

Consultation Response

Response to National Debate on Education July 2002

Introduction

Children in Scotland worked in partnership with the Scottish Support for Learning Association, to co-ordinate consultation meetings on the National Debate on Education (May-July 2002).

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 Group 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).

The Scottish Support for Learning Association (SSLA) is a unique Scottish professional association, founded in 1973, which aims to help create the best possible conditions for learning for all. It is a registered charity open to all who contribute to learning - whether from within the learning communities or from voluntary and statutory agencies. It is a network providing a multi-disciplinary forum for an exchange of information on issues affecting the education and welfare of learners and those who support them.

The consultation meetings, on the future of education in Scotland, sought to engage people involved in 'learning support', working directly with children and young people with a wide range of abilities in 'special' and mainstream settings. Participants included Special Educational Needs (SEN) Assistants, Learning Support Teachers, Teachers for Sensory Impairment, Health Promotion Workers, Educational Social Workers, New Community Schools Integration Managers, Administrative Workers, Head Teachers and Senior Service Managers, Health Visitors, Education Psychologists, Guidance Teachers Subject and Class Teachers and Members of Voluntary Groups. Virtually all levels of schooling were represented, from pre-school to community education.

The views expressed at the meetings were at times influenced by debate with children and parents. The views do not necessarily reflect the views or beliefs of any particular

organisation and indeed may be contrary to those views. As well as the responses gathered in this exercise, the publicity generated encouraged others to respond directly to the National Education Debate team or through other consultation exercises. Geographical areas covered included: Aberdeen, Angus, Argyll & Bute, East Renfrewshire, East Dumbartonshire, East Lothian and Midlothian, Fife, Glasgow, Highland Orkney and the Borders. Webpages were also set up on the Children in Scotland website www.childreninscotland.org.uk/educationdebate with links to the SSLA, Scottish Executive and other relevant websites. The Education debate and CiS/SSLA events were promoted through Children in Scotland and Scottish Support for Learning Association networks, forums and members, including the Children in Scotland magazine and the Child Policy Network.

The participants promoted a variety of individual, group, and structural solutions to problems within the education system. They wished to balance out universal reform with local/community based solutions. The recommendations below relate equally to recognising and valuing children who may require additional support, while at the same time ensuring we value all children as an integral part of our society, not as a minority who are effectively marginalised and muted.

The issues that gained most agreement were the need:

- For formal schooling to start later and full-time kindergarten to support physical, social and emotional development and self-esteem.
- To have different 'models' of good practice and flexible models of learning that recognise individual pupils' abilities and difficulties. These would include distance learning, work experience, vocational courses and IT.
- For a less prescriptive curriculum, less rushed and more flexible processes of assessment and accreditation more akin to the concept within life long learning.
- For social skills including citizenship to play an equally important role to academic subjects in a much wider but flexible and creative curriculum.
- To recognise non-academic achievements
- To reduce conflict between parents, pupils and teachers and to generate real dialogue and mutual respect of each other's skills and roles.
- For greater rights and choices for pupils.
- For greater recognition of the talents and skills of teachers.
- For greater community involvement, more locally based solutions and local accountability.
- For more accessible buildings.
- For more funding.

Main Findings

The findings have been subdivided into headings and the main points noted. There is considerable overlap between headings because of the breadth of the subject. The points were not necessarily universally agreed upon and their perceived importance varied between groups of professionals and regions.

Community

- The concept of “learning communities” can become more of a reality through better joint school-community initiatives.
- The school’s role in the community can be enhanced and the division between schools and communities lessened, by community and school based initiatives and the development of successful New Community Schools Approaches.
- There must be community based alternatives to traditional school structures (e.g. children should have access to a more flexible education structure which would allow them to take part in more community based projects during school hours).
- Greater attempts should be made to inform parents and children about their school’s curriculum and to engage with them about school life.
- An extremely controversial proposal was that local performance indicators could be developed with education staff, parents and community members (instead of league tables) to define and evaluate good schools, teachers, pupils and communities.
- Through better consultation and partnership a no-blame culture needs to be established and a co-operative ethos developed.

Schooling Stages

- Serious consideration should be given to starting formal schooling later, at around 6 or 7 years old, and to developing full-time kindergartens for early years. Care and education aspects of early years provision should not be confused. Secondary classes should start later in the day. Later entry to university could also be considered as well as the function of university education.
- Transition from primary to secondary school should be structured better to avoid pupils getting lost in this step (e.g. including, especially, improved transfer of information about children who may require additional support).

Professional training and development

- Multi-disciplinary working should be supported by health, education and social work staff training on a generic ‘working with children’ course for say, three years prior to gaining specialist post-graduate certificates. All teachers should have training in working with children who require additional support.

Improved consultation and communication

- Training for citizenship, the development of social skills and the provision of co-operative learning strategies should be positively encouraged including establishing 'Pupil Councils' and 'charters' to allow for greater pupil contribution to decision making and participation in the life of their learning community.
- There should be provision for better staff consultation and better home-school links.
- Problems with discipline must be recognised, acknowledged and addressed at an early stage. A community approach involving greater communication between parents and teachers should be adopted to solve discipline problems. It has to be recognised that good behaviour must also be developed at home.
- The need to engage parents in all aspects of schooling is paramount.

The curriculum, assessment and accreditation

- Models of education must be based on a greater understanding of child development and recognition of different ways that children learn.
- Whilst the flexibility of the curriculum and its presentation is recognised to be a strength of Scottish education, the curriculum for all age groups needs to be more holistic and flexible.
- The curriculum (and support for the curriculum) must hold pupils' needs at the centre.
- The need for a wider choice of subjects must be balanced with the knowledge that too much choice can over burden both children and teachers
- Learning must be relevant to all children, especially those who are more vulnerable, to prevent feelings of failure.
- It is necessary to stop using curriculum withdrawal as punishment.
- Develop curricular links across subject departments to enable the development of education in key skill areas.
- Pre-school curriculum should concentrate on the enjoyment of learning, developing self-esteem and social skills, and learning in partnership.
- Individual Education Plans and Personal Learning Plans need to be linked to changes in assessment and accreditation.

Assessment and accreditation must be more flexible and based on life long learning approaches that emphasise student choice.

- The emphasis on numeracy and literacy is positive, but should be kept in perspective with social development. i.e. social and academic targets should both be identified.
- More focus should be placed on accrediting non-academic abilities, e.g: value of self and others; achieving potential. There should be recognition of effort instead of only achievement. Life skills and developing resilience should have a place in the curriculum.

School life must have a creative culture and must include space for traditional, aesthetic and cultural skills to be taught.

Greater recognition and status needs to be given to distance learning, vocational courses and increased use of technology. This will also help universal inclusion.

- More meaningful work experience, more vocational courses and information on employment/training should be made available to all pupils. Employers should be enabled to allow their staff, at times, to work in and/or for schools alongside teachers.
- Healthy eating and exercise must be incorporated into the curriculum.

School structure & management

- Flexible approaches to learning need to be supported by more fully accessible play & quiet areas and space outside the classroom.
- More classroom assistants and auxiliaries must be employed with a clear promotion structure and rate of pay commensurate with the work they do.
- Smaller classes, smaller schools, and more staff are essential.
- Ways must be found to ensure better communication between schools and between school stages e.g. all primary schools in any area and between primary and secondary schools.
- There is a need for multi-agency support i.e. from Health, Social Care, Education and the voluntary sector, both within schools and as a focus on home life. Schools should be the focal point for this with effective co-ordination of services for individual pupils. The New Community School Approach is welcomed and should be built on.
- Health & Safety legislation is impacting negatively on pupils due to fear of risk-taking.
- Flexibility will cost money. Funding needs to be increased from central government.
- Education must not be a political tool e.g. academic league tables are irrelevant. We must celebrate the strengths of the system that the media overlooks.
- Funding must change its priorities away from quantitative universal scales to qualitative 'children's needs' assessments.
- Control of schools must remain localised.
- Target setting exercises, examination systems and excessive paperwork must be minimised.
- Local solutions to local problems ought to be encouraged.
- Higher levels of professional administration support are required.

Inclusion & accessibility

- Inclusion refers to the community, not just schools. Inclusion is about recognition and participation and not just permission to join in.
- Inclusion is currently a strength of the Scottish ideal of Social Justice and of many school communities and local initiatives. This should be acknowledged and built upon.
- An universal concept of inclusion needs to be adopted and used uniformly across authorities but it is important to acknowledge that definitions of inclusion vary between settings e.g. family / classroom / schools / community / LA.
- There is a need for good practice models that are pupil-centred.
- More effective use of IT could be made, e.g. for pupils who cannot travel to a school every day.

- Improvement to buildings is necessary to gain full accessibility.
- Social issues must be considered in making schools accessible.
- The cost of making schools accessible must be centrally funded
- Resources should be put into providing more public information and awareness to promote equality and equity throughout Scotland.
- Increased resources should be invested in alleviating poverty to enable children and young people to reach their full potential.

Appendix: Data quotes

- 'SEN pupils...often lose skills if they are not constantly practised'
- 'a much wider choice of subjects should be available...and community based work experience available to all (sic) pupils'
- 'children MUST (sic) see learning as relevant to their lives'
- '6-7 years old would be better [as an age to start formal schooling] to allow for physical and mental development'
- 'Behaviour is not taught solely within education...The home environment is extremely important for a child, and any improvements in housing, employment and health will also benefit education'
- 'Risk-taking is an important element in learning, but many schools are scared to allow risks to be taken. This affects SEN pupils more than others, as they will often tend to have poorer balance / bodily and spatial awareness etc. so are more prone to bumps and bruises.'
- 'Children's Rights" checklists [should] be built into school planning and procedures'
- 'Needs to be an overhaul of school's internal systems to ensure curriculum can be matched from mainstream to special needs pupils.'
- 'Where are the children in the decision making?'
- 'Reality of implementing PLPs...massive implications of time requirements and management of systems'
- 'Reduce size of schools to optimum (600 – 800)...Machinery and bureaucracy too big in many [larger] schools to allow personal knowledge of child's needs.'
- 'What is the community? Religious base, council estate, private estate, school population, social cliques...where do they fit in community?...Need the community to come into (sic) schools.'
- 'The schools are judged on results and the hidden curriculum is ignored.'
- 'Raise self-esteem of the family – ownership, participation, attainment'
- 'Should all children be in full time education – for kids who have been abused or neglected and in are children's homes school can be the last place they want to be. In stead of forcing them to go to school – when they are not ready we should be giving them help to be develop coping mechanisms and a range of provision in and out of school.'
- 'All kids should be able to take time out slots or go into the community during the school day to do things they enjoy or need to do whether its sport or going to see a counsellor. '
- 'I had a friend at school who did crap but later he got scotvecs and eventually went to do a PhD. He needed a more flexible approach to learning he didn't get at school.'
- 'We all need to treat each other with more respect. I think some teachers think that parents night is about parents agreeing with what they say and they don't listen to anything else, others shout at the kids and the kids do it back'
- 'My brother New Zealand and my niece was in school saying it was always easy and after three weeks they got a letter from the school saying she could move up a year, get harder work in class or take a social option. She is very good at tennis so now she gets out of school one day a week to do that.'
- 'Its important to recognise different types of intelligence e.g. emotional intelligence' and there should be far more recognition of mental health issues.'
- 'early years and primary schooling should have nothing to do with exams and later if youngsters want to do exams they should decide when they are ready to take the plunge.'