

Written Evidence from Children in Scotland to the Scottish Parliament Education Committee's Pupil Motivation Inquiry

Children in Scotland

Children in Scotland is Scotland's national 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 350 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. 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 also 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 Special Needs Advisory Group. Children in Scotland also hosts Enquire, which is a national information program for parents of children with additional support needs.

Introduction

Children in Scotland welcomes the Education Committee's decision to hold an inquiry into how children and young people can be motivated and engaged as much as possible by their school experience. This evidence is informed by work carried out by Children in Scotland (in partnership with Save the Children) during the National Debate on Education. Children in Scotland sought the views of 'harder to reach' children and young people including young gypsy/travellers, looked-after and accommodated children and young people, and young people who had been excluded from school.

Children in Scotland would like to raise two general points before focussing on the areas of interest identified by the Education Committee.

- If the inquiry is to have an impact in its aim of identifying 'how all children and young people can be motivated by their school experience to enable them to achieve their full potential' it is essential that the views of children and young people themselves are heard. In particular those young people who have had a negative experience of school can offer invaluable insights into how such experiences could be averted and how pupils disaffected by school can be identified earlier.
- Wide consultation was undertaken through the National Debate on Education and there are a number of developments currently underway in relation to the education agenda. Children in Scotland hopes that in identifying areas on which to focus its inquiry the Education Committee aims to complement this other work. There is also much existing research on pupils' experiences and the effectiveness of different approaches which could help to inform the Education Committee's consideration of pupil motivation.

Identifying which factors have a positive or negative impact on pupils' motivation

Negative factors

- *Bullying*
A number of factors were identified consistently by children and young people as having a negative impact on their motivation and attitude towards school. One of the most significant of these was bullying with children and young people describing how the experience of bullying could often lead to fighting or truancy which for some had resulted in suspension or exclusion¹.
- *Mental health and well-being issues*
A crucial underpinning factor in pupil motivation is positive mental health and well-being. Currently it is thought that around 1 in 10 children and young people experience mental health problems² and in a recent survey over one third were not aware of sources of support for young people with mental health problems³. Schools must provide an environment where good mental health and well-being is promoted and supported and pupils are able to access help if they experience difficulties. Children and young people who participated in the National Debate on Education raised self esteem as a key issue. They highlighted good relationships with peers and teachers as well as a supportive, positive environment as being central to their self esteem. Links should be made between the Education Committee's review and the work being undertaken by the Scottish Executive's National Programme for Improving Mental Health and Well-being (in particular *Children and Young People's Mental Health: A Framework for Promotion, Prevention and Care*) as well as with the work of the Health Promoting Schools Unit.
- *Inflexibility of school environment*
Research carried out by The Prince's Trust⁴ into the 'views and hopes of disadvantaged young people' found that unemployed young people in their survey had found school 'extremely difficult'. The research suggests that young people at risk of underachieving do not find it easy to fit into the traditional school setting and 'either opt out or begin attention-seeking behaviour'. The study also highlights the detrimental effect of being in an environment based on constant assessment where young people who do badly quickly experience a growing sense of failure and decreased expectations.

¹ *Reaching young people, a response from Children in Scotland and Save the Children to the National Debate on Education*, Children in Scotland July 2002

² *Needs Assessment Report on Child and Adolescent Mental Health*, Final Report, May 2003

³ 'See me' campaign questionnaire survey with 488 school children, January 2005 (http://www.seemescotland.org/media/press_releases.php?id=19)

⁴ *It's like that, the views and hopes of disadvantaged young people*, The Princes Trust July 2001

Factors which could have a positive impact

The children and young people who participated in the National Debate on Education identified factors which they said had had or would have a positive impact on their attitude towards school:

- *Greater choice in what to learn and flexibility in how to learn it*
Children and young people talked about the need for more variety of subjects and greater opportunities to choose what to study. They felt that school was too narrowly focussed on academic subjects and suggested that they should also learn practical life skills such as how to budget and how to drive.

The way in which children and young people were taught could also result in boredom. The National Debate on Education highlighted a desire for more innovative approaches and more balance in the school day between desk based learning, sporting and cultural activities, and leisure time. Equally important is a school's ability to be sufficiently flexible to respond to individual needs. Some children and young people said that lessons were too long to hold their concentration, particularly if the teaching style was not sufficiently engaging. Others said that they found it difficult to do work at the rate that was expected of them and suggested either the same amount of work spread over a longer school day. Another suggestion was to have a greater variety of courses

- *More balanced system of managing behaviour*
In the National Debate on Education children and young people identified behaviour problems as having been a key factor in the difficulties they had experienced at school. Although some of the children and young people took responsibility themselves for this they did suggest that it could have been managed more effectively. One young person described an approach which he had found to be successful which was based on rewards as well as punishments – *“You could go up the ladder as well as down... 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.”* (young person from Who Cares? Scotland)
- *Choice of guidance teacher*
While a number of those who took part in the National Debate on Education described good relationships with individual teachers to whom they would turn if they had a difficulty, there were few examples of good relationships with allocated guidance teachers. This reflects other consultations carried out by Children in Scotland in which children and young people have consistently highlighted school guidance systems as failing to meet their needs. One of the suggestions was to allow pupils to choose their guidance teacher while others felt that it would be better not to have a separate guidance system and instead ensure that all teachers were approachable and able to respond to pupils on a one-to-one basis where necessary. At the very least children and young people wanted to have a choice of whether to have a male or a female guidance teacher.

Examples of effective teaching approaches, learning styles and personalised learning that have a motivating influence for disaffected pupils

There are a variety of approaches which have been shown to be effective for different children and young people. Many of these reflect the need, identified above, for flexibility, sufficient time and attention from staff, positive relationships with peers, and the provision of a supportive environment.

Learning mentors

There are a number of examples of mentoring projects (National Learning Mentor Network – www.nmn.org.uk). One of these is the Walbottle Pyramid Learning Mentor Project which pupils reported had ‘...helped them not only improve their behaviour, but also increase their self-confidence and motivation, and improve their class-work, relationships with teachers, and personal organisation skills’⁵.

Family learning initiatives

Research suggests that differences in support for learning at home is one of the greatest sources of inequality in educational attainment among children of similar ability⁶. There are a wide variety of family based learning initiatives which have been shown to raise confidence and enthusiasm for learning⁷. There is much existing evidence for the effectiveness of these approaches but work is needed to assess their availability across Scotland. This would complement Scottish Executive’s initiatives to involve parents more in their children’s learning⁸.

Voluntary sector input

Partnerships between education authorities and the voluntary sector can have a significant impact in providing the time and attention needed by vulnerable children and young people. It is not possible to provide a comprehensive overview of these however one example is the Prince’s Trust xl network which sets out to ‘actively encourage young people to make the most of their time at school, boost their motivation and develop skills for the world of work’⁹. Another example is the Right Track Education Initiative based in Drumchapel in Glasgow which works with 15 and 16 year olds with attendance and discipline problems. The project offers young people basic skills and training as well as opportunities for personal development, building confidence, self esteem, and key life skills¹⁰.

⁵ Children Now Magazine 7th – 13th July 2004

⁶ *Children, families and learning: a new agenda for education* ed. Sue Innes, Scottish Council Foundation / Children in Scotland 1999

⁷ *Children, families and learning: a new agenda for education* ed. Sue Innes, Scottish Council Foundation / Children in Scotland 1999

⁸ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/News/Releases/2004/08/23152908>

⁹ [http://www.princes-](http://www.princes-trust.org.uk/Main%20Site%20v2/common%20cause/xl%20clubs%20in%20schools/xl%20clubs%20in%20Scotland.asp)

[trust.org.uk/Main%20Site%20v2/common%20cause/xl%20clubs%20in%20schools/xl%20clubs%20in%20Scotland.asp](http://www.princes-trust.org.uk/Main%20Site%20v2/common%20cause/xl%20clubs%20in%20schools/xl%20clubs%20in%20Scotland.asp)

¹⁰ *Reaching young people, a response from Children in Scotland and Save the Children to the National Debate on Education*, Children in Scotland July 2002