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"Education cannot cease": the experiences of parents of primary age children (age 4-11) in Northern Ireland during school closures due to COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the research findings from an online survey of parents of primary-age pupils in Northern Ireland during the COVID-19 pandemic. The aims of the study were to explore how parents supported their child/ren's home learning; to ascertain the communication, guidance and resources between home and school; and to learn from the experiences of parents to enable more effective practices to be established should similar circumstances arise in the future. The survey yielded 2,509 responses and highlighted the divergence of practices in relation to home-school communications across schools as well as the challenges experienced by parents, particularly those who had one or more children with special educational needs and/or those who had Free School Meal Entitlement. The study was guided by Epstein's Framework of the Six Types of Involvement, most specifically the spheres of *parenting, learning from home, communication, collaborating with the community* and *decision-making*. Within Epstein's framework, the challenges and tensions between family, school and work are explored. Recommendations are made that will be helpful to parents, schools, teacher-educators, policy-makers and researchers in informing the shape and delivery of education in Northern Ireland and internationally both during and following the challenge of the current COVID-19 pandemic and for similar situations that may arise in the future. The findings and conclusions are relevant not only to the Northern Ireland education context, but also make a valuable contribution to global dialogue on what this experience has revealed about inequities in education systems and how these should be addressed going forward.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic caused global disruption to education, resulting in prolonged school closures and a switch to remote learning for pupils of all ages. At the time of writing (February 2021), schools in Northern Ireland (NI) remain closed to most pupils with ongoing reviews to inform decisions about a safe return to schooling. In response to this unprecedented turn in education provision, a study was undertaken by researchers in the UNESCO Centre, Ulster University to examine parents' experiences of supporting home

learning during the first wave of the pandemic and to ascertain communication between parents and schools during this time. Data was collected through an online survey, yielding 2,509 responses. The study was guided by Epstein's framework of the Six Types of Parental Involvement. Viewed through this lens, the findings' "overlapping spheres of influence" (Epstein, 2019, p. 12) of school, family and community can inform effective engagement and support children's learning, as well as inform policymakers' planning for longer term education provision in NI.

Although Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom, responsibility for education policy and management is devolved to the NI Assembly. The NI Department of Education is responsible for the administration of pre-school, primary and post-primary education. In 2019/20, there were a total of 794 primary schools attended by 172,255 pupils in years 1 to 7.[1] Within primary schools, approximately 19%[2] of children have one or more recorded Special Educational Needs (SEN) and approximately 29% have Free School Meal Entitlement (FSME).

During the first wave of the pandemic, schools in NI closed from Monday 23 March 2020 until the end of the school year in June. Excluding Easter holidays, this was a closure of approximately 12 weeks. Some pupils of keyworkers[3] and vulnerable children continued to attend school for supervised learning during this period.[4] There was little time for schools to plan for this closure, with the NI First Minister, Arlene Foster, stating: "The societal and economic impact of this measure will be enormous as parents have to adjust their routine to deal with this unplanned long-term closure. . . . Education cannot cease".[5] The expectation was that learning and teaching would continue, but under the supervision of parents with some guidance from schools and teachers, as well as statutory bodies with a responsibility for education in NI. In most cases, individual schools provided home learning packs and/or online support, whilst the Department of Education (DE), Education Authority (EA) and Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) provided a range of online resources for parents and teachers.

National and international experiences and perspectives on the impact of COVID-19 on education

The closure of schools in Northern Ireland due to COVID-19 was not unique nationally or internationally. At its peak in April 2020, UNESCO[6] reported that 91.2% of total enrolled learners were impacted globally. Research is now emerging in relation to the experiences and perspectives of parents, pupils and teachers during this period. In addition to the survey reported here, the research team also undertook a survey of parents of children attending post-primary and special schools (O'Connor Bones et al., 2020). Surveys were also undertaken by Parentkind with parents in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and Walsh et al. (2020) with NI parents. The Parentkind (2020) survey found that for Northern Ireland responses over one third (37%) of parents were either not very confident or not at all confident in supporting their child's learning; it also revealed that while 68% of schools had communicated their expectations of home learning, approximately a quarter (26%) had not. Walsh et al. (2020, p. 3) found that parents educated to degree level were more likely to be directly involved in supporting their child's learning at home, whilst parents without a degree were more likely to report lower levels of confidence, indicating they simply monitored their child's learning.

Other research nationally and internationally has focused on the impact on mental health of children, young people and parents due to school closures. A study of child mental health in England before and during the COVID-19 lockdown (Newlove-Delgado et al., 2021) identified a significant overall rise in probable mental health problems among children aged 5–16, rising from 10.8% in 2017 to 16% in July 2020. According to Singh et al. (2020, p. 8) "Although the rate of COVID-19 infection among young children and adolescents is low, the stress confronted by them poses their condition as highly vulnerable". In their paper on the effect of the COVID-19 lockdown on parents, Fontanesi et al. (2020, p. S79) recognise that the lockdown period was particularly stressful for parents "due to unstable financial circumstances, school closures, and suspended educational services for children". Ways in which stress on parents can be mitigated is through the structured provision of support and through effective and appropriate school-home communications, which recognises that "The best approaches are tailored to specific parental needs, and context is an essential factor when considering parental engagement strategies" (Campbell, 2011, p. 3).

Parental involvement and school-family partnerships

Research evidence demonstrates the sustained value of parent involvement with their children's education, including improved academic achievement, motivation to learn and increased self-efficacy (e.g. Bandura, 1986, 1997; Fan & Chen, 2001; Hill & Tyson, 2009). There is also a body of education research which highlights the importance of strong school-family partnerships that foster effective parental involvement, suggesting that schools, families and communities should be interdependent rather than separate spheres of influence in a child's life (Epstein, 2019).

The benefits of parents engaging with their child's education and the importance of schools working closely alongside them has long been recognised in NI. Published policy guidance from the Department of Education (2009, 2011) acknowledges parents' pivotal role in improving educational outcomes and instructs schools to devise strategies for developing links with parents and the wider community. One of the six key focus areas in the *Every School a Good School* policy is "increasing engagement between schools, parents and families, recognising the powerful influence they and local communities exercise on educational outcomes" (DENI, 2009, p. 17). Parental involvement has also been at the centre of various campaigns run by the DE in recent years. Both the "Education Works" campaign (launched in 2012) and the current "Give your child a helping hand" campaign[7] (launched in 2018) have used TV commercials and educational booklets to encourage parents to engage with their child's learning. There is little empirical evidence, however, on the impact of these campaigns nor how communication strategies with parents have been implemented across schools. A survey of 11-year-olds in 2013, commissioned by ARK and Save the Children, found that "children's happiness and success at school is affected by their parents' attitudes towards, and involvement in, their child's educational experience" (Minogue & Schubotz, 2013, p. 3). Authors of this report suggest that the DE establish a clear strategy for communicating and engaging with parents, which is a recommendation that will be returned to later in this paper. Given that the *Every School a Good School* policy is now twelve years old, it is an opportune time to consider how school, family and community partnerships to support pupil learning could be re-centred.

While various terms have been used to describe the role of parents in their child's education and schooling, including *parent engagement* and *parent participation* (Hornby, 1989; Vyverman & Vettenburg, 2009), it is the term *parental involvement* which has been made popular by educational theorists such as Epstein (1995, 2019) and Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997, 2005), and it is now widely used by both researchers and practitioners. There remain some discrepancies about the exact definition, but it is generally agreed that parental involvement includes activities which take place both at home and in school to support learning as well as communication between schools and families. Desforges and Abouchaar (2003, p. 12) describe it as a "catch-all term for many different activities including 'at home' good parenting, helping with homework, talking to teachers, attending school functions, through to taking part in school governance". A significant dimension of parental involvement theories, and one which will be considered in this study, is that they recognise the unique knowledge of parents regarding the needs and strengths of their child(ren) and how it can be used by schools to improve the learning experiences of individual children. As well as considering how schools can support families and how communication between schools and families can be improved, theories of parental involvement entail "enriching the curriculum with the involvement and contribution of parents" (Cetin & Taskin, 2016, p. 107). It is therefore intended that a key contribution of the study reported here is the utility of the evidence base to inform schools' policy and planning going forward.

Epstein's framework of the six types of involvement

Epstein's influential Framework of the Six Types of Involvement (1995) was considered the most appropriate model to guide this study. Its focus on the importance of school, family and community partnerships to create a caring educational environment for young people underlines how effective practices should be designed and implemented (Epstein, 2019). Of the six types of involvement listed in Epstein's model, the five most relevant to this study are *parenting, learning from home, communication, collaborating with the community* and *decision-making*. The first four areas can be used to interpret the significance of parents' experiences during this pandemic and their level of involvement with their child/ren's education: they prompted consideration of parents' knowledge of the curriculum and their child/ren's learning processes; the kind of learning activities taking place at home; and the resources used to aid learning and the level of support provided by schools and teachers. Connections with the wider community were also taken into account by considering how parents interact with each other and the online resources, videos and activities provided by local organisations such as libraries and museums. Decision-making is also highly relevant as it established the level of support from the school to parents and pupils.

There has been limited research on parental involvement in online and blended learning environments. Relevant studies (e.g. Black, 2009; Curtis, 2013; Hasler Waters et al., 2018; Morse, 2019) note that using frameworks which were developed for traditional school settings are "helpful but ultimately incomplete" (Borup et al., 2019, p. 96). This study is an opportune moment to examine Epstein's model in a COVID-19 context and consider whether it needs to be adapted for this unique situation. The "learning from

home" which took place during this period was a rapid decision, largely unplanned and decisions made by schools regarding the delivery of education were, arguably, reactionary in the first lockdown phase.

Aims of the study

This study focused specifically on how parents of primary school children in Northern Ireland guided and supported their child's learning at home during the first period of school closure. The aims of the study were three-fold:

- to obtain insights into how parents of primary age children in Northern Ireland supported their child/ren to learn from home during the closure of schools due to COVID-19;
- to ascertain what resources, support and communications existed between schools and parents during this period; and
- to learn from the experiences of parents, including the challenges they faced, to enable more effective practices to be established should similar circumstances arise in the future.

Methodology

In order to collect data from the target population – parents of primary school age children across Northern Ireland – a survey approach was adopted. Online survey methodologies have become more prevalent over the last twenty years. This has been driven by improving broadband services, smart phone ownership, and use of social media (Pew Research Centre, in Evans & Mathur, 2018). For example, smart phone ownership in Northern Ireland was reported at 76% of the adult population in 2017 (Ofcom, 2017) and at 98% in 2021 in the UK for those aged 25–44 (Statista, 2021). The advantages of using an online survey include: reach, flexibility and ease of design, speed and timeliness, convenience and ease of obtaining large samples from potentially hard to reach, geographically dispersed populations (Evans & Mathur, 2018; Roberts & Allen, 2015). An online survey aimed at parents of primary school children across NI was created using SurveyMonkey. In reporting the methodology and findings, the authors have followed key aspects of good practice set out in the Checklist for Reporting Results of Internet E-Surveys (CHERRIES) (Eysenbach, 2004). The inclusion criteria was parents/carers who have one or more children attending a primary school prior to the school closures. The project received ethical approval from the University prior to its commencement.

   The survey was designed as an open survey to facilitate the widest possible dissemination and only one response per device/IP address was permitted. An information sheet explaining the study and a link to the final survey was distributed to every principal via their school's email address, with a request for the survey to be shared with parents through whatever means the school chose (email, text, social media). Information about the survey along with a link was also posted on appropriate social media sites, such as Twitter and on Facebook pages and groups. The survey ran from 20 April to 15 May 2020.

When a respondent clicked on the survey link they were immediately taken to the Information Sheet and Consent Form which had to be ticked (Question 1 in the survey), thereby ensuring the survey could only be completed via a process of informed consent. All participation was on a voluntary basis and parents could withdraw at any stage up to clicking Submit at the end of the survey. Participant anonymity was assured with no respondents identifiable in either the resultant project report or subsequent scholarly publication.

The survey comprised 38 questions. These were mostly closed questions, with a small number of open questions to allow respondents to add further detail if necessary. There were five short sections within the survey, each presented on its own survey page:

(1) Background information (Questions 2–11);
(2) The curriculum (Questions 12–14);
(3) Learning at home (Questions 15–28);
(4) Staying connected (Questions 29–34); and
(5) Overall perspectives (Questions 35–38).

The survey design was informed by Epstein's Framework (1995, 2019). This is reflected in the questions that were included and in the strong focus on home-school communications which is particularly evident in the survey.

The survey was piloted by individuals to ascertain the appropriateness and clarity of wording and the relevance of the questions (Cohen et al., 2011). This led to some minor adjustments in wording.

Statistical analysis of survey data was subsequently undertaken. Descriptive statistics were applied to the survey data (frequency counts, percentages, cross-tabulations). Open-ended answers were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase guidelines for thematic analysis, which enabled the identification of "patterns across qualitative data" (p. 80) and are included in the findings alongside the descriptive statistics.

Given that this was an online survey, one obvious limitation is that parents with no ICT access, low digital literacy, and/or literacy levels would have found it difficult to participate, and this caveat needs to be borne in mind when reading the findings.

Findings

Background information and demographics

The survey yielded 2,509 responses, representing 81 of the 82 postcode districts in NI. Of the respondents, 92.1% were mothers, 6.9% were fathers and 1.0% other guardians/carers. In terms of the numbers of children attending primary school, 53.7% of respondents had one child, 35.9% had two children, 9.3% had three children, and 1.2% had four or more children. Twelve percent of respondents had one or more children with special educational needs. Eighteen percent of respondents had one or more children entitled to Free School Meals. English was the first language for 96.2% of respondents.

Parents' employment is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Current employment status of the survey respondents (N = 2,484).

Currently working from home	35.7%
An essential worker/key worker	23.1%
Not working at present due to COVID-19 (e.g. furloughed, made redundant, self-employed, self-isolating)	20.7%
Not working for other reasons	19.7%

At the time of the survey, the majority of parents (58.6%) had not taken unpaid leave from work to care for their child/ren, 30.3% indicated they might need to in the future, 5.1% had taken leave of more than a month, 3.7% had taken leave of 1–4 weeks, and 2.3% of less than one week. Of those who were not working due to COVID-19, 38% had taken leave from work for more than one month.

Communication between home and school

Parents were asked a range of questions about initial contact and information from schools, the resources and guidance they received to support their child's learning and any ongoing contact with the school and individual teachers. It is evident from the findings that the information provided and the ongoing home-school communication varied from school to school (and also within schools depending on specific teachers and year groups).

At the time of school closures, 81.5% of parents received instruction on how to access online materials and 69.2% received guidance on how to use the learning material provided by the school (Figure 1). Communication both with the school and with individual teachers continued, for most, on an on-going basis. Over three-quarters (77.5%) of parents received regular updates from the school, whereas 18.0% did not and 4.3% were unsure. The nature of these communications included emails from the principal, school newsletters, appropriate government updates for parents/children, items focussing on pastoral care, information about school transfer tests, and Facebook updates (photographs, videos etc. which in some cases included photographs and videos of what pupils had been up to submitted by their parents).
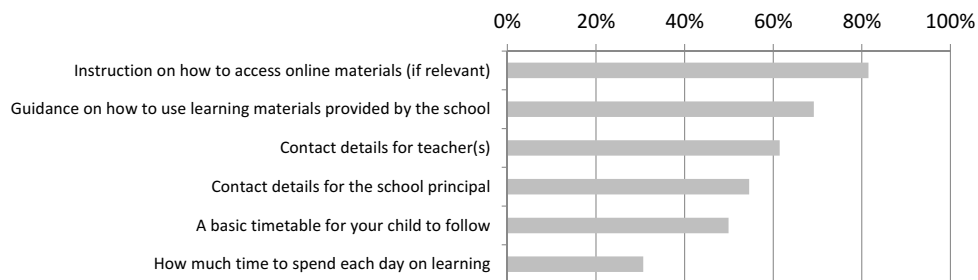

Figure 1. Initial information received from the school at the time of closure (N = 2,390).

Figure 2 shows that most parents considered it important to have contact with their child's teacher, with only 3.5% saying it was not important at all. A majority of respondents (88.5%) stated that they were able to contact their child's teacher if necessary, while 4.6% were unable to and 6.7% were unsure. Different communication channels were used by schools and teachers, including: Seesaw, ClassDojo, Google Classrooms, Facebook, Purple Mash, Zoom calls, email, telephone calls and text messages.

Examples of parents initiating contact with teachers included seeking clarification about work that had been sent home, or technical issues in accessing resources. In some cases, parents were seeking additional help with curricular areas (which included Irish language, Literacy/English grammar, and Numeracy/mathematics). Other parents had made contact as they struggled to get their child to focus on schoolwork, adapt schoolwork for a child with SEN, or to discuss other difficulties their child was experiencing.

The open-ended responses gave further insight into these experiences and examples were provided of regular teacher-initiated interaction, often through an online app.

- "*Videos uploaded on Seesaw. Also allowed pupil interaction and ability to ask questions.*"
- "*Daily contact through app.*"
- "*ClassDojo app – the teacher is in contact daily with tasks and support. I can contact the teacher directly through that.*"
- "*School have been fabulous. Using Dojo, teacher has directed and supported learning. I'm more of an auxiliary support.*"
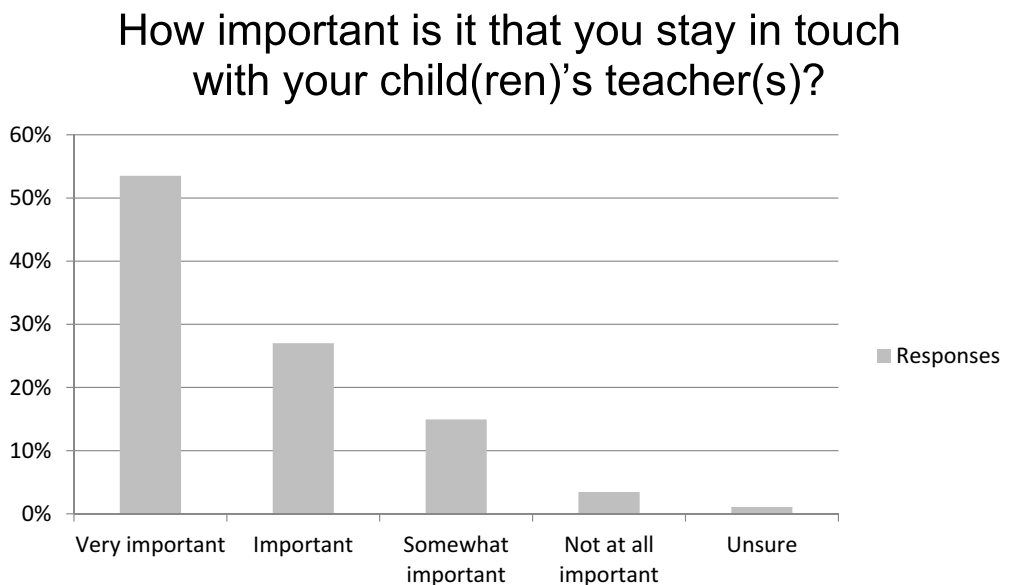- "*Additional Zoom sessions and Facebook interaction.*"

Figure 2. Importance to parents of maintaining contact with their child's teacher.

- "*Facebook live assemblies, and videos through the school Seesaw app.*"

Other parents, who were more likely to receive home packs of resources for their children, were less likely to have consistent communication with teachers.

- "*We received packs of work for kids to do at their own pace.*"
- "*We received a photocopied 'pack' of resources for each child. Information of some online websites and advice on how we could contact staff if necessary.*"
- "*A pack with reading book, comprehension books and some maths worksheets.*"
- "*Just a pack of work, nothing else.*"
- "*A list of websites to visit & 120 pages of random worksheets.*"

At the other end of the scale, some parents felt they had received very little guidance from schools and that communication with teachers was often parent-initiated.

- "*Very little initial contact with primary school. Some confusing and basic pointers on school website, but after some pressure from parents they supplied home learning packs.*"
- "*Nothing.*"
- "*Poor quality print outs with limited guidance from school.*"
- "*No educational resources provided by school. A text message was sent to all parents from the headteacher simply saying that the school would be closed.*"
- "*No contact with any teacher available and if not for the parents setting up a WhatsApp group to help each other there's no support.*"
- "*Nothing except we are closing and you will get a pack from the school, which we did do, but the pack wasn't in an accessible format for our child therefore we had to try and produce materials ourselves.*"

This last comment also reflects the challenges that parents of children with differing or special needs had where a "one size fits all" approach was applied to the provision of information and resources.

It was also clear that both parents and schools had very different expectations about how learning should proceed during lockdown. Some parents had received supportive communications from school that emphasised they should not put themselves or their children under pressure with home-schooling:

> We have received lovely communication from headmaster of my daughter's school, emphasising the importance of mental health, not to worry if not everything gets completed, not to be hard on ourselves as parents— and that we are parents, not teachers.

There were other examples where parents felt that learning should be more directed and supervised by schools, particularly when they compared their situation to those of parents who had children attending schools elsewhere:

> Quite disappointed as most primary school use Seesaw or something but we were just given packs and the work isn't being sent back.

Learning from home

Further questions about parents' experiences of supporting their child's learning offered valuable insights into their familiarity with the primary curriculum (Figure 3) and levels of confidence in supporting learning (Figure 4).
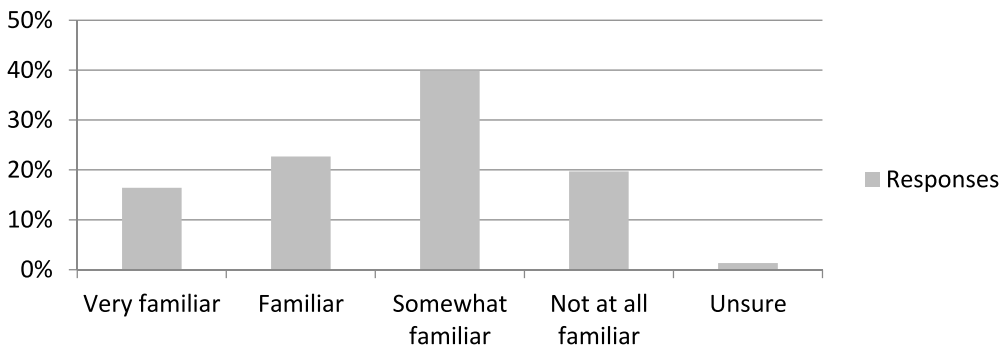
Figure 3. Parents' familiarity with the NI Primary Curriculum (N = 2,504).
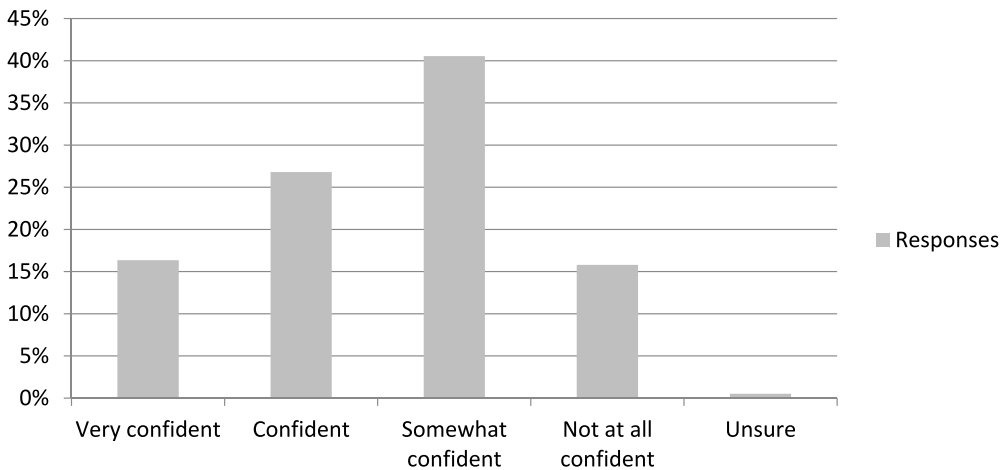

Figure 4. Parents' confidence in supervising their child's learning at home during school closures (N = 2,501).

While parental levels of confidence varied across the different curricular areas, overall parents were most confident about supporting their child in Physical Education and least confident about supporting their learning in Religious Education (Table 2).

Parents were also asked about the various resources they used to help them with their child's learning, some of which would have been provided or recommended by the school, and others they would have created or encountered themselves (Table 3).

In the open-ended responses to this question, there was variance in terms of parental investment – both in terms of financial investment and in giving time and creative energy to engaging children in a range of play-based learning activities. A number of respondents referred to the cost of purchasing workbooks and printing material whilst others described creative and play-based activities including baking/cooking, gardening, treasure/scavenger hunts, nature walks, crafts and painting, jigsaws and boardgames.

Maintaining contact with their child's teacher was clearly important to parents; over two-thirds reported providing feedback on their child's progress, and for approximately one-third there was some teacher involvement. A structured approach to home learning was important and 72.3% had a set time each day for schoolwork, whilst 27.7% did not. For the majority of children, the time spent on schoolwork each day was between 1–3 hours, and less than 2% of parents reported that their child spent no time on this.

Wider support

Parents were also asked about use of social media by the school and among parents themselves. Just over half (51.4%) were a member of a parents' social media group. In terms of parent-parent contact, there were mixed responses on how this was used (Table 4).

Table 2. Parents' confidence of supervising learning in specific curricular areas (N = 2,487).

	Very confident	Confident	Somewhat confident	Not at all confident	Unsure	Weighted total
Physical Education	25.3%	39.9%	27.1%	7.4%	0.3%	2.2
Numeracy	23.5%	33.4%	31.5%	11.0%	0.6%	2.3
Language and Literacy	19.8%	33.2%	35.9%	10.5%	0.5%	2.4
World Around Us	19.6%	33.7%	34.4%	11.1%	1.2%	2.4
Personal Development and Mutual Understanding	19.2%	34.0%	33.0%	12.1%	1.6%	2.4
The Arts (incl. Music, Art, Drama)	17.3%	28.8%	31.3%	21.6%	1.0%	2.6
Religious Education	17.8%	27.3%	20.3%	20.9%	3.8%	2.7

Table 3. Resources used by parents (N = 2,399).

Resources provided by the school	89.8%
Online videos, activities and websites	71.2%
Other printable activities/worksheets	57.1%
Apps	55.6%
Resources created by themselves	38.6%
Online resources, videos, activities provided by local organisations in Northern Ireland (e.g. libraries, museums)	33.0%
Television programmes	25.8%
Not using any resources as their preference is for child to learn through play	2.2%

Table 4. How important to you are each of the following for staying in touch with other parents? (N = 2,357).

	Very important	Important	Somewhat important	Not at all important	Unsure
Being able to chat to other parents generally	15.2%	23.9%	37.5%	21.5%	1.9%
Advice on my child/ren's learning	23.4%	25.8%	26.1%	23.0%	1.7%
Suggestions for online resources/activities	21.3%	30.7%	30.5%	15.4%	2.1%
Sharing concerns around child/ren's mental well-being	27.0%	28.5%	21.3%	20.4%	2.8%
Sharing concerns around child/ren's physical well-being	21.9%	25.8%	22.3%	26.9%	3.1%

Combining Very Important and Important responses showed that sharing concerns around child/ren's mental well-being was of greatest importance in terms of staying in touch with other parents.

Main challenges: "he just doesn't want to do it as home isn't school"

What clearly emerged from the survey responses was that parents found the period of school closures and primary responsibility for supporting their child/ren's learning a challenging experience (Figure 5).

Parents typically experienced a range of difficulties, with the main challenge being keeping their child/ren focused on schoolwork (Table 5).

More than 500 parents provided open-ended responses in relation to the *Other* category, where additional difficulties emerged. Some parents highlighted the emotional struggles their child was experiencing, while for others it was the expectations and difficulty of parenting, schooling and working all at the same time as the quotes below illustrate.

Have you experienced any difficulties with your child(ren)'s learning from home during this period?
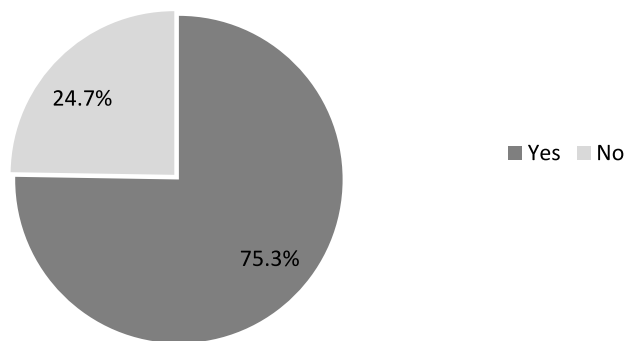

Figure 5. Whether parents had experienced difficulties.

Table 5. Difficulties experienced by parents (N = 1,831).

Keeping my child(ren)'s attention	78.5%
Sticking to a timetable/routine	48.1%
Getting schoolwork done while caring for other child(ren)	47.0%
My child hasn't understood the subject content	29.8%
Completing the subject content in a reasonable time	24.5%
Lack of resources	13.6%
I haven't understood the subject content	13.3%
No or poor Internet access	8.6%
Other	30.9%

> I am not a teacher … I am a nurse, my husband is a key worker and he has health problems. We were refused a key workers child place at the school as my husband was working from home and became ill. We also have a 16 month old. It's been a struggle and stressful time.

> I am working full-time!! I am a single parent. So now I have to work, cook, clean, parent and teach AT. THE. SAME. TIME.

Not only was it a struggle to balance work, home life and schooling but lockdown also highlighted the unequal access to resources such as printers and digital technology necessary to support home schooling:

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

> Not enough iPads to share amongst children. No quiet space in house as husband working from home too. No table space for all to work so have staggered times.

The separation from friends and teachers and resulting lack of social interaction for children was also noted by parents. In some instances this impacted on the emotional wellbeing of children:

> At times it can be quite overwhelming for my child. We take time away from work and let him take it at his own pace he is missing his friends as well as the social interactions with all the school staff.

> Children having emotional meltdowns as this is not school. Missing their teachers, their classrooms, their friends. Dealing with big emotions and the worry they will not go back to school, when they will go back to school. Not finishing their current year. Worried they will be behind or have to repeat work. The list is endless and no two days are the same. They look to us for answers and we don't often have any.

It was clear that the challenges were particularly acute for parents of children who had special educational needs.

> My daughter's ASD has caused problems for her which can make it very hard to teach her and my other child.

> Autistic children don't understand why schoolwork is being done at home. It's called schoolwork because it's meant to be done at school. Literal interpretation! Complete meltdowns and refusal to put pen to paper. Not going to force my child if it makes them so distressed.

Parents of children with SEN were more likely to experience difficulties in all aspects of supporting their children's learning. Most notably, parents of children with SEN were more likely to struggle with sticking to a timetable/routine, keeping their child's attention, their child's understanding of the subject area and getting work done while caring for other children.

Just over three quarters (76.8%) of all parents indicated they had experienced difficulties in organising their own work while supporting their child's learning, with the key challenges being interruptions to work, struggling to get their own work completed, and organising their work schedule. In the open-ended responses parents referred to the problems of "juggling" parenting, their work and schoolwork, with many stating that there simply were "not enough hours in the day": *"You either ignore your work or ignore your children – really hard to juggle both"*.

> I am exhausted by balancing the basic needs of my family, a very difficult job during a global pandemic with the poor support I have received from the educational system.

> I'm a teacher myself, teaching another 31 primary school children online through Google Classroom and with a young toddler at home. The situation is extremely difficult, my child who is learning online also, at times doesn't get the support needed because of the pressures associated with online teaching: time spent preparing lessons, marking and throughout the day answering queries from parents and children.

The survey also asked parents about how difficult they had found specific situations during this period (Table 6). The responses demonstrate the challenges faced by working parents in terms of balancing caring for their child/ren and their work responsibilities. Parents also found it difficult to keep their child/ren entertained and there was also a clear impact on parents' physical and mental well-being, with two-thirds responding that they had found looking after their own physical and mental well-being very difficult, difficult or somewhat difficult.

Free school meal entitlement (FSME) was used as a proxy of deprivation among families participating in the survey, and statistical tests were run to see how the experiences of parents with children entitled to FSM differed from those whose children were not entitled to FSM. These results underlined the existing digital divide across families, with parents whose children were entitled to FSM more likely (9.7%) to struggle with

Table 6. How difficult have each of the following been for you?

	Very difficult	Difficult	Somewhat difficult	Not at all difficult	Unsure
Juggling caring for my child(ren) with work	23.6%	17.1%	21.8%	30.2%	7.3%
Keeping my children Entertained	11.6%	17.8%	41.1%	29.4%	0.1%
Managing limited opportunities for outdoor activity	10.7%	18.1%	28.5%	42.7%	0.1%
Managing my own physical well-being	10.1%	17.8%	35.9%	35.8%	0.5%
Managing my own mental well-being	9.8%	17.2%	38.6%	33.7%	0.7%
Managing social isolation	8.4%	18.1%	37.9%	35.4%	0.2%
Managing household budgets	6.8%	13.4%	28.4%	50.8%	0.7%
Answering my child(ren)'s questions on COVID-19	3.4%	8.3%	27.8%	59.9%	0.6%
Keeping my child(ren) safe and healthy	2.3%	5.0%	16.8%	75.6%	0.3%

internet access that other parents (5.6%), as well as being less likely (59.3%) to use online videos, activities and websites to support learning than other parents (70.0%) and less likely (46.2%) to use printable activities that other parents (56.5%). Parents of children with FSM were also more likely to experience difficulty in managing their own mental wellbeing and physical wellbeing.

Overall perspectives

In order to gain a better understanding of how parents viewed their role regarding their child/ren's education during school closures, a series of Likert-style questions were included towards the end of the survey (Table 7).

Survey respondents were also asked whether they had found aspects of the period of school closures beneficial in terms of their relationship with their child/ren and their child/ren's education (Table 8).

Finally, parents were asked to sum up their experiences of supporting their child/ren's learning at home during school closures in three words (see Figure 6). Although a mix of both positive and negative sentiments were expressed, the top two words used by parents were "challenging" (21%) and "stressful" (16%).

Discussion

The findings of this study reflect other similar evaluations of parents' experiences during the pandemic. A large-scale study by Thorell et al. (2020) examined parental experiences across seven European countries, with comparable experiences reported across regions.

Table 7. Parents' overall perspectives on how to support their child/ren's learning.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I think my role is to support my child(ren) as best I can in whatever way he/she/they needs.	76.4%	21.6%	1.6%	0.1%	0.2%
I think my role is to teach my child(ren) as much as possible during this period.	21.8%	30.6%	24.1%	19.0%	4.6%
Learning through play is more important than formal schoolwork during this period.	11.8%	26.6%	45.3%	15.0%	1.2%
Helping my child(ren) with their education at this time is not a priority for me.	3.6%	8.1%	16.2%	44.8%	27.2%

Table 8. Whether parents found aspects of being at home more with their children beneficial.

	Very beneficial	Beneficial	Somewhat beneficial	Not at all beneficial	Unsure
Enjoying new activities with my child(ren)	49.4%	35.2%	11.4%	3.0%	1.0%
Talking and listening with my child(ren)	49.3%	39.0%	10.1%	1.1%	0.4%
Finding out new things about my child(ren)	48.1%	33.3%	13.1%	3.3%	2.3%
Seeing how my child(ren) has adapted to a new routine	45.3%	33.6%	13.7%	5.8%	1.6%
Learning together	42.2%	38.0%	14.9%	3.7%	1.2%

Figure 6. Word cloud showing the main words parents used to describe their overall experience.

While there were pockets of positive experiences in home learning, most parents noted that it had led to increased levels of stress, worry and social isolation. Insufficient support from schools and limited contact with teachers was a prevalent issue, with the lowest levels of teacher contact being reported in the UK and Germany. In the UK, a NFER study (Lucas et al., 2020) found that just over half (56%) of parents of primary school children in England engaged with their children's home learning. This report noted lower levels of engagement with remote learning in areas of higher deprivation, raising concerns about limited access to IT or space for children to study at home. Similar to what was found among families in Northern Ireland, their study unveiled differences in parents' abilities and resources to support learning and how this can lead to a widening range of educational inequalities.

The findings presented in this paper have provided valuable insights into the experiences of both parents and children (as reported by their parents/carers), revealing inconsistences in levels of home-school communication and levels of engagement in learning across and within schools, as well as showing challenges and highlighting educational inequities among families from differing socio-economic backgrounds. Careful reflection on these findings can help to inform decisions going forward, both in the immediate return to normal schooling but also in developing longer-term strategies for strengthening liaison between home, school and communities. Parents' experiences highlight where communication and knowledge about the primary curriculum and how to support their child's learning is currently lacking, and how more effective communication strategies could be implemented to improve the overall learning experience for children. It is clear that meaningful school/parent relationships are an integral part of the learning experience and can help to improve pupil engagement and minimise the widening of educational inequities (Lucas et al., 2020). As noted by Richmond et al. (2020, p. 503), the pandemic "is affording the opportunity for teachers and teacher educators to re-gather themselves around homes and communities and to address the needs and challenges of students". Epstein's framework offers a valuable lens through which to

interpret the significance of the experiences and challenges discussed in this paper, and can help to offer recommendations for parents, schools and policymakers going forward. Table 9 provides an overview of the five spheres of influence relevant to this study, how each sphere has been at work during the period of remote learning and how findings can help to pinpoint areas of future development.

While all five types of involvement were present in the findings, parents' experiences related most significantly to *parenting, learning from home* and *communicating*. Regarding *parenting*, findings provided an insight into the multiple challenges arising in the home learning environment, including space limitations, unequal access to the internet and online technology and providing for the learning needs of other children. Findings related to *learning from home* underlined the need to address the digital divide, both so that pupils would have equal access to learning resources and so that digital technology could be used as a way of broadening and enhancing communication methods between home and school. The varying levels of curriculum knowledge and confidence in supporting learning shows the need for improved information-sharing between school and home, as well as creating opportunities for parents to be involved in curriculum planning. Some parents criticised teachers for setting generic learning tasks, rather than taking into account the needs of individual pupils, especially those with SEN. This unprecedented turn in education provision has, perhaps more than ever before, shone a light on the importance of effective home-school *communication*. This study revealed varying levels of communication between home and school, with the emphasis being on school to home communication rather than developing two-way school/home communications. It has also shown the potential of online technology to improve communication methods, but again raises the issue of the digital divide which exists between households.

There is a danger of over-generalising tables like Table 9 and indeed, this is a criticism which has already been levelled at Epstein's framework. Recognising that there are many socio-economic and cultural differences between families which affect levels of parental involvement, Hamlin and Flessa (2018) underline the need for a more nuanced, contextually located typology. The differing family environments, socio-economic backgrounds and distinct needs of children presented in our study also make clear that a generic response to families and pupils following the pandemic will not work. Table 9 is therefore not intended to be a definitive approach to be used by schools but rather serves to show that the foundational elements of Epstein's framework were effective in guiding this study and in providing a valuable lens to interpret the significance of parents' experiences during this pandemic, the nature of their involvement in home learning and their level of communication with schools and teachers. Epstein's framework was first developed in the early 1990s and has since undergone revisions, with updated definitions of terms and new practical examples of how to work in partnership (the latest being Epstein, 2019). Table 9 therefore offers further practical examples in response to a unique period of education provision that can be used by educators when considering both short-term and long-term strategies for strengthening partnership and communication across the differing spheres of influence.

Table 9. Alignment of study findings with Epstein's framework.

Type	Epstein's definition	Issues identified in survey	Going forward
Parenting	*Help families establish home environments to support children as students*	• Inequality of resources • Lack of access to ICT • Difficulty balancing work and home learning • Difficulty keeping attention of children • Demands of looking after other children	• Address existing inequalities related to internet and IT access • Schools should provide information about impact of pandemic on education and how to work through it • Video calls with parents • Enable families to share information about their culture, background, children's talents and needs
Learning at home	*Provide information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning*	• Varying knowledge of curriculum • Varying levels of confidence in supporting home learning • Lack of ICT skills to use online apps and resources • Set tasks were often generalised – not specific to SEN pupils • Children feeling isolated – may miss friends	• Provide information about curriculum • Provide information on using online resources and apps • More opportunities for virtual home learning – maximise synchronous learning opportunities • Provide opportunities for pupils to interact online in more informal, social ways
Communicating	*Design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programmes and their children's progress*	• Varying levels of communication, ranging from non-existent to daily communication with teachers • Emphasis on school to home communication rather than developing two-way school home communications	• Consider lack of equal access to internet/devices when deciding communication • Consider EAL parents, literacy levels or other accessibility e.g. large type • Provide opportunities for pupil-parent-teacher communication.
Collaborating with the community	*Identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programmes, family practices and student learning and development*	• Online resources/activities provided by libraries/museums • Benefit of contact with other parents • High levels of social isolation	• Information for pupils and families on community health, cultural, recreational, social support, and other programmes or services • Integrating/including locally relevant content for pupil learning
Decision-making	*Include parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives*	• Parents are most equipped to discuss experience of home learning and provide feedback • Parents can provide insights into challenges faced by pupils (outside of learning) so that schools can prepare to support them	• Parental involvement in decision making, not just about recovery phase but longer-term decisions about curriculum and learning • Include parents from all racial, ethnic, socioeconomic and other groups in the school • Include pupils and parents in decision-making groups • Schools should evaluate or collect feedback from home learning experience

Conclusions

Remote learning for pupils during school closures can only be effective where there is appropriate work set for pupils, robust two-way school-home communications, support within the home, access to devices and the Internet (and the skills to use them), and other conditions in the home which are conducive to learning. It is very difficult, possibly unrealistic, to have all of these requisites in place. However, the evidence presented here serves to highlight areas which are within the control of schools and policy-makers which can improve the remote learning situation for families.

Drawing on the framework provided by Epstein, this study highlighted in particular the variance in terms of support from schools that pupils and parents received. There is clearly a need for a more consistent approach where pupils have equity in terms of the support, guidance and resources provided. This may require intervention at a higher level, for example, from government, managing authorities or other key statutory educational bodies and the development of a template or structure setting out requirements for all schools to follow. It is therefore intended that the research and conclusions reported here will help shape responses to sustained school closures should similar emergencies arise in the future and also highlight the interventions now needed to support pupils and families impacted by the recent period of school closures: "Given the strong association between learners' academic achievement and parental involvement, it is essential to understand home and school collaboration dynamics during remote learning" (Raguindin et al., 2021, p. 435).

The period of school closures during the first lockdown led to a deepening of inequities. There are two important responses that need to be made for this. Firstly, interventions and mechanisms that provide an opportunity for these young people to gain the ground that they missed, and secondly much more scaffolding and support is required in the future for similar periods of school closures for these pupils and their parents.

In particular, the research here indicates that there are serious challenges relating to:

- access to ICT (devices and the Internet) and the skills to make effective use of ICT for learning;
- how working parents can also take responsibility for supporting their child/ren's remote schooling;
- the impact of COVID-19 and school closures on the emotional and psychological needs of children; and
- the impact of school closures on children with special educational needs.

Unplanned closures and expectations placed on school communities affected the nature, extent and quality of preparation for home learning, and some schools responded more effectively than others. Findings clearly reveal that, overall, parents welcomed and valued guidance and support provided by schools during lockdown. Survey results further suggest that flexible and creative teacher/principal communication with parents/learners provided a much-needed point of educational stability and reassurance. Bitesize overviews of curriculum areas, virtual assemblies, online teaching segments and virtual opportunities for home-school interaction were all identified by parents as valuable supplementary resources in addition to curriculum

content. It was also clear, however, that many children struggled to follow a routine timetable at home and missed regular engagement with their classmates. Further development of good practice could seek to maximise synchronous learning opportunities, for example, online collaboration software such as video conferencing tools, providing children with the ability to interact with others in the class and with their teacher. An overall framework of advice and training for all parents should be provided centrally by the statutory authorities rather than being the responsibility of individual schools who could, instead, supplement this guidance with specific tailored support appropriate to their learners. Likewise, systematic provision of ICT training and online pedagogy needs to be provided for teachers in recognition of the fact that they are also operating in an unfamiliar terrain.

In conclusion, what is clear is that schools need to be responsive to the needs of their school community – there is no one size fits all approach and a blended approach with adequate support, instruction and communication will be of greatest benefit. The value of strong two-way communications between school and home cannot be underestimated. This research has shown that home-school relationships are multi-faceted and the responsibility for engagement and implantation lies with a range of stakeholders. We would also call on the statutory bodies responsible for education provision to establish minimum levels of engagement to ensure schools are providing adequate content, support and interaction to pupils and their parents/carers. It is unfair on parents to shift the responsibility for their children's learning to them when prior to school closures parent engagement and involvement in learning is often viewed as peripheral from a school perspective. Relationships need to be developed, strengthened, and sustained in good times and bad. Epstein herself leads a US project, the "National Network of Partnership Schools", and as Epstein et al. (2021) state, the knowledge gained from the demands of the period of COVID-19 school closures, should be used now to strengthen school, family and community partnerships. We hope these findings are relevant and useful for parents, teachers and principals, school governors, statutory education bodies as well as school support bodies and researchers.

Notes

1. https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-enrolments-northern-ireland-summary-data.
2. https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/revised%203rd%20March%202020%20-%20Annual%20enrolments%20at%20schools%20and%20in%20pre-school%20.pdf.
3. https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/ministers-announce-extension-definition-key-workers-access-childcare-0.
4. See: https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/schools-open-supervised-learning-key-workers-children-and-vulnerable-children-1-april-2020.
5. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-51950900.
6. https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse.
7. https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/campaigns/helping-hand.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [UO'C], upon reasonable request. https://www.ulster.ac.uk/coronavirus/research/impact/understanding-parents-experiences-of-home-schooling-in-northern-ireland

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