which is robust but fair. Examination authorities are already having conversations as to how schools might have to adapt to ensure that, should teaching be disrupted again in the academic year 2020-2021, grades can be awarded justifiably and with clarity for candidates, parents and schools. This might impact on the curriculum and what is taught when in a two-year course, for example, and also on the data gathered by teachers about the progress of students. There are dangers here of 'over-datafication', with the gathering of evidence dominating classroom processes, at the cost of learning. In primary schools, the Minister of Education seems determined to continue with the selection process, despite growing opposition, and it is possible that data gathering by teachers might start to dominate what teachers are required to do in primary schools, at the cost of real learning. Some post-primary schools have already made the decision that they will not use transfer test results in their intake selection process in 2021.

*There are real dangers of changing educational structures and expectations, but also opportunities to build an assessment structure which is fair and robust, but which does not obscure the real purpose of schools, which is learning.*

## 6. The development of a system of education which is affordable and sustainable, yet resilient in the face of challenges

Northern Ireland's education system is divided by social class and by religion and it is widely accepted that this is unsustainable. There are opportunities in planning a new educational provision to build one which addresses those divisions and creates a single system which caters for all needs and is inclusive and equitable. As the worst of the Covid-19 pandemic seems to show some signs of abating, the hashtag #BuildBackBetter has been trending on social media. While not exclusively focussed on environmental change, it is largely a recognition that going back to what reflected 'normal' before the crisis is not acceptable, and that, for example, the climate crisis and global extinctions must be addressed urgently. There could be a similar sentiment in relation to education. What passed for 'normal' in the education system may not be something to which we should aspire to return.

*The predicted recession can be challenged by 'building back better', creating a sustainable and affordable education service that delivers for all, in an inclusive society.*

## 7. Educational Research and Data Collection

Educational research over this period of public lockdown has undoubtedly gathered a rich evidence base to provide initial insight and understanding on the impact of school closures from a range of perspectives. Data collection like this produces valuable information for parents, schools, statutory and non-statutory agencies and policy-makers, and can be of immediate use in short-term planning. At the same time, the usefulness of data collection must be harnessed in an on-going research programme that will systematically monitor patterns and trends over time. The impact of school closures on pupil educational outcomes and well-being is already documented; however, it is simultaneously recognised that social, educational and psychological outcomes will become more apparent in the longer term. The DE already collects substantive individual pupil level data that includes key variables such as FSME status, SEN status, both of which were indicators of parental stress in these surveys. Moving forward, there is a unique opportunity to develop linkages between DE data and other social and health data that provides clear insights into pupil outcomes relative to their family and environmental circumstances. Better understanding of this relationship will provide insights that contribute to improved joined-up planning and decision-making over the longer term; will complement existing policy and legislation, including the Children and Young People's Strategy 2019-2029<sup>6</sup> and the Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland), 2015<sup>7</sup>; and ensure that services meet the educational and wider needs of children and their families.

*Educational research and data collection can inform and deliver meaningful change, particularly when merged with wider social data. Its potential to inform and assist statutory and non-statutory partners through collaborative dialogue is essential if policy is to fully represent the needs of children and their families.*





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