

# THE BEST DAYS OF YOUR LIFE?

YOUNG PEOPLE'S VIEWS ON EDUCATION  
AND SOCIAL INCLUSION IN SCOTLAND



*Children*  
IN SCOTLAND  
CLANN AN ALBA  
working for children and their families



Save the Children

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A report by Save the Children and Children in Scotland, October 2002

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The views contained in this report are not necessarily the views of Children in Scotland nor Save the Children. The views expressed are those of the children and young people that were consulted. Quotations used in the report are illustrative of points made. They are not necessarily typical of young people's responses overall, which were diverse, unless noted. To protect young people's anonymity, no names have been linked with quotations.

Children in Scotland and Save the Children both work to codes of ethics on research and consultation with children and young people. These were followed for this project and are available on request.



Children in Scotland is Scotland's national umbrella agency for organisations and professionals working with and for children and their families. It exists to identify and promote the interests of children and their families and to ensure that relevant policies, services and other provisions are of the highest possible quality and are able to meet the needs of a diverse society.

Children in Scotland represents over 300 members, including all the major voluntary, statutory and private children's agencies, professional associations and local authorities as well as many smaller community groups and children's services. Children in Scotland facilitates the National Early Years Forum, the Scottish Parenting Forum, the Special Needs Advisory Group, Enquire, the national advice service for special educational needs in Scotland and the National Steering Group on Children infected/affected by HIV/AIDS. It works in partnership with the National Children's Bureau and Children in Wales, and is a member of the European Forum for Children's Welfare (EFCW).



Save the Children is an international children's rights organisation working in Scotland, the UK and over 70 countries to achieve a better world for children. Here in Scotland we have over 20 years experience in working with and supporting children, young people and their families disadvantaged by a range of circumstances. All our work is underpinned by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child to which the UK Government is a signatory. Save the Children believes that the well being of all children could be ensured through the full implementation of the articles of the UNCRC.

Save the Children seeks to highlight the importance of children and young people's participation in decisions that affect their lives. We work to ensure greater protection, improved support and social inclusion of vulnerable children and young people, through highlighting the denials of rights in key sectors and working to develop new collaborative approaches.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION AND KEY MESSAGES

**What is education for? How do children and young people learn best? In what spaces and at what times do they learn? Who can help them with their learning? Such fundamental questions were being asked by both the Scottish Executive and Scottish Parliament's Education, Culture and Sport Committee in 2002 through the National Debate on Education and the Scottish Parliament's Inquiry into the Purposes of Scottish Education.**

The Scottish Executive provided funding for Children in Scotland and Save the Children, to involve young people who otherwise might not be heard from in 'mainstream' responses to the National Debate on Education.



## **KEY MESSAGES FROM THE YOUNG PEOPLE:**

- Children and young people support the idea of having a central place to socialise, learn and gain qualifications.
- Schools should do more to promote understanding, respect and appreciation of different cultures and social circumstances. Children and young people should not be judged or labelled at school and schools should be more flexible to the diverse needs of young people.
- Good relationships with teachers are paramount. Teachers should be in a position to relate to young people with patience, humour and understanding. Teachers should have the time to listen and respect the views of young people.
- Class sizes are presently too big at 30. Classes should be 15-20 pupils maximum, should have more than 1 teacher, (a ratio of 8 pupils : 1 adult) and when appropriate, should be grouped to reflect how different people learn.
- Young people need to learn more than academic subjects at school. Schools should:
  - (1) Teach 'skills for life', on how to live independently and skills for their future jobs;
  - (2) Provide a wider range of subject choice and a broader range of activities; and
  - (3) Build pupils' self-esteem.
- Learning should be fun and flexible to the needs of the learner. More balance in the curriculum, smaller classes and better relationships with teachers would help facilitate this.
- Young people should not have to spend so much time at their desks but should have a more balanced day including more sport and cultural activities and more leisure time.
- Reward systems for good behaviour, smaller classes and teachers with strong interpersonal skills will do more to improve pupils' behaviour than punishments that are seen as unfair, futile or disproportionate.
- The participation of young people needs to be improved both in individual decisions about their education and in 'policy' decisions about their school and education generally.
- The school environment should be safe, in good repair and with enough space for everyone.
- School should also be a place where young people can spend autonomous time with peers. Young people should have access to common rooms to relax or leisure facilities to unwind with friends.

## 2. METHOD: WHO TOOK PART AND HOW WE GATHERED THEIR VIEWS

### STAGE 1: CONSULTING THE PARTICIPATION NETWORK

Children in Scotland facilitates the Participation Network (funded by the Carnegie UK Trust). The Network is open to all those with an interest in involving children and young people in 'public' decision-making. Members include a wide range of organisations: from schools, social work departments, youth projects, other voluntary organisations, health boards, arts projects and advice centres. The 258 members of Children in Scotland's Participation Network were sent the National Debate on Education's briefing pack and an activities sheet.

### STAGE 2: CONSULTING THE EXPERT GROUPS

We worked with 7 'expert groups' of young people with a variety of perspectives on education (see opposite) over 2 or 3 sessions. Each group took part in in-depth discussions about their experience of school and developed key messages for a poster and CD-Rom which were displayed at 'School Daze' (see below) and submitted to the Scottish Executive. 49 young people took part in total.

The difficulties or barriers that faced the young people did mean that many had a fairly negative view of their educational experience, particularly at school. However, a number of young people who took part in the work were positive about their experiences and, of those who were unhappy about the experiences, most were able to identify things that they had enjoyed about education and things which had worked well.

### STAGE 3: 'SCHOOL DAZE'

The young people from the expert groups attended an event in Edinburgh called 'School Daze', to discuss and debate their views on education. This included a drama workshop, a mural workshop and a 'question time' with key decision-makers including the Minister for Education and Young People, Cathy Jamieson.



## **THE GROUPS:**

### **FAIRBRIDGE**

7 young people took part, 2 young women and 5 young men, aged from 17-20 approximately, based in Edinburgh. Fairbridge is a voluntary project providing social and personal development for inner city young people aged 14 to 25.

### **GRAYSMILL SCHOOL**

13 young people took part, 9 young women and 4 young men, based in Edinburgh. Graysmill is a special school for children and young people with physical disabilities and associated learning difficulties. The school is a day school.

### **LEARNING FOR THE FUTURE**

8 young people took part, 6 young women and 2 young men, based in South Lanarkshire. Learning for the Future is a recently formed advocacy group for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or receiving special educational support. The group is made up of young people from three different schools in South Lanarkshire. The group aims to promote a forum for young people to express their views on issues of collective concern and to provide opportunities for young people to participate in decision making processes at a local and national level. It also encourages young people to meet and socialise outwith the school setting.

### **RIGHT TRACK EDUCATION INITIATIVE**

9 young men aged from 15 to 16 took part, based in Drumchapel, Glasgow. The project offers a one year course to young people who have been excluded from school or who are not being presented for exams by school. The young people are offered basic skills training and personal development, building confidence, self esteem and key skills necessary to take advantage of future opportunities in life. The young people who took part in the group had been formally excluded from school, had persistently not attended or were encouraged by their school not to return.

### **WHO CARES? SCOTLAND**

2 young men took part, aged 15 and 18, from Glasgow and East Dumbartonshire. Who Cares? Scotland is a national voluntary organisation which advocates on behalf of young people looked after and accommodated by the local authority.

### **WOODFARM HIGH SCHOOL**

7 young women took part, aged 14 to 15, from East Renfrewshire. Young women, who regularly attend Woodfarm High School's Pupil Support Base, took part in the consultation. The Pupil Support Base has been set up using New Community School funding to provide learning and behaviour support for vulnerable young people. All of the young women in the group had been offered the opportunity of additional support at school due to a variety of difficulties. All were offered the opportunity to work on confidence and self esteem within the group and to access support from staff at the base when required.

### **YOUNG GYPSY/ TRAVELLERS**

2 young women took part, both aged 16, based in North West Scotland. The young women who took part have been working with the Save the Children Young Gypsy/Travellers' Project. Save the Children works with young Gypsy/Travellers across Scotland providing opportunities to develop new skills and experiences, to enable them to raise awareness about their culture and to challenge discrimination. Two young people were forced to withdraw from the event 'School Daze' at the last minute because their family was evicted from their roadside camp on that day.

### 3. FINDINGS: LISTENING TO THE EXPERTS . . .

#### WHAT NEEDS TO BE IMPROVED ABOUT SCHOOL EDUCATION IN SCOTLAND?

Young people suggested a number of improvements, including a broader range of activities at school, considerably smaller class sizes, improved teacher-pupil relationships and more flexibility and support. These are discussed later in the report. In addition, the following four issues were strongly expressed:

##### 1. Unfulfilled potential

Whilst they recognised that there were other ways that people could learn and get qualifications, most young people felt that school offered the best opportunity. Many felt they had missed this opportunity to gain the education they needed to pursue the career or training they wanted to do and, even though still under age 20, felt that it was too late.

A number of young people from Fairbridge and from Right Track thought that they were responsible for their lack of success to a certain degree. Several young people talked about being more interested in doing other things at that time: they did not see their education as a priority and they did not have a sense of its importance. These young people wished they could now make up lost opportunities:

**I think I'd do a lot better now than I did back then. I've got more intelligence now to realise that I do need an education. I've got some college stuff but it's not the same as having your standard grades. I would like to go back and do that sort of thing, but I'm not going to because I'm too old. I've looked for a course that will let me do my standard grades and I can't find one. I think I've mucked up somewhere.**

(Fairbridge)

Other young people who were outwith projects and schools did not know how to find out about careers options and routes.

**I wanted to do a college course but it was too difficult so I just had to give up on it. I actually want to be a hairdresser but I don't know where to apply to get qualifications or to start training for it. I didn't know what to do. . . .**

(Gypsy/Travellers)

## 2. Bullying and discrimination

All groups except Graysmill School spoke of bullying.

The direct relationship between school performance and bullying described by one young person echoes many of the young people's comments:

**If it wasn't for the bullying, school would be OK - you'd make more friends and people would get to understand you. People don't understand each other - if you could be friends with everybody then it would be much better.**

**The bullies in the school make you dog it and so you're missing out - if they weren't there then you'd get a better education. They are not letting you get the education that they are getting.**

(Woodfarm High School)

Those who had been bullied often found themselves drawn into fighting in an effort to stand up for themselves, in desperation or in self-defence. For some this had developed into a behaviour record which eventually led to suspension, exclusion or non-attendance. Some of the young people in the groups had been in trouble for bullying themselves. One of the young people from Who Cares? Scotland suggested that the bullies were often the ones with the greatest problems and they need help.

Although some of the young people had been in trouble for truancy as a result of bullying, they did not think that staying at home or learning from home was the answer to the problem of bullying. They thought that by being forced out of school by bullying, they were being denied the quality of education and social experience that other young people enjoyed:

**I think you'd learn more at school than at home because you're going to all different classes, and you can't really bring all different teachers to your house to teach you different subjects.**

(Woodfarm High School)

There were fairly mixed views about how to handle bullying. Whilst some felt that teachers did not do enough, many felt that involving teachers only exacerbated the problem. Some teachers were said to not take the young people's reports of bullying seriously, as described by one young woman:

**Sometimes I would fight back... After a while you do get fed up of telling the teacher when they don't do anything... So I started getting into a lot of fights at school and then I'd be the one that got the blame for starting the fight when there was, like, me and five other people! When I did tell the teacher it was like 'we're not interested in petty school girl squabbles'...**

(Gypsy/Travellers)

Young people spoke of particular places and times when bullying happened, such as outside the school gates on the way home, to breaks and lunchtime. Some spoke of being bullied because of special educational needs and two young people from different groups talked about bullying in relation to clothes and having 'the right stuff'. Most agreed that young people needed to be listened to when the young people wanted to talk about what was happening to them. Support had to be easily accessible, with the feeling that there was an 'open door'.

### 3. Prejudice, Labelling and Diversity

The young Gypsy/Traveller women felt very strongly that Gypsy/Travellers are not respected as a minority group in Scotland. Whilst there is growing awareness of racism and discrimination experienced by black and Asian minority groups, they felt that awareness levels of the discrimination Gypsy/Travellers experience are low. Whilst racism towards those from black and Asian backgrounds was widely condemned in their schools, a 'blind eye' was turned on racism towards Gypsy/Travellers. It was felt that prejudice against Gypsy/Travellers had in effect excluded many from the formal education system.

**A lot of Travellers get taken out of school for bullying... Some of the teachers didn't bother a lot of the time... actually a lot of the time I think the teachers were quite biased - y'know you were seen as wee 'tinky' kids... They didn't really care that much about it...**

One young Gypsy/Traveller described how at one school she was able to stop bullying and discrimination by educating others:

**When I went to school first of all they would all go 'Gypsy! Go back to where you belong...' Then I just told them 'You live in houses, I live in a caravan. I'm proud of what I do. It's my way of life, I can't do anything about it.' When I told them that - they never really accepted it - but they didn't call me 'Gypsy' or anything...**

**I think a lot of the bullying comes from the fact that they don't understand - or sometimes they even envy you a bit because of what you do. If they knew more about it they would accept it more. Some schools they don't want to talk to you and to really know what a Gypsy is. At my school they wanted to know what it was like. And they thought I was lucky being a Traveller.**

From their different perspectives, young people from several groups spoke of the detrimental effects of being unfairly labelled or stereotyped. For example, young people from Who Cares? Scotland were very aware of the prejudice that many young people faced at school who had different living arrangements:

**I think that teachers and lecturers should be sent on awareness courses as not every pupil comes from typical stereotype of 2.4 children. You are going to have the ones that are staying with gran, staying with Nan, foster care, residential care. They have this preconception of you, mum and dad, the dog, the nice car, the fence and that and it's not that...**

(Who Cares? Scotland)

Another young person spoke about pupils with special educational needs being singled out:

**Teachers treat children who are special cases different.** (Learning for the Future)

Young people from Fairbridge and Right Track talked about feeling judged by teachers at school. Some felt that they were labelled as coming from a certain family and expected to cause trouble as older siblings or cousins had. Others felt they were labelled as trouble-makers because of their past record. They felt that their reputation for bad behaviour constantly prejudiced their relationships with staff, leading to low expectations and hasty assumptions in turn making it difficult for them to break out of a cycle of conflict, punishment and resentment.

#### 4. Participation at school

Most - but not all - of the young people across the groups had little experience of active participation in their education, other than when they had actively decided to leave or not attend.

Smaller class sizes and individual support facilitated some young people's involvement but not others. One young person who had attended a residential school with small classes felt that the teachers were able to listen and to allow pupils more options because they had the time and space to do that. In contrast, young people from Graysmill School felt strongly that, in spite of the small classes and individual support, the choices about subjects and the structure of the school day were extremely limited. Whilst teachers were often keen to listen to their views and to make changes where possible, the young people recognised that their school is constrained by a number of factors such as staff resources and transport arrangements.

At a school level, young people expressed different views on pupil participation. One young person from Fairbridge looked back on his school experience and felt he had had a lot of say. He had been fairly successful at school, had had no problems and as part of a large group of friends, felt quite powerful.

**...if there was anything to be changed they would sometimes ask the pupils what they felt. Our entire school complained about the uniform when we had to wear a shirt and tie and trousers and we really were not happy. The teachers reviewed it and we all looked at it and decided to wear trousers and a school t-shirt. One of the pupils designed a badge to go on the t-shirt that we weren't too keen on but it was better than the shirt and tie. That's what happened and we were happy with it. It was excellent. They did listen to the views of pupils.**

(Fairbridge)

But even with a very active school council in place, young people from Woodfarm were not confident that their views would be listened to by pupil representatives.

Their experience exposes the weakness of pupil participation based largely on representative models.

**...they might think some things are daft and they won't want to say them. You think they might reject your ideas... if they don't want what you suggest then they won't listen to them.**



## WHAT SHOULD YOU LEARN?

Young people thought pupils needed to learn more than academic subjects at school. Their views can be summarised into three main points on what schools should do:

### 1. Teach 'Skills for Life'

**I don't think they teach you things you need for life.**

(Learning for the Future)

Many young people thought more life skills should be taught at school. Young people from Who Cares? Scotland and Learning for the Future detailed what should be provided. Both groups emphasised the need for work experience and skills that would help them gain and maintain future employment. Young people from both groups recommended increased attention to practical skills, with suggestions such as cooking, learning to drive, learning how to deal with money and bills, and first aid. One young person who left care at the age of 16 said:

**Computing, maths and English I used, but not science. My time could have been better spent doing true-to-life things: home economics or even stuff about how to Hoover! I didn't know about budgets. Why do they not teach you about bills, all these different things they could teach you...**

(Who Cares? Scotland)

Young people from Learning for the Future further recommended the teaching of social and interpersonal skills, such as making friends, resolving conflicts and 'how to stick up for yourself'. They should have more information on people who could help them, such as social workers. They should learn how to engage in leisure activities, with such skills as learning to play particular games and how to sing.

### 2. Provide a wider range of subject choice and a broader range of activities

Young people agreed that a wider range of subject choice should be available. Consistent with the wish for choice, young people had diverse views on what subjects should be taught. Several young people recommended a reduction in the number of compulsory subjects (e.g. to English and maths).

Based on differing rationales and experiences, a strong, common message from the groups was that schools should value and support a broader range of activities than subject teaching. This included more time for the young people to relax and socialise, more opportunities for them to engage in physical activities such as sports and games, and to enjoy and experience music and drama.

Young people from Graysmill School and Learning for the Future emphasised the importance of school as a place where adults and young people can learn to get along and peer friendships can be made. Time without adult supervision was needed and they would like to have their own space where they can relax and socialise.

**We want more time and more space for the students to come together and just talk.**

**Staff are always around. I would like an hour without staff over the top of us.**

The young people from Graysmill School described their particular experiences, with a significant proportion of their breaks spent waiting for care needs to be met (queuing for the use of the hoist etc.). Consequently opportunities to socialise and 'chill out' were regularly cut short. Many of the young people at their school lived far apart, transport was a big constraint and they had very few opportunities to meet up with their friends or take part in social activities when they were at home.

At school they were supervised 'every minute of the day' and so they felt denied the chance to experience independence, risk taking and the kind of social interaction that most secondary aged pupils took for granted.

Young people from Right Track described how the focus on academic subjects created boredom and frustration - and ultimately led some of the young people to get into trouble.

**There's nothing to look forward to at school... That's what bugs you - you do the work, then you get bored with the work, and then when you get bored with the work you want to find something better to do... So then you talk to your pals and that's when the teacher tells you to shut up and that's when you start getting annoyed with the teacher... It's the work that bores you into doing other things... things to amuse yourself.**

(Right Track)

This young person went on to describe how Right Track Education Initiative provided a different approach, with varied activities and rewards:

**Here [Right Track] if you don't do the work for two days you won't be going out, so we do the work and then we get to go out... We're obviously going to do our work if we know for a fact we are going to get something in return...**

He also described the restrictions in his school environment as he experienced them:

**You couldn't do anything - you can't play football because you'll break windows. Then you're playing a game and they say 'you're not allowed to gamble'... They just wreck your life. All you're meant to do is stand about and talk. You run about and they class it as carrying on, they say 'that's dangerous - someone could fall and hurt themselves'. And if you stand about in a big crowd they come round to check - they think there's a fight going on, you end up getting accused of stuff.**

### 3. Build self-esteem

Young people gave examples across the groups of both positive and negative school experiences, which related to how they were treated by both teachers and other young people. Young people from three groups made particular comments on the need for a supportive environment, to help build self-esteem. One young person suggested that schools could learn from projects such as Fairbridge:

**Treat the individuals with consideration. If they're lacking in self-esteem, help them build it up. There is plenty folk who are bubbly and seem to have an awful lot of self-confidence but they don't and people need to pick up on that and learn how to deal with it and help them.**

(Fairbridge)

Two young people spoke of the value of support groups at Woodfarm:

**...you learn a lot from these sort of groups and if you are shy then you can talk in the small groups. Classes are far too big... If you are in small groups and you like those in your group then you'll get a better education because you all like each other and they don't make fun of what you're saying and bring you down.**

**The group is very important. It helps... build confidence. Schools should have groups like this for when things go wrong and you need to talk to someone...**

## HOW SHOULD YOU LEARN?

Learning should be fun

Many of the groups discussed the need for learning to be fun. Young people who had had problems with behaviour or attendance and those who had been excluded clearly expressed the view that school had simply not engaged them. They had felt bored and fed up in the classroom. Various reasons were given: teaching techniques or styles that failed to excite them, subjects that they found difficult to remain interested in for a whole lesson, the lack of variety in the lesson or in the school day as a whole. One group described what made a good lesson:

**A mixture of getting told what to do but having fun at the same time, not just sitting down and writing with someone yapping on in your ear.**

**When a teacher explains... and gives you the information and they let you find the answer for yourselves.**

(Woodfarm High School)

### Flexibility

Certain young people felt strongly that the education system was insufficiently flexible. This young woman's criticism mirrors that expressed by other young people, from their own perspectives:

**It's like everybody has got to be the same at school. I've always been brought up to believe that when you are at school you are developing into the kind of person you are going to be and you can't make everybody fit into the same mould. You can't make everybody go to school and everybody get the same jobs because people aren't like that. Traveller people have always wanted to travel, even if they want jobs they still want to travel because that is the way they have been brought up and that is part of their life, and sometimes you do have to do things differently to meet people's needs. And I think that schools, teachers and social workers, they shouldn't try to make everybody fit into school, or fit into the same thing or all be the same.**

(Gypsy/ Traveller)

Young people from a number of groups expressed a need for a particular form of flexibility: for learning to proceed at 'your own pace'. For example:

1. One young person who talked about learning difficulties found it hard to fit his work into the uniform time period and recommended:

**I think instead of having to do so much in a day, you should get to stay on longer. You should have to do less in a period and stay on longer.**

(Right Track)

2. A young person from Woodfarm thought exams should be taken when the individual felt ready.
3. A young person from Who Cares? Scotland suggested that schools should allow pupils to pursue a variety of courses in fifth and sixth year, giving them more time at school and more time to prepare.

These suggestions demonstrate links between inflexibility and the failure to gain necessary qualifications at school.

Several young people spoke about the advantages of sometimes being grouped with other young people who learn in similar ways. This prevented those that learnt more quickly becoming distracted and stopped people from misbehaving through lack of attention. This emerged as a particular priority for young people during the School Daze event.

Class management and behaviour policies  
For some of the young people, their behaviour had been a significant factor in the failure of their school experience. Some took responsibility for their behaviour, saying they had often caused problems for themselves and for teachers. At the same time, young people also thought that some teachers could have handled behaviour issues more effectively but instead often exacerbated the situation. Many of the young people described minor incidents escalating into explosive situations where the young person, without the personal skills or the power to handle the situation, ultimately came off worse.

*Why did you threaten the teacher?*

**They wouldn't let me do what I wanted to. I was trying to work but she kept saying 'No that's wrong'. Everything I did was wrong. I felt angry because I was wasting a period, I sat and did what she told me but then she told me it was wrong.**

(Anonymous)

Some teachers were able to handle young people better and thus avoid these explosive situations:

**A good teacher is just someone who knows how to calm you down if you get angry.**

(Right Track)

**When I was at [school] I had a history teacher who was fun, he was brilliant, had a sense of humour, but when people were carrying on he was firm as a rock. He never took any nonsense from anyone. He did have a great sense of humour but if there was people mucking about trying to cause trouble he was strict as anything.**

(Fairbridge)

**They wouldn't let a situation start up, they would nip it in the bud before it got out of hand.**

(Fairbridge)

The young people found it difficult to identify punishments that they felt were effective or fair. Punishment exercises were generally regarded as 'a waste of everybody's time' unless pupils were given constructive work to do. One young person commented on the irony of temporary exclusions being used as a punishment, when young people themselves did not want to be in school. Punishments were frequently described as impossible to fulfil, unjust, or out of proportion.

The young people's sum of experiences suggests that combining a reward system for good behaviour with smaller classes and a teacher with strong interpersonal skills is a more effective way to prevent behaviour difficulties. One young person describes the good discipline system he experienced:

**Everyone started on an even keel. You could go up the ladder as well as down. You had a verbal warning, two written warnings, referral, punishment exercise then you get a second referral, and a detention. On the other side you got praise slips, merit awards, you know. It encouraged people more as at the end of the day everything you do is for your CV. It encouraged people more to try and keep themselves right and go for the merit awards as it's extra certificates as well as your grades.**

(Who Cares? Scotland)

## **WHO CAN HELP YOU LEARN?**

The pivotal role of teachers

Young people from all the groups were very clear about how influential, helpful and supportive the good teachers in their lives had been. They were very appreciative of the supportive relationships they had with particular teachers and the workers involved with their groups or projects. At the same time, many young people were very negative and bitter about their experience of some other teachers. They felt that too many teachers had not really been interested in them as individuals or been able to give them the support they needed to succeed at school. This was particularly pertinent for those who had had behaviour difficulties at school, those who had been excluded and those who had suffered persistent bullying.

**There was only one teacher who was good... He didn't talk to you like a daftie and you got a carry on with him and all... He cared about you...**

(Right Track)

**...he had ultimate respect for everyone... he always had time for you. Because you could get a laugh with him... If you had a problem he would stay with you after school... His door was always open at lunchtime, you could go into his room and just sit and have a laugh and have your lunch with him...**

(Who Cares? Scotland)

**[A good teacher is] one that you can talk to and will listen, instead of saying 'Go away, I'm busy just now'... They should be able to give you their attention when you want it or when you need it.** (Woodfarm)

Some of the young people who had had a poor behaviour record at school described their sense of injustice and their confusion about the way they had been treated or the way that they had seen teachers behave.

**Teachers should behave the way that they want the children to behave. I hate when teachers shout at you and when you shout back they say 'don't shout at me'. That annoys me.**

(Right Track)

**If they are allowed to handle us then we should be allowed to handle them... Y'see these clipboards. She [teacher] had one of them and she was like 'take your work' and I was like 'no, I'm no doing work' and she was like 'fine' and slammed it on my fingers...**

(Right Track)

At the event 'School Daze' the issue of 'friendly teachers' was agreed as a priority. Young people felt that teachers should be more friendly and patient. They should understand people, use language everyone can understand and not brand children with labels. It was suggested that such attitudes should be looked for in selecting teachers and should be part of teacher training.

### The importance of support and guidance

The young women from Gypsy/Traveller backgrounds spoke of the advantage of on-site provision and the disparate levels of support they had received over time and between different local authorities. One young woman remembered when a teacher had been provided at one of the sites she had stayed at. Others could remember a school bus with teachers going around the sites. The young women felt that this kind of provision was very useful both in supporting the children and in supporting parents who wished to home educate. Both these services had been discontinued.

Certain young people described good relationships with individual teachers to whom they would turn if they had difficulties. However, there were very few examples given of good relationships with allocated guidance teachers. Some felt that guidance teachers were just not accessible enough:

**He listens to you sometimes but then he's like 'I've got a class to teach'. We went up to him and he was like 'No, I've not got time. Come back when you think I've got time.' He turns away when it's really important and you feel like you've got no one to talk to.**

(Woodfarm High School)

Others felt that the guidance teacher they had been allocated was not someone they necessarily wanted to talk to or confide in. This might be because of a personality clash or because they simply did not know the person well and therefore felt uncomfortable about talking about personal issues with them. Sometimes they would find other staff members who they felt fulfilled this role better - or they would find no one.

**I think the whole guidance teacher thing shouldn't be in place, I feel the teachers that do your subjects should deal with the one-to-one things. It comes [down] to classes being smaller so that they can spot the individual problems... so they can realise more of a problem within the work. The teachers see it first hand, the guidance teachers are just asking how you are. A lot of people don't feel like talking about their problems.**

(Fairbridge)

Young women from Woodfarm were split in their views about guidance teachers. All those with a male guidance teacher found the relationship unhelpful, whilst those with a female found the relationship relatively good though not accessible enough. Consensus was that all young people should have a choice as to the sex of their guidance teacher.



## **WHEN SHOULD YOU LEARN?**

The groups did not extensively discuss the timing of education but particular groups did comment on certain aspects.

### **School leaving age**

Although most of the young people at Right Track had been excluded from school and some had had very negative experiences, the group as a whole felt very strongly that young people should not be allowed to leave school at 15 or 16. Rather than taking people out of school who failed to benefit from the experience, they thought that schools should adapt or change the experience so that the young people did benefit (for example through extended work experience schemes).

### **School days**

The young people from Right Track thought that school started and finished too early. They suggested that they would have been much happier coming in later and spending longer at school.

**Some of us don't go to school because we're too tired to get up. If I could go in at one I'd stay until about 6.**

Young people from Graysmill School, Right Track and Woodfarm were all concerned that school breaks were too short and classes frequently too long. Young people from Right Track recommended that classes be only 30 minutes. The need for longer breaks to combine health and care needs with social opportunities has already been discussed.



## WHERE SHOULD YOU LEARN?

### Class sizes

Groups used to larger class sizes strongly agreed that class sizes were generally far too big and contributed significantly to poor relationships with teachers, poor classroom management and a lack of support.

**I left school about 6 months ago. I think it was because of the classes... if there are big classes and you're trying to get help with your work, the teacher can't get round everybody.**

(Right Track)

In contrast, a young person spoke of the benefits of smaller classes at his residential school:

**At my boarding school, the classes were smaller and the teachers were more involved in things. You had the occasional twat in your class and the teacher would deal with it. That person was usually removed from the class, spoken to and brought in. The staff dealt with situations well and there was very rarely any disruption.**

(Fairbridge)

Young people whose class sizes were smaller (typically seven to nine young people, with low teacher to pupil ratios) generally seemed more satisfied. However, some young people did feel that it would be nice to have a bigger class so that they could get to know and spend time with different people. One solution was to increase the size of the class to around 10-14 pupils but to double the number of teaching staff (i.e. maintain the same teacher to pupil ratios).

At the event 'School Daze' the young people discussed class size in depth through the drama workshop. It was agreed that reducing class sizes and teacher to pupil ratio would be key to improving education in Scotland. They thought that classes should be 15-20 pupils, broken up into small groups of 4-5 pupils, and that there should be more than 1 teacher, with 1 teacher (or other adult) mobile or floating, to help pupils. A ratio of 8 pupils: 1 adult was thought to be ideal.

School settings: special, 'mainstream', residential and home education

Taken as a complete group, young people had experience of numerous learning settings and many groups had strong and differing views on their desirability.

On one hand, young people commented on the advantages of special and/ or residential schools. In contrast to mainstream schools these schools could often provide the necessary support or assistance that the young people needed. Five of the young people from Fairbridge had special educational needs and felt that mainstream schools dealt with their needs very poorly. Resources and materials needed were not always provided and more significantly they felt teachers kept forgetting and disregarding their special needs and the young people received no extra help. One young person described his experience:

**Although I had explained to the teachers - 'I'm deaf, I can't hear what you're saying' - half the time they kept forgetting. If I'm sitting in the middle of the classroom and the teacher is at the other end with their back to me, I'm like 'eh?'. [The history teacher] was very good at turning his back on folk - I used to have to say do you mind facing me when you are talking to me. It's embarrassing.**

(Fairbridge)

On the other hand, young people at both special and residential schools spoke of the disadvantages of restricted educational opportunities. One young person was frustrated by the unchallenging education at a residential school and commented on the prejudice faced as a result of going to the school:

**I wanted to be a mechanic. I went to college, the person in charge... said 'where did you get your qualifications?' It was at xxx Residential, and he said, 'I don't know if I can take you here if you have been to a residential school'. Knocking me back from college because I had been in a residential school, saying he didn't know if he could trust me in case I bring any disturbance to his college. He sent us a letter saying sorry I can't be accepted ...** (Who Cares? Scotland)

Restricted educational opportunities concerned a number of young people from Graysmill School. Due to the small size of the school, they had had no choice in the subjects they did until some older pupils complained and they were given a limited choice. They thought this was unfair and made some of them feel excluded. An argument made for mainstream schools was the potential for increased educational opportunities in a large school.

One young person commented on the importance of having a school nearby, whether this was special or mainstream:

**Whatever school you choose it shouldn't matter where it is as long as it provides your needs but it is better if it is near.**

(Learning for the Future)

This view was reflected by other young people from Graysmill and Learning for the Future. If young people travelled significant distances to get to school they rarely had opportunities to meet school friends outwith school and their chances to develop a more local circle of friends were limited. Being reliant on local authority transport also curtailed opportunities for extra-curricular activities and participation in special one-off events.

Two groups discussed their experiences of home education: those from Gypsy/Traveller backgrounds and those from Woodfarm. For these young people, home education seemed to have been a 'negative' choice: that is, because schools were not meeting their needs.

When learning at home, the young women from Gypsy/Traveller backgrounds struggled from lack of access to books, materials and technology and parents could not necessarily provide the support needed. They suggested that educational resources could be more widely accessible, education authorities could be more supportive and access to computers and the internet improved.

Young people from Woodfarm High School, who had suffered persistent bullying and who had ended up missing a lot of school requested similar supports as well as contact with a teacher. However, they only saw this as a short term solution. They felt strongly that school provided the best opportunities and bullies should not prevent people from attending school.



## 4. CONCLUSION: THE YOUNG PEOPLE'S VISION FOR EDUCATION

### WHAT SHOULD YOUNG PEOPLE LEARN?

- Young people should have a bigger choice of subjects to choose from, with more flexibility on which subjects are compulsory.
- There should be more emphasis on vocational subjects and practical skills that help young people in life, to continue with education, get a job and establish a career.
- A wide range of cultural and sporting activities should also be on offer - some which are part of the school curriculum and some which are on offer for young people to enjoy in their own time.

### HOW SHOULD YOUNG PEOPLE LEARN?

- Learning methods in classes should vary throughout the day to give variety and to cater to individual learning styles, with young people sometimes working in small groups with others that learn in similar ways.
- Pupils should spend less time at their desks, and their day should be broken up with a variety of activities, with more or longer breaks, giving them time to relax and socialise with their peers, to play games, listen to music or just to chill out in their own space.
- There should be more flexibility in how courses and qualifications are followed, with options to take time out when necessary and to decide when young people are ready to sit exams, with every young person moving through their chosen courses at their own pace.
- Schools should treat young people with respect, listen to and respect their views, and involve young people in decisions about their education and their learning environment.
- Schools should reflect and respect the diversity of the population. Cultural, social and racial diversity, equality and discrimination should be discussed and considered within the curriculum and respect for diversity should be promoted through the ethos of the school. No one should feel judged or labelled.
- There should be flexibility, understanding and support for young people who cannot attend full time, with access to resources, support for home learning and links with parents.

### WHO SHOULD HELP YOUNG PEOPLE LEARN?

- Teachers should be in a position to relate to young people with patience, humour and understanding. There should be flexibility in respect to who and when young people can approach teachers for the help they need.
- There should also be specialist support with the resources required to meet people's different physical and learning needs.
- There should be support for those who have been bullied, who have missed lessons, or are having a hard time generally. There should always be an open door and a listening ear.

## WHERE SHOULD YOUNG PEOPLE LEARN?

- The young people generally thought that the school model is a good model both for learning and for socialising with other young people. It should be local, accessible and flexible enough to meet the needs of all children and young people in the community.
- Classes should be no bigger than 15 or 20, with two teachers in every class, who have the time to teach, to listen, to give individual support and attention, but also to have a laugh and chat and to manage any disruption calmly.
- Schools should be a pleasant environment in good repair and with enough space for people to work.



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