

**Department of Education NI
Research Project**

**Findings from the consultation exercise with
parent focus groups**

**Submitted to the Department of Education NI
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By the Parenting Forum [NI]**

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Context and rationale

The Department of Education has set up a Research Project which is part of the on going Education Strategy. The baseline research being undertaken will feed into the Education Strategy.

An important aspect of the Research Project initiative is to speak to people throughout Northern Ireland and ask for their views about what would encourage children and young people to remain life long learners through educational achievement.

In this context the Parenting Forum NI was approached to carry out a consultation exercise with parents. Consultation with parents is an integral part of the work of the Parenting Forum [NI] and, as such, the organisation has developed effective methodology to carry out such consultations. To facilitate the consultation process a short programme was designed lasting approximately 2 hours for use with a number of parent focus groups throughout Northern Ireland.

Whilst research indicates that the consequences of disengaging from education may persist into adult life, and thus effect what value base is given by parents towards their child's education there is also evidence of the benefits to children when entering into life long learning through educational achievements. This consultation therefore serves to make a difference to children and young people on the subject of education and becoming life long learners by listening to the views of parents in order to impact on government policy in relation to the education system in Northern Ireland.

The Consultation Process and Methodology

In February 2006 the Parenting Forum [NI] commenced the task of carrying out a consultation exercise with parents on behalf of the Department of Education Northern Ireland. The Parenting Forum has considerable experience in carrying out such exercises: it has contact with a network of parents and parent support groups throughout Northern Ireland on a daily basis and is well placed to carry out real and meaningful consultations with parents within a tight time frame. The consultation method chosen was focus groups.

The Parenting Forum NI used their own internal facilitator for the focus groups. Consultation with parents requires highly skilled and experienced facilitators who are capable of working sensitively with diverse groups and the facilitator was chosen accordingly. The majority of focus group were well attended and parents clearly valued the opportunity to be consulted on issues concerning them with regards to education and how to encourage children to be life long learners and readily contributed their views and their experiences.

A consultation pack was designed to ensure a uniform approach across all the focus groups in collecting and collating the views of parents.

The pack also included information for parents on the purpose of the Department of Education NI consultation and how the focus groups fit in with the overall work of the research. User friendly materials were designed in order to present to parents the key areas on which their views were being sought. Focus groups were chosen as the main data gathering method because they brought parents together in a way that allowed them to share their views and identify issues both of individual and common concern with effective use of the resources available. One group were consulted through a questionnaire format on a one to one basis with facilitator and participating parent. Existing support groups/networks were approached with a view to becoming involved. The Parenting Forum was aware at the outset of the need to ensure that a diverse group of parents was consulted and therefore parents were consulted from differing socio- economic backgrounds.

3 focus groups were set up and 1 group was available for a questionnaire style consultation. Quantitative information was collected from the focus group parents and participating questionnaire parents. 27 parents were consulted and these parents cared for a total of 83 children. Focus groups were held at times that would most suit the parents and transport and childcare costs were met to ensure accessibility.

The groups which proceeded were located as follows:

- Craigavon
- Belfast x 2
- Downpatrick

The facilitator compiled a report based on the 4 exercises carried out. The responses were compiled into this report which presents the views of parents both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Parent focus groups: the Findings

Survey Information Sheet is designed to enquire about family background and the value placed on education

From the 27 participating parents: 3 were Male and 24 were Females

Children in total cared for: 83

With a combination of: 41 males and 43 female children in total

For the number of parents at home: 9 are lone parents and 18 from a two parent family

The age of which participating parents became parents ranged from 16 to 38 years of age

13 parents indicated that they were unable to complete their education by gaining qualifications

Reasons supplied as to why education ended prematurely are as follows:

- Left school due to pregnancy completed one GCSE
- I left school at 14
- No interest in school left in 4th Year
- Left school at 15, I was told I was not doing any exams
- I left school at 16 because I was needed to bring in a wage to help my parents
- School was not for me I left as soon as possible
- Had to help mum with household money when I was 15

The emerging theme for this grouping is that school either no longer benefited or interested them or due to family circumstances there was a requirement to cease their education

14 parents stated that they did complete their education. This stage of completion varied from G.C.S.E.'s or equivalent, then 'A' levels through to third level education

Responses from parents who completed education at around the age of 16 were as follows:

- To earn an income for family I finished school at 16
 - Finished at G.C.S.E. level, got employment suitable at time
 - Went to college to study Community Care for one year at 16
 - Left in 5th year because all my friends where leaving and I went on to a Y.T.P
 - Age 16, got a job in an office. There wasn't further education at that time
- The common theme for parents choosing to complete their education at around the age of 16 was to gain employment

Responses from parents who continued education to the 'A' level or equivalent stage stated:

- After secondary school went into training as a nurse

- After college – Mum died, and I couldn't cope with diploma
- I left school at the age of 18 because I had a job, I did not feel that further education was for me
- My parents encouraged me to stay at school because it was difficult to get a job without qualification in the 1960's

Parents having secured a further qualification were now entering into employment

Only 1 parent completed their original schooling and education after third level education

7 parents indicated that they have not gone back into Education

Of the 20 parents who indicated that they have chosen to continue their education the following choices are as follows:

- Maths
- To try and get some education I obtained a G.C.S.E. in English
- Went back to night classes for various subjects – my self esteem improved when I knew that I could do this
- Computer classes, to help myself and to be able to help children with school work
- First Aid Course, also for 'Rainbows Group' I've completed course on 'dealing with children'
- Courses through local women's group
- Parent Support Programme covering, Computers, English, Maths, Cooking, and First Aid. In addition College of Music studying Piano
- Studied N.V.Q. Level 3 in Childcare and Education – B.E.L.B. funded this course which enabled me to gain qualified status in my job
- Open University Courses (Openings). Completed a nail technician's course. My children are at school and I am looking to gain employment
- Left teaching to raise my family went back and did my degree. Took my Advance Certificate in Education, followed by Institute of Leadership and Management, a counselling course (UU)
- Education with Education Management to gain more understanding

The key theme emerging from parents for re-entering learning are for being better equipped to support their children's school work and for reaching personal goals and to raise their self-esteem

Exercise 1

This exercise is designed to find out what parents experience of school and education are from firstly a positive experience then to the negatives of school and thus education

Positive Experiences Responses:

- I had an enjoyable time because I had an interest in what I was studying
- Quite good both primary and secondary school, disadvantage was secondary school was quite a large school and I felt quite lost at times
- I liked school because it helps you to get along in later life
- I went to school to be with my friends and go to the after school clubs. Secondary school had its ups and downs
- There wasn't the same pressure as now. I loved hockey and was on the team for which I received a lot of support
- I enjoyed learning and I liked reading and writing
- Making friends in Primary school who I am still friends with today
- Primary School was very small with only six pupils, after this I went to Secondary school which I didn't like due to the size. However I did enjoy going to further education college
- My primary school was local – not far from home. I liked poetry and participating in sports. There was more freedom in 6th and 7th form and I was pushed to do my best
- Playtime, school trips and having a good time
- I found peace at school, it provided time away from home

The key theme emerging from parents is that the social aspect of their school life was one of the main reasons for enjoying school with their friends being a top priority

Negative Experiences Responses:

- School was not that good, never really went to school that much only to a training school
- There were twelve of us in our family and as one of the youngest children I was never made to go to school, so I just didn't go to school that much
- For very little causes some teachers would use the cane
- I was bullied because of low confidence
- School dinners
- I went into school with nothing and came out with nothing. It was a horrible experience with bad discipline and a lack of care for a child's welfare
- No interest, would rather mess about with friends
- At secondary school I was placed in a low class academically and at that time there were certain things you were not allowed to do i.e. school trips
- P.E. in secondary school
- Detention, competitive behaviour in class, bullies, homework

- Never socialised as education took over. I felt a failure when I didn't pass 11+. Teacher told my Mum that I would never pass an exam in P7
- Nuns were very hard on children. I found it difficult to be closed in all day in this very strict environment. For discipline straps and rulers were used and I didn't like that
- Not all the time but on occasion I was made to feel inadequate in maths by both the pupils and teacher
- Pressure in secondary school with the structured timetable and exams
- Spent primary school feeling terrified and I never fully recovered

The emerging theme is a lack of interest in schooling, which came about through a strong overbearing teaching environment and parents not having their individual needs met

Responses to the question 'How did negative experiences impact on your education?'

- School was off putting but I want to get back into education now
- I had no inclination to study, why bother?
- I loved school and it didn't stop me going but when asked the question 'Are you stupid?' when learning maths I then lost interest and didn't learn about maths
- The attitude of teachers affected my learning at the convent grammar School. However when I went to Tech I studied four G.C.E's in one year because no one chased you for work you had to want to do it. This style of learning suited me best.
- I believe that education is a means to provide a form of social control
- I was forced to go to secondary school
- My experience of school was an overbearing strict environment when a young child I would hold on to school railings and refuse to let go because I just didn't want to go into school
- After 5th year my experiences improved because I feel the relationship changed between teachers and pupils. Children could now feel more able to speak to their teachers and ask about what they didn't fully understand
- I would have to question how much is teaching and much is a happy coincidence because you have a bright child?

The theme emerging is that school can be off putting particularly if made to feel inadequate by teacher which can result in a loss of sustained interest and desire to learn

Responses to the question 'If you were to score the importance of education to success in life, where 10 was top and 0 was bottom, what score would you give and why?

Below are the ratings received with a selection of responses:

2 parent gave the score 0

- Because of their own painful school experiences
- Left school due to pregnancy completed one GCSE

1 parent chose the score of 5

- I am not sure about the direction of education and would question if the National Curriculum is the best model

1 parent gave the score 6

(no response provided as to why this score was selected)

6 parent gave the score 7

- Although education is essential in life for basics, I feel life experiences are a better basis. Nothing in education prepares you for the outside world. Experience teaches you a lot
- Education today appears to be all about a lack of funding and the need for parents to support school financially

11 parents chose the score of 8

- I liked school
- Common sense tells you that education is part of success in life

6 parents chose the score of 10

- I understand the importance of supporting my children in their education
- Nowadays you need all the qualifications you can get to gain a good job
- Basic learning gets you a better view on life for a better job prospect

23 parents scored 7 or higher in ranking for the importance of education to success. Fixing the score came easily but the reasons behind why making this choice were not so apparent. The main reason quoted and agreed upon was 'that common sense tells you that education is part of success in life'

The final section of Exercise 1 asked the question 'Do you think your experiences at school could have an effect on how your child views school? The following responses are documented:

- I want a better education for my kids and ensure that they get all the help they require
- I sailed through school as have my girls however my son has ADHD so has experienced difficulties regardless of how I view school and provide support to him
- I encourage my children, in addition school provided support to myself and my children

- Yes, keep showing my kids a positive attitude towards education and it's importance
- My views of my schooling I do not involve my children in. I base things on what life is like now and all the opportunities that are open to them which obviously would not have been available for me when I was at school
- If your not interested in your children's school work they will not be either
- If I want the best for my child then his education is at the core. My children are taught that education takes you far
- If you have negative points this will effect your child
- Negative attitudes can be transmitted as can positive ones
- Children are always influenced by anything parents say
- You need to try to get through to your children that they need an education

Overall parents do not want any of their negative experiences of school to effect how their child views school and education. It is acknowledged that school has altered for the better with a learning climate which promotes active hands-on learning for children. One group wanted it to be noted that 'there should be more diverse ways of teaching as every child learns in a different way'

Exercise 2

This exercise is to find out parent's views on what happens at a local level by schools to support a child when they are experiencing difficulties which could be putting them off school and education.

Positive solutions

- Duty of care
- Monthly newsletter
- School policies
- PTA meetings
- Parents offered classes i.e. essential skills
- Support network including: staff, councillors, nurse
- School providing classes for parents
- Special needs schools have training to deal with times when a child presents physical duress
- Extra reading and writing classes provided for children
- Provide praise to child at all relevant times and convey positive news to parents not just when your child is presenting a difficulty
- Letters and phone calls from school keep parents informed, ensure time is taken to talk to child
- Regular communication with scheduled meetings at a convenient time for parents
- School should contact parent and try to work together to get the problem sorted
- Teacher/Parent relationship at my child's school are very good and I am keen to ask my children how their day has been and hopefully gauge from that if they are having any problems and if they are, I will have a quick word with teacher for her views
- When a difficulty arises first you talk to your child's teacher, and the parent advisor and if problem not resolved you would then approach the principal

Negative solutions

- Parents don't get praised for their child's achievements
- 11+ what is going to be provided in its place?
- One particular child's behaviour impacted on class including my son, I offered support and conveyed my concerns to the school. However the situation wasn't resolved for the child presenting behaviour difficulties
- Procedures in place can cause more harm than good
- Training for teachers not in place to deal with special situations
- Teachers should be more informed about clinical illnesses
- Child can feel nothing is going to change and its then in one ear and out the other
- Lack of information provided for making appointments
- When a child has a lot of issues you may not be allocated sufficient time to talk at parent interviews

- Teachers don't always convey relevant information to one another

Exercise 3

This is a handout which parents were requested to complete on an individual basis. The exercise is designed to find out parent's views on what general consultation they currently have had the opportunity to take part in and to document what in the future would help parent's to take part in consultation with the Department of Education

Question 1 on the handout asks 'if as a parent have you ever been consulted by the Department of Education about its policies?'

6 parents replied that 'yes' they had taken part in a consultation

Please note that some of the 6 parents have been consulted via more than one medium of which the following are detailed

- 4 parents had received a postal consultation
- 4 parents had participated over the phone
- 1 parent had taken part in a consultation when out on the street
- 2 parents received a caller to the house for consultation
- 2 parents entered into a school lead
- 2 parents took part in a consultation through a focus group
- 1 parent completed a survey

Question 2 'Do you feel your views are taken on board, and are as important as other stakeholders?'

6 parents considered that 'yes' their views are taken on board and would have an expectation that this would be the case 'after all who knows a child better than the Parent'

6 parents considered that 'no' their views are not really taken on board and 2 parents reported that there is 'too much stigma about coming from working class homes'

Question 3 'Would you like to be consulted in the future about proposed development in education that may affect your child/children?'

Parents do want to be consulted (only 1 parent opted not to be consulted in the future)

A selection of responses are provided

- Every parent has the right to know of any changes both good and bad that will somehow affect their child
- Very important for consultation to be as broad as possible
- This will keep me informed, give me input and benefit my child
- Consultations should be targeted at the groups that are closely affected by issue presented for feedback
- Please be realistic about costings
- Young people 16-18 should be consulted on their education. What they thought was good teaching practise and what wasn't

Question 4 ‘Do you think parents need additional support in having their voice heard and if so, how best do you think this can be provided?’

In response parents who expressed their choice all indicated that ‘yes’ additional support is required to having their voice heard

A selection of responses are provided on how best to provide this

- Parent support programme
- A group of mothers and fathers coming together to discuss school matters
- Through monthly PTA meetings
- Local school
- Parent Groups and discussions with teachers
- Parent support group
- Sometimes the language used is too difficult and needs simplified
- Parents need a strong voice

Question 5 ‘What would help you to be informed and to take part in the future?’

The results of parent’s relevant choices are provided below:

Information Choices	Total for Parent Selection
Newsletter	18
Fact Sheet	9
Booklet in user friendly language	11
Dept. of Education web site	9
Representation by the Parenting Forum	14
Other	2

For the 2 parents who selected other information choices: Radio and T.V. advertisements are mentioned as is a concern raised that there is a danger in group response because it may be dismissed as being orchestrated/manufactured by a particular lobby group e.g. as in Post-Primary Transfer Consultation

Conclusions

The Parenting Forum NI has developed and successfully implemented a methodology for consulting with parents on their views in relation to what would encourage children and young people to remain life long learners through educational achievement. The Research Project set up by the Department of Education NI to be part of the on going Education Strategy has identified the parameters.

The organisation is in a unique position to carry out such consultations because of its links with a huge network of parents and parent support groups throughout Northern Ireland. From the 4 focus groups with parents 27 parents were consulted and of these parents a total of 83 children are cared for. The required mix of parents was met by selecting groups situated in areas of high deprivation e.g. SureStart groups, groups parenting children with special needs and groups both in rural and urban locations

The consultation has provided a range of useful information. The view of parents in areas of deprivation did not seem to differ from those in less deprived areas.

The key themes emerging from the discussion with parents are that:

Friendships and school social life were important positive factors for parents and provided the motivation to be at school

Parents were put off their education when made to feel inadequate and their learning potential became diminished

Regardless of parents experiences of school and education there is a strong desire to support children in their education with an acknowledgment that you need an education to gain employment

Positive support provided by schools is identified by the ability to provide regular communication with parents, and providing a support network and ensuring that parents know who to go to when they have a concern for their child

The Positive Parenting Programme is proving to be very popular with parents who express the benefits of school providing workshops and training on specific areas which provide the opportunity for parents to gain knowledge and confidence in relevant subjects. To allow the community to enter into the school life the results demonstrate positive parental impact by raising self esteem and equipping parents to value and support their child's education

It is suggested that teachers should be more informed about clinical illnesses and have training to deal with special situation i.e. restraining a child when presenting physical distress

Learning opportunities for parents should be provided at a convenient location, if possible the local school in order for parents to feel equipped to support their children's learning and for their own personal achievement

Parents do not in general have the perception that they are valuable stakeholders whose opinions are requested by the Department of Education NI. Further research and promotion will be required to ensure parents can become equal participants

In conclusion the Parenting Forum NI is an independent organisation, which would be well equipped to provide the required mechanism to facilitate and co-ordinate parent support groups and to distribute and signpost information to parents.

