

Stepping Up and Stepping Forward

Learning Insight 3

Covid-19 had a greater impact on learners from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds than their peers; coherent multi-agency work can continue to meet their diverse range of needs



What do we know?

Prior to Covid-19, organisations worked tirelessly to support learners affected by socio-economic disadvantage. In the decade up to 2020, evidence indicated that NI was being successful in closing the attainment gap. In the foreword of the DE commissioned report, [A Fair Start](#) (2021), the authors state rightly that, ‘Despite the significant financial challenges faced by schools over the past ten years or more, the panel is acutely aware of the year-on-year improvements there have been in educational outcomes at level 2 (GCSE or equivalent) and level 3 (A level or equivalent) and the particular success of non-grammar schools in closing the gap between FSME and non-FSME pupils’.

EXPERT PANEL ON EDUCATIONAL UNDERACHIEVEMENT IN NORTHERN IRELAND



In March 2020, the additional disruptions brought by Covid-19 impacted profoundly on the most disadvantaged learners. The pandemic exacerbated poverty levels, bringing about furlough and unemployment, and impacting adversely on people’s emotional health and wellbeing. In education and training, those impacted most by the Covid-19 disruptions include: asylum-seekers; those not in employment, education, or training; prisoners serving time in jails; and children affected adversely by economic poverty and homelessness. The [Department for Communities' latest statistics on homelessness](#) reveal that by the end of August 2021, 3,596 children were living in temporary accommodation, up 48% from January 2019 when the figure was 2,433. In this challenging context, schools remained open for vulnerable children and the children of key workers and special schools stayed open for all of their pupils.



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What have we learned?

Schools and organisations responded creatively to support the most disadvantaged individuals, their families and the wider communities they serve. For example, across education and training, many organisations went the extra mile to meet the needs of learners and their families by visiting homes, offering support and delivering food parcels. Covid-19 brought about particular challenges for the children and young people who attend special schools. In many instances, special schools collaborated effectively with parents and optimised their resources to meet holistically the needs of these vulnerable learners.

Lockdown necessitated online and blended learning which brought significant operational challenges for teachers, tutors and leaders. They responded with great professionalism to the digital challenges at pace pivoting to a new method of delivery almost overnight. Nevertheless the challenges of unfamiliar teaching approaches and, for example, the cessation of practical elements of the curriculum resulted in variable and inconsistent quality and pace of delivery.

Schools and organisations provide learners with opportunities to build friendships, to socialise and to benefit from routines. While all learners were unable to access fully these formative opportunities during lockdown, those experiencing high levels of educational disadvantage felt the impact more keenly. Furthermore, many children and young people did not have the pre-requisite skills to access fully and effectively the remote learning provided. This group includes: newcomer children with language challenges, pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties who require face-to-face teaching and learners in a prison environment whose entry level literacy skills did not prepare them adequately for the demands of remote learning. The provision of digital devices on its own was insufficient to overcome all of the challenges, resulting in significant loss of, or disengagement from, learning. In addition, some parents were unable to support well their child's learning due to reasons which included work demands and their own confidence levels.

Providers had to adapt their provision at pace. For example, there was a prompt response from childcare partnership managers, Health and Social Care Trusts and Sure Start providers to adapt their normal support services and provide practical, online and face-to-face support, tailored to meet the needs of families. Despite the best endeavours of organisations and their success in overcoming many problems, learning experiences for particular children and young people remained tough.

The youth sector was very quick to respond to the need for young people to stay connected, to facilitate the expression of their views and in providing community services, such as, the delivery of essential food items. The youth sector played a key role in helping many young people to stay positive and demonstrate strong community values, minimising the risk to those who may be susceptible to anti-social influences.



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What will help us move forward constructively?

Most educators adapted and responded positively, and often collaboratively, to meeting the needs of the most disadvantaged children and young people. Working collaboratively and pooling resources and expertise can support the increasingly complex and diverse needs of those learners who have been hit hardest by Covid-19.



All children and young people deserve access to a high quality education. Prior to the pandemic, good progress was being made in tackling underachievement and closing the attainment gap between the most and least advantaged learners. In working towards a fairer and more equitable society, the successful implementation of: DE's response to A Fair Start; the Department for the Economy's draft skills strategy, [Skills for a 10X Economy](#); and the [14-19 Transition into Careers Project](#), will be key in reducing inequality and improving opportunities for all learners.

We all share the aim of building a just, inclusive and shared society. We know that we need to find solutions to the disadvantages that affect many of our learners. By remaining committed to tackling disadvantage, we can work towards a more equitable society, even when unforeseen challenges threaten to undermine our aspirations. The benefits of coherent multi-agency support are well-documented including in our own [Evaluation of Full Service Extended Schools and Full Service Community Network](#) report (2013). Providing the wraparound support these learners need is key to addressing the challenges outlined above. We know that practitioners are the main contributors to improving learners' lives and life-chances. They deserve coherent support from all of us, government, multi-disciplinary professional peers, parents, local communities and all other stakeholders contributing our expertise to complement their work. ETI will continue to support learners through working with teachers, tutors and lecturers to disseminate best practice in tackling educational disadvantage and to identify the innovative ways in which all organisations are working to help close the attainment gap.



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