

Children in Scotland

every child - every childhood

Working it out: helping to shape the future of Scotland's children's sector workforce

Seminar report

4 February 2009

**Qualifications and opportunities for new partnerships
University of Aberdeen**

This seminar was hosted by the University of Aberdeen as part of the *Working it Out* programme. The event considered both current qualification requirements and future potential qualifications, which could reflect approaches taken in other European countries. The seminar provided employer and provider perspectives on qualifications and professional development and heard about the initial education received by Norway's pre-school pedagogues.

The *Working it out* seminar in Aberdeen revealed support for a simpler and more coherent qualifications framework for the children's sector workforce.

Belief in the ongoing importance of specialist skills and knowledge associated with traditional professions such as social work, teaching and paediatric health was very strong. But there was also agreement that the existing qualifications and professional development framework would benefit from being simplified to help achieve a shared vision and common skills, knowledge, values and goals right across the children's sector workforce.

A simplified and coherent framework that provides core skills, knowledge, values and goals focusing on an holistic approach to working with children, young people and families would not only help different professionals work together but create a solid foundation for the whole children's sector. It could create a solid foundation and entry point for anyone who wants to work with children and families and create a workforce that is flexible, able to work in a number of different settings and provide opportunities for people to specialise and progress their careers if desired.

The seminar also discussed how simplifying the framework in this way could help strengthen currently undervalued parts of the workforce, in particular the huge net of support staff such as family support workers, classroom assistants and auxiliary assistants. It could extend further, to catering staff and caretakers, who all play a vital role in creating environments in which children can thrive.

An holistic understanding of children and skills that enable people to engage and work in partnership with parents and the community are absolutely essential for making sure new policies such as *Getting it right for every child*, *Curriculum for Excellence* and the *Early Years Framework* are a success.

Sue Bruce, chief executive of Aberdeen City Council, said she supported the need for a broader qualification to enhance workforce mobility.

There is a lot of good work already happening in Scotland that could provide a springboard for change, some of which was presented at this seminar. At Aberdeen University, for example, the Bachelor of Education degree has a strong focus on community, recognising that in order to understand children's behaviour in the classroom, you have to understand the community in which they live. The university's Curative Education degree was also offered as an example of a qualification which could equip the workforce with an holistic understanding of work with children and families. Its roots are in the Camphill Rudolph Steiner communities, which provide inclusive, holistic education and a generally supportive environment for vulnerable children and adults. However, it is beginning to attract a wider clientele like those working in residential care and Norma Hart, the programme's leader, believes there is huge potential for it to benefit many other areas of the children's sector workforce. The problem at the moment, she said, is that it is not meaningful to the wider workforce.

Many comparisons can be drawn between the Curative Education degree and pedagogy qualifications offered in a number of countries throughout Europe. Pedagogy also focuses on the holistic care of children – their body, mind, feelings, spirit, creativity and relationships. Students study pedagogical theory and their studies often incorporate areas such as psychology, health, communication, social policy and law. There is also a large practical element. As part of the Curative Education degree students have to learn a musical instrument, and study other art forms so that they can use them in their practical day-to-day work with people.

A number of delegates felt that before we move forward to change the qualification framework in this country, we have to address our cultural attitudes towards children, which underpin all professional practice. Does the historically low status (in terms of pay and conditions) of those working in the early years reflect the value that society places on our youngest members of society? Is the heavy emphasis on child protection over children as strong and independent with rights helpful?

Particularly important for moving forward however, will be better quality partnerships between those who employ the children's sector workforce and those who provide initial training and continuing development. It was pointed out that any new qualifications have to follow jobs rather than the other way round.

Seminar sound-bites:

“We need teachers of children not just teachers of subject. We need people who understand the complementary roles of health, communication and learning, and understand that they are inextricably linked, who view *Getting it Right for Every Child* as a way of working. I need professionals who put the needs of children first.”

“I am looking for common features, common entry points and common goals for the children’s sector workforce. That workforce must aspire to support children who are safe, nurtured and stimulated.”

Bruce Robertson, director of education, learning and leisure at Aberdeenshire Council.

“In order to understand why children act the way they do in school you need to understand what is affecting them outside school.”

“The mistake we might be making is starting from traditional models. We need to be much clearer about what we are looking for and create a simple qualifications and professional development framework. Let’s be creative for the future and not rely on models of the past.”

Myra Pearson, head of school of education, University of Aberdeen.

“Rather than looking at them as teachers in the classroom, we view them as teachers in the community. The course is closely linked, in that way, with pedagogy. Students look first and foremost at the community the children are coming from and then use that in the classroom.”

Sheila Nutkins, programme leader, Bachelor of Education, University of Aberdeen.

“If it is a workforce focusing on outcomes, what about the language and values used across the workforce? They are rather disparate at the moment. And what about regulation? This too varies across different areas of the workforce.”

Ian Davidson, Workforce Development Team Leader, Children, Young People and Social Care Division, Scottish Government

“I’m supportive of looking further at the possibilities offered by the pedagogue model. Certainly supportive of the need for a broader qualification as something to help enhance workforce mobility.”

Sue Bruce, Chief Executive of Aberdeen City Council

“I think it would be very helpful to be able to work with more flexibility. So if you train as a teacher you could also work in social care, for example.”

Delegate

“There are lots of gaps in our qualifications system in terms of the skills they equip people with to become part of children’s workforce. But with so many different qualifications there is also a lot of overlap. None in themselves meet all the needs of the children’s sector workforce.”

Delegate

“The financial disparities between different areas of the workforce is a big problem still. Not just in terms of pay and conditions but in terms of the training available. For example, why does someone training to become a teacher get a grant, but there is no such guarantee for someone who wants to do the BA in Childhood Practice?”

Delegate

“I agree that there should be more parity in pay and conditions between different parts of the children’s sector workforce, but how will those services run by the voluntary sector be able to offer that? I wonder if introducing a minimum level 9 level of qualification for managers could be the death of playgroups. They are diminishing in huge number because they can’t offer high pay. If someone is educated to degree level, they are not going to hang around very long to be paid £7 per hour.”

Delegate

“I think everyone should have an understanding of working with children and young people across the age ranges. I started my career as a secondary school teacher and then, perhaps unusually, moved into early years. I wish I’d known what I know now about early child development when working with teenagers. And vice versa, I think my experience with older children helps in my work with younger children.”

Delegate

List of speakers

- Dr Bronwen Cohen, Chief Executive, Children in Scotland (Chair)
- Professor Duncan Rice, Principal of the University of Aberdeen (Welcoming address)
- Ian Davidson, Workforce Development Team Leader, Children, Young People and Social Care Division, Scottish Government
- Sue Bruce, CEO, Aberdeen City Council
- Bruce Robertson, Director of Education, Learning and Leisure, Aberdeenshire Council
- Myra Pearson, Head of School of Education, University of Aberdeen
- Ann Goeril Hugaas, Bodo University, Norway
- Norma Hart, Catriona McDonald and Sheila Nutkins, University of Aberdeen