

## Response ID ANON-G6SR-C8PJ-Q

Submitted to **Educational Underachievement - Give us your views**

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### Educational Underachievement - Give us your views

#### 1 What is your name?

**Name:**

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#### 3 Are you responding as an individual or on behalf of an organisation?

Organisation - Go to question 4

#### 4 Please provide the name of your organisation and outline briefly its context/ aims and scope?

**context/aims of your organisation :**

The Royal College of Occupational Therapists (RCOT) is the professional body for occupational therapy representing over 33,500 occupational therapists across the UK.

There are 1,299 RCOT members in Northern Ireland (RCOT, February 2020). Occupational therapists in Northern Ireland work in trusts, across health and social care services. They deliver services across housing, schools, prisons, the voluntary and independent sectors, and vocational and employment rehabilitation services.

Occupational therapists work with people of all ages (including children) who are experiencing difficulties through injury, illness or disability or a major life change. We help people to continue or reengage with participating fully in daily life, including work, social activities and maintaining roles and responsibilities.

#### 5 Are you responding as? Please choose from the options below:

Other (please provide details below)

**Other:**

Professional Body - Royal College of Occupational Therapists

#### 6 What would you say are the main causes of educational underachievement?

**main causes of educational underachievement:**

Adult literacy - Members of the Royal College of Occupational Therapists (RCOT) in Northern Ireland report that some parents/carers are unable to support their child's learning (reading and homework) because of their own poor literacy skills.

Lack of opportunity to develop basic motor skills – Some children lack opportunities to develop the fundamental movement skills necessary for learning (for example adequate hand strength to grip/handle a pencil and other school tools, core strength for balance and sitting posture) because of social deprivation and/or poor awareness that these skills are important. This can contribute to educational underachievement.

Motor coordination difficulties - Students whose handwriting is affected by developmental coordination disorder – DCD- (which often occurs alongside autism, dyslexia and ADHD) are at risk of educational underachievement. DCD is poorly recognised but affects around 5% of school-aged children (Lingam et al 2009). Handwriting difficulties are a feature of DCD and frequently persist despite intervention, resulting in illegible writing that is limited in quantity. Students' handwritten work does not reflect their academic potential, resulting in lower grades. A paper by Harrowell et al (2018) "The Impact of developmental coordination disorder on educational achievement in secondary school" (Research in Developmental Disabilities Vol 72 p13-22) concluded that DCD has a significant impact on educational achievement.

Unmet sensory needs - The sensory needs of autistic pupils (and others) are not always well understood or met within the school environment, meaning pupils become quickly overwhelmed. Few schools have safe (quiet) spaces to which pupils with sensory needs can retreat during the day, or sensory rooms that pupils can use to learn and practice sensory self-regulation strategies. Few schools offer clubs/activities specifically for pupils who struggle with the social and sensory demands of playgrounds/outdoor spaces. As a result, some students are not able to access learning because of sensory overload.

Poor understanding of special educational needs and limited access to specialist services – Members report delays in children's needs being identified and met because of poor access to diagnostic and specialist services such as educational psychology. Poor recognition and understanding of special educational needs affects teachers' ability to implement strategies to ensure pupils fulfil their potential. There is a risk that students will be suspended or withdrawn from education because their behaviour is not understood or is labelled as 'challenging'. Members are also concerned that pupils who don't reach the threshold for diagnosis or 1:1 support are unable to access the resources, attention and time they need from teachers to reach their potential.

Low aspirations – The academic potential of children with special educational needs, disabilities and long term health problems is not always recognised. Adults

may have low expectations and limit opportunities for a young person to achieve their educational potential.

## **7 In your view, what is the main impact of educational underachievement?**

**impact:**  
Mental health issues - Educational underachievement affects pupils' motivation and well-being, Students who don't receive the grades they deserve for written work are likely to become frustrated and may disengage from learning. This can affect their self-esteem and need to access mental health support as children and adults.

Social isolation & disruption- Students who are unable to regulate their responses to sensory over-stimulation may miss key opportunities for learning and social interaction, leading to social isolation and exclusion. Some pupils may become disengaged or disruptive if their academic potential is not recognised, affecting their own learning and that of their peers.

Employment – Employment options will be limited for pupils who do not fulfil their educational potential. This not only impacts on the social and economic well-being of the individual and their future family, but also on organisations and society who will not benefit from the skills offered by a diverse workforce who could be the innovators, experimenters and problem-solvers that society needs.

Use of statutory services - Academic underachievement can affect use of health, employment, criminal justice and social services across the lifespan.

If not addressed, a cycle of intergenerational underachievement is perpetuated.

## **8 From the list below please select five (only) interventions that you consider have an impact on raising educational achievement and rank in order with 1 being the most effective. Please add any additional interventions in the comment box below.**

**ranking - Effective school leadership:**

**ranking - Effective classroom teaching:**

4

**ranking - Greater family engagement:**

**ranking - Greater focus on children and young people's mental health, well-being and resilience:**

2

**ranking - Addressing income poverty:**

**ranking - Raising aspirations:**

**ranking - Greater focus on early years development including language development:**

3

**ranking - Improving local employment opportunities:**

**ranking - Stronger links between school and community:**

**ranking - Greater investment in schools - capital/ buildings:**

**ranking - Effective intervention for Special Educational Needs:**

1

**ranking - A relevant and engaging curriculum:**

5

**ranking - Provision of educational opportunities or life long learning skills for parents:**

**Other:**

## **9 In your experience what has worked to address educational underachievement?**

**what has worked to address educational underachievement:**

Occupational therapists help prevent educational under-achievement through a range of universal, targeted and specialist interventions. Early intervention and working in partnership with colleagues in health, education and social care are key.

Training – Occupational therapists provide training, information and literature to raise aspirations and ensure parents, carers and the children's workforce have the knowledge to support young people (including those with special educational needs such as autism, DCD and cerebral palsy) to develop the skills and resilience they need to realise their personal and educational potential. Providing training in community settings or through organisations such as EMPOWER ensures these learning opportunities are accessible and relevant. Strategies and approaches are therefore more likely to be implemented.

Early intervention - Targeted interventions such as those provided by occupational therapists in partnership with schools through the RISE NI project help build the capacity of parents/carers/teaching staff to enable children develop the fundamental sensory-motor skills that underpin learning and independence. This early intervention, delivered by the people closest to children and young people under the guidance of occupational therapists, optimises children's development with

long term benefits for their educational and personal achievement.

Well-being support– Occupational therapists in West Belfast offer a whole-school programme focusing on well-being. The programme (which includes anxiety management, relaxation, building self-esteem, sleep hygiene and developing productive routines) enables post-primary students to implement strategies to manage their own well-being so they are better able to engage in the curriculum and achieve their personal and educational potential.

Sensory-smart schools – Occupational therapists work in partnership with schools to create environments that support pupils' learning and participation. Schools that offer a quiet area/a sensory room and alternative break time provisions such as LEGO clubs, Harry Potter clubs, astronomy clubs, history clubs provide a more manageable environment for autistic pupils and others with sensory needs. Providing opportunities for students to take time out to 'decompress' means they are better able to access the curriculum. These approaches also offer opportunities to develop social interaction skills.

Typing – Those schools who allow pupils to record their learning via typing rather than handwriting can prevent high frustration levels, poor emotional regulation and refusal of homework for those pupils. RCOT members recommend that pupils start learning how to type from Primary 5 onwards. Students with persistent handwriting difficulties should be able to use other means (e.g. a laptop) to produce written work that reflects their potential. Some students may just require extra time to produce written work, rather than using a laptop.

Access to occupational therapy – Pupils with the most complex needs/circumstances should have access to occupational therapy to help them develop skills such as handwriting, the ability to handle school tools/equipment and ability to self-regulate levels of alertness – skills that facilitate learning and help prevent educational under-achievement. Young people with physical disabilities require specialist input from occupational therapists regarding school seating and environmental adjustments to ensure they can access all aspects of the wider school curriculum, including social and outdoor activities.

## **10 How has the Covid-19 lockdown impacted on educational underachievement?**

### **covid-19:**

RCOT members report that some young people/parents/carers have struggled to engage with occupational therapy services since March 2020 because of poor access to technology and complex home circumstances. There have also been fewer opportunities for movement breaks, meaning children have missed opportunities for physical development and self-regulation. As a result, the gap in academic performance between young people with and without additional needs has widened.

## **11 Please add any other comments that you would like the panel to consider.**

**any other comments :**