



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Education  
Youth Engagement: My Life and  
Learning in Lockdown Report

Report: NIA 210/17-22



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## “We are the future”

In light of the troubles we have today, I would like to say a few things. As a nation we tried to handle this so well but for this to be handled well, lockdowns had to take place, curfews had to be set, masks had to be worn, most effectively schools had to be closed early and opened late. a lot it being done just to keep us the next generation alive.

Academically it affected and it's still affecting.

31 December 2019, from this day everything changed.

The virus just spread like lava, from continent to continent,

Country to another. The dream of every grown up out there

Is for the next generation to experience their lives, to have a better

Future, for the young ones to be educated.

Covid 19, corona virus, the reason why schools were closed early.

In 2020 everything changed, the school calendar changed. Online Learning had to take place everywhere, but there are some countries out there with economic problems and insufficient resources. Some kids couldn't do online learning because of that. It is better being taught in school some of us need a teacher in front of us,

just for us to understand. COVID AFFECTED OUR LIVES.

Friendships were broken, loneliness, the lockdown affected us Social life. When schools opened a lot of things had changed, it Took weeks for us to catch up. All because of the virus disease we Lost some of our loved ones, parents, teachers. Our hearts are broken. We are trying to keep up with our education for a better tomorrow.

*By: Anesu Mahuni*

*10SPC3 (15 years, 9 months)*

*St. Patrick's College, Dungannon. Co.Tyrone. (Zimbabwe, Africa)*

# Remit, Powers and Membership of the Committee

The Committee for Education is a Statutory Departmental Committee established in accordance with paragraphs 8 and 9 of the Belfast Agreement, Section 29 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and, under Standing Order 48. Statutory Committees have been established to advise and assist the appropriate Minister on the formation of policy in relation to matters within his/her responsibilities. Specifically, the Committee has power to:

- consider and advise on departmental budgets and annual plans in the context of the overall budget allocation;
- consider relevant secondary legislation and take the committee stage of primary legislation;
- call for persons and papers;
- initiate inquiries and make reports; and
- consider and advise on matters brought to the Committee by the Minister for Education.

The Committee has 9 members, including a Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson, and a quorum of 5.

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Mr Chris Lyttle MLA (Chairperson)

Mr Pat Sheehan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Ms Nicola Brogan MLA

Mr Robbie Butler MLA

Mrs Diane Dodds MLA

Mr Harry Harvey MLA

Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA

[Committee for Education – Youth Engagement and 'My Life and Learning in Lockdown' project]

Mr Justin McNulty MLA

Mr Robin Newton MLA

# **Youth Engagement: My Life and Learning in Lockdown**

## **Chronology**

The Committee’s work on good practice in youth engagement and its ‘My Life and Learning in Lockdown’ outreach to children and young people developed as follows.

### **Young People’s Voices**

On 10 March 2021 the Committee invited a panel of young people to present to its main public Committee meeting on ‘Covid-19 Pandemic Impact on the Mental and Physical Health of Children and Young People’. The session was entitled ‘Children and Young People’s Voices’, and the young people who presented to the Committee were:

Mr Odhran McAllister, Crisis Cafe

Ms Inez Murray, Crisis Cafe

Ms Bronagh Close, Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People Youth Panel

Ms Taisie Court, Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People Youth Panel

Mr Jack Dalzell, Northern Ireland Youth Forum

Ms Lauren McAreavey, Northern Ireland Youth Forum

Mr Jay Buntin, Pure Mental

Mr Theo Burton, Pure Mental

Mr Matthew Taylor, Pure Mental

Ms Sophia Armstrong, Secondary Students' Union for Northern Ireland

Mr Cormac Savage, Secondary Students' Union for Northern Ireland

Mr Morgan Shuttleworth, Secondary Students' Union for Northern Ireland.

The young people generously shared the impacts of pandemic on their wellbeing in many respects, speaking from their homes or walking in the

outdoors. They also spoke in the week of International Women's Day and were encouraged to express gender issues, which they did in respect of RSE, period poverty and uniform. They raised a range of general concerns in relation to their challenges in influencing scholastic life, from inadequate access to CAMHS and lack of range in RSE to limitations placed on them (as growing sleepy teens) by the inflexibility of school life and trammelled career advice; the embarrassment of period poverty; and adherence to conventional uniform policies which precluded full participation in school, sporting and social life not to mention expressions of gender fluidity/curiosity. They referred to bullying on the basis of identity and socioeconomic factors.

Exam stress and the focus of adults on academia rather than wellbeing was a very strong theme in comments on the pandemic.

As regards the emotional and mental health of children and young people generally at this time, they attested to their own signal efforts to network, counsel, provide resources and reassure their peers; and to anxieties among the panel and their peer group in relation to exams, assessment, remote and blended learning and overall career prognoses for the pandemic cohort of pupils.

The Committee considered this testimony to be moving; brave; civic minded; and agenda-setting. The Children's Commissioner for Northern Ireland commented that this session was the best thing the Assembly had ever done.

The transcript of this session can be found at

<http://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/officialreport/minutesofevidencereport.aspx?AgendaId=25672&evidID=12645>



## **Youth Engagement Best Practice**

On 26 April 2021, the Committee received a briefing from Professor Laura Lundy of the Centre for Children’s Rights at Queen’s University Belfast (QUB). In a session based on her paper ‘Children and Young People’s Right to be Heard – the Lundy Model’, Professor Lundy outlined the full requirements of proper adherence to article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The article requires governments to ensure that children have their views sought and given due weight in all matters affecting them. The right applies to decisions affecting children as individuals and children as a group. Professor Lundy focuses on the latter – children and young people’s entitlement to participate in public decision-making and its significance for child and youth engagement.

Responding to a lack of compliance with article 12, Professor Lundy proposed her model (presented under the title “‘Voice’ is not enough”) which suggests that implementation of Article 12 requires consideration of four inter-related concepts: **space, voice, audience and influence.** “

Professor Lundy’s presentation focused the Committee’s attention on the importance of youth stakeholder engagement at this critical epoch.

Professor Lundy’s briefing paper can be found in the appendices to this report.

## **Addressing Bullying in Schools**

Pupil concerns about the inevitable peer pressure in schools raised in youth engagement were conveyed by the Committee in correspondence and in questions to departmental officials on the implementation of the Addressing Bullying in Schools Act 2015, on which a briefing was received on 12 May 2021.

## **Relationship and Sexuality Education**

The Committee relayed young people’s concerns about RSE to departmental officials in correspondence and in its evidence session on 12 May 2021.

## My Life and Learning in Lockdown

The Committee decided to engage more with young people and considered ways in which to do so given pandemic restrictions and the range of ages of pupils in the school population.

### Young at Art

It agreed to open a call for art to all pupils so they could express their experience creatively, whatever their age.





## **Focus Groups and Zooms**

The Committee also agreed to run focus groups with younger pupils and to invite older pupils to zoom meeting to discuss the following questions:

- What was the most difficult thing about lockdown and what did you miss most?
- Were there any benefits from lockdown and what did you look forward to most after lockdown ended?
- Who provided you with emotional support?
- Did you feel supported during lockdown?
- How did your school or the government support your mental health and wellbeing during lockdown, if at all?
- If there are further lockdowns what could your school or the government do to support your emotional wellbeing and mental health?
- What one thing could the school or government do to help you cope with school life now and in the future?
- Is there anything else the Committee should consider about the impact of lockdown on learning and young people's mental health?
- Following the experience of lockdown, what are you now most grateful for?

## **Young Adults’ feedback**

The comments of the young people themselves gathered in events in April, May and June 2021 are summarised in the appendices to this report, as are lists of the schools who took part in focus groups on the topic.

The facilitation of these events was carried out by the Chair, Deputy Chair and Members of the Committee; the Committee Clerk and her team; and the Engagement team and the Education Service of the Assembly. Translation for the zoom event for refugees was provided by Barnardos, Save the Children and Externe. The Committee extends its heartfelt thanks to all of these supporters of young people.

The young adults’ comments and concerns reflected an holistic perspective in relation to the impacts of mental health and wellbeing. They felt their stage of life was complex, with so much to learn about themselves and those around them. They were capable of great fortitude and compassion but also of strong vulnerability and loneliness.

Benefits of lockdown such as family time, hobbies, activism, resilience, outdoor mindful activities and creative projects were enjoyed by many.

However, the young people also represented the experience of child carers, children in care who did not have a feeling of security at home in lockdown and newcomer refugee children who were not participants in the education system and whose ambitions were very frustrated; children enjoying lockdown because their school lives were dogged with stress and bullying, and children whose family members were front line workers or had health conditions which made them particularly vulnerable, causing very real worry and anxiety.

Exam stress was a very significant factor, and there was criticism of decisionmaking and messaging about exams. Pupils commented that schools

were directive and didn't involve them in messaging about the pandemic; but there was good practice in some schools where discussions about mental health and arrangements to access counselling were proactively communicated.

Pupils felt that often, when they tried to express what they were experiencing, adults dismissed it or tried to "solve" it. This is a deep learn for all of us in how to listen to one another and hold confidences in a dignified space, regardless of age.

Feedback on remote and blended learning showed a range of perspectives. Pupils got alerts about schoolwork at all times of the day and night, and felt that this was unreasonable and made them anxious. The Committee considers that this is unacceptable for both pupils and teachers, all of whom need to switch off properly for the day especially in stressful time.

Pupils felt they could find their own rhythm and pace when they did assigned work at home, sleeping as much as they needed to and realising when they were most productive such as after a run or after a meal. When most work was done by assignment or a directive class, pupils said they missed the interaction between pupils and teachers.

Pupils felt young adults should continue to do hybrid learning after the pandemic so they could get enough sleep and balance their learning with exercise and outdoor time.

For further details of the youth feedback, please use the links in this report and read its appendices.



## **DE Youth Engagement**

On 30 June 2021 the Department of Education presented to the Committee its approach to youth engagement.

The Hansard report of this session is at

<http://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/officialreport/minutesofevidencereport.aspx?AgendaId=27089&eveID=14560>

The Committee listened to Ed Reynold’s awardwinning song for Wheelworks Art, ‘Celebrate the Artist’, as they enjoyed the artworks submitted by pupils which decorated the Senate Chamber.

The Engagement team and the Education Service of the Assembly also briefed the Committee on the range of events run under the title of ‘My Life and Learning in Lockdown’, which included zooms with refugee teens facilitated by local charities.

The Committee also heard a research briefing in that session on comparative approaches to school uniform policy, an issue raised by the young people.

<https://niassembly.tv/committee-for-education-meeting-wednesday-30-june-2021/>

## **Eating Disorders in the School Community**

On Wednesday 15 September 2021 the Committee discussed eating disorders in the school community with Eating Disorders NI and departmental officials.

The Committee focused on understanding the significance of this issue among pupils and relative to other mental health issues experienced by young people.

The Committee continued to ask questions after the session about services in Northern Ireland to help young people with eating disorders.

## **Commissioning of Research**

Specific issues raised by young people were agreed by the Committee to merit the commissioning of research to inform and update discussion and policy making.

Of particular relevance to and in many cases as a result of the youth engagement are the following research reports, which can be found on the Committee's webpage and that of Assembly Research and Information Service (RAISE).

26/02/2021 - Children's Rights and Educational Policy in Northern Ireland: Implementation of the UNCRC

- 26/02/2021 - Restraint and Seclusion of Children with Additional Needs in Schools
- 18/03/2021 - Gender Budgeting and Gender Inequalities in Northern Irish Education Policy
- 03/06/2021 - Physical Activity and the Wellbeing of Children and Young People
- 02/07/2021 - School Uniforms: Cost, Gender and Behavioural Considerations
- 02 09/ 2021 - The Role of Sleep in Adolescent Health and Wellbeing
- 10/03/2022 - Newcomer Pupils in Northern Ireland

## **Careers**

Pupils told the Committee that in their lockdown they found their passions, but that careers advice did not broach these as potential career paths; rather pupils felt they were encouraged to do certain prestige subjects regardless of their tendencies and motivation. The Committee reflected this concern in correspondence and endeavoured to undertake a stream of cross-cutting work

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on the 14-19 strategy with DE and DfE Ministers. Although the Committee had a hardhitting presentation from Pivotal on the topic, the strategy and joint working did not eventuate this mandate but the Committee’s legacy report recommends it to its successor Committee to undertake.

## **Follow-up to 2021’s ‘My Life and Learning in Lockdown’**

The Committee would have liked to take its report to the Assembly via a Committee motion but did not have enough time given legislative priorities after summer recess.

The Committee followed up in February 2022 with a zoom engagement asking similar questions in relation to the end of restrictions and the intervening period. On 8 March the Committee asked questions of CCEA raised at this session.

The comment boards from this event are appended to the report.

## **Mental Health Champion**

The Mental Health Champion was signal in informing the Committee’s approach to pandemic. In particular, her perspective that young people were making an enormous sacrifice for everyone else hit home with the Committee.

She attends the Committee’s final meeting today and the transcript of this session can be listened to here:

<https://niassembly.tv/committee-for-education-meeting-wednesday-23-march-2022/>

## **Conclusion**

In terms of Space, Voice, Audience and Influence, the Committee has provided well-advertised and appropriate engagement spaces and amplified the issues

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voiced by young people through its debate, correspondence to the Minister and others, commissioning of research, and championing of young people's voices wherever possible.

They have spoken truth to power, and the Committee has endeavoured to give them audience and influence.

## **Next Steps**

The current Committee hopes that this work might be continued by a successor Committee and that the evidence gathered to date may be mined in a strategic format with research analysis which time did not permit in the 2017-2022 mandate.

## Appendix 1 Youth Engagement

- Promoting child and youth engagement in Northern Ireland – Professor Laura Lundy, Centre for Children’s Rights, Queen’s University, Belfast
- Northern Ireland Assembly Education Service – Impact of lockdown and restart on the emotional well-being and mental health of children and young people -Focus Groups
- Northern Ireland Assembly Education Service – School Focus Groups
- Clerk to the Committee for Education - Youth engagement on life, learning, mental health and wellbeing in Lockdown – 29 June 2021
- Life and Learning in Lockdown Mentimeter 1
- Life and Learning in Lockdown Mentimeter 2
- British Red Cross – My Life and Learning in Lockdown 16-18 years
- My Learning and Life in Lockdown – Young people’s artwork expressing their experiences of learning and life lockdown
- Life and Learning in Lockdown: Summary of 2021 issues and artwork
- Life and Learning in Lockdown and the Pandemic 24 February 2022 - Mentimeter
- Briefing Paper – Professor Siobhan O’Neill, Mental Health Champion

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