CONSULTATION ON LIFE SKILLS IN THE CURRICULUM – FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

As part of the Welsh Youth Parliament’s inquiry into life skills in the curriculum, focus groups were held to gather the opinions of young people, teachers and youth workers. Life skills in the curriculum is one of the Welsh Youth Parliament’s three priorities this term, and the consultation’s findings will be used as the basis for recommendations for the Welsh Government in the autumn.

METHODOLOGY

A number of consultation methods were applied over a period of four months. Two questionnaires were prepared – one for young people and the other for adults – to understand how life skills are currently taught in schools. Through the questionnaire, data were gathered on the specific skills that are taught, how often the lessons are taught and who teaches them. In addition, young people were asked what they would like to learn and how often, as well as who should teach these lessons.

In addition to these quantitative data from the questionnaires, it was decided that focus groups should be held to gather qualitative data. 13 focus groups were held in July – the majority in our regional events in Swansea and Wrexham, as well as one group at a teachers’ conference in Llandudno. An additional 12 focus groups were held in August with young people from youth groups across South and North Wales.

Specific focus groups were designed for young people, teachers and youth workers. Participants in the focus groups for young people came from a range of schools and youth groups across north and south Wales.

Data from the questionnaire were used to prepare questions for the focus groups, with a view to gathering further opinions on trends emerging from the results, the reasons for these trends and practical ideas for changing the situation.
SUMMARY OF FOCUS GROUPS – YOUNG PEOPLE

THE MEANING OF ‘LIFE SKILLS’

At the beginning of the focus groups, the young people were asked to describe what life skills meant to them. At this point, a large number of young people noted the life skills that are most important to them.

The examples mentioned most often were financial skills (taxes, mortgages, managing money, banking, debt), sex education, political education, cookery/healthy diet, employment (careers, interviews, writing a CV) and first aid.

These were the definitions given by three young people from the focus groups in Swansea:

“Developing the skills needed to achieve a successful future.”

“Skills that enable people to operate effectively in society and reach their potential.”

“Skills that ensure that the younger generation has the skills needed to succeed in the modern world.”

CURRENT EXPERIENCES

Even though 80 per cent agreed that the current provision with regard to teaching life skills is not sufficient, there were several examples where experiences of these lessons had made a positive impression, for example:

- A careers day in year 10 – mock applications and interviews
- Projects similar to Dragon’s Den – creating and trying to sell a product
- Trips to UCAS and university fairs
- Community ambassadors
- Building a rocket in a science lesson – using financial and budgeting skills
- The challenge of managing a family of four’s weekly budget
- Welfare days for new pupils
- Healthy relationships – discussing what is and is not appropriate
- Lessons on terrorism and media influence
• Weekly lessons on welfare
• Lessons in a van which travels around schools educating young people on different life skills subjects
• Lessons on consent with the No Barriers theatre company were very engaging
• Lessons on consent from the Yorkshire Police – the Consent like Tea video was very memorable

Interestingly, a number of young people noted that the most memorable lessons were those given by guest speakers or those who were not teachers. The examples given were as follows:

• An entrepreneur attended French lessons to discuss the importance of speaking different languages
• Show Racism the Red Card
• St John’s Ambulance Service
• The Police – drugs, bullying, cyber-bullying
• Doctors and nurses
• Mess up the Mess (a company that helps young people to deal with mental health issues via theatre and the arts)
• The sixth form teaching younger pupils.

**APPEALING TO YOUNG PEOPLE**

**WHEN THE YOUNG PEOPLE WERE ASKED HOW LIFE SKILLS SHOULD BE TAUGHT IN A WAY THAT APPEALS TO THEM, A LARGE NUMBER REPLIED THAT THE SESSIONS NEED TO BE INTERACTIVE AND PRACTICAL, USING GAMES TO APPEAL TO THEM. ONE PARTICIPANT SUGGESTED THE FOLLOWING:**

“Encourage practical learning - for example, work experience, outdoor activities, presentations, listening to the pupils’ voice, interviews and debates”

*Swansea*

It was noted that the sessions need to be relevant to daily life, using real-life examples. This was a recurring theme, alongside the need for modern and relevant resources to facilitate this.
Interestingly, several focus groups discussed teaching boys and girls together, and opinions on this varied. Even though one participant argued that girls and boys should be taught separately in order for certain issues to be covered in greater detail, another participant stated that:

“It is important for boys and girls to be taught together about all issues related to sex in order to tackle the stigma surrounding the topic between the sexes.”

Wrexham

Who should teach the lessons became a subject of debate once again, and it was noted that external specialists should be drafted in to teach these lessons. It was said that the people who teach the lessons should be able to identify with young people, and that honesty is vital when discussing these topics.

An interesting point was raised in a youth group in South Wales that pupils need to be fully aware of how the contents of the lesson is relevant to their future lives. The life skills context of the lesson should always be made clear before teaching.

An example of a successful project was mentioned in North Wales:

“SWEET – a new qualification already being offered in schools in Denbighshire which includes qualifications in RSE, diversity, identity etc. It has a really good structure.”

Denbigh

WHO TEACHES THE LESSONS

To create a fuller picture of current provision, the young people were asked who teaches the lessons at present. The majority noted that teachers – primarily their form teachers – teach these lessons.

“The lessons are obviously handed to teachers at last minute. They read the information off Power Points, and the teachers clearly have little interest in the subject.”

Merthyr
Several participants noted that specialists from external organisations visit their schools on occasion, but that teachers teach these lessons as a rule.

“Usually, the form teachers teach these lessons, but external professionals come in to talk about specific topics and we learn much more.”

**Swansea**

**SPECIALISTS**

The young people were asked their opinion on the expertise of those who teach them. The response was varied, but 89 per cent of the young people noted that those who teach life skills need to be specialists in the topics being taught.

Despite this, when asked to expand on their responses, several participants noted that a teacher does not necessarily have to be an expert to teach every topic.

“I believe that specialists are needed to teach the most sensitive topics – sex education and mental health.”

**Wrexham**

“Teachers don’t have to be experts, but they need to take an interest in the subject.”

**Swansea**

“The teacher must be ready to listen and understand our point of view, and they should be approachable.”

**Swansea**

**TIMETABLE**

With the vast majority of young people (80 per cent) noting that not enough life skills lessons are currently being taught, the best way of incorporating these lessons into the school timetable was discussed.
In accordance with the new curriculum, a large number of young people suggested that the best way to teach a wide range of life skills in schools was to include these topics in lessons on the relevant subject. Their recommendations were as follows:

- Mathematics – mortgages, taxes, budgeting
- Science – sex education
- Geography – terrorism and extremism
- Religious education – awareness of sexual orientation and racial identity
- Welsh/English – relationships, politics
- Physical education – healthy eating, mental health

One participant said:

“I believe that in order to incorporate life skills within core subjects, a lesson should be taken from each subject and devoted to life skills within that subject area instead.”

Swansea

The teachers’ focus groups had a similar discussion, with more than one participant noting that schools should appoint a life skills co-ordinator, in addition to the literacy, numeracy and digital competence co-ordinators.

Several young people expressed an opinion on the practicality of teaching life skills within existing subject areas:

“It would be possible to include these issues within subjects like Biology – for example, real-world situations – but the emotional side has to be considered as well.”

Wrexham

“If life skills are taught within the new curriculum, priorities will need to be set to ensure the curriculum’s success, while ensuring that other lessons aren’t neglected.”

Swansea

It was noted that the skills must be relevant if they are to be taught within other lessons.

Several others were of the opinion that life skills should not be taught in lessons on other subjects at all.
“I don’t think that life skills should be taught during other lessons. The curriculum is under enough pressure already, and trying to squeeze in even more would be ridiculous.”

Swansea

Several participants noted that they now have PSE lessons on specific days once or twice a term. Opinions on this structure were mixed, with several participants reporting that these day-long courses were not taken seriously and that pupils were bored of them.

“In my opinion, we receive enough PSE lessons, but as they are taught over the course of a morning children become bored, so it would be better to spread out these lessons and have one lesson every week/fortnight.”

LIFE SKILLS OR EXAMS?

One concern expressed by Members of the Welsh Youth Parliament was that too much emphasis is placed on exams in schools and that this has a negative effect on young people’s mental health. This was discussed by young people in the focus groups, and their views were mixed.

When asked whether learning about life skills or learning how to succeed in exams is more important, several participants noted that this was a very difficult question to answer. It was noted that passing exams is important because so much emphasis is placed on them.

Of the participants, 38 per cent agreed that teaching life skills is more important than teaching young people to pass exams, with 29 per cent disagreeing and the remainder feeling that both aspects were equally important.

One solution, according to a participant, is as follows:

“Lessons on life skills should be taught regularly in years 7, 8 and 9 only, but it is important to have lessons focused on mental health at exam time.”

Swansea
On the whole, the consensus emerging from this discussion was focused on the importance of striking a balance between learning about life skills and learning how to pass exams.

To conclude the discussion, young people were asked whether teaching life skills in schools would help young people to address their mental health. Of the participants, 71 per cent agreed, 16 per cent disagreed and the remainder were uncertain.

**SUMMARY OF FOCUS GROUPS – TEACHERS**

**BARRIERS**

Discussions in the focus groups for teachers started by exploring the barriers that prevent schools from teaching life skills to young people on a regular basis.

There was a consensus, as well as strong feelings, in every focus group that an overemphasis on exams and results was the main reason for this. One teacher said:

“We still work in an old-fashioned system that teaches pupils how to pass exams rather than preparing them for real life.”

*Llandudno*

There was a great deal of discussion too of the pressure on teachers and the expectations of them, and the ensuing implication that there is insufficient time to teach topics that do not come up in exams. One teacher noted that subjects such as PSE and religious education are the first to be cut to make room for work in preparation for exams.

With teachers and results facing such scrutiny and criticism, management teams have to prioritise the teaching of exam subjects.

“We must see a change in culture regarding the way that schools are judged.”

*Wrexham*

One participant noted that the overemphasis on exams means that pupils view the teaching of life skills and PSE in a negative light.
“It's difficult to get pupils to take the lessons seriously when there is no exam and qualification at the end.”

Swansea

A solution was suggested to this problem, namely the creation of a life skills/PSE qualification to be assessed on an informal basis. It was noted that some schools are already trialling this approach. On the other hand, another participant in a different focus group argued that this would send the wrong message to young people – for example, if they were to receive a low grade in an assessment on mental health.

**WELSH BACCALAUREATE**

While discussing a potential life skills qualification, the Welsh baccalaureate was mentioned several times as a natural topic of conversation. The discussion focused on the fact that this is, fundamentally, the purpose of the baccalaureate, and that there is room within this qualification to teach more about life skills; for example, in the enterprise and employability challenge.

Despite this, ironically, it was noted that the number of PSE lessons that used to be offered in schools has now decreased because the weekly pastoral PSE lessons have been replaced by day-long PSE courses and the Welsh baccalaureate.

**TEACHING**

As with the focus groups for young people, the best way to incorporate lessons on life skills into the curriculum was also discussed in these focus groups. The teachers noted that attempting to include life skills in the curriculum on top of expectations regarding literacy, numeracy and digital competence would be very difficult.

More than one focus group discussed the need for life skills frameworks that place primary schools and secondary schools within a single continuum.

This was discussed in the context of the new curriculum. One teacher said:
“In theory, the new curriculum will solve this problem, but the new curriculum is ambiguous and wordy.”

Llandudno

There followed a discussion of the fact that such an ambiguous curriculum provides an opportunity for schools to claim that they are doing this work when, in reality, they are not. It could also lead to greater inconsistency across Wales.

A solution to this was discussed, namely setting a clear framework that describes what needs to be taught at what age. As an example, it was suggested that learning about mortgages may not be relevant to year 7 pupils.

More than one focus group mentioned that some schools may feel nervous about teaching particular subjects for fear that this would lead to complaints from parents. Teachers felt that a central framework should be set by the Government to ensure consistency and clarity for schools.

“Every school has a literacy, numeracy and digital competence co-ordinator, but no life skills co-ordinator.”

Llandudno

It was noted that this would enable schools to map how the framework was being taught across schools and would ensure that life skills were taught as a natural part of other subjects – as is currently the case with literacy and numeracy.

**PROBLEMATIC SUBJECTS**

The teachers were asked whether there were any topics that they would not feel confident teaching, or subjects that pose particular problems for them.

Mental health was the topic that engendered the greatest uncertainty – it was noted that there were no black-and-white answers to mental health issues, and while some teachers may have their own experiences of dealing with their own mental health issues, this would not be a solution for everybody.
Another problematic subject was financial education, because these sessions are usually provided by the private sector. Schools find it difficult to afford this provision.

One teacher voiced concerns regarding the teaching of domestic skills in schools, and the idea that these skills would traditionally be taught to girls. Making these lessons relevant to boys too would be a vital step towards challenging this stereotype.

Political education was raised on more than one occasion, as was the fear that teachers’ own political bias may influence young people, as well as very many older people’s lack of understanding of the political system – particularly in Wales.

Education about technology was the next cause for concern, primarily because the world is developing so quickly. The concern is that keeping abreast of technological developments is very difficult, and lessons and resources date very quickly.

There was a consensus that the most problematic topics were those that have come to the fore in recent years – particularly among young people. Teachers would find it difficult to teach these and do them justice.

**TEACHERS’ COMPETENCE**

Every focus group discussed teachers’ competence in teaching these lessons.

> “Staff haven’t been fully trained to teach PSE and, as a result, they don’t commit fully to teaching these lessons. It is often seen by them as an inconvenience.”

*Swansea*

It was also mentioned that teachers are under a great deal of pressure – in particular, the constant pressure of being judged. The question was asked as to whether teachers should be teaching these lessons.

It was noted that it would be difficult for teachers to develop expertise in life skills when they are so busy with work on their specialist subjects.

A large number of teachers stated that they would not feel confident in teaching topics such as mental health and suicide. It was noted that some topics are easy for anyone to teach in terms of knowledge – for example, money – but that topics such as sex education should be taught by specialists trained to teach these topics effectively.
“Specialists should teach the more emotional topics.”

Wrexham

“My main concern is getting things wrong.”

Llandudno

It was noted that a large number of teachers have no experience of teaching life skills, leading to the question of whether inexperienced teachers should be teaching these lessons.

There was a consensus that staff require specific training, as well as making use of external expertise, but that this is dependent on funding.

It was suggested that there should be investment in teacher training during initial training so that every newly qualified teacher feels confident in teaching these topics.

Others argued that this funding should be invested in training external specialists.

RESOURCES

There was a strong feeling across the focus groups about the need for a central bank of modern resources containing up-to-date and reliable information to be used by schools.

It was suggested that the Welsh Government should be responsible for referring schools to the best resources for teaching all kinds of life skills.

Following on from this, it was mentioned that agencies should come together to contribute to this central bank and share resources with schools. This would save teachers time, would ensure that the right subjects were taught at the right times, and would ensure consistency across the nation.

Teacher training was raised once again at this point, as was the need to invest in teachers – to let them know where they can get these resources; to make them aware of the problems facing young people at different stages of their development; and to train them to feel confident in teaching life skills.
SUMMARY OF FOCUS GROUPS – YOUTH WORKERS

PROVISION

When the youth workers were asked to list the life skills that they cover in their sessions, over 30 different life skills came to the fore across both focus groups. These skills included:

- Drugs and alcohol
- Healthy eating and living
- Mindfulness
- Politics
- Citizenship
- Sex education (including consent and LGBTQ+ issues)
- Money
- Employment skills
- Cultural education – tolerance and cultural awareness
- Healthy relationships
- Online safety
- Dealing with emotions
- Bullying

SCHOOLS

The youth workers were asked for their opinion on the provision of life skills in schools. One hundred per cent of the youth workers agreed that the current provision does not adequately prepare young people for life as adults.

Concerns were expressed regarding the inconsistency in provision between schools, and a number of factors that cause this inconsistency were also discussed.

One factor was the difficulties faced in rural areas with regard to sourcing good providers and up-to-date resources. Another factor was funding cuts, which affect schools’ ability to pay for quality providers and resources. Reflecting teachers’ concerns, the lack of teacher training was also mentioned, as well as a lack of confidence in their ability to teach these topics. It was also noted that nobody is currently monitoring these inconsistencies across schools.
The new curriculum was also discussed at this point, and, like the teachers, the youth workers expressed concerns regarding the ambiguous nature of the new curriculum and the danger that it could ultimately lead to greater inconsistency.

There was a consensus that this places additional pressure on teachers who are already up to their ears in work, and that it is difficult for teachers to feel positive about new developments when faced with so many other expectations.

**WHOSE ROLE?**

The focus group’s final discussion was on whether it is the role of youth workers to teach life skills to young people. One focus group agreed unanimously that this was part of a youth worker’s role. The second focus group did not vote on this issue, but there was a consensus that it is a duty for everyone.

Despite this, it was noted that it is not a youth worker’s role to ‘teach’ but to advise – teaching in an informal way.

Participants arrived at a consensus that teachers, youth workers and parents are duty bound to teach life skills. It was noted that it is not always easy for every parent to do this, and that it is, therefore, important that each sector works together to ensure that some groups of young people don’t ‘miss out’, particularly those from disadvantaged areas.