

# Consultation response



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## **Schools in the 21st Century October 2007**

Children in Scotland welcomes the opportunity to respond to the European Commission working paper on Schools for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Children in Scotland believes that the EU has an important and valuable role to play in developing the education and learning opportunities for children, despite this issue being a reserved competency for Member States and devolved administrations. This is particularly true in relation to the prioritization and development of universal early years services.

It is important to embed the principles of this working paper in the context of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, (ratified by every member state in the EU) and the European Charter of Human Rights. Both of these documents impose duties on every government to meet particular rights held by children and young people, most notably, the right to an education. The European Commission acts on behalf of the member states, and its measures directly affect the lives of children and young people in the EU. The Commission should therefore ground the work it does in relation to children and young people in the provisions of the ECHR and the UNCRC.

### **The importance of education**

We welcome the value placed by the Commission on education and securing better outcomes for all children. The Commission is right to point out that educational attainment is an important foundation for the future economic growth of Europe, and the associated economic benefits for European citizens (as described by the Lisbon Agenda). However, the purpose of universal education should not be first and foremost to meet the needs of the economy, but to meet the needs of the child. This does not preclude an economic case for education but places the onus on meeting the potential of individual child.

Governments across Europe have a responsibility to ensure that children across Europe experience a happy, and fulfilling childhood. Providers of education should therefore take a holistic approach to child development thereby contributing to a better current childhood as well as a better future.

### **Universal provision of education**

The wider commitment to producing schools with high levels of excellence at the same time as raising general educational standards is key to a universal system of provision. We are particularly encouraged by the positive references made by the Commission to the importance of pre-school education and early learning.

High quality, universal, whole-day, pre-school provision that combines elements of both education and care should be the foundation of better childhoods and better educational outcomes for children. Children in Scotland welcomes the fact that the European Commission recognizes the importance of preschool and would welcome support for more comparative research and developmental work on provision. The sector is often characterized by a complex mix of providers, tension between parental needs and child needs, lack of funding and a low-skilled, low paid workforce. Yet it is also a service sector with some of the most innovative, child-centered and exciting developments in education and care for children. These need to be shared with other countries and, in some cases, with schools.

Universal, high quality provision is particularly relevant to addressing issues of inequality among children. Children in Scotland is one of 13 EU member states who produce a twice yearly magazine called Children in Europe. Issue 13<sup>1</sup> of this magazine explores the role of early childhood services and the first years of schooling in helping to combat inequality. *'Multiple belongings: achieving equality of opportunity for all Europe's young children'* demonstrates how services that are high quality, offer well resourced care and education, recognise diversity in curricula and have a professional workforce can promote equal opportunity for all young children regardless of their ethnicity, religious and cultural beliefs, gender or whether they have a disability.

## **Parental involvement**

Supporting the involvement of all parents in their child's education is one of the best ways of supporting and encouraging children on a path of life-long learning and academic achievement. All fathers have a general and valuable role to play in creating a healthy, happy childhood for their children at the same time as instilling an expectation of gender balance in the home. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit more visibly than children from better-off families from the involvement of a father in their lives. The absence of a father, or low levels of parental involvement can have the following implications for children.<sup>2</sup>

- ❖ Vulnerable children from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to gain even more from a strong father-child relationship than do children from better-off families – and to suffer more when this relationship is lacking.
- ❖ Involvement of fathers can help children's educational attainment and well-being.
- ❖ Involvement of the father is particularly important and valuable in the case of lone mothers having relatively low educational attainment (no matter the level of the father's attainment).
- ❖ Children who do not live with their father are more likely to:
  - ❖ live in poverty;
  - ❖ be less successful in school (behaviourally and academically);
  - ❖ have more trouble getting along with peers;
  - ❖ run a higher risk of health problems;
  - ❖ be at greater risk of abuse; and,

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<sup>1</sup> Children in Europe Issue 13 - 2007

<sup>2</sup> 'Making the Gender Equality Duty real for children, young people and their fathers' 2007  
Children in Scotland

- ❖ run away from home.

Children in Scotland believes that the European Commission should support member states in developing more research and understanding of the impact father figures have on a child's educational attainment at the same time as supporting member states to learn from each other's experience of working directly with fathers. We believe that this is a crucial element of improving a child's experience of, and outcomes from, formal schooling.

## **Multilingualism.**

Member States have become increasingly multilingual. Communities seek to preserve indigenous languages such as Gaelic and Welsh, which form part of their cultural heritage, but must also cater for new languages introduced with immigrant populations arriving from around the world. In the UK alone more than 300 languages other than the official language are spoken by our schoolchildren. Making multilingualism a positive experience enhances the education children receive as well as supporting the potential this skill has to meet the needs of a developing EU economy.<sup>3</sup>

## **Active citizenship**

A sound school education also lays the foundation for an open and democratic society by encouraging knowledge of citizenship, solidarity and participative democracy. Active citizenship entails professionals and service providers engaging with the child as a valued and valuable component of governance. Children's rights need to be at the heart of this approach, which should start at a pre school level. Being meaningfully consulted, listened to, respected and involved are key elements of encouraging a positive perception of citizenship amongst children and young people.

Children and young people need to be aware that rights and responsibilities belong to them while they are still young and are not conferred upon them when they reach a certain age. The UNCRC itself places a duty on states to *'undertake to make the principles and provisions of the Convention widely known, by appropriate and active means, to adults and children alike'* (Article 42).

There is also a need for general awareness raising and training of parents and professionals about rights and responsibilities, particularly in relation to the UNCRC. Rights for children can sometimes be perceived as a threat to adults and not as a basis for development of the child. This type of attitude must be addressed. Practical training on how to involve children and young people should be supported. A programme in Scotland run by UNICEF called the Rights Respecting Schools<sup>4</sup> is an example of best practice. There are a number of creative ways in which young people can express their opinions and this could be included in a number of subjects. There also needs to be recognition that involving children and young people in a real and meaningful way will take time and resources.

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<sup>3</sup> Children in Europe Issue 12

<sup>4</sup> Rights Respecting Schools <http://rrsa.unicef.org.uk/>

The European Commission should begin this process internally by consulting children on all issues relevant to their lives. This working paper is one such example.

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**Children in Scotland** is Scotland's national agency for organisations and professionals working with and for children, young people and their families. It exists to identify and promote the interests of children and their families and to ensure that 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 450 members, including all major voluntary, statutory and private children's agencies, professional organisations, as well as many other smaller community groups and children's services. It is linked with similar agencies in other parts of the UK and the European Union.

The work of Children in Scotland encompasses extensive information, policy, research and practice development programmes. The agency works closely with MSPs, the Scottish Executive, local authorities and practitioners. It is a partner of the Participation Partnership Group for children and young people's mental health. It services a number of groups such as: the Cross Party Parliamentary Group on Children and Young People; the National Children's Voluntary Forum; the National Early Years Forum, and the Rural Advisory Group. Children in Scotland hosts Enquire, the national advice service for additional support for learning.