

# Consultation Response



**The Inquiry into Purposes of Scottish Education  
(Scottish Parliament, Education, Culture and Sport Committee,  
June 2002)**

and

**The National Debate on Education  
(Scottish Executive Education Department, July 2002)**

## **CHILDREN IN SCOTLAND**

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 Forum 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).

## **AN UNPRECEDENTED OPPORTUNITY**

Children in Scotland welcomes the respective debates on education, initiated by the Scottish Executive and the Education, Culture and Sport Committee of the Scottish Parliament. They provide an unique opportunity to consider radical, rather than merely incremental, change and represent an unprecedented opportunity to ask the most fundamental and important of questions – 'What is education for?'

Children in Scotland appreciates the recognition by the Scottish Executive that, in order to reach people who might otherwise not be included in the debate, certain forms of consultation needed to be financed. The Scottish Executive funded Children in Scotland, in partnership with other agencies, to undertake the following consultations:

1. *Helping Children Learn: Qualifications and Training Seminar*, with the Faculty of Education, University of Edinburgh. A summary of key conclusions is included in Appendix A.

2. *Reaching young people*, jointly with Save the Children Fund. This was a three stage consultation, seeking to engage young people who would potentially not be involved in 'mainstream' school responses. (1) Over 250 members of Children in Scotland's Participation Network were mailed out the briefing pack for the National Education Debate and an accompanying activity sheet. (2) Work with 7 expert groups of young people, resulting in A1 posters and a CD summarising their views. (3) An expert debate 'School Daze' bringing the young people together to exchange their views and to discuss them with key decision makers. A summary of this work is included in Appendix B.
3. *Reaching partners in learning*, in partnership with the Scottish Support for Learning Association. A website was constructed, for this and other partnership activities, at [www.childreninscotland.org.uk/educationdebate](http://www.childreninscotland.org.uk/educationdebate). Meetings were held across Scotland with adults directly involved in children's learning support. A summary is included in Appendix C.
4. *Responding to the National Debate on Education*, with the Scottish Consumer Council. This qualitative research sought the views of parents, who otherwise might not be included in 'mainstream' responses. The submission date for this work is at the end of July so a summary is not attached here.

Key points from the first three activities are incorporated into the response here, although are more extensively elaborated upon in separate submissions.

Children in Scotland also undertook consultations with its members through:

5. Consultation with its Special Needs Advisory Group (SNAG) on 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2002
6. Consultation with its Early Years Advisory Group (EYAG) on 17<sup>th</sup> June 2002
7. A consultative seminar open to all CIS members, held on 4<sup>th</sup> July 2002

Children in Scotland works with the Scottish Council Foundation through its Learning Network; this Network has submitted a separate response (8).

All these sources are drawn upon in the response below. The numbers are used above to indicate sources of views, as appropriate.

## SUMMARY

“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. ... 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.” (2)

**What is education for? The current fixations with academic subjects and narrow targets and assessments are undesirable. A fundamental shift in discourse and thinking is required: from a concentration on ‘schooling’ and ‘content’ to ‘learning’ and ‘knowledge’.**

- Learning should be fun.
- A wider range of subjects needs to be taught and a broader range of activities available. Pupils should not have to spend so much time at their desks. Learning needs to build young people’s self-esteem.
- While good examples were cited, overall young people and adults call for a fundamental shift in practice to involving and respecting children, young people, parents and communities.
- Flexibility is essential – in where, how, what, when children and young people learn. The possibilities of IT and distance learning should be used far more extensively to support flexibility.
- Young people say that punishments are frequently unfair, impossible to fulfil or out of proportion.
- The concept of ‘interrupted learning’ is potentially more useful than labelling pupils.
- Young people think teachers should be selected on the basis of, and be trained to be, friendly, patient and sensitive.
- To match the refocus of education and schooling on learning, teacher training needs to be reviewed to re-conceptualise teachers’ role as learning mentors. Teachers need to be trained to work with others and the community.
- Guidance and support for pupils is essential.
- Debating compulsory school ages become less salient if more flexible learning approaches and ‘spaces’ are introduced into the education system.
- Class sizes must be substantially reduced with corresponding increases in adult: pupil ratios.
- Physically, young people recommend improvements in school environments.
- Accessibility – physical but also social, communication etc. – needs to be increased substantially in schools and suitably funded by the government.
- Special, residential and home schooling were seen as ‘negative’ choices because of failures of the ‘mainstream’, for some young people. Inclusion, according to adult

participants, must be based on children's needs and best interests rather than on having all young people in 'mainstream' settings.

- While the increased government commitment to early years and out of school services is supported, the present coverage and type of services are seen as highly inadequate.
- Those young people who had left school with poor experiences and qualifications feel they have missed their opportunity for education.

## A. WHAT NEEDS TO BE IMPROVED?

A host of recommendations were made across the consultations, from smaller class sizes to improving teacher training to a refocusing around 'learning' and 'knowledge' over schooling and content. These are detailed in later sections. However, three issues were strongly expressed but do not fit neatly into later discussions and thus are covered here:

1. Increased involvement and respect for children, young people, parents and communities.
2. The 'missed opportunity' for young people with negative school experiences.
3. Looking critically at the purpose, structure and funding of child care services

### 1. Involvement and respect

"Involve pupils, parents in school – meaningfully rather than legalistically." (7)

**While good examples were cited, overall young people and adults call for a fundamental shift in practice to involving and respecting children, young people, parents and communities** (2, 3, 4 and 7).

Some young people describe good experiences of school councils being effective in influencing school decisions while other young people describe negative experiences of school councils being ineffective or their views not being considered by pupil representatives. Young people want to be involved in choices about their own education, with good experiences cited when they were in smaller classes and teachers had more time to listen. (2)

At the end of 'School Daze', a call was made for continuing dialogue in national decision-making, between children/ young people, parents and teachers. (2)

More local decision-making is recommended, with local accountability (3 and 7).

### 2. Missed opportunity

Most young people think that schools currently offer the best opportunity to get the qualifications they need for their future. **Those young people who had left school with poor experiences and qualifications feel they have missed their opportunity.** Even though still under the age of 20, they feel it is too late for them. Some had become connected into alternative approaches, which they find helpful, but they still wish they 'could go back and do it again'. (2)

**Young people outwith 'the system' can find it difficult to access careers information and opportunities.** (2 and 7) They may be afraid of assessment, lack confidence and certainly lack practice of more formal learning. Some young people may not wish to use existing models of adult basis education, to be taught with adults much older than themselves. (7)

### 3. Early years services

**While the increased government commitment to early years and out of school services is supported, the present coverage and type of services are seen as highly inadequate.** The low qualifications of many working in such services, despite the services' importance to children's learning and well-being, were highly problematic. Services continued to be under-resourced. The 'mixed economy of services' is not, in most areas, providing choice; frequently a particular service is the only one parents and children can access. (7)

Basic questions are not presently answered on the purposes of such services: are they to meet families' needs? To foster equality? To support a larger workforce of female labour? More should be learnt from positive models elsewhere, such as Denmark and Sweden (1 and 7).

### B. WHAT SHOULD CHILDREN LEARN?

"Stop being obsessed by measurement. There is much of value that is extremely difficult to measure." (7)

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

"You need to learn for everyday life." (2)

**Fundamental questions need to be asked, it was suggested at the Education Seminar (7), on what is valued in education.** This then effects what children should learn and what and how learning is assessed. The current fixations -- with content over knowledge, academic subjects over other skills, and narrow targets and assessment -- are seen as highly detrimental to young people's experiences and the outcomes of the Scottish education system (2, 3, 7 and 8). Further and higher education should reassess their entrance requirements, to be less dependant on examination results (7).

**A wider range of subjects needs to be taught and a broader range of activities available (2, 3, 7 and 8).** Participants differ on what subjects should be compulsory but all agree that the school curriculum is too narrowly conceived at the moment and creates unworkable burdens on many teachers and pupils. Skills and opportunities for participation and citizenship are essential in pupils' learning. A particular suggestion is for development education to become a focus of learning. (7) Young people need to be taught 'skills for life' (2 and 5).

**Learning needs to build young people's self-esteem.** The detrimental effects of bullying and discrimination were extensively described by young people, directly linking to the educational failures and poor experiences of school. (2)

### C. HOW SHOULD CHILDREN LEARN

“Reduce our use of labels as solutions.” (7)

**Learning should be fun** (2 and 7). Young people, who had problems with behaviour or attendance and/ or those who had been excluded, clearly express the view that school had simply not engaged them (2). Early years services themselves may provide an example, where experiential learning and play are integral.

**Flexibility is essential.** This runs throughout this response, in what, where and when children should learn. In addition, young people said that learning must be ‘at your own pace’. At ‘School Daze’, they concluded that classes should be grouped to how people learn. When pupils are not grouped by how they learn, those that learn more quickly can be distracted. People misbehave when they are not getting attention. (2)

**The possibilities of IT and distance learning should be used far more extensively to support flexibility.** They could not solve all the present problems for those whose ‘mainstream’ schooling was failing them (e.g. those who were bullied, who had special educational needs, or who were travelling) but they had considerable potential. (2, 3 and 7)

**Pupils should not have to spend so much time at their desks.** They should have more opportunities for physical activities and games, social opportunities, after-school opportunities and more physiotherapy. They need to have space to relax, to be with their friends, to ‘chill out’. (2)

**Young people say that punishments are frequently unfair, impossible to fulfil or out of proportion.** Young people note the irony of being excluded from schools, when being absent from schools is what the young people want anyway. Young people comment positively on the effective combination of a reward system for positive behaviour, smaller classes and teachers with good interpersonal skills. (2)

**The concept of ‘interrupted learning’ is potentially more useful than labelling pupils** in various groups (e.g. asylum and refugee, Gypsy Traveller, those with ‘special educational needs’). As described by a headteacher having to deal with such diversity, perceiving that ‘We are all equally different’ allows for diversity to be recognised along with equity of experience and provision. Young people should not have to gain labels in order to obtain services. (7)

Young people spoke of the negativity of being assigned labels by teachers and schools, because of untraditional families and lifestyles, of the poor behaviour of older family members or of their own bad reputation (2).

### D. WHO CAN HELP CHILDREN LEARN?

“Teachers should behave the way they want their pupils to respond, with respect.” (7)

Comments were extensive on who should be teachers, and the training they should received. **Young people think teachers should be friendly, patient and sensitive** and these characteristics should be looked for in selecting teachers and should be

encouraged in teacher training. Teachers should seek to understand people, use language everyone can understand and not brand children with labels. Young people should be brought into teacher training, to help train on these and other issues. (2 and 7)

**To match the refocus of education and schooling on learning (see Section F) teacher training needs to be reviewed to re-conceptualise teachers' role as learning mentors** (1 and 7). Subject disciplines should be used to develop understanding and skills, which can be applied to authentic issues and problems.

**Teachers need to be trained to work with others and the community.** Interagency working should be incorporated into job descriptions. (1, 3 and 7) Multi-professional teams should be brought into schools (3 and 7). Specialist expertise should be brought into continued professional development (7). Consideration should be given to a common platform of initial training, for all relevant professions (1 and 3).

Consideration should be given to other professionals in the classroom, beyond teachers. Such professionals may be able to contribute the skills needed to make learning fun (see Section C above), using learning modes such as experiential, arts, crafts etc. (1).

**Teacher education and teaching practice need to be focused more explicitly on serving children, young people and parents** (1). Section A discusses in more detail the strong call for teachers to respect pupils and parents and for learning and decision-making truly to be participative.

A particular concern is **the general lack of qualifications and support for those working with the youngest children** – despite the evidence from child development of the vital importance of the early years to learning (7).

Young people are clear on the **qualities of 'good' teachers** (2). Good teachers respect pupils, listen to them, are fair, help pupils with their work and keep what young people tell them confidentially to themselves. Good teachers prevent minor incidents from escalating, being 'firm but fair'. Certain young people recognise that they did cause behaviour problems in classes but note how some teachers made the situation worse while others were able to deal with it effectively. The difference made by good teachers in their lives was immense.

**Guidance and support is essential.** Certain young people can describe positive experiences of guidance support and with individual teachers. However, the positive experiences of guidance teachers are few. The inaccessibility of guidance teachers is described, as well as the unsuitability of some for the role. Guidance teachers need the time to undertake this task. One group of young people are particularly concerned about the lack of choice in guidance teachers, which has meant that girls are unwilling to confide in their guidance teacher because he is male. It was agreed that young people should have a choice in selecting their guidance teacher. (2)

As stated in Section A, **parents need to be involved more in the school community.** School boards or parent teaching councils do not always engage all parents in their children's schools (4). Particular attention needs to be given to the needs of those whose first language is not English, to ensure information and interpretation is available and the pupils are not over-used as translators (7).

Young people tend to perceive school and education as separate from their family and home. A few young people did comment, when asked, and note that parents frequently do not know what is happening to their children at school – even with such attempts as a school-homework diary or when children were truanting from school for months. (2)

## E. WHEN SHOULD CHILDREN LEARN?

### *Question 10: compulsory school age*

Rather than debating a compulsory school starting age, both the EYAG (6) and the Helping Children Learn seminar (1) suggest that change should be determined by the appropriateness of the curriculum, to match the needs of the young child. A structured, continuous pathway is needed from early years to primary school. Consultations with the SSLA (3) did lead to a later starting age for formal education being recommended, with full-time kindergarten to support physical, social and emotional development and self-esteem.

Equally, **the question of a compulsory school leaving age becomes less salient if more flexible learning approaches and ‘spaces’ are introduced into the education system**, including work experience and training (2, 3, 7). With such change, a group of young people with negative educational experiences think that the compulsory school age should be extended up to age 17 or beyond (2).

At present, transitions between parts of the education system are not smooth, whether from entrance into primary school, primary to secondary or leaving secondary school (1, 6 and 7). Sweden have developed a concept of a ‘red thread’, with the aim of linking services children from age 1 to 16, which may be a concept of use to Scotland (1).

## F. WHERE SHOULD CHILDREN LEARN?

“Break down the walls. Learning can take place anywhere.”

“Interagency learning and support centres not schools as they are.” (7)

“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.” (2)

**A fundamental shift in discourse and thinking is required: from a concentration on ‘schooling’ to that of ‘learning’.** Young people from Gypsy Traveller backgrounds feel that the learning they gained from their lifestyles is undervalued by the present educational system (2). Learning is not encapsulated within schools, and all learning should be valued in schools, the home, in communities and in peer groups (1, 6, and 7). Alternative spaces for learning (e.g. museums) should be encouraged, as they can offer particular experiences and skills (e.g. creativity) (7). An overarching learning framework and common purposes could be created, which all services involved in facilitating learning can work (1).

**Substantial reductions in class sizes, and corresponding increases in adult: pupil ratios,** are strongly advocated by young people and adults alike (2, 5 and 7). Young

people involved in 'School Daze' settled on a ratio of one adult to eight pupils, stating that even with flexibility to local circumstances an upper ceiling should be set. They describe over and over again the disadvantages to their learning of larger class sizes and the advantages of more contact with teachers provided by smaller classes (2). Teachers too would be motivated by smaller class sizes (2 and 7).

**Physically, young people recommend improvements in school environments (2).**

They and adults comment on how school space can make it difficult for young people to work in small groups. Schools should be in good repair. Two particular requests are made by young people for:

- A place for all pupils to relax and chill. Young people should have opportunities to relax without constant supervision from adults.
- Space for games and play

Young people explored the advantages and disadvantages of special, residential and home schooling versus 'mainstream', with no consensus (2). Common across many comments, however, is that any advantages of the first three are caused by failures of the latter: in other words, **special, residential and home schooling were frequently 'negative' choices because of failures of the 'mainstream'**. Inclusion, according to adult participants, must be based on children's needs and best interests rather than on having all young people in 'mainstream' settings (7). Accessibility – physical but also social, communication etc. – needs to be increased substantially in schools and suitably funded by the government (3).

When young people leave secondary schooling, they can face particular problems of connecting in with further educational opportunities (2 and 7). Those from rural areas can find particular difficulties due to lack of transport and isolation (7).

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **HELPING CHILDREN LEARN: QUALIFICATIONS AND TRAINING**

#### **Children in Scotland/University of Edinburgh seminar, Moray House, 25 June 2002**

- Learning is not encapsulated within schools. It would be helpful to have an overarching framework and common purposes within which all services involved in facilitating learning can work
- The demarcation lines between schools and early years services and youth projects, and between primary and secondary schools, need to be reviewed particularly in the light of the rolling out of new community schools. Teacher training needs to allow for greater flexibility and mobility between services and age groups whilst still enabling teachers to develop a sense of their own professional skills and expertise
- Sweden offers a model for integrated initial training for teachers and social educators (social pedagogues) with a common core of 18 months training for all those teaching or caring for children from the age of 1–19 years of age but significant salary differentials remain between sectors and between teachers and social pedagogues. Some participants expressed reservations about fully integrated teacher training. In Scotland, one possibility for teacher training would be to have education professionals divided into early (to include pre-school), middle and later year specialists rather than pre-school, primary, secondary and further education college lecturers
- Teachers should focus on helping children develop skills and critical thinking rather than imparting knowledge, using subject disciplines to develop understanding and skills which can be applied to authentic issues and problems. This implies a major change in the teacher education curriculum
- Teacher education needs to focus more explicitly on serving children, young people and parents
- Teacher education should be linked to continuous professional development with opportunities for training with other related professionals

## APPENDIX B

### REACHING YOUNG PEOPLE

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. A three stage project was undertaken:

- Stage 1: Engaging the Children in Scotland's Participation Network. The 258 members of the network, from a broad range of agencies, were sent the National Debate on Education's briefing pack and an activities sheet.
- Stage 2: Working with 7 'expert groups' of young people with different perspectives on education. The emphasis was on in-depth discussion, leading up to Stage 3. Each group developed key messages for a poster and a CD.
- Stage 3: Holding an 'Expert Debate' (called *School Daze*) to bring the young people from the expert groups together to discuss and debate their views. This included drama, a 'question time' with key decision-makers, and artwork.

49 young people participated in Stages 2 and 3. All participating young people will receive feedback on the report's findings.

#### KEY MESSAGES FROM THE YOUNG PEOPLE:

- **Children and young people supported having a central place, to socialise, to learn and to gain qualifications.** Children and young people learnt things at other times but felt that school offered the best opportunity to get qualifications. It was also important to have a building like school where young people came together.
- **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 sporting 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 to socialise, 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.

## **APPENDIX C**

### **REACHING PARTNERS IN LEARNING – SUMMARY OF AGREED POINTS**

Children in Scotland, in partnership with the Scottish Support for Learning Association.

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.