



Save the Children



Report

EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS' PERSPECTIVES ON PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT WITHIN PRIMARY SCHOOL SETTINGS IN NORTHERN IRELAND **August 2019**

savethechildren.org.uk

Registered charity England and Wales (213890) Scotland (SC039570)

Report

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	2
1 Introduction and Overview	6
2 Policy and Practice Context	10
3 Consultation Findings, Analysis and Key Themes	18
4 Key Points for Consideration	41
5 Recommendations	44
6 Endnotes	47
7 Appendices	49
Appendix I List of Interviewees	
Appendix II Case Study – Scoil an Droichid	
Appendix III Case Study – Kilcooley Primary School	
Appendix IV Case Study – Elmgrove Primary School	
Appendix V Survey	

Acknowledgements

This report was written by S3 Solutions and Anne Moore from Save the Children.

We would like to thank the education professionals for their contribution to the research and to thank Peter Bryson, Laura Feeney, Malachy Campbell, Corrine Heaney and Orla Bowden for their support and comments.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Through our work in Northern Ireland and across the UK, Save the Children aims to contribute to a significant and sustained improvement in early learning for young children growing up in poverty, helping to narrow the early learning gap between them and their better-off peers.

Save the Children has delivered parental engagement programmes in schools across Northern Ireland since 2010, based on evidence about the benefits of parental engagement on children's learning. However, the evidence is less clear about how to support parents to become involved in their children's learning and development. This consultation seeks the perspectives of education professionals in primary schools in order to increase understanding about the current practice landscape and to strengthen the case for prioritising investment in a parental engagement implementation plan.

Save the Children commissioned S3 Solutions to undertake a consultation to explore education professionals' perspectives on parental engagement within primary school settings in Northern Ireland. The questions focused on their experiences of what matters and what works, what hinders and enables effective parental engagement and what they recommend as the way forward.

The report takes the form of findings from a survey of primary school staff, interviews with principals and other key stakeholders, against the backdrop of the policy and practice context for parental engagement in Northern Ireland, Scotland and England.

The report is set out as follows:

- Introduction and overview
- The policy and practice context
- Consultation findings and analysis
- Key points for consideration and recommendations

For the purposes of this Report, Save the Children defines parental engagement as:

“How parents can best be supported to develop the skills and confidence to engage in their children’s learning at home. It’s about ensuring parents have the tools and means to engage in play-based activities that boost early learning activities at home. It’s about ensuring quality interactions that are based on what we know works to support children’s early language, communication, literacy and numeracy development. We do not include in our definition parents’ involvement or representation in schools e.g. being part of school decision-making processes.”

The Policy and Practice Context

This section provides an overview of the strategic context for parental engagement and explores:

- Definitions of parental engagement
- Policy and practice in Northern Ireland
- Examples of policy and practice in England and Scotland

The overview presents a non-exhaustive summary of the importance attached to the role of parents in their children's development and learning. There may be value accorded to parental engagement, but the lack of an agreed definition of parental engagement, the limited quality standards, guidance materials, training and investment attest to the absence of a parental engagement strategy and implementation plan. The different models

adopted in England and Scotland can provide learning for a new approach in Northern Ireland, especially their emphasis on parents as equal partners who are experts in what they and their children need.

Consultation findings and analysis

This section contains the perspectives of education professionals gathered by interview and survey (Appendix V). The respondents include principals from 14 primary schools (via interview), 2 university representatives and 56 education professionals (via survey).

The consultation took place between November 2018 and March 2019.

The findings are presented under 6 themes:

1. Definition of parental engagement
2. The importance and value of parental engagement
3. Outcomes from parental engagement
4. The role of teachers and schools in engaging, delivering and sustaining parental engagement
5. Challenges and barriers associated with parental engagement
6. Solutions and enablers

Definition of parental engagement

The results of the interviews and surveys reveal that most professionals adopt a broad interpretation of parental engagement that includes any activity that involves parents. They are inclined to use the terms parental involvement and engagement interchangeably which suggests that there is a lack of clarity at policy level.

Importance and value of parental engagement

The findings show widespread agreement about the importance of parental engagement, with over 73% of respondents prioritising it in their school development plan. Their support was shown through enthusiastic language such as “vital”, “essential” and “of upmost importance”. A survey respondent stated:

“I passionately believe that parents must be involved in their children’s learning. It is important that they know what their children are learning, who their peers / friends are, learning alongside their children. Children love seeing their parents around the school when in the classroom.”

There was also widespread agreement about the value of parental engagement, with almost 93% of respondents citing ‘experience of working with parents’ as a key driver of their interest in parental engagement.

Outcomes from parental engagement

Findings showed that the majority rated ‘developing strong relationships between parents, children and staff’ as the most important outcome, followed by ‘supporting children’s emotional and mental health and wellbeing as the foundation of learning’ and ‘developing parental skills and confidence’.

Respondents, who indicated that parental engagement programmes had been effective in their school, reported key outcomes including ‘improved trust and relationships between parents and school / teachers’, ‘increased confidence and self-esteem of parents’ and ‘improved relationships between parents and children’.

The role of the teachers and the school in engaging, delivering and sustaining parental engagement

A prerequisite for successful parental engagement emerged from interviews with principals, namely the importance of developing trust and strong relationships between parents and schools. They suggested this can be achieved by creating a welcoming atmosphere in schools and ensuring teachers actively seek ways to work in partnership with parents.

Challenges and barriers associated with engaging parents in their children's learning, delivering parental engagement and sustaining parental engagement

Respondents cited the following barriers to engaging parents in their children's learning: 'parents aren't aware of their importance as the first and most important educator from birth', 'parents don't have the confidence to collaborate with schools' and 'parents have their own bad experiences of education, so keep away' and the 'stigma of being perceived as "bad parents" if they are seen to need parental support'.

When asked about barriers to their school's ability to deliver parental engagement, most cited the lack of funding to release teachers for professional development, and action short of strike (reported during the research period November 2018 - March 2019).

The major barriers to schools' ability to sustain parental engagement included the short-term nature of funding that prevents longer-term planning, a reliance on initiatives and pilots that prevents mainstreaming and sustainability and lack of political will and policy buy-in for a parental engagement strategy and implementation plan,

which are deemed necessary to raise the profile of parental engagement and embed it in school provision.

Solutions and Enablers

Against the background of sustained budget cuts, respondents argued that investment in a parental engagement strategy and action plan was critical to ensuring effective mainstream provision. They also recommended the need for parental engagement as a priority in the school development plan, for a dedicated lead to organise transition to primary school, for increased parental demand for learning how to support their children's learning and for student teachers to receive experience of parental engagement during placements.

On being asked about the critical factors that enable effective parental engagement, most cited school culture, the nature and content of the programmes, the capacity of the staff team and parents' prior experience of working in partnership with early childhood practitioners in day care, Sure Start and pre-school settings.

Recommendations

On the basis of these findings, the report highlights the importance of a cross-departmental strategy and resourced delivery plan to provide policy direction and investment. It argues that there should be an agreed definition of parental engagement, that parental engagement should be specified in the inspection framework and as a teaching and leadership competency to ensure quality standards, that it should be reflected in training and qualifications, that national parenting organisations and families, especially families living in poverty, should be involved in the co-design, and that it should be cross-referenced with relevant

Report

strategies including the Family and Parenting Support Strategy and the Tackling Education Disadvantage Strategy.

In acknowledgement of the difficulty of moving from intent to implementation, especially in the current financial climate, the report suggests convening a working group or panel to widen the discussion to more educationists and other stakeholders who could investigate the wide range of dilemmas and contradictions, consider further research and funding options and the co-production of a blueprint for supporting the best start in life by embedding parental engagement in all young children's services – beginning with primary school provision and extending into early years from pre-birth.

Conclusion

The research, with its survey, interviews and case studies, provides a snapshot of the policy and practice landscape for parental engagement in Northern Ireland. There is no doubt that education professionals face increasing challenges, including a rise in child poverty in the next few years. However, the report makes clear that helping to give children the best start in life is the main purpose of parental engagement and that effective provision will help realise the aspirations of professionals, policymakers, regulators and most importantly parents, especially those living in low income. The research is also clear that effective parental engagement will repay efforts many times over to the benefit of children, families and society.

1. Introduction and Overview

1.1 Background to 'Education professionals' perspectives on parental engagement'

Save the Children believes all young children should have happy, healthy childhoods and the same chances of succeeding in later life, regardless of their background.

Through our work in Northern Ireland and across the UK, Save the Children aims to contribute to a significant and sustained improvement in early learning for young children growing up in poverty, helping to narrow the early learning gap between them and their better-off peers.

What we're doing

Save the Children wants to directly help children to get a better start in life, by delivering programmes with children and families and by campaigning to have a positive impact on many more. To ensure we can make the biggest difference for children in Northern Ireland and across the UK, we will work over the next three years to make sure that:

- Young children living in poverty experience a positive home learning environment and their parents are engaged in their learning
- Children living in poverty have access to high-quality early years services that support their learning
- Significantly fewer young children grow up in poverty and experience material deprivation

The link between poverty and early learning outcomes is strong. According to the latest official figures for Northern Ireland, there are 102,000 children living in poverty, approximately 23% of children. The biggest proportion of children in low

income lives in families where the youngest child is under five.ⁱ

The extent and impact of child poverty are predicted to worsen. A recent report from the Resolution Foundation warns that young children born between 2016 and 2020 are expected to face relative early years poverty close to 40% in the next few years. The report suggests the need to consider the incidence of in-work poverty, the role of housing costs and the functioning of the social security system in actions to alleviate the impact on families, particularly children.ⁱⁱ



Father and son taking part in Save the Children's Families Connect Programme in Elmgrove Primary School. Photo: Neil Harrison Photography.

Recent research reveals that children growing up in poverty often start school behind their peers, with the gap between the poorest and most advantaged tenth of children becoming as large as 19 months.ⁱⁱⁱ This early education achievement gap can persist and widen as children progress through school. This is evidenced in Northern Ireland through GCSE results, when unfortunately it is too late to intervene to support children's learning: In 2017/18

Report

48.6% of children entitled to free school meals (FSME) achieved five A* - C grade GCSE's compared to 78.1% of non-FSME children.^{iv}

However, evidence shows that this link between low income and learning outcomes is not inevitable. For example, the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project found that the quality of the home learning environment (HLE) is more important for intellectual and social development than parental occupation, education or income. 'What parents do is more important than who they are.'^v

In view of the crucial importance of the home learning environment, Save the Children is committed to exploring how parents can be engaged in their children's learning.

Research findings from neuroscience and economics demonstrate the benefits of preventative early intervention, especially for young children in low income families. The first years of a child's life are critical for optimum brain development and the level of support, nurture and resources during the first five years is the foundation of lifelong health and well-being. This earlier support is foundational but needs to be sustained throughout childhood.

In Northern Ireland several influential bodies have called for a focus on parental engagement in schools and for establishing a Department of Education-led parental engagement strategy as a result of the evidence about the link between parental engagement and children's learning outcomes:

The NIAO argues: "Huge gains can be made in literacy and numeracy attainment levels if parents received more encouragement to work with schools in support of their children's education and opportunities were taken to engage parents to provide educational development in the home."^{vi}

The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) suggests that the education department should "establish a

clear strategy for parental engagement to ensure that all schools have clear procedures for communicating and engaging with parents and the community."^{vii}

The CBI recommends a strategy for "harnessing" parental engagement and wider community involvement, including links with business.^{viii}

It is for these reasons that Save the Children is calling for high-quality early years (0-8) provision that prioritises parents' engagement in their young children's development and learning. The aim is to invest in the foundations of childhood and to help close the poverty-related education achievement gap.



Parents taking part in Save the Children's Families Connect Programme in Elmgrove Primary School. Photo: Neil Harrison Photography.

1.2 Purpose of the research

Save the Children has delivered parental engagement programmes in schools across Northern Ireland since 2010 and commissioned this

Report

research based on the evidence about the benefits of parental engagement on children's outcomes, especially for children living in low income households. Through our experience of programme delivery, we are aware the evidence is less clear about the best ways to support parents' involvement in their children's learning and development. How support is designed and implemented is complex and often riddled with assumptions about the roles different actors play in developing a systemic approach. Hence the decision to explore the support available for parents and as a first step seek the experience of education professionals in primary schools. The findings are also expected to increase understanding about the policy and practice landscape in Northern Ireland, and to inform the case for prioritising investment in parental engagement.

This report details key findings from a consultation with education professionals in order to explore their perspectives on parental engagement, with a focus on the following:

- School staff attitudes to and relationships with parents
- Professionals' views on parents' own experiences of school and how they inform their attitudes to their children's learning
- Professionals' assumptions about their role in engaging parents to support their children's learning
- How school staff currently work with other parental engagement initiatives to support children's learning
- The challenges faced by education professionals in engaging parents in their children's learning
- The enablers and challenges in delivering and sustaining school-based interventions that support parents to engage in their children's learning

- The outcomes, if any, that schools see in parental engagement
- Professionals' solutions to overcoming barriers to delivering school-based parental engagement interventions.

This report is set out as follows:

- Overview and analysis of current policy and practice
- Consultation findings and analysis
- Key points for consideration and recommendations for future action

1.3 Process and Research Approach

S3 Solutions was appointed to complete the consultation on behalf of Save the Children in October 2018. The following steps were taken to complete the research:



Desktop research of relevant information for contextual insight before consultation with professionals and to ensure research objectives were met, whilst also ensuring optimal input from the professionals was achieved.

A comprehensive consultation process was then designed to maximise input from education professionals in order to meet the key objectives of Save the Children. The central element within the consultation process was the distribution of a survey for education professionals within 816 primary schools in Northern Ireland.

To enhance the consultation process and gain greater insight from education professionals into the research, a series of interviews was completed with principals from local primary schools and professionals working in Stranmillis College and the Ulster University.

Detailed analysis and assessment of all information obtained during the desktop review and consultation process. The Report highlights key findings, identifies priorities and notes areas of potential action for future parental engagement policy and provision.

2. Policy and Practice Context

2.1 Introduction

This section provides an overview of the strategic context for parental engagement and explores:

- Definitions of parental engagement
- Policy within Northern Ireland
- Examples of policy in other jurisdictions

2.2 Definitions of Parental Engagement

The initial challenge is to address the extent of confusion about the difference between parental involvement and parental engagement. The literature^x does not define the role of parents clearly or consistently. Parental engagement has been described as parental communication with their children about school, parental participation in school activities and parental communications with teachers about their child.

According to Education Scotland, parental engagement most often refers to parents' engagement in their child's learning at home, at school and in the wider community. Parental engagement is supported by discussion between parents and practitioners and focused on how families can build on what they already do to help their children's learning and provide a supportive home learning environment.

It is recognised that there is a continuum between parental involvement and parental engagement. The movement between the two represents a shift in emphasis, away from the relationship between parents and schools, to a focus on the relationship between parents and their children's learning.

For the purposes of this consultation with education professionals, Save the Children offers the following definition as:

“How parents can best be supported to develop the skills and confidence to engage in their children’s learning at home. It’s about ensuring parents have the tools and means to engage in play-based activities that boost early learning activities at home. It’s about ensuring quality interactions that are based on what we know works to support children’s early language, communication, literacy and numeracy development. We do not include in our definition parents’ involvement or representation in schools e.g. being part of school decision-making processes.”

However, a brief review of the literature reveals a variety of interpretations and definitions. For example, Save the Children and others emphasise supporting parents' skills and confidence to engage in their children's learning:

“Parental engagement is considered to be a parent’s participation in their child’s learning, rather than simply parental involvement in schooling.”^x

“We define parental engagement as the involvement of parents in supporting their children’s academic learning. It includes: approaches and programmes which aim to develop parental skills such as literacy or IT skills; general approaches which encourage parents to support their children with, for example reading or homework; the involvement of parents in their children’s learning activities; and more intensive programmes for families in crisis.”^{xi}

“Parental engagement is about parents’ and families’ interaction with their child’s learning. It can take place in the home, at school or in the community. Where it takes place is not important. The important thing is the quality of the parent’s engagement with their child’s learning, the positive impact that it can have and the interaction and mutual development that can occur as a result of that interaction.”^{xii}

This contrasts with the findings of the Department for Education (England) which adopts a broader interpretation of parental engagement that combines Education Scotland’s definitions of parental involvement and engagement:

- learning at home: help with homework, skills, attitudes, values, behaviour
- communication: school-home; home-school
- in-school activities: volunteering; helping in classrooms, parents’ evenings
- decision making: membership of Parent Teacher Associations or other committees and advisory groups
- collaborating with the community as a parental engagement strategy often extends beyond schools.^{xiii}

The NI Department of Education (DE) definition of parental engagement is explored in the next section.

2.3 Policy and Practice in Northern Ireland

This section considers relevant strategic documents and policies from departments including the Executive Office, the Department of Education (DE) and the Department of Health (DoH). Current parental engagement practice of the inspectorate, teacher trainers and other agencies have been reviewed.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

Article 5 states (Parental guidance): ‘Governments should respect the rights and responsibilities of families to direct and guide their children so that, as they grow, they learn to use their rights properly. The Convention does not take responsibility for children away from their parents and give more authority to governments. It does place on governments the responsibility to protect and assist families in fulfilling their essential role as nurturers of children’.

Article 18 (2) states: ‘For the purpose of guaranteeing and promoting the rights set forth in the present Convention, States Parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children’.

Education

DE’s overarching strategy for school improvement, Every School a Good School (ESaGS) 2009, directs attention to the need for good practice to close the education achievement gap. It outlines the characteristics of a good school including effective leadership to foster good relationships and engagement between school, parents and the wider community. It makes the case for schools to make it easier for parents to be engaged - ‘research evidence, including from focus groups carried out for us by the Parenting Forum, shows very clearly that parents want to support their children’s learning but sometimes lack the skills or the knowledge to do so.’^{xiv}

However, the 2011 literacy and numeracy strategy, Count, Read: Succeed, employs a broad definition of parental engagement and involvement.^{xv} It specifies that co-operation between schools,

parents and pupils can range from parents and communities engaging with, and supporting the school; maximising pupils' enjoyment of school; proactively and diligently encouraging pupils' attendance at school; pupils being encouraged and facilitated by their parents to study to the best of their ability; pupils participating fully and positively with their teachers and other staff; ensuring homework is completed diligently; preparing properly for school-based and external examinations; schools that are welcoming to parents; the provision of regular feedback from schools to parents on their children's progress; schools keeping parents informed about how they can help to support their children's learning; and parents being encouraged to consider volunteering, in particular to support the development of literacy and numeracy.

The action plan commits to ensuring parents get help to support their children's development of literacy and numeracy.

DE also acknowledges the importance of parental engagement in the 2013 policy 'Learning to learn: A Framework for Early Years Education and Learning'^{xvi} which lays out the policy landscape for early education in Northern Ireland, with 'early education' encompassing the Sure Start programme (0-4), the Pre-School Education Programme (3-4) and the Foundation Stage of primary school (4-6).

'Learning to Learn' specifies that the department should ensure parents understand the value of education and are actively supported to be their child's first and ongoing educators, taking part in programmes that support the home learning environment and acting in partnership with the school in regards to their child's education. It also acknowledges that practitioners may need support to improve how they work more effectively with

parents, and to learn from others about best practice in parental engagement.

There are references to parental engagement in DE's draft Children and Young People's Strategy 2017-2027.^{xvii} 'Many of the outcomes for our children and young people will be influenced by their parents and wider family. Parents are the first educators and play a vital role in ensuring healthy outcomes, providing opportunities to play, encouraging learning, and acting as advocates for their child's rights. But they need support to do this.' Within the Learning and Achievement section of the document, the role of parents and a child's home life in education are again noted and that 'parents and guardians should support their child's education by supporting their learning and by promoting a healthy learning environment in the home'.

Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI)

ETI's Inspection and Self-Evaluation Framework (ISEF) aims to provide a holistic overview of the key aspects of education and training from early years through to further education and work-based learning. According to ISEF,^{xviii} the criteria of effective leadership practice in improvement includes consulting with and sharing the school development plans with parents, children and staff. Self-evaluation questions for middle management include 'how do I consult with and involve staff, children and parents in developing learning and teaching in my area of responsibility?'

In advance of inspections, parents have the opportunity to complete confidential questionnaires to give their views on partnership work with the school and to what extent their views are considered.

The 2016-18 Chief Inspector's Report praises the work of Sure Start but also states that in the

developmental programme for 2-3 year olds, 'there is often too low an expectation of the importance of parental involvement and not enough practical work is done to support these parents to help their child learn by building secure and enduring relationships with them.'

Therefore, it would seem that ETI uses parental involvement and engagement interchangeably in discussing Sure Start inspection, with more emphasis on parental involvement in the ISEF leadership and middle- management criteria.

DE's parental engagement campaign

In January 2018, DE launched Give your Child a Helping Hand,^{xix} a campaign using television, social media, radio and billboard advertisements to provide advice and information to parents on helping their child with their education which promotes parental engagement. This has evolved into a booklet launched in February 2019 by DE and the Health and Social Care Board for parents of children aged 0-4.

Programme for Government

The Executive Office's draft Programme for Government 2016-2021^{xx} highlights the role of parents in supporting the education and development of children and young people. In relation to Outcome 12 which is 'We give our children and young people the best start in life' it states: 'The parents and other adults who care for children will be the biggest influence on ensuring that their needs are met – and the role of Government in this area is to support children and young people, including, by providing help to families where they need it.' Additionally, the report indicates that this can be achieved through the delivery of early years provision, excellence in education and by supporting and building confidence and capacity of families and

communities to support young people to achieve their potential.

Health

According to the Department of Health's 2009 Families Matter - Regional Family and Parenting Strategy, 'government recognises it has a role to play in helping parents gain the skills that they need to help their children reach their full potential.'^{xxi}

The Public Health Agency's strategic framework Making Life Better 2012-23^{xxii} highlights the socio-economic and environmental factors that influence health and well-being. Its first theme is 'giving every child the best start' with the emphasis on the significance of parenting and family support to provide a strong home learning environment as the foundation for realising children's potential and reducing disadvantage.

Practice in parental engagement

The inclusion of modules on engaging parents at Stranmillis University College, a leading teaching university, helps to highlight its value and importance.

Within the PGCE programme, parental engagement is infused throughout each of the key phases, namely nursery, Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 on a mandatory basis and in the B. Ed parental engagement is given an entire module, albeit an optional one.

Detailed below are the learning outcomes for the optional Masters module on 'A critical perspective on working with parents' which is part of the MA Early Childhood Studies, and attracts some current teachers:

- An ability to engage in research on a topic of interest in the field of parental involvement

- A knowledge and understanding of the issues in the area of working with parents
- An understanding of the historical development of working with parents
- A knowledge and understanding of contemporary research in the field of parental involvement
- An ability to develop creative approaches to working with parents
- An ability to review relevant literature regarding policy, research and practice

The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) emphasises the importance of parental engagement. Its curriculum for primary schools specifies that children should be supported by trained and committed professionals who work in partnership with parents and carers to ensure that children achieve their full potential.^{xxiii}

In previous years the Belfast Education and Library Board provided some support for parental engagement, but restructuring and budgetary pressures have limited the Education Authority's involvement. The Education Authority employs one officer to deliver a Belfast-wide parental engagement approach in several primary schools, nurseries and museums, but no longer allocates programme funding. The museum parental engagement programme receives current funding from Urban Villages.^{xxiv} Its stated aim is to put parents at the heart of young children's learning and help break the cycle of educational underachievement: 'parental involvement in the early years has a significant impact on children's school readiness and later academic success. Meaningful engagement of parents in their children's early learning has a major bearing on cognitive development, language, and literacy and number skills.' In view of its success, there are plans to regionalise the museum programme.

Parental engagement is also supported by DE's Extended Schools programme in settings that serve the most disadvantaged communities. Extended schools^{xxv} provide a range of services and activities beyond the school day to help meet the needs of children, their families and the wider community. An Extended School may provide support for families including opportunities for training in parenting skills, supporting their children's learning, leisure activities, ICT skills and healthy living skills.

The 2018-19 eligibility criteria state that a school must have the following:

51% or more of their pupils living in either a Neighbourhood Renewal Area or the 30% most deprived Super Output Areas (SOAs); and/or 37% or more of pupils with a Free School Meal Entitlement (FSME).

The Regional Integrated Support for Education (RISE) Programme^{xxvi} recognises the need to engage parents within their child's education. It provides a range of multidisciplinary child-focused programmes in all primary schools across Northern Ireland which include the delivery of training, advice and support for parents and education staff, and the provision of integrated early interventions for children on a group or individual basis, depending on the needs of the children. Its stated intent is to highlight the key role of parents in terms of delivering improved outcomes for their children and the importance of parental engagement within education.

Sure Start programmes support parents with children aged under four years old, living in disadvantaged areas in Northern Ireland. All Sure Start programmes must include home-based support for parents and families to enable them to be more equipped to support their children and young people.

Several early years (0-4) programmes demonstrate a focus on parental engagement. The pilot 2016-19 Early Intervention Transformation Programme (EITP) provided a welcome focus on key parenting stages through Getting Ready for Baby, Getting Ready for Toddler, Getting Ready to Learn and Play Matters. 'Getting Ready to Learn' (GRtL) aimed to improve outcomes for children in pre-school by engaging and empowering parents to help them create and sustain positive home learning environments.

In preparation for EITP's development, the Centre for Effective Services (CES) compiled a Parenting Programmes Review. It outlines a wide variety of organisations and networks across the statutory, voluntary and community sectors that offer family support and training to professionals on working with parents.^{xxvii}

However, the EITP was a three-year pilot and there is little core funding for parental engagement approaches once children transition to primary school.

2.4 Examples of Policy and Practice in GB

England

As stated earlier, parental engagement is the subject of the Review of best practice in parental engagement: Practitioner Summary, commissioned by the Department for Education. The review highlights the extent of evidence about the large and positive impact of parental engagement on children's learning, and sets out its remit to 'identify interventions that are effective in supporting parental involvement, particularly those parents who are either not significantly involved in their children's education, or who are not involved at all.'^{xxviii} The review notes all messages are aimed at schools, service leaders, practitioners and policymakers.

The report provides guidance on planning parental engagement in schools and specifies key features of an effective school strategy as follows:

Planning - Parental engagement must be planned for and embedded in a whole school or service strategy. The planning cycle will include a comprehensive needs analysis; the establishment of mutual priorities; ongoing monitoring and evaluation of interventions; and a public awareness process to help parents and teachers understand and commit to a strategic plan.

Leadership - Effective leadership of parental engagement is essential to the success of programmes and strategies. A parental engagement programme is often led by a senior leader, although leadership may also be distributed in the context of a programme or cluster of schools and services working to a clear strategic direction.

Collaboration and engagement - Parental engagement requires active collaboration with parents and should be proactive rather than reactive. It should be sensitive to the circumstances of all families, recognise the contributions parents can make, and aim to empower parents.

Sustained improvement - A parental engagement strategy should be the subject of ongoing support, monitoring and development. This will include strategic planning which embeds parental engagement in whole-school development plans, sustained support, resourcing and training, community involvement at all levels of management, and a continuous system of evidence-based development and review.^{xxix}

The Education Endowment Foundation provides guidance for schools on parental engagement on the premise that 'parents play a crucial role in supporting their children's learning, and levels of

parental engagement are consistently associated with better academic outcomes.^{xxx}

According to the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services,^{xxxi} leadership of parental engagement is critical. It may take many forms and involve a wide range of personnel, but it is almost always driven by a key senior leader—often the headteacher. In the same study it is noted that for effective engagement all effective leaders share a set of common attributes. The common values of these leaders were listed as being:

- driven by a strong sense that children and families matter
- focussed on people – able to develop relationships built on trust and integrity
- effective role models – doing what they say they will do and setting standards for others in how they conduct themselves
- passionate about what they do
- focussed on outcomes
- highly effective networkers who engage support and commitment from a wide range of stakeholders

The Office for Standards, Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) now inspects parental engagement as part of school leadership and management judgement, on the basis of research that parents' engagement in their children's learning is linked to children's outcomes and that leadership is crucial to increasing parental engagement in their children's learning.^{xxxii}

Scotland

The Scottish Government sets out a clear commitment to parental engagement in Learning Together. Scotland's National Action Plan on parental involvement, parental engagement, family learning and learning at home 2018-2021. The plan

states: 'The guiding vision is that every parent and family should be supported to be involved and engaged in their child's education throughout their learning journey.'^{xxxiii}

It also states, 'parental engagement in "learning" has received increasing attention recently. We know that there have been important improvements in communication to and from parents, but we also know we need to make progress in supporting collaborative, two-way relationships. We would like to see further involvement of parents in meaningful ways from the beginning of key processes, throughout those processes and in the evaluation and "lessons learned" stage.'^{xxxiv} The plan incorporates 52 national actions and lists a series of goals to be achieved.

One of the goals is to provide additional investment in a package of training of current teachers, with plans to ensure Initial Teacher Education (ITE) universities and childcare colleges improve how parental engagement is reflected in training and qualifications. The Scottish Government has provided 48 pages in their plan to further and develop parental engagement and other practices in schools, pre-school and day care settings.

'We know that parental engagement leads to better educational outcomes. This is why parental engagement, family learning and learning at home is a key theme within this plan. The actions taken forward under this section of the plan will help to contribute towards our aim to ensure that every child has the same opportunity to succeed, with a particular focus on closing the poverty-related attainment gap.'^{xxxv}

The plan builds upon the 2006 Parental Involvement Act.

Learning Together incorporates an evidence, inspection and improvement tool. Education Scotland states its intent to hear the voice of parents as part of inspection activity. Inspection is to play an important role in helping to assess the extent to which parents are being fully involved in the life and work of their child's school. The plan notes that parental engagement is to be:

- pro-active rather than reactive
- sensitive to the circumstances of all families
- recognise the contributions parents can make
- aim to empower parents
- schools that involve parents in supporting achievement: offer flexible arrangements for parents' evenings, provide translators for parents who do not speak English, provide enough information on homework so that parents know how to help

The action plan commits to underpinning parental engagement with statutory and best practice guidance, workforce development, investment and funding. The leadership guidance commits additional investment in training and materials designed to support collaborative leadership; the General Teaching Council is to ensure parental engagement is reflected in amended standards for headships and professional standards; the Scottish Government is to engage with ITE universities and childcare colleges to improve how parental involvement and parental engagement are reflected in relevant qualifications; the Scottish College of Educational Leadership, as part of Education Scotland, is to work with parent organisations to ensure parental involvement and parental engagement are included in the 'Into

Headship' qualification; materials are to be developed for and with parents and the theme of parental leadership, confidence and capacity is to be a strong element in the new package of support and advice.^{xxxvi}

It is worth noting that in Northern Ireland, DE developed Learning Leaders: A Strategy for Teacher Professional Learning in 2016, with the stated intent to provide teachers with high quality learning opportunities to meet the complex and developing needs of pupils in a rapidly changing world. The strategy outlines the need for new teacher professional learning (TPL) and describes the Education Authority's role in developing a new pathway to a Professional Qualification for Headship, ETI's role to provide good practice guidance and GTCNI's role to review teacher competencies. However, unlike England and Scotland, the strategy does not place an emphasis on skills in supporting parents in their children's learning.^{xxxvii}

2.5 Summary

The review of policy and practice in Northern Ireland attests to the value placed on parental engagement. However, the limited funding, training and guidance, as well as the lack of clarity about the definition of parental engagement, suggest that the absence of a strategic approach has undermined the translation of policy intent into implementation. The different models adopted in England and Scotland can provide learning for designing a new approach in Northern Ireland.

3. Consultation Findings, Analysis and Key Themes

3.1 Introduction

This section of the report contains the findings of the consultation process with education professionals. This process incorporates information from principals of fourteen primary schools via interviews, a representative each from Stranmillis University College and the Ulster University and 56 education professionals via survey.

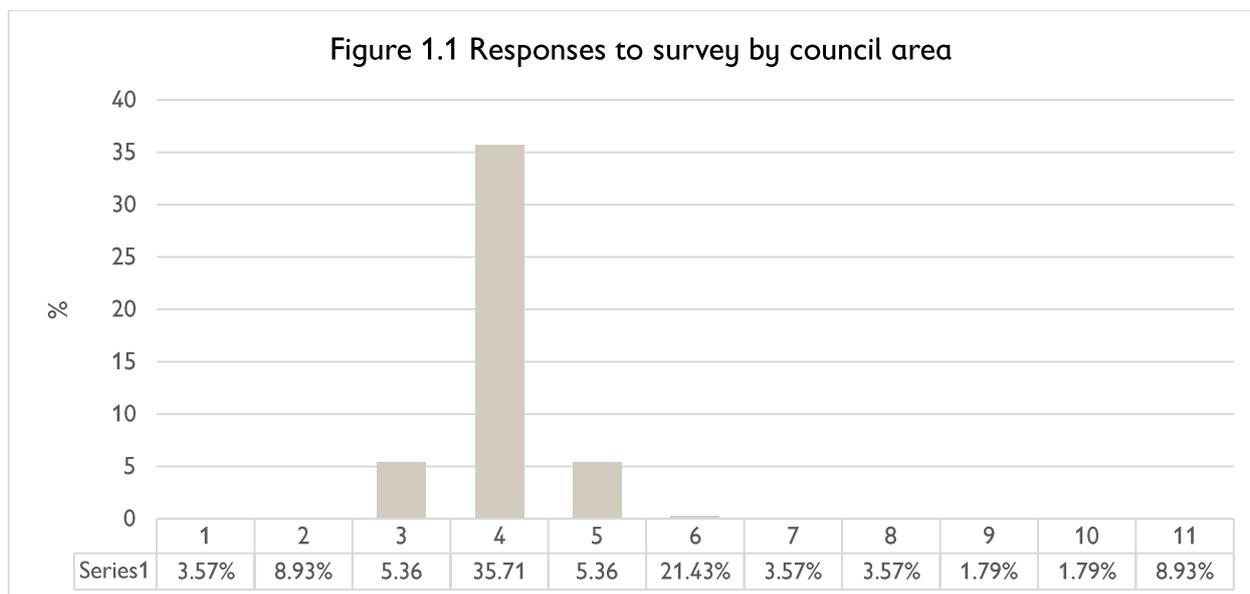
The survey (see Appendix V) was distributed electronically using an email database compiled by S3 Solutions with contacts for 816 primary schools across Northern Ireland. As noted below, 56 responses were received, representing a response rate of 6.9%. S3 Solutions and Save the Children had targeted a higher response rate, however it should be noted that the database used to distribute the survey was compiled using publicly available email contact details for schools and principals which included a significant number of generic email addresses as opposed to contact details for key individuals within schools. A higher response rate may have been achieved with a more targeted contact database. The list of principals who participated in interviews to inform the research has been included as Appendix I. The following provides a snapshot of the profile of respondents to the survey:

Position of Respondent

- Principal: 40
- Vice Principal: 2
- SENCO: 1
- Teacher: 6
- Classroom / Nursery Assistant: 6
- School Secretary: 1

School Management Type

- Controlled- 27
- Integrated-6
- Catholic Maintained – 20
- Grant Maintained Integrated (GMI) – 1
- Irish Medium- 2



	Answer Choices	Responses	
1	Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council	3.57%	2
2	Ards and North Down Borough Council	8.93%	5
3	Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council	5.36%	3
4	Belfast City Council	35.71%	20
5	Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council	5.36%	3
6	Derry City and Strabane District Council	21.43%	12
7	Fermanagh and Omagh District Council	3.57%	2
8	Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council	3.57%	2
9	Mid and East Antrim Borough Council	1.79%	1
10	Mid Ulster District Council	1.79%	1
11	Newry, Mourne and Down District Council	8.93%	5

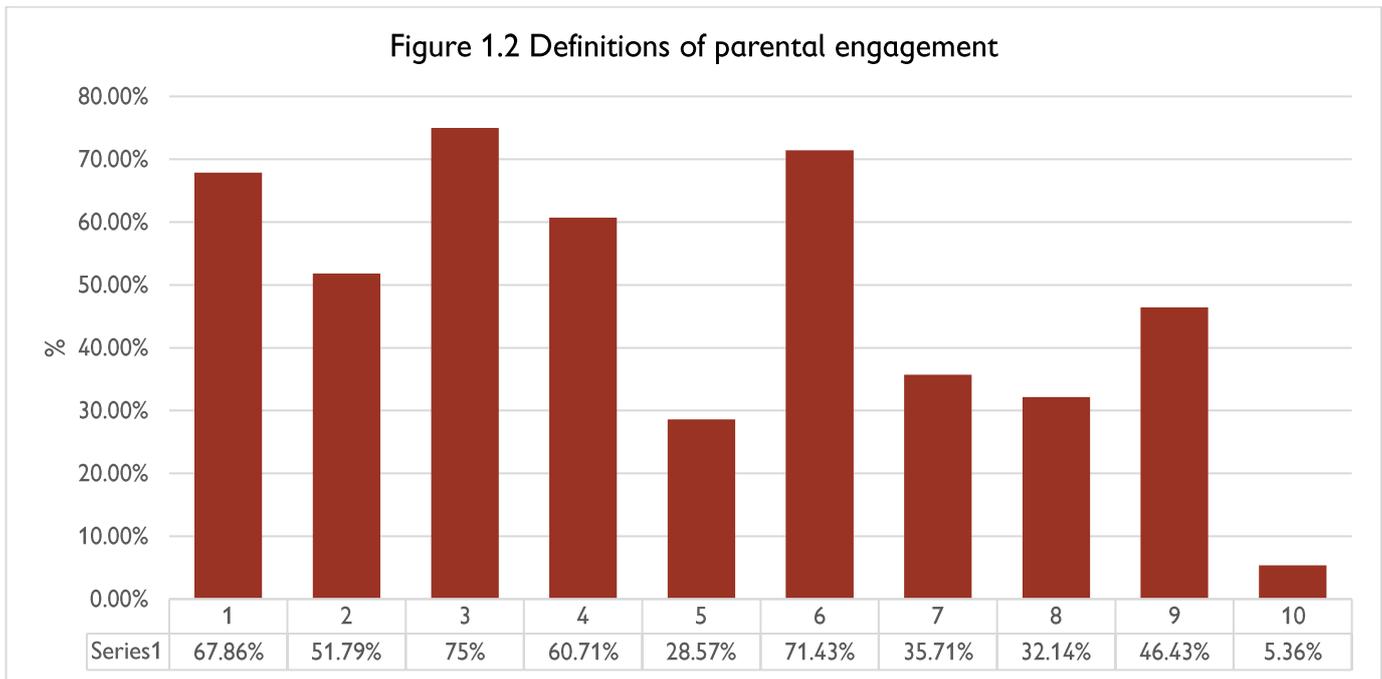
In order to consider the findings in line with the terms of reference and objectives for the research, details of the findings and analysis have been presented under six themes:

1. Definition of parental engagement
2. The importance and value of parental engagement
3. Outcomes from parental engagement
4. The role of teachers and schools in engaging, delivering and sustaining parental engagement
5. Challenges and barriers associated with parental engagement
6. Solutions and enablers

3.2 Defining Parental Engagement

3.2.1 Survey Findings

Question 4 of the survey for principals and teachers asked participants to identify from a list of options, activities that they defined as parental engagement. Responses are detailed in the chart and table below:



	Answer Choices	Responses	
1	Maintaining communication with parents via letters, phone calls, emails	67.86%	38
2	Maintaining communication with parents via digital technology i.e. SMS and web portals / apps	51.79%	29
3	Engaging via parent - teacher meetings and progress reports	75.00%	42
4	Specific communication about child development stages and the importance of parental support	60.71%	34
5	Engaging external providers to deliver parental engagement programmes	28.57%	16
6	Allocating staff time to deliver parental engagement programmes to support parental engagement in their children's learning and improve the home learning environment	71.43%	40
7	Provision of a parents' room and space for parents to meet regularly in school	35.71%	20
8	The involvement of parents in school decision-making, including curriculum design	32.14%	18
9	The involvement of parents in volunteering in parent councils etc	46.43%	26
10	Other	5.36%	3

“Engaging via parent teacher meetings and progress reports” was the most popular response (75%), followed by “allocating staff time to deliver parental engagement sessions” (71.4%) and thirdly “maintaining

communication with parents via phone calls, letters and emails etc” (68.9%). The most popular and third most popular responses would be associated more with the parental involvement as opposed to the definition of parental engagement recognised by Save the Children.

3.2.2 Interviews with Education Professionals

When principals were asked within interviews to define parental engagement, responses received offered both a definition of parental engagement from the perspective of that individual and examples of what they perceive as parental engagement activity. Some of the themes in the feedback received are detailed below:

- Recognition of the dual role of teachers and parents in supporting a child’s education and school experience
- The concept of parents being co-educators
- “Everything and anything”, parental engagement as being engagement in every aspect of school
- Building trust with parents and reassurance around aspects of their child’s education and development

Parental engagement is viewed by interviewees in most cases as anything from parent teacher meetings, parent/school communication (keeping regular contact with parents), involvement in Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs), attending school activities and events and specific programmes focused on parents, parental support and learning. Parents respecting school culture, environment and rules (i.e. being interested or engaged in the school itself) was also viewed by some principals as an aspect of parental engagement.

“Parental engagement is bringing parents on board at school and at home. Engaging them in their children’s numeracy and literacy needs and development, as well as their social, emotional and behavioural needs.”
(Interviewee quote)

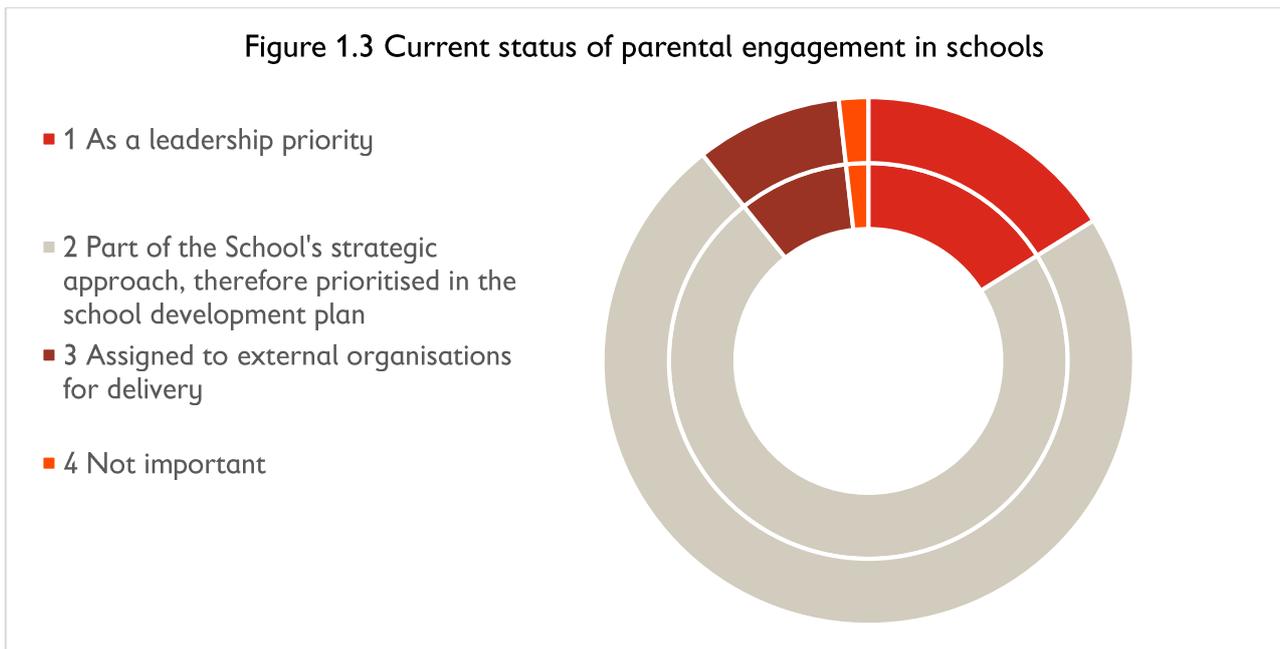
From both survey and interview responses, participants regard a broad range of activity involving parents to be within the definition of parental engagement, as opposed to a sole focus on more targeted approaches linked to learning. This contrasts with the definition in the terms of reference for the research. This suggests that there is no clear and consistent definition of parental engagement recognised by key stakeholders in children’s education such as teachers, policy makers and providers of parental engagement programmes.

Within interviews with principals, the lack of clear policy and direction within the education sector relating to parental engagement was noted and discussed. The importance and value of parental engagement is recognised within the views of participants from across the education sector but also broad agreement there is no clear direction in terms of defining parental engagement for schools and how it should be incorporated within the school environment.

3.3 The Importance and Value of Parental Engagement

3.3.1 Survey Findings

Survey respondents were asked to describe the status of parental engagement within their school. Responses received are presented below:

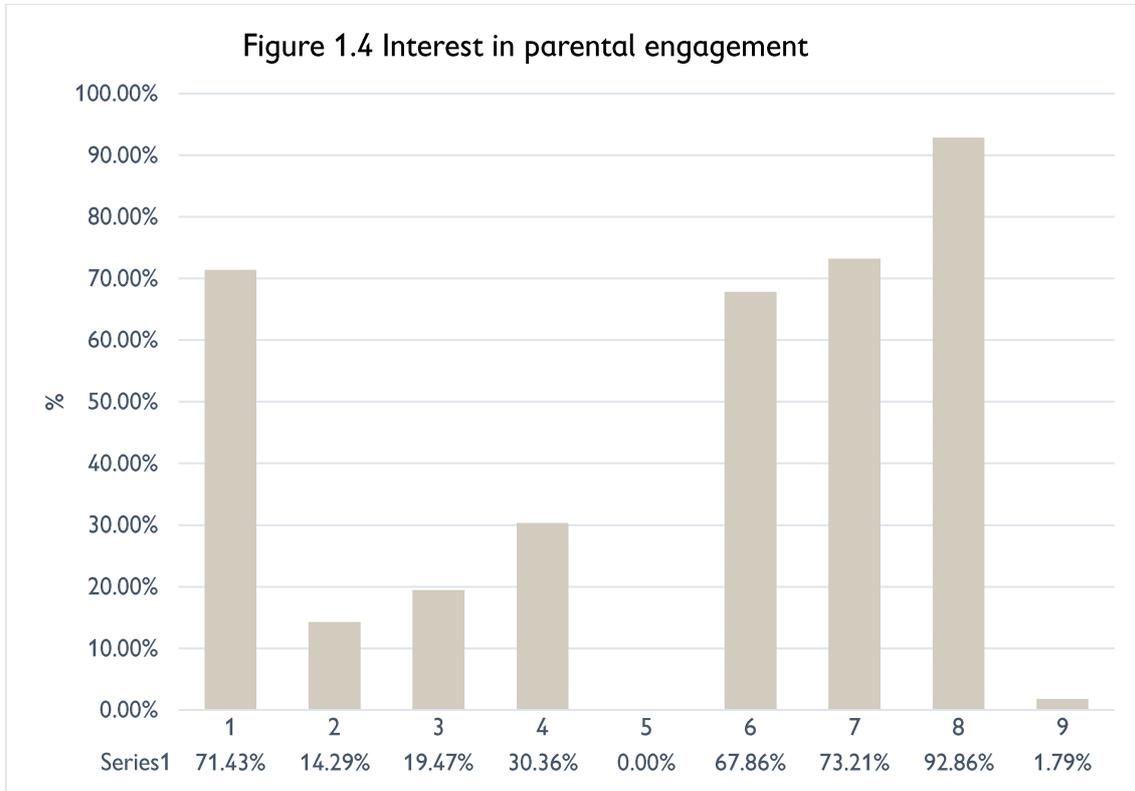


	Answer Choices	Responses	
1	As a leadership priority	16.07%	9
2	Part of the school's strategic approach, therefore prioritised in the school development plan	73.21%	41
3	Assigned to external organisations for delivery	8.93%	5
4	Not important	1.79%	1

The most popular response by a considerable margin was “part of the school’s strategic approach, therefore prioritised in the school development plan” with 73.2% of respondents. Only 16% described parental engagement as a “leadership priority”, 9% describe parental engagement as something “assigned to external providers for delivery” and 1.8% described it as “not important”. The responses reinforce the importance and value placed on parental engagement by schools. However, the fact that while over 73% indicated parental engagement was prioritised within the school development plan and only 9% described it as a leadership priority for the school is interesting and a subject for further analysis.

Report

When asked what drives their interest in parental engagement, the following responses were received:



	Answer Choices	Responses	
1	The school development plan	71.43%	40
2	ITE and professional learning	14.29%	8
3	EA guidance	19.64%	11
4	ETI guidance	30.36%	17
5	GTCNI guidance	0.00%	0
6	Research findings	67.86%	38
7	Quality of programmes, including the evidence base	73.21%	41
8	Experience of working with parents	92.86%	52
9	Teaching union guidance	1.79%	1

The most popular response was “experience of working with parents” with almost 93% of respondents indicating that it is a key element driving their interest in parental engagement. It is clear that respondents place a high value on parental engagement and recognise the need to work with parents to support the education of children.

“I passionately believe that parents must be involved in their children’s learning. It is important that they know what their children are learning, who their peers / friends are, learning alongside their children. Children love seeing their parents around the school when in the classroom”. (Survey respondent)

“Quality of programmes” (i.e. the quality of parental engagement programmes offered by the school or external providers to parents) was the second most popular response at 73.2% and “the school development plan” was third with 71.4% of responses. This suggests that both are important factors in terms of the priority placed on parental engagement (for example, in comparison with other aspects of teaching and school management) within individual schools and how parental engagement is promoted or practised within schools.

“Research findings” (i.e. research on parental engagement practice or evaluation of parental engagement programmes) also ranked highly with 67.9% of respondents. This helps to highlight the importance of ensuring teachers and principals have access to research on parental engagement and importantly what works or doesn’t work, particularly if they are to be encouraged to actively implement and promote parental engagement practice within schools and classrooms as part of a long-term and sustainable teaching approach.

It is interesting that guidance from education and inspection authorities does not rank highly in terms of driving interest in parental engagement. This may be due to the lack of policy and guidance for schools and principals or suggest that current available guidance needs to be improved.

3.3.2 Interviews with Education Professionals

When asked how important parental engagement in their view was, feedback from interviews with participating principals highlighted a common view that parental engagement is of high importance to a child’s education. Participants used words and phrases like: “vital”, “of upmost importance”, “essential”, “very/extremely important”.

Some of the feedback and statements from individual interviews included:

- “early intervention, parental engagement and catering for special needs are the three core aspects to learning”
- “very important for families to understand where their child’s education is at”
- “parental engagement and relationships are so important when dealing with children and parents from traditionally hard to reach communities or backgrounds, and also those children with behavioural issues”
- “vital to have a relationship with the school and parent to get the best outcomes for children”
- “parents and the attitude of parents towards school and education have a huge impact if parents buy in. They can help to guide their child”
- “it is important that the child is getting the same message from home and school in relation to their education”
- “parental engagement is also important so that parents have an opportunity to tell schools what their needs are and also their children’s needs. The more teachers and the school know or are aware of issues the greater potential to address these as part the school environment or the child’s education”

Report

Interview participants were then asked whether their school had a clear policy on parental engagement. Of the interviews completed with principals, all participants indicated that parental engagement is incorporated within their school development plan. However only 3 stated that they had a clear policy on parental engagement specifically. Those that stated they had a clear policy gave a range of examples of how the policy was then implemented in practice. Examples ranged from parental involvement activities through to specific parental engagement programmes.

All principals interviewed recognised the importance of good relationships with parents and ensuring this is maintained throughout a child's education. To stress its importance a number referenced the fact that this is a stated goal or objective in their school development plan.

Some other points received included:

- There is a need to ensure school is a positive place or environment for children, that starts in the home
- If parents speak positively of school so will children
- If you do not engage the family unit, it limits the impact of your teaching

Each of the principals also acknowledged the difficulties in maintaining relationships and parental interest in school life and education. Different reasons were offered for this, including wider societal and community problems such as socio-economic issues, poverty, drug and alcohol use and mental health problems. Participants recognised that engaging parents has always been an issue for teachers, but there was a clear

line of thought that this was a growing issue in recent times. Modern life in relation to the use of social media and technology, which people increasingly rely on for social interaction rather than face-to-face engagement, was seen as a contributory factor.

Some of the findings reveal an interesting dynamic between the perceived importance and value placed on parental engagement and how it is prioritised from a school leadership perspective. Interviews (and individual statements received from survey participants) highlighted an overwhelming consensus that parental engagement is a vital aspect of a child's learning and development. However, only 9 respondents (16%) classified it as a school leadership priority.

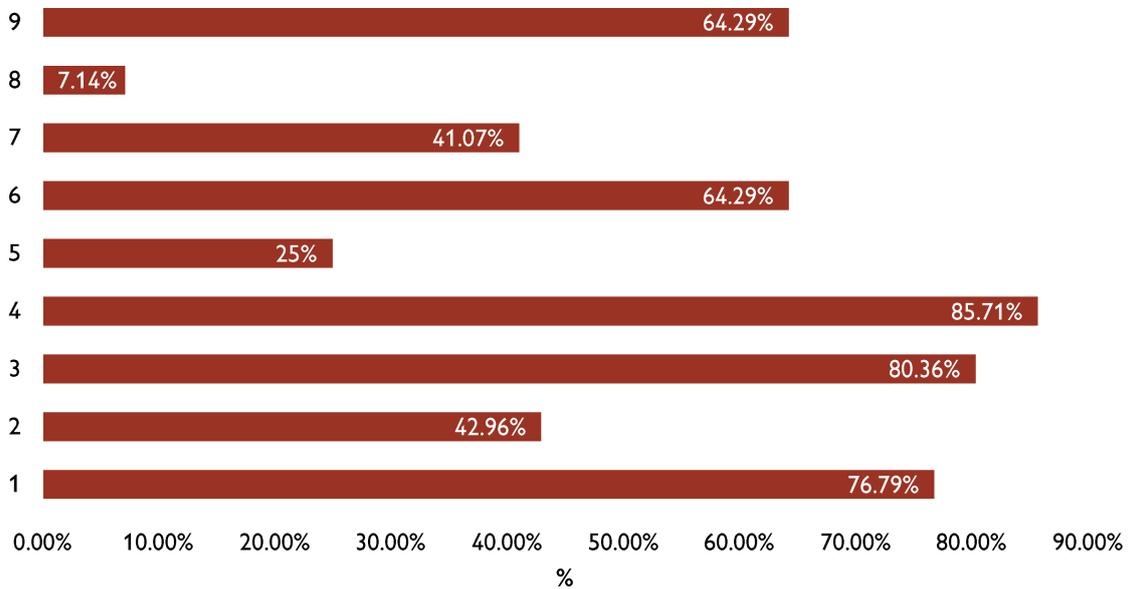
Report

3.4 Outcomes from Parental Engagement

3.4.1 Survey Findings

Within the survey, we asked respondents to indicate what they view as the purpose of parental engagement. Responses received are presented in the graph and table below:

Figure 1.5 Purpose of parental engagement



	Answer Choices	Responses	
1	Developing parental skills and confidence	76.79%	43
2	Narrowing the education achievement gap	42.86%	24
3	Supporting children's emotional and mental health and wellbeing as the foundation of learning	80.36%	45
4	Developing strong relationships between parents, children and staff	85.71%	48
5	Supporting child learning outcomes at the end of primary school	25.00%	14
6	Supporting early learning activities in the home / the home learning environment (HLE)	64.29%	36
7	Supporting speech, language and communication, early numeracy and literacy	41.07%	23
8	Encouraging parents' involvement in school decision-making and communication	7.14%	4
9	Developing a partnership between parents and education professionals	64.29%	36
		Answered	56

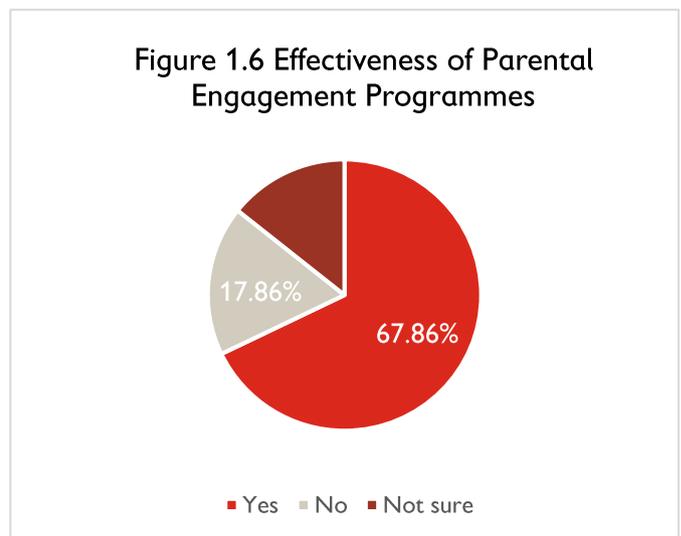
“Developing strong relationships between parents, children and staff” was the most popular response from 85.7% of respondents, followed by “supporting children’s emotional and mental health and wellbeing as the foundation of learning” as the second most popular with 80.4% of respondents and “developing parental skills and confidence” was the third most popular response at 76.8%. Respondents prioritised the achievement of these ‘softer’ outcomes (relationships, wellbeing and improved confidence) as the purpose of parental engagement as opposed to options such as “narrowing the education achievement gap” or “supporting speech, language and communication, early numeracy and literacy” which have a more direct focus on educational achievement and attainment.

This provides an important insight into teacher and principal views on the purpose of parental engagement, outcomes it can realise and how achievement of these outcomes can then support and complement the work of teachers within a classroom setting. This information is useful in terms of how parental engagement programmes are designed, how they are to be measured and how they are to be promoted to teachers in the context of their work educating children. For example, based on this information, it would not be fair or appropriate to measure the effectiveness of parental engagement programmes based on a child’s educational attainment records only.

The least popular response is “encouraging parents’ involvement in school decision-making

and communication” with only 7.1% of respondents highlighting it as the purpose of parental engagement. Respondents clearly do not view this as the purpose of parental engagement or as an outcome to realise and again this is important information that can inform the design, delivery and evaluation of programmes.

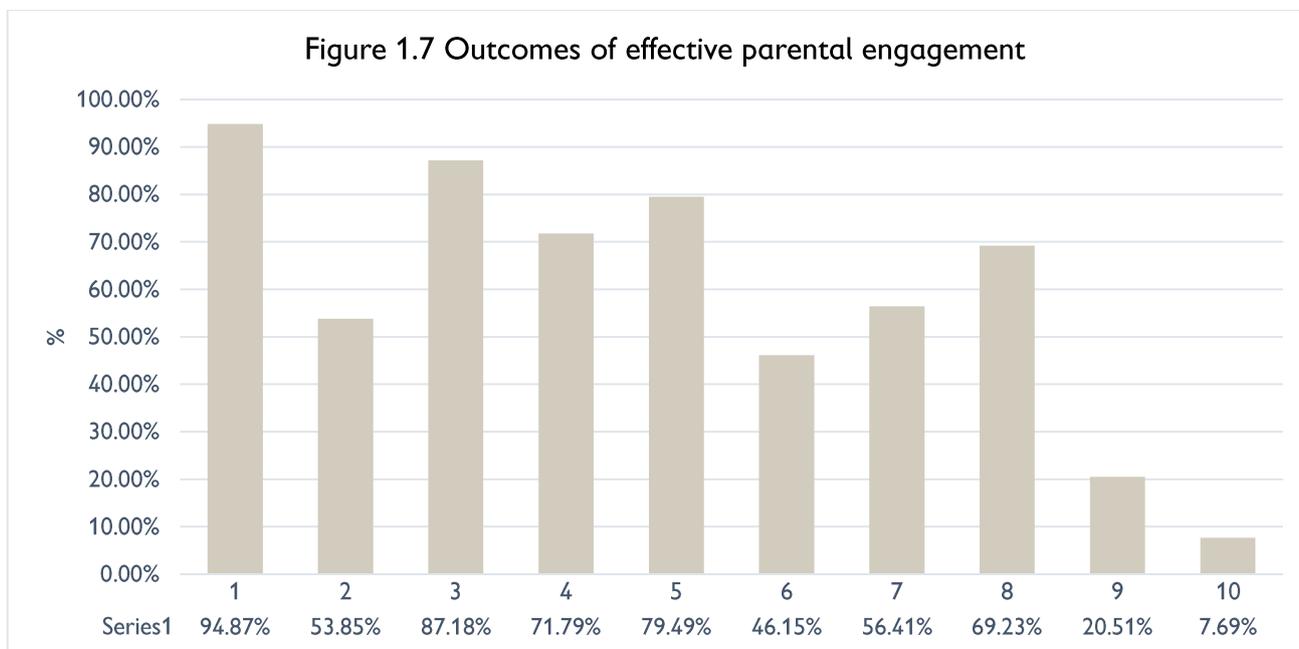
Participants in the survey were asked to state whether parental engagement programmes in their school had been effective. The graphic and table below present the responses received:



Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	67.86%	38
No	17.86%	10
Not sure	14.29%	8

The finding that many were uncertain about the effectiveness most likely reflects the lack of clarity about definitions and desired outcomes, as well as the varied experiences of different programmes and approaches.

Those respondents who indicated parental engagement programmes had been effective in their school were asked to select from a list of options the type of outcomes that had been realised:



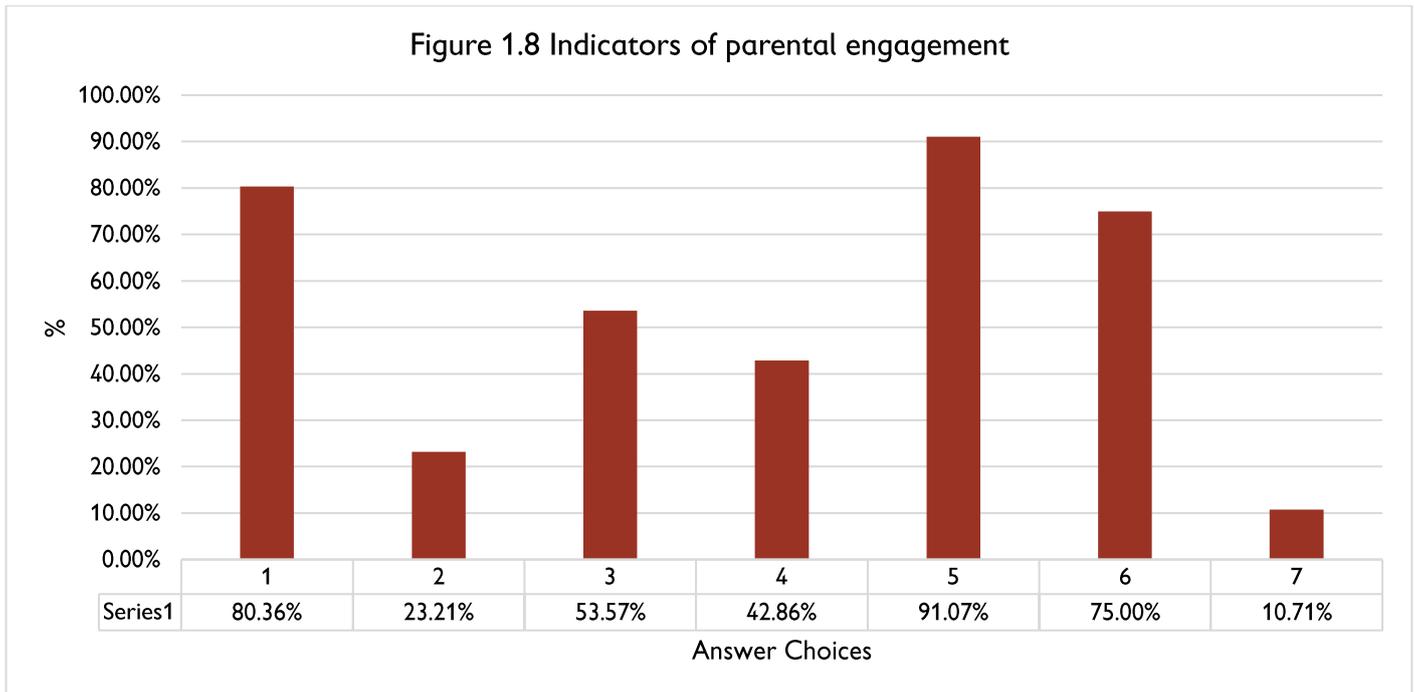
	Answer Choices	Responses	
1	Improved trust and relationships between parents and school / teachers	94.87%	37
2	Improved educational attainment of children	53.85%	21
3	Increased confidence and self-esteem of parents	87.18%	34
4	Improved confidence and self-esteem of children	71.79%	28
5	Improved relationships between parents and children	79.49%	31
6	Improved pupil attendance	46.15%	18
7	Improved social skills and behaviour of children	56.41%	22
8	Parents have a better understanding of the teacher's role and the curriculum	69.23%	27
9	Parents more active in policy making at school and in the community	20.51%	8
10	Other	7.69%	3

The most popular response to this question was “improved trust and relationships between parents and school / teachers” (94.9%), followed by “increased confidence and self-esteem of parents” (87.2%) and “improved relationships between parents and children” (79.5%). The importance of developing trust and relationships between parents and teachers / schools has been reinforced throughout the consultation. It is noticeable that outcomes such as “improved educational attainment of children” and “improved pupil attendance” do not rank highly in terms of outcomes achieved as a result of effective parental engagement programmes even though these are traditionally very important measures in the assessment of educational

Report

performance. This aligns with the findings in relation to respondent views on the purpose of parental engagement.

When asked what the best indicators to measure the impact of parental engagement are, the following responses were received:



	Answer Choices	Responses	
1	Number of parents involved	80.36%	45
2	Number of staff involved	23.21%	13
3	Outcomes in social and emotional health	53.57%	30
4	Outcomes in speech, language and communication	42.86%	24
5	Observations that parents know how to encourage children's learning at home	91.07%	51
6	Better literacy and numeracy outcomes that improve education attainment	75.00%	42
7	Other	10.71%	6

“Observations that parents know to how to encourage children’s learning at home” (91%) was the most popular response to this question with “number of parents involved” (80.4%) ranking second most popular and “better literacy and numeracy outcomes that improve education attainment” (75%) third most popular.

3.4.2 Interviews with Education Professionals

Asked about the effectiveness of parental engagement activities and programmes that are currently or have been previously delivered within their school, interviewees noted the following outcomes:

- More trust between teachers and parents
- Parents have a more positive experience of school
- Better/improved attendance of children
- Children have higher attainment levels
- Children are happier and have better behaviours
- Parents getting a sense of achievement
- More communication/better communication between parents and the school
- Have been able to signpost parents to other services in line with their needs or child's needs
- Better speech, language, attention and concentration by children
- The value placed on education increases for parents and as a result, children thrive

These positive outcomes suggest the benefit of parental engagement programmes and activities, for both interviewees and survey respondents. They agree that important outcomes include the development of trust between teachers and parents, as well as children's development and learning.

3.5 The role of teachers and the school in engaging, delivering and sustaining parental engagement

3.5.1 Interviews with Education Professionals

From the interviews completed with school principals, incorporating and making parental engagement important within the role of a teacher means:

- Being approachable and welcoming to parents – this includes supporting the school ethos, supporting a sense of community and projecting to parents that the school and teachers are approachable
- Having a positive approach to dealing with parents and recognising the value of engaging with parents
- Actively seeking ways to engage or interact with parents on a regular basis, some examples of this include text, email, newsletter, communication using technology or apps, creating opportunities to meet parents e.g. at school gates, approaching parents during extra-curricular activities e.g. schools plays, concerts. The focus should be achieving a high level of communication with parents
- Commitment to continuous professional development

The current pressures on teachers were also highlighted within the consultation. They included having to deal with more complex and demanding challenges at a time of increasing resource constraints.

“School has become a substitute parent and tasked with fixing society’s issues. Maintaining staff enthusiasm and morale is becoming increasingly difficult. We are fortunate that parents are supportive. Other schools struggle with parents who over-rule schools and make attempting to work with parents a misery. If this survey is advocating more involvement for parents, it must come with a parent charter”
(Survey respondent)

Interviews completed with representatives from the Ulster University and Stranmillis University College highlighted that parental engagement is seen as an increasing role for teachers and within teacher training practice. It was recognised as being “vital” with a shift in the role from informing parents to actively working with parents to improve their children’s learning. However, it was noted that in a lot of cases, parental engagement is still viewed as additional to the teacher’s role rather than part of it, particularly amongst teachers who have been practising for a number of years, compared to those who are recently qualified and new to the field.

A key theme from all interviews was the need for relationships’ development and trust between parents and teachers / schools and how this can be an enabler then for other work, benefits and outcomes such as increases in educational attainment, parents or children being able to access specialist supports and increases in wellbeing.

3.6 Challenges and Barriers Associated with Parental Engagement

Within both the survey and interviews, participants were asked about barriers and challenges with parental engagement from two perspectives:

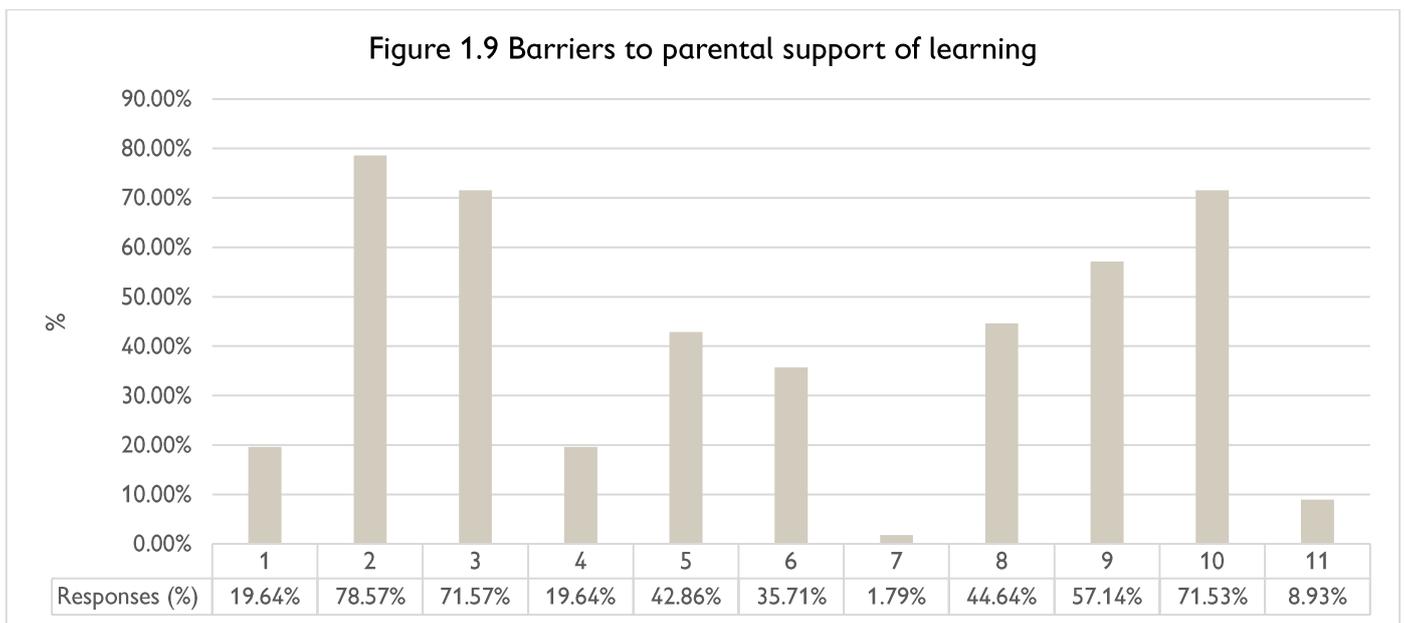
- Challenges and barriers to engaging parents
- School challenges and barriers to delivering or sustaining parental engagement

The findings from surveys and interviews have been presented separately for each type of barrier and challenge.

3.7 Challenges and barriers to engaging parents

3.7.1 Survey Findings

Within the survey, respondents were asked to highlight what they feel are key barriers to parents supporting their child's learning. Responses received are presented as follows:

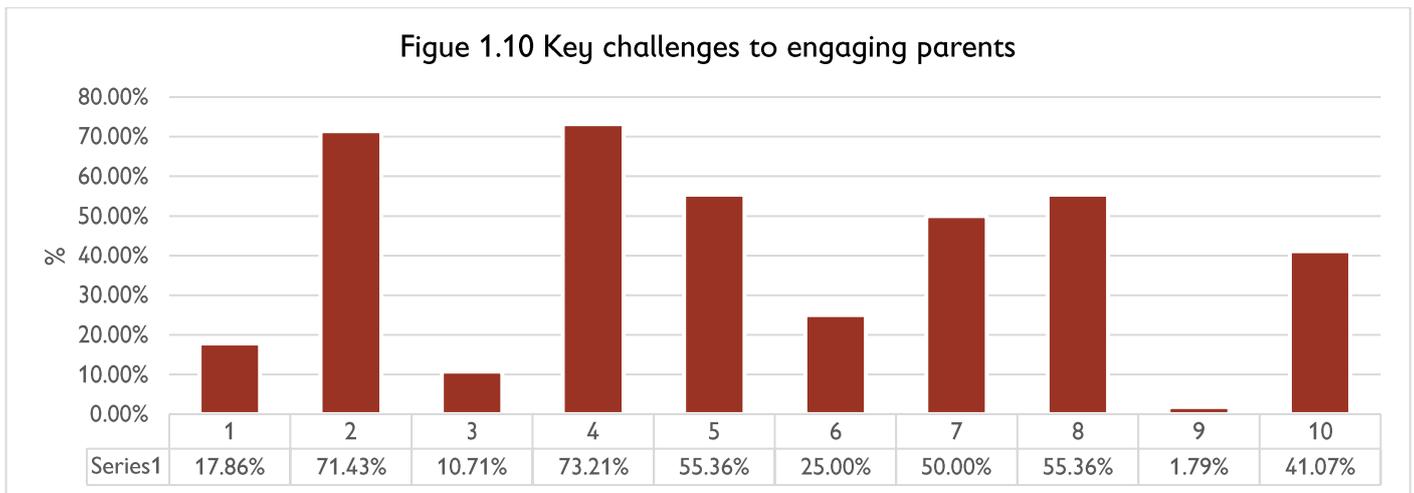


	Answer Choices	Responses	
1	Parents don't see themselves as welcome partners with schools	19.64%	11
2	Parents aren't aware of their importance as the first and most important educator from birth	78.57%	44
3	Parents don't have the confidence to collaborate with schools	71.43%	40
4	Parents don't have English as a first language and find it hard to communicate with schools	19.64%	11
5	Financial pressures and other anxieties prevent them devoting more time to their children's learning	42.86%	24
6	Parents work too long hours to get involved in their learning	35.71%	20
7	Parents live too far away from the school	1.79%	1
8	There is resistance from parents to being 'lectured' about parenting	44.64%	25
9	There is a stigma about being perceived as a bad parent in need of support	57.14%	32
10	Parents have their own bad experiences of education, so keep away	71.43%	40
11	Too many other agencies are involved in their lives and there is no single source of information and support	8.93%	5

Report

The most popular responses included “parents aren’t aware of their importance as the first and most important educator from birth” (78.6%), “parents don’t have the confidence to collaborate with schools” and “parents have their own bad experiences of education, so keep away” (both 71.4%).

Respondents were also asked what they felt were the key challenges to engage parents in parental engagement activities - responses are presented below:



	Answer Choices	Responses	
1	Communication barriers with parents	17.86%	10
2	Lack of parental interest	71.43%	40
3	Parents feel unwelcome as partners in their children's learning	10.71%	6
4	Lack of recognition of their pivotal role in their children's education	73.21%	41
5	General attitudes to the value of education and educational achievement	55.36%	31
6	The lack of support for education in the community	25.00%	14
7	Parents' distress caused by living in poverty, which hinders their ability to focus on child development and learning	50.00%	28
8	Stigma of being perceived as 'bad parents' if they are seen to need parental support	55.36%	31
9	Parents live too far away	1.79%	1
10	Parents are too busy working	41.07%	23

The most popular responses were “lack of parental recognition for the pivotal role in their child’s education” (73.2%), “lack of parental interest” (71.4%) and “general attitudes to the value of education and educational achievement” and “stigma of being perceived as ‘bad parents’ if they are seen to need parental support” (both 55.4%).

From the responses to both questions, respondents feel that lack of parent awareness and understanding of their role in the education of their child is the largest barrier to parents supporting their child's learning and poses a major challenge to engaging parents in parental engagement activities. Confidence and their own educational experience are also important factors. The findings are consistent with the most popular responses about the purpose of parental engagement and the outcomes that effective parental engagement have achieved, both of which were very much focussed on building relationships and trust between parents, schools, teachers and children; and enhancing skills and confidence.

3.7.2 Interviews with Education Professionals

From the interviews, the key challenges and barriers to engaging parents were as follows:

- Parents who have a negative attitude of school or education due to their own experiences.
- Parents who have a lack of interest in school activities and feel that education is to be led by and completed within a school setting.
- Some parents feel it is a school's responsibility solely for their child's education and do not understand or recognise the importance and value of their role.
- Broader community issues linked to drug and alcohol usage and mental health problems.
- Socio-economic issues and poverty particularly in communities that experience high levels of deprivation and disadvantage.
- Parents feeling intimidated by the school environment which prevents them from wanting to engage with teachers.

- Getting parents who can act as role models to support initiatives and encourage others (within PTAs or participating in parental engagement programmes).
- Teachers are seen as judgmental by parents.

Principals were also asked about the impact of parents' educational experience on parental engagement and involvement in their child's learning. Many indicated that this impacts on their attitude towards education, schools and teachers which can create barriers to engaging parents in their child's learning. Some of the general views received via the interviews noted that negative experiences of education by parents have the following impacts:

- There is a perception that schools are 'out to get them' and that teachers are 'snobs'
- Creates a 'them against us' mindset
- Can lead to lower aspirations in terms of education and its importance within their child's life and development
- Parents want the best for their children but do not recognise the value of education in realising this
- Sometimes if a parent has struggled with a particular subject or aspect of education, if their child is also struggling there can be a sense of acceptance (that this is a family or generational issue) rather than supporting or seeking support for the child to progress in the subject.
- Parents may also experience lack of confidence because they don't feel they know how to support their child due to their own experience or low level of attainment

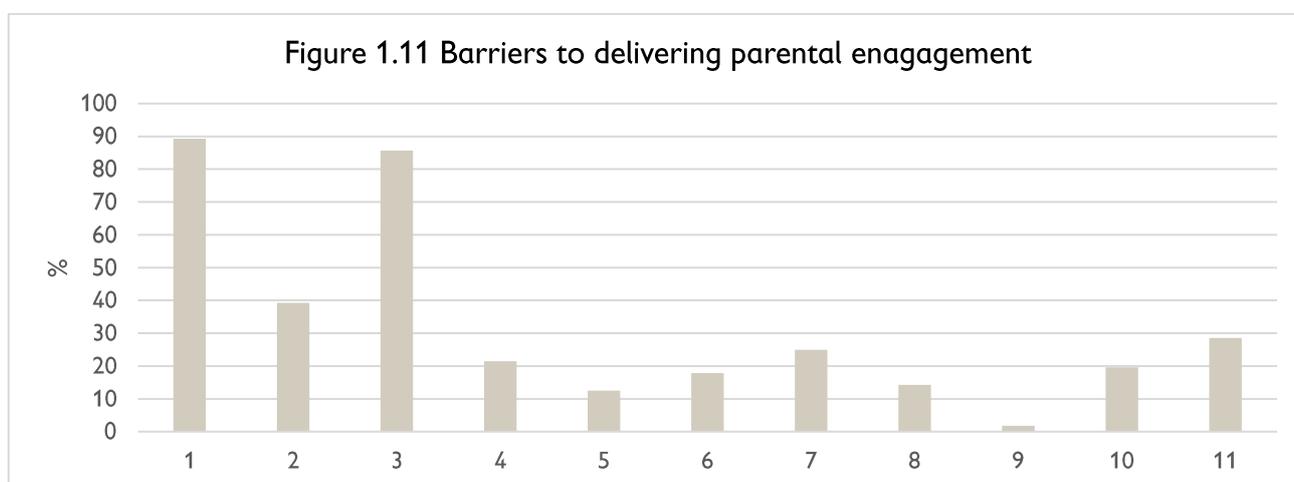
The responses received for both survey questions help to highlight the importance of developing trust and positive relationships between parents and schools to help overcome

the barriers the education professionals have identified.

3.8 School challenges and barriers to delivering or sustaining parental engagement

3.8.1 Survey Findings

When asked about barriers to their school's ability to deliver parental engagement, the following responses were received:

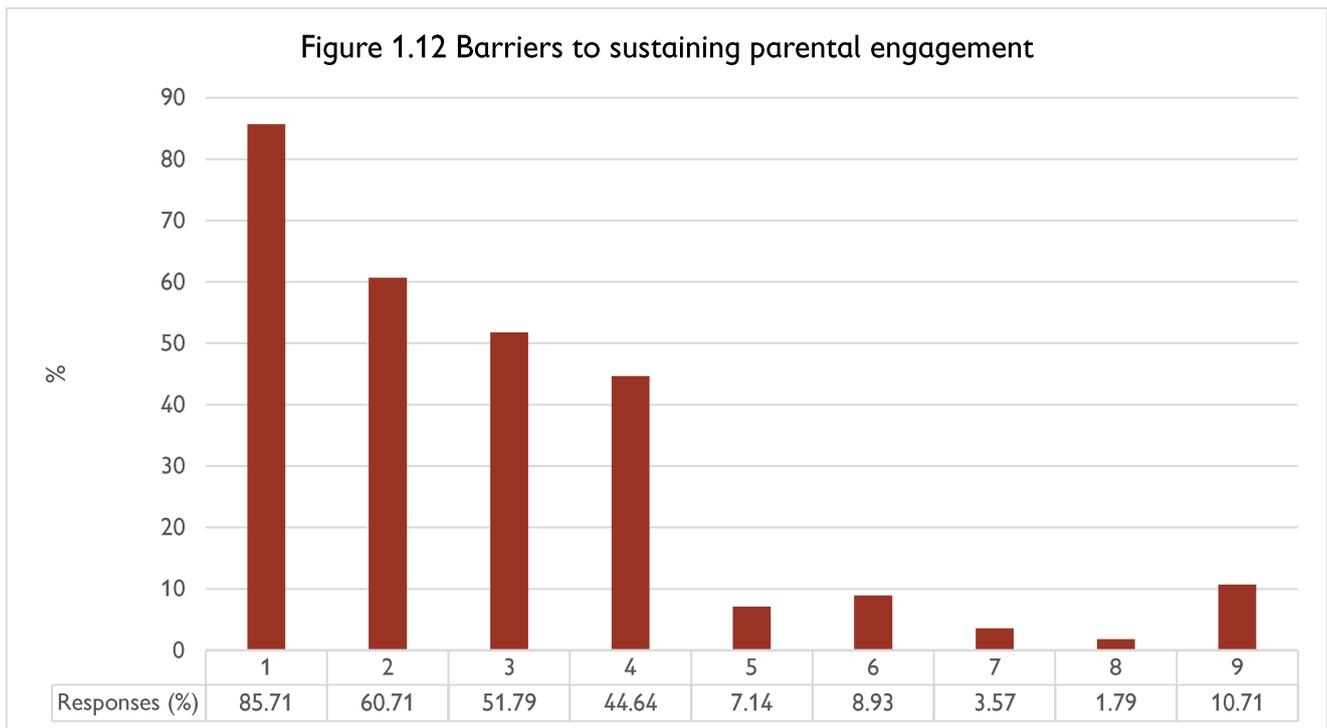


Answer Choices		Responses	
1	Lack of funding to release teachers for professional development	89.29%	50
2	Action short of strike	39.29%	22
3	Budget cuts to undermine ability to allocate adequate funding	85.71%	48
4	Schools have to prioritise academic results due to parental pressure	21.43%	12
5	Hard to support newcomer parents whose children attend school for a short time before they move on	12.50%	7
6	Hard to support newcomer parents whose first language is not English	17.86%	10
7	Other initiatives / priorities take precedence e.g. focus on ACES, EAL training	25.00%	14
8	Parental engagement is not a priority with policymakers	14.29%	8
9	Parental engagement is not a priority with senior management, the Education Authority, CCEA, ETI, General Teachers Council and the teaching unions	1.79%	1
10	Lack of ITE, professional development about supporting parents in their children's learning	19.64%	11
11	Lack of knowledge about evidence-informed programmes that meet parents' needs	28.57%	16

Report

The most popular response from the survey was “lack of funding to release teachers for professional development” (88.3%), “budget cuts undermine ability to allocate adequate funding” (85.7%) second most popular and “action short of strike” (39.3%) third most popular.

When asked about the major barriers to their school’s ability to sustain parental engagement, the following responses were received:



	Answer Choices	Responses	
1	Short-term funding prevents longer-term planning	85.71%	48
2	A reliance on initiatives and pilots prevents mainstreaming and sustainability	60.71%	34
3	Lack of political and policy 'buy in' for a parental engagement strategy and implementation, necessary to raise the profile of parental engagement and embed it	51.79%	29
4	Lack of a workforce development strategy to ensure initial training and professional development in parental engagement	44.64%	25
5	Lack of regulation and inspection regimes to ensure parental engagement is mainstreamed as core practice	7.14%	4
6	Lack of teaching union 'buy in'	8.93%	5
7	Lack of CCEA commitment	3.57%	2
8	Lack of GTCNI commitment	1.79%	1
9	Other	10.71%	6

The most popular response from the survey was “short-term funding prevents longer-term planning” (85.7%), “a reliance on initiatives and pilots prevents mainstreaming and sustainability” (60.7%) second most popular and “lack of political will and policy buy-in for a parental engagement strategy and implementation, necessary to raise the profile of parental engagement and embed it” (51.8%) third most popular.

From the responses to both survey questions on the challenges and barriers for schools, there are common themes in terms of lack of sufficient or appropriate funding for parental engagement and a lack of clear direction for schools and teachers. This is important information to be considered in terms of future action to promote parental engagement as an important aspect of teaching and educating children.

Factors such as “action short of strike” and “a lack of funding to release teachers for professional development” were highlighted amongst the largest barriers to schools delivering parental engagement. These are external factors beyond the control of schools but that can prevent or inhibit delivering of parental engagement programmes in the school setting. These are issues which highlight the need for broader departmental buy-in and funding if parental engagement is to be implemented on a broader and more consistent basis. It also highlights the need for ongoing consultation and engagement with schools to ensure that parental engagement programmes delivered by external providers (in the school setting) consider these factors, plan and set targets accordingly.

3.8.2 Interviews with Education Professionals

The main challenges noted from the interviews with principals were as follows:

- Lack of sustained funding and resources. At present many initiatives are short term or pilots as opposed to long-term and mainstreamed. Therefore, it is more difficult to assess the impact and value of these programmes
- Lack of dedicated staff or resources
- A lot of the time schools are not consulted in the planning and design of programmes. Therefore, there can be a sense that programmes are thrust upon schools and they do not always match the needs or interests of parents

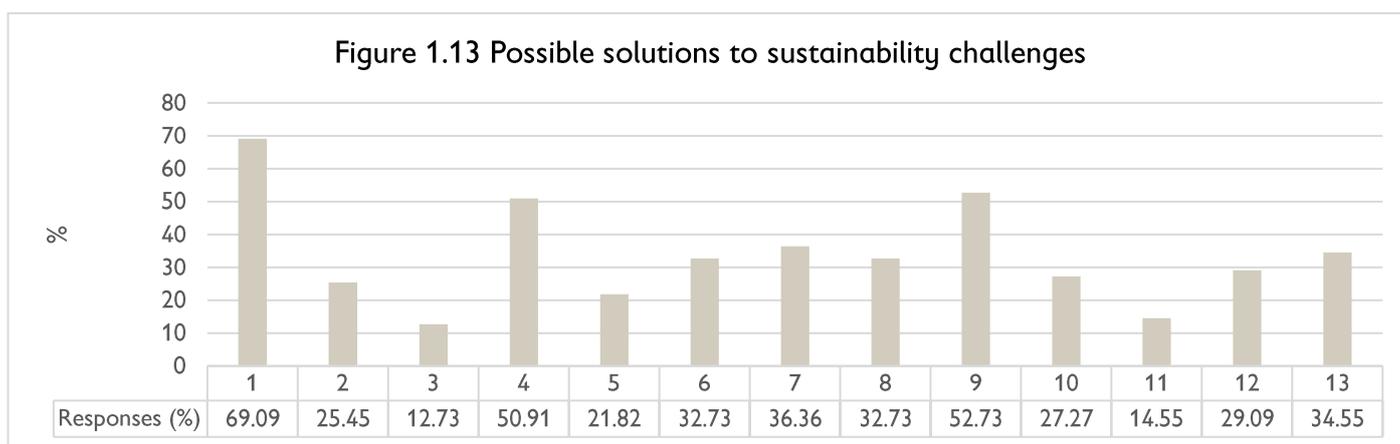
From the responses, it is clear that lack of resources and funding are major barriers for schools supporting and sustaining parental engagement programmes. At the time of the research, the issues relating to budgets within schools have been well-documented. There is a general view from those who participated in the consultation that parental engagement requires dedicated resources on a long-term funding basis. This would require political will and buy-in to achieve and it is recognised in responses that it is not currently in place and as such is a barrier to sustaining parental engagement programmes.

The responses also highlight the need for a parental engagement strategy and implementation plan that will drive the release of funding to ensure parental engagement becomes a priority.

3.9 Solutions and Enablers

3.9.1 Survey Findings

Survey respondents were asked to identify any solutions to the challenges identified that impact upon schools' ability to deliver and sustain parental engagement. Responses are presented as follows:

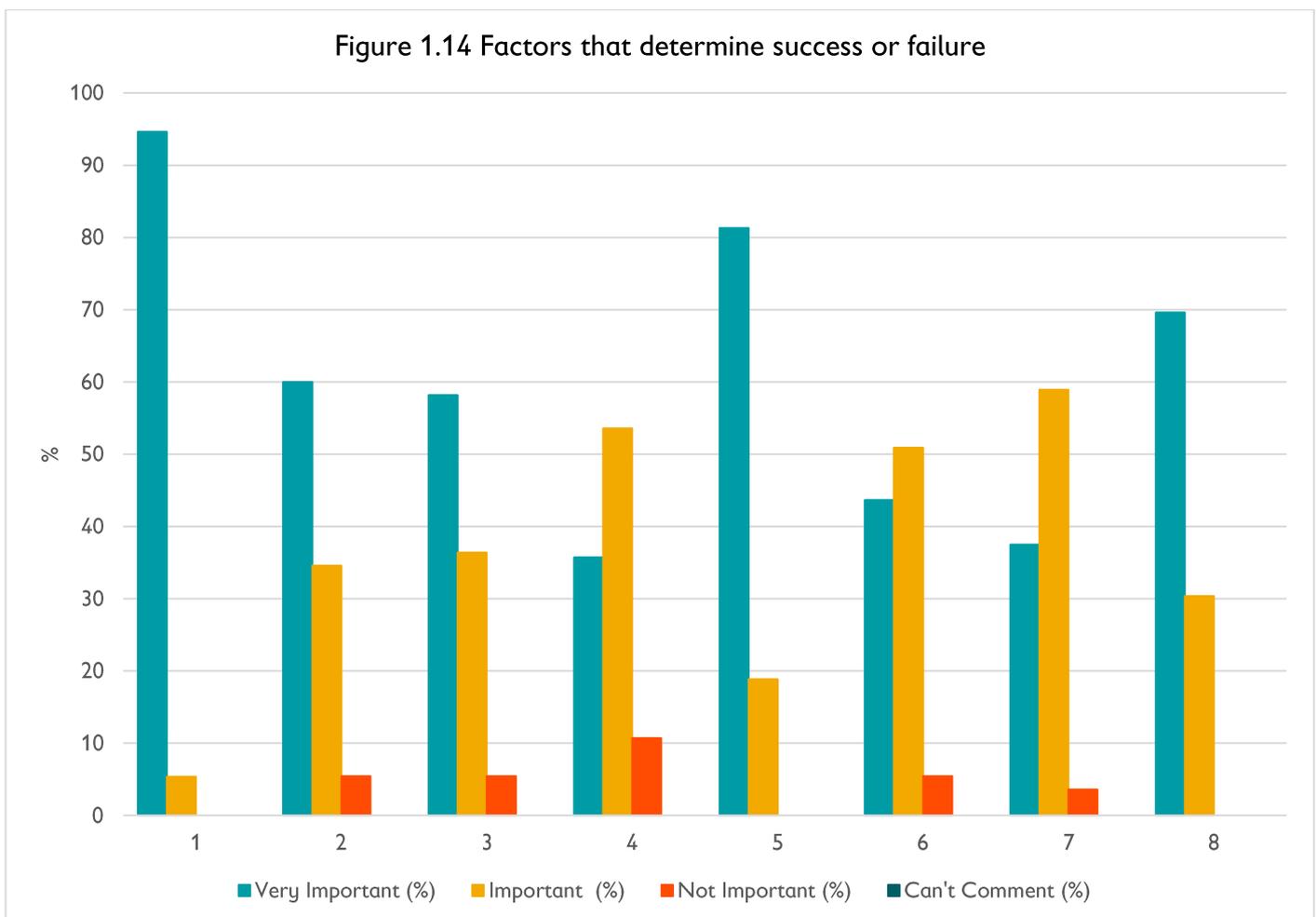


	Answer Choices	Responses	
1	Parental engagement strategy underpinned by an action plan and investment	69.09%	38
2	Official guidance from the EA and other sectoral bodies	25.45%	14
3	Parental engagement as part of inspection evaluation	12.73%	7
4	Priority in school development plan	50.91%	28
5	Parental engagement is a mandatory module in ITE, PGCE, professional development and in early years training	21.82%	12
6	Students receive experience of parental engagement during their placements	32.73%	18
7	Parents have prior experience of working in partnership with early childhood practitioners in day care, Sure Start and pre-schools	36.36%	20
8	Increased parental demand for learning how to support their children's development and learning	32.73%	18
9	A dedicated parental engagement lead, who has links with early childhood settings and organises transition to primary school	52.73%	29
10	Evidence of best practice, including impact reports	27.27%	15
11	Partnership-working with statutory, voluntary, community and private sectors to share learning, complement services and pool resources e.g. sustain and develop EITP	14.55%	8
12	Reduction in poverty to relieve pressures on families	29.09%	16
13	Long-term approach to planning between decision-makers, civic society, academia e.g. an education Bengoa	34.55%	19

Report

The most popular responses received were “parental engagement strategy underpinned by an action plan and investment” as the highest ranked response (69.1%), “a dedicated parental engagement lead, who has links with early childhood settings and organises transition to primary school” second highest ranked response (52.7%) and “priority in school development plan” (50.9%) third highest ranked response.

The survey also asked those participating to rank a number of different options relating to the critical factors that enable parental engagement and contribute to its success or failure. The graphic below details the responses received:



Report

		Very important	Important	Not important	Can't comment
1	School culture / environment	94.64%	5.36%	0.00%	0.00%
2	School policy / strategy	60.00%	34.55%	5.45%	0.00%
3	Community context (socio - economic issues, geography, demographics etc)	58.18%	36.36%	5.45%	0.00%
4	Relationships with external providers	35.71%	53.57%	10.71%	0.00%
5	Nature and content of the programmes delivered	81.13%	18.87%	0.00%	0.00%
6	Suitable facilities	43.64%	50.91%	5.45%	0.00%
7	Priority in development plan	37.50%	58.93%	3.57%	0.00%
8	Capacity of the staff team	69.64%	30.36%	0.00%	0.00%

School culture / environment ranks as the option which received the most responses under “very important”, followed by “nature and content of the programmes delivered” and “capacity of the staff team”. The importance placed upon school culture and environment is interesting when we consider that research reviewed within section 2 of the report highlighted the need for positive leadership for effective parental engagement but only 16% of survey respondents stated that parental engagement was a leadership priority in their school.

3.9.2 Interviews with Education Professionals

Information from interviews highlighted the need for a focussed parental engagement strategy with investment in order for schools to do more and plan to make positive improvements. The issue of budgets and resources was again well-documented so the need for dedicated resources was highlighted. The importance and value of parental engagement, the potential benefits for learning and willingness of schools to buy into parental engagement were all highlighted but it is recognised that the current climate of budget pressures does not allow schools to do any more without additional resources.

In addition, it is interesting to compare that 73.2% of respondents indicated that parental engagement was identified as a priority within their current school development plan but only 50.9% felt that making it a priority in the school development plan was a solution to current challenges to deliver and sustain parental engagement. Having a parental engagement strategy underpinned by an action plan and investment was seen as a much higher priority. This would also be reinforced by those views received during interviews with principals, particularly that the value and importance of parental engagement is well established and recognised across schools but the ability to act is limited due to a number of factors including a lack of clear direction and resources.

4. Key Points for Consideration

Within this section of the report, a series of the key points and messages is presented emanating from the consultation process and the review of policy and practice.

1. There appears to be no clear and consistent definition of parental engagement recognised by education professionals in primary education

Save the Children, in the terms of reference for this research, articulated a definition of parental engagement which differentiated between parental involvement in schooling versus supporting parents to be involved in children's learning and development. Based upon both the survey findings and completed interviews, it is not clear that this differentiation is shared from the perspective of most education professionals. Principals seem to have a much broader interpretation of parental engagement which includes any activity which supports and promotes parental involvement in their child's learning and school life. This may well reflect the frequent conflation of parental involvement and engagement in policy and practice materials.

2. Regardless of the way it is defined, education professionals recognise parental engagement as a vital component of the education of children and demonstrate awareness of its purpose and outcomes.

This research has highlighted the value of parental engagement from the perspective of education professionals. Most consultees indicated that parental engagement is now seen as an important part of the teacher's role. In fact, the consultation revealed that over 92% of survey

respondents cited their own experience of working with parents as the key driver of their interest in parental engagement.

However most noted the lack of strategic direction and funding in Northern Ireland.

3. In order to realise positive outcomes for children and their learning and deliver parental engagement activities that are effective, parental engagement must be viewed as a leadership priority for the school leadership team and governance structures

Research considered within the report suggests that the school leadership approach and commitment to parental engagement is a critical factor in whether effective parental engagement is delivered within school. Almost 95% of survey respondents also indicated that school environment/culture was "very important" to enable successful parental engagement. However, only 16% of survey respondents felt that parental engagement was a leadership priority for their school. Feedback from principals via interviews would suggest that both a strategy and additional resources are required to place a greater priority upon parental engagement within schools. In 2009 Northern Ireland's Every School a Good School identified leadership to foster parental engagement as a key characteristic of a good school, as do Scotland's Learning Together and England's Review of best practice in parental engagement: Practitioners' Summary. However, it doesn't appear that this insight is given weight in DE's Learning Leaders strategy or the forthcoming headship qualification. Nor does the ETI prioritise parental engagement as a key middle-management or leadership criterion. This mixed messaging means that parental engagement may be valued as a priority but is

easily pushed down the agenda by other more pressing priorities, including funding pressures.

4. Schools find engaging with parents an increasingly challenging experience and have noticed a growing trend in terms of increasing levels of disengagement and lack of interest amongst parents

From the perspective of education professionals this challenge can be attributed to a range of issues including features of modern life that include parents' working lives, communication via social media and technology as opposed to face-to-face engagement, socio-economic issues, limited resources within schools to sustain parental engagement activities, parents' childhood experiences in school and a lack of understanding (and in some cases interest) amongst parents of their role as co-educators. Many have the impression that education is a school-led responsibility.

“The vast majority of parents aren't interested - they expect schools to do more and more for their child/children and they offer less and less support” (Survey respondent)

A key challenge therefore is ensuring that opportunities for parental engagement are attractive to parents, are matched to their own needs and enhance parents' understanding of their role as co-educators, so that they feel empowered as equal partners who can make a difference to their children's lives.

5. In order to realise effective parental engagement and positive outcomes for children's learning, there needs to be buy-in from both the school and from the parents themselves – it is vital to build trust and relationships otherwise

parental engagement will struggle to work

The principals who were interviewed highlighted the importance of relationships and trust with parents in order to achieve any success or sustained engagement. Specific examples were shared of good and bad experience of parental engagement with a key result, within those they deemed successful, being the positive relationships developed with parents (that then led to more in-depth support and co-operation). Those that were not effective typically did not meet the needs / interests of parents or did not reflect their own level of parenting and education.

A common theme across interviews and survey findings was: More trust; Parents have more positive experience of school; Better / improved attendance of children; Child has higher attainment; Children are happier / better behaviours.

Some of the key enablers identified to support effective parental engagement included:

- effective communication with parents
- clearly articulated parental engagement activities (what it is, why it's needed, outcomes etc)
- making activities as accessible as possible for parents i.e. time, location, cost etc
- building trust and relationships with parents within wider school life

6. Short-term funding and projects hinder sustainability and evaluation of the impact of parental engagement on outcomes

Education professionals have noted the lack of sustained and longer-term funding options for parental engagement activities and programmes. This has a knock-on impact on the ability of the

school to design, plan and sustain parental engagement and importantly, demonstrate its impact upon the education of children over a longer-term period.

“We have only ever had short-term parental engagement initiatives and it is therefore difficult to measure (impact), but definitely very positive” (Survey respondent)

“Access to longer-term initiatives, parental engagement and early intervention strategies can only benefit children and therefore society” (Survey respondent)

7. Programmes and initiatives to support parental engagement are often designed and planned without school involvement (but rely on the school or school setting to engage parents)

This observation was made by several principals throughout the interview process. Principals noted that they are often only aware of the content and delivery approach of programmes once they have been funded and are ready for delivery. In their opinion, greater involvement of schools in the planning and design of programmes could ensure enhanced engagement and outcomes.

8. Parental engagement is recognised as an important element of a teacher’s role

In teaching practice parental engagement is seen as important as any other part of a teacher’s role. Therefore, continuous professional development and training opportunities for teachers are increasingly important as parental engagement practice and evidence of effective programmes continue to evolve.

Some principals did highlight challenges securing buy-in from teachers to recognise parental engagement as part of their role, especially those who have been teaching for longer.

9. A parental engagement strategy and implementation plan are needed to ensure parental engagement is given priority in an environment of competing pressures.

The findings show that parental engagement is currently implemented or driven forward on a school-by-school basis rather than directed by a clear overarching strategic approach. As a result, delivery is often reliant on school / principal / teacher commitment and on fluctuating or short-term funding. As a result, it is particularly susceptible to adverse factors such as teacher industrial action and funding cuts.

Resources within schools are increasingly under pressure and threat due to budgetary pressures and the relative resources available versus rising annual costs and demands on principals and teachers. This has an impact upon the environment and “mindset” of schools, which are forced to focus on statutory obligations and curriculum requirements. Without strategic investment as a priority, it is inevitable that funding pressures will impact negatively on parental engagement activities. Survey respondents and interviewees frequently compared Northern Ireland with Scotland, where a comprehensive plan was launched in August 2018, with a series of clear actions, target measures, standards and investment.

5. Recommendations

The main recommendation put forward by the consultants is that the findings and perspectives of educational professionals should be shared with schools, principals, teacher training universities and policy makers as the first stage of a campaign to embed parental engagement in policy and practice.

The evidence is clear that children do better when parents are engaged in their learning. The research report shows that parental engagement is valued by education professionals, policymakers, researchers and regulators.

The research illustrates the extent of support among education professionals, with over 92% of survey respondents citing their personal experience of working with parents as a key driver of their interest in parental engagement.

But the findings also show the extent of uncertainty about the difference between parental involvement and parental engagement, about the status of parental engagement, given that it's not a teaching competency, it's not a priority for workforce development or inspection and it is not core funded as part of school provision.

The research cites the concerns of some education professionals about the number of parents who are disengaged and disinterested in working with them. But this is all the more reason for learning how to work effectively with parents in a mutually respectful way. It is well documented that parents want the best for their children but may lack the resources, confidence and skills to realise their aspirations. Therefore, we would argue that it is an obligation to provide them with the support of skilled professionals who view them

as equal partners in making a difference to children's lives.

The research findings repeatedly emphasise the call for strategic direction to embed parental engagement in school provision. This call for implementation of a funded parental engagement strategy reiterates the long-standing recommendations by the Public Accounts Committee and the CBI for a DE-led parental engagement strategy to help tackle educational underachievement.

Recommendation 1

Based on the aim of all children having the best start in life, develop a DE-led cross-departmental strategy and resourced implementation plan, to include the following:

- Best practice guidance that outlines the definition of parental engagement, its benefits and ways of working with parents as equal partners and of assessing the impact of parental engagement on children's outcomes
- A requirement that effective parental engagement is specified in the Inspection and Self-Evaluation Framework (ISEF), used by ETI to evaluate quality standards
- Requirements that parental engagement is specified as a teaching competency and reflected in teacher training and qualifications
- A co-designed approach with national parenting organisations and families, especially families living in poverty
- Recognition of parental engagement in related strategies, including the Family and Parenting Support, Tackling Education

Disadvantage and child poverty strategies, T:BUC and the Communities in Transition project.

The research reveals that professionals value parental engagement as an important part of their role but many don't see it as a leadership priority. The report outlines the importance devoted to parental engagement as a key leadership priority by the Scottish Government and Ofsted. The English and Scottish education departments invest in training across all levels from initial training to CPD and headship.

Placing parental engagement at the heart of teacher and leadership training would support skills in planning approaches tailored to the needs of 'their' parents and in assessing the impact of parental engagement on children's outcomes.

Recommendation 2

- The ITE universities should continue their development of mandatory modules in parental engagement
- The Education Authority should take forward its implementation of the Learning Leaders strategy by including parental engagement in the Training for Professional Learning (TPL) framework and the updated Headship qualification
- All professionals should be trained in parental engagement including knowledge about the impact of poverty on learning, tools to support parents in their children's learning and methods to evaluate the impact of parental engagement on children's outcomes

- Schools could explore the model of a dedicated practitioner to make important links to other children's services including health, day care, Sure Start and pre-school.

The report cites the importance of early intervention and prevention to support children's outcomes. The research tells us that parents are often better prepared for engagement in their children's development and learning if they have prior experience of this support from health, daycare, Sure Start and pre-school practitioners.

The Scottish government plans to ensure childcare colleges improve how parental engagement is reflected in training and qualifications.

Recommendation 3

As part of the parental engagement strategy, it would be strategic to ensure mandatory training in parental engagement for early years practitioners. This would involve preparing a realistic timeline for workforce planning across children's services from pre-birth to the first years of primary school.

The findings illustrate the depth of the budget crisis and professionals' frustration about the prevalence of short-term funding of initiatives and pilots that hinders delivery and sustainability.

Recommendation 4

The delivery of a cross-departmental parental engagement strategy and implementation plan will need investment from pooled resources across government. The Children's Services Co-

operation Act, the Children and Young People's Strategy, the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership and the draft Programme for Government provide mechanisms for partnership-working that would enable a number of departments and agencies to help realise their commitments to the best start in life for all children.

The report illustrates many examples of policy-makers' stated intent to support parental engagement but also illustrates the difficulty of implementation. It will require a concerted effort to make it a priority and raise it up the political agenda.

Recommendation 5

In order to discuss the research findings and explore the way forward, Save the Children to convene a working group or panel to investigate the range of dilemmas, contradictions and assumptions unearthed by the research, take evidence from parents, more professionals and other stakeholders, explore the key questions of what matters and what works in parental engagement, consider further research and funding options and make recommendations for embedding parental engagement in provision from pre-birth to primary school.

This partnership approach will also have the benefit of reaching many more stakeholders which in turn will help raise the profile of parental engagement.

Conclusion

The report, with its survey findings and interviews, provides a snapshot of the policy and practice landscape for parental engagement in Northern Ireland. There is no doubt that education professionals face increasing challenges, including a rise in child poverty in the next few years. However, the report makes clear that effective parental engagement will help realise the aspirations of professionals, policymakers, regulators and most importantly parents. The report is also clear that effective parental engagement will repay efforts many times over to the benefit of children, families and society.

Endnotes

- ⁱ Department for Communities, 'Northern Ireland Poverty Bulletin 2017-18' (webpage), <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/households-below-average-income-northern-ireland-201718>
- ⁱⁱ F Rahman, *The generation of poverty. Poverty over the life course for different generations*, Resolution Foundation briefing, 2019, p4 <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/the-generation-of-poverty-poverty-over-the-life-course-for-different-generations/>
- ⁱⁱⁱ J Waldfogel and E Washbrook, 'Income-related gaps in school readiness in the US and UK' in T Smeeding et al (Eds), *Persistence, Privilege, and Parenting: The Comparative Study of Intergenerational Mobility*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2011
- ^{iv} Department of Education, Statistical Bulletin 4/2019, 'Qualifications and Destinations of Northern Ireland School Leavers 2017/18', <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/qualifications-and-destinations-of-northern-ireland-school-leavers-20171...pdf> p19, table 5
- ^v K Sylva, E Melhuish et al. *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Technical Paper 12 - The Final Report: Effective Pre-School Education*, DfES/Institute of Education, University of London, 2004, p57, <http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/10005309/1/sylva2004EPPEfinal.pdf>
- ^{vi} Northern Ireland Audit Office, *Improving Literacy and Numeracy Achievement in Schools*, Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, 19 February 2013, <https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/publication/improving-literacy-and-numeracy-achievement-schools>
- ^{vii} Northern Ireland Assembly, Public Accounts Committee, *Report on Improving Literacy and Numeracy Achievement in Schools*, NIA 116/11-15, June 2013, p5 <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/Documents/Reports/Public-Accounts/nia-116-11-15-Report-on-Improving-Literacy-and-Numeracy-Achievement-in-Schools.PDF>
- ^{viii} CBI, *First Steps: A new approach for our schools*, Nov 2012, p43
- ^{ix} Education Scotland, 'What is Parental Involvement and Parental Engagement?' (webpage), <https://education.gov.scot/improvement/research/What%20is%20Parental%20Involvement%20and%20Parental%20Engagement>
- ^x S Miller, *Outline Proposal to Evaluate the Bristol University and Harvard University Project: Engaging Parents through Text Messaging*, The Centre for Effective Education, Queen's University Belfast, 2014, p2
- ^{xi} Education Endowment Foundation, 'Parental Engagement, Teaching and Learning Toolkit', September 2018, p1 (webpage), <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/pdf/generate/?u=https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/pdf/toolkit?id=139&t=Teaching%20and%20Learning%20Toolkit&e=139&s=>
- ^{xii} Scottish Government, *Learning together. Scotland's national action plan on parental involvement, parental engagement, family learning and learning at home 2018-2021*, August 2018, p1 <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/strategy-plan/2018/08/learning-together-scotlands-national-action-plan-parental-involvement-parental-engagement/documents/00539357-pdf/00539357-pdf/govscot%3Adocument/00539357.pdf>
- ^{xiii} J Goodall & J Vorhaus, *Review of Best Practice in Parental Engagement*. Department for Education, 2011, p13, <https://purehost.bath.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/146139638/DFE-RR156.pdf>
- ^{xiv} Department of Education, *Every School A Good School. A Policy for school improvement*, 2009, p31, <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/de/ESAGS%20Policy%20for%20School%20Improvement%20-%20Final%20Version%2005-2009.pdf>
- ^{xv} Department of Education, *Count Read: Succeed. A Strategy to Improve Outcomes in Literacy and Numeracy*, 2011, <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/de/count-read-succeed-a-strategy-to-improve-outcomes-in-literacy-and-numeracy.pdf>
- ^{xvi} Department of Education, *Learning to learn: A Framework for Early Years Education and Learning*, 2013, <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/de/a-framework-for-ey-education-and-learning-2013.pdf>
- ^{xvii} Department of Education Northern Ireland, *Children and Young People's Strategy 2017-2027*, 2017, <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/education/Children%20and%20young%20people%27s%20strategy%20%284%29.pdf>
- ^{xviii} Education and Training Inspectorate, *The Inspection and Self-Evaluation Framework (ISEF)*, p9-10, https://www.etini.gov.uk/sites/etini.gov.uk/files/publications/isef-primary-with-shared-ed_0.pdf
- ^{xix} Department of Education, 'Give Your Child A Helping Hand' (webpage), <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/give-your-child-helping-hand>
- ^{xx} The Executive Office, *Draft Programme for Government 2016-2021 and Outcomes Delivery Plan 2018-19 - by tackling disadvantage and driving economic growth*, <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/execoffice/outcomes-delivery-plan-2018-19.pdf>
- ^{xxi} Department of Health, 'Families Matter: Supporting Families in Northern Ireland. Regional Family and Parenting Strategy', March 2009, <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dhssps/families-matter-strategy.pdf>
- ^{xxii} Northern Ireland Executive, *Making Life Better. A Whole System Strategic Framework For Public Health 2013-2023*, June 2014, https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dhssps/making-life-better-strategic-framework-2013-2023_0.pdf
- ^{xxiii} CCEA, 'The Northern Ireland Curriculum. Primary' 2007, p9 (webpage), http://ccea.org.uk/sites/default/files/docs/curriculum/area_of_learning/fs_northern_ireland_curriculum_primary.pdf
- ^{xxiv} National Museums NI, 'Parental Engagement' (webpage), <https://www.nmni.com/learn/Community-engagement/Parental-Engagement.aspx>
- ^{xxv} Department of Education, 'Extended Schools Programme' (webpage), <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/extended-schools-programme>
- ^{xxvi} Health and Social Care Board, 'Regional Integrated Support for Education (RISE) Programme' (webpage), <http://www.hscboard.hscni.net/regional-integrated-support-for-education-video/>
- ^{xxvii} Early Intervention Transformation Programme, *Parenting Programmes Review*, Centre for Effective Services, December 2014,

Report

http://www.cypsp.hscni.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Workstream2_EITP_Parenting_Programme_Review_CES_Dec14.pdf

^{xxxviii} See note xiv p3

^{xxxix} See note xiv p 9-10

^{xxx} Education Endowment Foundation, 'Working with Parents to Support Children's Learning' (webpage),

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/news/new-guidance-for-schools-on-engaging-parents/>

^{xxxix} National College for School Leadership, *Leadership for Parental Engagement*, 2010,

<https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/2094/1/download%3Fid%3D134336%26filename%3Dleadership-for-parental-engagement.pdf>

^{xxxix} Ofsted, *Schools and Parents*, 2011, p16,

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/schools-and-parents-developing-partnerships>

^{xxxix} Scottish Government, *Learning together. Scotland's national action plan on parental involvement, parental engagement, family learning and learning at home 2018-2021*, 2018, p3

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/learning-together-scotlands-national-action-plan-parental-involvement-parental-engagement/pages/8/>

^{xxxix} *ibid* p4

^{xxxix} *ibid* p16

^{xxxix} *ibid* p8

^{xxxvii} Department of Education, *Learning Leaders. A Strategy For Teacher Professional Learning*, 2016,

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/teaching-professional-learning-strategy>

APPENDICES

Appendix I: List of Interviewees

1. Shauna McGill, Lecturer in Education, University of Ulster (Belfast)
2. Dr Barbara McConnell, Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood Studies, Stranmillis University College (Belfast)
3. Siobhan Gillen, Principal, Steelestown Primary School (L'Derry)
4. Fionnuala McCotter, Principal, Scoil an Droichead (Belfast)
5. Mrs J Thomas, Principal, Clandeboye Primary School (Bangor)
6. Mrs Craig, Principal, Ballywater Primary School (Ballywater)
7. Mrs Pauline Brown, Principal, Kilcooley Primary School (Bangor)
8. Mrs Rebecca Bishop, Principal, Bloomfield Primary School (Bangor)
9. Mrs Jayne Jeffers, Principal, Elmgrove Primary School (Belfast)
10. Beverly McCormick, Principal, Newbuildings Primary School (L'Derry)
11. Ashleigh Galway, Principal, Currie Primary School (Belfast)
12. Rita Robinson, Principal, St Mary's Primary School (Maghery)
13. Patricia McNutt, St Anne's Primary School (L'Derry)
14. Peter Gildea, Mount St Catherine's Primary School (Armagh)
15. Mairead Connolly, Principal, Gaelscoil Eanna (Glengormley)
16. Claire Robinson, Principal, Holy Evangelist Primary School (Belfast)

Appendix II: Case Study – Scoil an Droichid

Established in 1995, Scoil an Droichid is an Irish Medium Primary School serving 177 children across South and East Belfast. The school is located in one of the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland, ranked within the top 8% for Multiple Deprivation and falls within the Inner South Neighbourhood Renewal Area.

Given the range of backgrounds children come from in this area, a key theme identified by Scoil an Droichid in terms of parents' own learning experiences informing attitudes to their child's learning was that "parents who are from areas of poorer socio-economic circumstances were more reluctant to engage with school, quicker to shy away from parental engagement initiatives and there was a greater need to convince them of their child's learning potential compared to parents living more affluently and/or parents who have been through 3rd level education themselves."

For Scoil an Droichid, parental engagement is "a vital part of school for children and should involve engagement in every and any aspect of school life". While the school does not have a policy on parental engagement, it is to the fore of what it does and is actively implemented through other policies and as part of the school development plan. For example, they currently operate the "See Saw" app which provides a direct link between school and parents in a controlled environment, enabling ongoing communication and they have previously worked with NSPCC, Save the Children and other external delivery organisations to deliver various parental engagement initiatives in the past.

Based on experience delivering previous programmes and initiatives for parental engagement, the school, through observation, anecdotal evidence and external evaluation questionnaires have identified a range of outcomes for children including:

- better and improved attendance
- more respect towards school staff
- increased attention in class
- higher attainment levels
- improved behaviours

Moving forward, Scoil an Droichid is keen to deliver its own parental engagement initiatives in the future however the school is limited by various constraints beyond its control, namely finance and resources. The school has tried to secure funding for a home-school liaison officer and been unsuccessful and is currently experiencing ongoing teacher action resulting in non-co-operation of teachers after 3pm, restricting engagement to school hours and necessitating the use of sub teachers which incurs additional costs for the school.

Appendix III : Case Study – Kilcooley Primary School

Kilcooley Primary School is in the Kilcooley Estate on the outskirts of Bangor, an area designated as a Neighbourhood Renewal area (ranked in the top 10% of most deprived areas in Northern Ireland). It is an area of high population density as one of the largest residential estates in NI and suffers from a range of significant socio – economic issues linked to poverty, legacy of conflict, educational underachievement and wellbeing. There is a nursery unit linked to the school which is heavily subscribed, and the maximum school enrolment is up to 205 pupils.

The school vision is:

“Kilcooley Primary School aims to provide a stimulating and interesting environment in which all children are encouraged to reach their full potential in all areas of the curriculum, as members of a happy and caring community”

Kilcooley PS recognises the importance and value of parental engagement in the education of children. The school has implemented a range of parental engagement activities and programmes over the past number of years, delivered from both internal teaching resources and working in tandem with external providers. As part of their parental engagement approach the school’s involvement has included the delivery of the Incredible Years Programme and the FAST Programme. The school also developed its own SPICE Project which was designed to offer free breakfast for parents and teachers within the school once per week to provide opportunities for parents and teachers to engage and communicate on an ongoing basis.

Kilcooley PS has noted clear benefits from parental engagement activities and programmes previously but has also recognised that the success or outcomes achieved have depended on several key factors. One of these factors has been the need for pre – consultation with the school for the delivery of an externally delivered parental engagement programmes. The content and level of programme must be reflective of the needs and interests of the parent group to ensure buy-in and relationships can be established at the outset.

In recognition of their commitment to parental engagement to support children’s learning and based on experience of previous initiatives, the school has developed a targeted home-based parental engagement programme funded as a pilot project from some of their own resources and externally secured investment. The programme is focussed on a group of parents who traditionally have not been active or interested in school life or parental engagement activities, with a facilitator (non-teacher) working with parents in the home environment to build a positive relationship, discuss needs and areas of support, providing practical advice and support and assist parents to support their children with learning. The goal is to then enhance relationships so that parents can become more active in their child’s learning and progress into more school-based parental activities. Whilst this work is in early stages at the time of report, positive outcomes have been realised in terms of parent – school relationships, parental engagement in school activities and parental participation in their child’s learning. The school hopes to build on this work in the future, but this will be funding dependent as resources for a short pilot only have been secured at the time of report.

Appendix IV: Case Study – Elmgrove Primary School

Located on the Beersbridge Road in East Belfast, Elmgrove Primary School is ‘an intrinsic part of the local community and which places great emphasis on sustaining a positive learning partnership between home and school.’ The majority of pupils that attend Elmgrove PS reside within close proximity to the school which encapsulates some of the most disadvantaged and deprived communities within Inner East Belfast. The school also has a significant number of ‘newcomer pupils’ i.e. young people from an ethnic minority background which includes a wide range of cultures including Eastern European and Asian amongst others.

Elmgrove PS recognises the importance of parental engagement and the role that parents play in supporting the education and learning of their children. However, due to the high level of newcomer pupils enrolled at the school, there are a number of significant barriers to delivering successful parental engagement. One major challenge for the school is that many newcomer parents don’t use English as their first language and therefore communicating with these parents is extremely difficult. The school often needs to have translators present when delivering meetings with parents which requires significant resources which ultimately takes away from other budget areas. In addition, this provides other challenges such as being able to deliver specific parental engagement activities or programmes as the school simply cannot afford the translator costs on top of all the other associated costs.

The school therefore relies on providing materials and resources through their website and online portal. This provides opportunities for parents to build their own capacity and skills and help them to support their children’s education and development. The online system enables ongoing communication as well as providing resources to continually support parents. Resources provided by the school include:

- Internet Safety Guidance
- Parents, Teachers and Friends Association Information i.e. how to get involved, projects / events etc
- Useful Links – links to a range of relevant support programmes and agencies i.e. Family Support NI, Action for Children, Dept of Education etc
- 'How To' Videos – resources that provide advice and guidance in relation to how parents can support learning within the home, assist with homeworks etc
- Parental Involvement Videos – advice and guidance in relation to how parents can engage within their child’s education and work with the school / teachers to support their child

The online system utilised by the school also provides opportunities for parents to communicate with teachers on an ongoing basis. This ensures that parents who work can still engage with teachers even if they can’t regularly attend meetings due to other commitments.

Elmgrove PS is a strong advocate for parental engagement and sees the value of implementing this a core part of their work. The challenges faced by the school however impact on the nature and the level of parental engagement that can be delivered. This supports some of the wider findings within the report and highlights the need for schools to be involved in the design and development of effective parental engagement programmes to meet their own varying needs.

Report

Appendix V: Survey

Question Title

1. What is your position?

Question Title

*2. What is your school's council area?

Question Title

*3. What is the school management type?

Question Title

*4. What would you define as parental engagement? Please select a maximum of 5 options which you feel are most relevant.

- Maintaining communication with parents via letters, phone calls, emails etc
- Maintaining communication with parents via digital technology i.e. SMS and web portals / apps
- Engaging via parent - teacher meetings and progress reports
- Specific communication about child development stages and the importance of parental support
- Engaging external providers to deliver parental engagement programmes
- Allocating staff time to deliver parental engagement programmes to support parental engagement in their children's learning and improve the home learning environment
- Provision of a parents' room and space for parents to meet regularly in school
- The involvement of parents in school decision-making, including curriculum design
- The involvement of parents in volunteering in parent councils etc
- Other (please specify)

Question Title

*5. Of the above kinds of parental involvement and engagement, what does your school provide and / or practise? Please tick all that apply.

If you communicate via digital technology, please specify the types i.e. web portal, app etc

- Maintaining communication with parents via letters, phone calls, email
- Maintaining communication with parents via digital technology eg SMS, web portals, apps etc
- Engaging via parent-teacher meetings and progress reports
- Specific communication about child development stages and the importance of parental support
- Engaging external providers to provide parental engagement programmes

Report

- Allocating staff time to deliver parental engagement programmes to support parental engagement in their children's learning and improve the home learning environment
- Provision of a parents' room and space for parents to meet regularly in school
- The involvement of parents in school decision-making, including curriculum design
- The involvement of parents in volunteering in parent councils etc

Other / Comment:

Question Title

*6. What do you feel is the purpose of parental engagement? Please select a maximum of 5 options which you feel are most relevant.

- Developing parental skills and confidence
- Narrowing the education achievement gap
- Supporting children's emotional and mental health and wellbeing as the foundation of learning
- Developing strong relationships between parents, children and staff
- Supporting child learning outcomes at the end of primary school
- Supporting early learning activities in the home / the home learning environment (HLE)
- Supporting speech, language and communication, early numeracy and literacy
- Encouraging parent's involvement in school decision-making and communication
- Developing a partnership between parents and education professionals

Question Title

*7. What drives your interest in parental engagement? Please select a maximum of 5 options which you feel are most relevant.

- The school development plan
- ITE and professional learning
- EA guidance
- ETI guidance
- GTCNI guidance
- Research findings
- Quality of programmes, including the evidence base
- Experience of working with parents
- Teaching union guidance

Question Title

8. How would you describe the status of parental engagement in your school. Please tick the most relevant.

- As a leadership priority
- Part of the school's strategic approach, therefore prioritised in the school development plan
- Assigned to external organisations for delivery
- Not important, if so, please explain why you don't feel it is important in the comment box below

Report

Comment:

Question Title

*9. If supportive of parental engagement, how would you best measure success? Please tick all that apply.

- Number of parents involved
- Number of staffs involved
- Outcomes in social and emotional health
- Outcomes in speech, language and communication
- Observations that parents know how to encourage children's learning at home
- Better literacy and numeracy outcomes that improve education attainment
- Other (please specify)

Question Title

*10. What do you think are the barriers to parents supporting their children's learning? Please select a maximum of 5 options that you feel are most relevant.

- Parents don't see themselves as welcome partners with schools
- Parents aren't aware of their importance as the first and most important educator from birth
- Parents don't have the confidence to collaborate with schools
- Parents don't have English as a first language and find it hard to communicate with schools
- Financial pressures and other anxieties prevent them devoting more time to their children's learning
- Parents work too long hours to get involved in their learning
- Parents live too far away from the school
- There is resistance from parents to being 'lectured' about parenting
- There is a stigma about being perceived as a bad parent in need of support
- Parents have their own bad experiences of education, so keep away
- Too many other agencies are involved in their lives and there is no single source of information and support

Question Title

11. What is the level of seniority / experience of staff that deliver parental engagement within your school?

Question Title

*12. Please identify the barriers to education professionals' ability to attract parents to participate in parental engagement programmes. Please select a maximum of 5 options which you feel are most relevant.

- Communication barriers with parents
- Lack of parental interest
- Parents feel unwelcome as partners in their children's learning
- Lack of parental recognition of their pivotal role in their children's education
- General attitudes to the value of education and educational achievement
- The lack of support for education in the community

Report

- Parents' distress caused by living in poverty, which hinders their ability to focus on child development and learning
- Stigma of being perceived as 'bad parents' if they are seen to need parental support
- Parents live too far away
- Parents are too busy working

Question Title

*13. Please identify the barriers to schools' ability to deliver parental engagement. Please select a maximum of 5 options which you feel are most relevant.

- Lack of funding to release teachers for professional development
- Action short of strike
- Budget cuts to undermine ability to allocate adequate funding
- Schools have to prioritise academic results due to parental pressure
- Hard to support newcomer parents whose children attend school for a short time before they move on
- Hard to support newcomer parents whose first language is not English
- Other initiatives / priorities take precedence e.g. focus on ACES, EAL training
- Parental engagement is not a priority with policymakers
- Parental engagement is not a priority with senior management, the Education Authority, CCEA, ETI, General Teachers Council and the teaching unions
- Lack of ITE, professional development about supporting parents in their children's learning
- Lack of knowledge about evidence-informed programmes that meet parents' needs

Question Title

*14. What are the major barriers to the schools' ability to sustain parental engagement? Please select a maximum of 5 options which you feel are most relevant.

- Short-term funding prevents longer-term planning
- A reliance on initiatives and pilots prevents mainstreaming and sustainability
- Lack of political and policy 'buy in' for a parental engagement strategy and implementation, necessary to raise the profile of parental engagement and embed it
- Lack of a workforce development strategy to ensure initial training and professional development in parental engagement
- Lack of regulation and inspection regimes to ensure parental engagement is mainstreamed as core practice
- Lack of teaching union 'buy in'
- Lack of CCEA commitment
- Lack of GTCNI commitment
- Other (please specify)

Question Title

15. Any solutions to the challenges identified? Please select a maximum of 5 options which you feel are most relevant.

- Parental engagement strategy underpinned by an action plan and investment
- Official guidance from the EA and other sectoral bodies
- Parental engagement as part of inspection evaluation
- Priority in school development plan
- Parental engagement is a mandatory module in ITE, PGCE, professional development and in early years training

Report

- Students receive experience of parental engagement during their placements
- Parents have prior experience of working in partnership with early childhood practitioners in day care, Sure Start and pre-schools
- Increased parental demand for learning how to support their children's development and learning
- A dedicated parental engagement lead, who has links with early childhood settings and organises transition to primary school
- Evidence of best practice, including impact reports
- Partnership-working with statutory, voluntary, community and private sectors to share learning, complement services and pool resources e.g. sustain and develop EITP
- Reduction in poverty to relieve pressures on families
- Long-term approach to planning between decision-makers, civic society, academia e.g. an education Bengoa

Question Title

*16. What enables delivery of successful parental engagement programmes in your opinion? What are the critical factors for success or failure? Please mark as appropriate

	Very important	Important	Not important	Do not feel I can comment
School culture / environment	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
School policy / strategy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Community context (socio - economic issues, geography, demographics etc)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Relationships with external providers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Nature and content of the programmes delivered	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Suitable facilities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Priority in development plan	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Capacity of the staff team	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Report

Question Title

*17. In your experience, have parental engagement initiatives delivered in your school been effective?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

Question Title

18. If you answered yes to question 17, please provide some examples of outcomes realised:

- Improved trust and relationships between parents and school / teachers
- Improved educational attainment of children
- Increased confidence and self-esteem of parents
- Improved confidence and self-esteem of children
- Improved relationships between parents and children
- Improved pupil attendance
- Improved social skills and behaviour of children
- Parents have a better understanding of the teacher's role and the curriculum
- Parents more active in policy-making at school and in the community
- Other (please specify)

Question Title

19. Any other comment you would like to make in relation to the research?

Report

Report

Save the Children

Popper House
15 Richmond Park
Belfast
BT10 0HB
info@savethechildren.org.uk
02890431123

A limited company registered in England and Wales (178159)

Registered charity England and Wales (213890)
Scotland (SC039570)

© The Save the Children Fund.



Save the Children