

Scottish Learner Panel



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Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills

The Year of Young People 2018 created an opportunity for government to reflect on how we engage with our children and young people and positively challenge our existing practices and processes. In no area of government was this challenge viewed with more significance than by our education system.



We know that government works best when its priorities are shaped by the direct participation of its citizens, including our children and young people. In Scotland we have a proud and well-established record of empowering our citizens to be involved in shaping government policies and services. The Scottish Government has many excellent examples of how we have reformed aspects of our education system by taking account of the voices and feedback of our children and young people. However, we recognized that these examples were not consistent or wide ranging enough. In order to ensure that we are able to truly place the voices of our learners at the heart of everything we do we recognized the need for a new approach.

In October 2018 I welcomed the establishment of the Scottish Learner Panel, the first step in our journey towards building this new approach to formally incorporating the voice of learners in our decision making processes.

This report details the first year of the Scottish Learner Panel, the discussions of its participants and the key thinking points that those participants wished to convey to decision makers. It provides a very helpful insight in to how our education system works and feels to those learners who it has been developed to serve. It helps us to understand what areas our learners see as key strengths and what areas they feel we must work to improve and develop further. It is a document which I hope all decision makers in the Scottish education system will reflect on and take account when continuing to improve and reform what we do.

I would like to thank Children in Scotland, Children’s Parliament, The Scottish Youth Parliament and Young Scot, who worked together to support the learners involved in this first year of the Scottish Learner Panel and make it a success. I would also like to thank all of the key decision makers who attended meetings of the panel including members of the Scottish Education Council. In particular, I would like to thank each and every one of the learners who gave up their time to participate in the Scottish Learner Panel’s first year and for all of the work that they have done.

I hope that this report marks the beginning of what will become a long standing practice of formally and continually gathering the views of our learners to shape what we do and I look forward to continuing to hear from the Scottish Learner Panel in the years to come.

John Swinney

**Deputy First Minister and
Cabinet Secretary for Education & Skills**



Foreword

From a very early age, education forms an important part of children and young people’s lives. It is responsible for not only shaping their academic capabilities, but their personal, social and physical abilities too. Such is the importance of education to our children and young people’s futures; it is vital that they are given the opportunity to contribute to decisions about their learning.

We are delighted to have engaged with 3-18-year olds from across Scotland on this partnership project. This experience has given all partners insight into the experiences of children and young people and the differences and similarities between schools. By attending meetings and engaging with children and young people, stakeholders and policy-makers can give them a real platform. This allows children and young people to feed their ideas about their futures into policy design and development.

The insights and thinking detailed in this report fully capture the work of the Scottish Learner Panel. This year of work is ensuring that children and young people’s participation is valued in the most meaningful way – by putting their needs and interests at the heart of the Scottish education system.

Amy Woodhouse, Joint Acting Chief Executive / Head of Policy, Projects and Participation, Children in Scotland

Rona Blackwood, Head of Programmes, Children’s Parliament

Jamie Dunlop, Deputy Chief Executive, Scottish Youth Parliament

Louise Macdonald, Chief Executive, Young Scot



Introduction

During the 2018 Year of Young People, the Scottish Government commissioned a number of new and innovative projects and approaches designed to increase the participation of children and young people in decisions which affect their lives.

This included the commissioning of a project in education, to ensure that the voice of learners was being heard loudly and clearly in key decisions being made around how education is designed and delivered in Scotland.

Children in Scotland, Children's Parliament, the Scottish Youth Parliament and Young Scot were commissioned by Scottish Government to work in partnership to engage with children and young people across Scotland to discuss their views and experiences of education. This group formed a 'Learner Panel' that participated in five workshops from October 2018 – February 2019.

The aim of the learner Panel was to further improve the voice of children and young people in the formulation of national education policy and to build a clear legacy in Scottish education from the Year of Young People 2018. For the first time it also provided a coherent structure for the gathering of the views and perspectives of diverse group of children and young people (aged 3-18 years). The aim was to develop and pilot a model to shape school-level, local and national education policies, highlighting the key issues, challenges and opportunities in Scottish education.

Issues for decision-makers to consider were to be brought forward and shared with the Scottish Government and other agencies with a role in education policy. The Scottish Government will use this important feedback to shape future decision making in education policy

In order to ensure a breadth of views from across the curriculum age range of 3 to 18 and based on their expertise – Children's Parliament and Children in Scotland also carried out direct work with children from an Early Years setting in East Lothian. As it was not appropriate for children aged 3 to 7 to travel and be involved in full panel meetings, so instead Children's Parliament and Children in Scotland staff were able to

gather their views and perspectives, in an age appropriate way, by working with the children in situ over several sessions.

Outcomes

Throughout this first year of the engagement with the Scottish Learner Panel the main aim was to ensure an impact for children and young people in Scotland and policymakers involved in the educational decision-making process. To assess this social impact, the following outcomes were proposed when the panel was commissioned:

+ Outcomes for children and young people involved in the Panel:

- Panel members will have a greater (age and stage appropriate) understanding of national education policy in Scotland and how it relates to their lives.
- Panel members will gain new skills and experience in terms of sharing their views, engaging in decision making processes.
- Panel members will experience increased confidence and self-esteem as a result of participation in the panel.

+ Outcomes for all children and young people in Scotland:

- National educational policy will better reflect the needs and priorities of children and young people, as identified by panel members.
- Children and young people have increased opportunities to shape and influence national educational policy.
- Children and young people have opportunities to develop their knowledge and understanding, and learn from the organisations who are working to deliver national educational policy.

+ Outcomes for the Scottish Government:

- Scottish Government will have increased understanding of the perspectives, needs and priorities of children and young people in relation to national educational policy.
- Scottish Government will have improved, targeted, effective provision for children and young people.
- Scottish Government will have increased meaningful engagement with children and young people.

effort to include schools from both urban and rural areas, Gaelic Medium schools and schools that fall within the lowest deciles of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation. To encourage a commitment for staff and learners alike, we emphasised how essential it was for a range of voices be presented.

The following is a list of the schools who participated under their regional sub-grouping, and the pupil representatives from each.

The Tayside Collaborative / Forth Valley & West Lothian Collaborative

- Balfroun High School, Stirling: Sophie (S5); Ines (S5); Eva (S5); Roisin (S5)
- Claypotts Castle Primary, Dundee: Teeda (P5); Harry (P5); Kelly (P7); Kristers (P7)

South East Improvement Collaborative

- Bell Baxter High School, Cupar, Fife: Orla (S2); Molly (S2); Inver (S3); Sam (S3)
- Prestonpans Infants and Primary School, East Lothian: Megan (P4); Ava (P5); Archie (P6); Angus (P7); Sarah (P7)

The West Partnership / South West Collaborative

- Bannerman High School, Glasgow: Cara (S4); Demi (S4); Lewis (S5); Adam (S5)
- Glasgow Gaelic School, Glasgow: Zoe; Jack; Olivia; Stella

The Northern Alliance

- Meldrum Academy, Aberdeenshire: Caitlin (S4); Ellie (S4); Chloe (S5); Morgan (S5); Lucy (S5)
- Bramble Brae Primary, Aberdeen: Calum (P6); Yvie (P6); Andi (P7); Macauley (P7)

Engagement with decision makers



John Swinney, Deputy First Minister, meeting with panel members

To achieve one of the Panel's main outcomes - 'to further improve the voice of children and young people at national level, national education policy will better reflect the needs and priorities of children and young people' - it was essential that the panel members had the opportunity to interact with those responsible for policy development and governance.

To do this in a meaningful way, key 'decision makers' in Scottish education, including members of the Scottish Education Council, were invited to attend the meetings to listen to discussions and hear children and young people's opinions first hand. It was hoped that throughout the course of the meetings the panel members would build a rapport with facilitators and one another leading to increased confidence in sharing their opinions with the attending decision-makers. This also presented children and young people with the opportunity to develop knowledge and understanding and learn from the organisations and individuals who are working to implement national policy.

Some of the panel member representatives also had the opportunity to meet with the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills in October 2018 to feedback their thoughts and views on education and their participation in the learner panel.

Decision-makers who attended panel meetings included the following:

- **Gayle Gorman**, Chief Inspector/Chief Executive, Education Scotland
- **Lesley Sheppard**, Deputy Director – Curriculum, Qualifications and Gaelic, Scottish Government
- **Janet Brown**, Chief Executive Scottish Qualifications Authority
- **Ken Muir**, Chief Executive General Teaching Council for Scotland
- **Maureen McKenna**, Director of Education Glasgow City Council
- **Carrie Lindsay**, Executive Director for Education & Children’s Services Fife Council
- **Joanna Murphy**, Chair of the National Parent Forum of Scotland
- **Ian Rivers**, Chair of the Scottish Council of Deans of Education
- **Gillian Hamilton**, Strategic Director Education Scotland
- **Linda Rae**, Head of National Events, Education Scotland

Method

Five workshops were delivered over a five-month timeframe, between October 2018 to February 2019. With four partner organisations working together on delivery, the initial introductory session was delivered collaboratively, and each preceding session delivered mainly by one organisation. Before delivery began, a list of themes was agreed upon by organisations and submitted to the Scottish Government for panel. Each panel session was then delivered under these agreed themes in different education settings across the country:

- **Introductory Workshop**
October, Scottish Storytelling Centre, Edinburgh
All partner organisations
- **Workshop 1 - Wellbeing and inclusion**
October 2018, Harlaw Academy, Aberdeen
Led by Children's Parliament
- **Workshop 2 - Learning**
December 2018, Glasgow Gaelic School, Glasgow
Led by Children in Scotland
- **Workshop 3 - Participation and Voice**
January 2019, Bell Baxter High, Fife
Led by Scottish Youth Parliament
- **Workshop 4 - Open theme/Reflections**
February 2019, Codebase, Stirling
Led by Young Scot

The workshop structure for each session generally followed the same outline, with a range of methodologies employed to engage appropriately with the different age groups.

- Group icebreaker to establish rapport
- Smaller group work and key theme discussions (findings presented below)
- Creative activity to express and develop ideas
- Panel members' feedback and reflections

The core delivery of panel sessions involved children and young people from 8 primary and secondary schools. However, separate delivery of early years sessions was further supported by Children in Scotland and the Children's Parliament. Great care and time were taken to ensure activities developed were age appropriate incorporating an engaging and inclusive approach that allowed views to be expressed freely.

Theme discussion



Participants ideas written on the 'triangles of support'

Workshop 1 - Wellbeing and inclusion

The first themed workshop encouraged panel members to think about what contributes to positive wellbeing in the school environment and what makes them feel included.

Wellbeing

The children and young people were asked to think about a number of things that impacted on wellbeing and feeling included in school. The feedback from the children and young people centred around positive relationships with teachers, having friends and feeling included, integrating extracurricular activities into the day, healthy and enjoyable food on offer, being recognised for achievements and engaging and comfortable surroundings to learn in.

Panel members told us:

"When people can say hello to you. People that sign well makes me happy in school"

"A nice classroom makes me happy. Soft and warm, nice colours on the wall"

"Feeling relaxed in class. Not so much pressure on you"

Barriers

Most of the children and young people's responses suggest that many of them felt that reasons they were unable to achieve their best were factors largely out of their control. This ranged from the possibility of family issues at home, to feeling excluded by peers and unapproachable teachers to the increasing pressure of stress and exams throughout high school.

Panel members told us:

"Distractions in class means less learning time"

"People teaching in different ways"

"Family problems outside of school"

Equality & diversity

The children and young people spoke about the need for individualised support and extra help for those with higher support and disability requirements and described mostly positive experiences of this being delivered. A discussion about curriculum choices highlighted that some young people don't feel they have been presented with a diverse enough range of subjects, therefore it isn't inclusive of the needs of all learners.

A Panel member told us:

"PE class with more boys than girls so the choices of activities feel more traditionally boys games"

Relationships

The children and young people spoke about the importance of strong friendships for social and personal development along with peer groups helping to understand difficult material in the classroom. However, the substantial difference a positive teaching dynamic can have was raised on multiple occasions across different sessions. Panel members had a multitude of things to say about teachers, mostly around developing a mutual respect and creating a place that everyone can share their feelings. Most noted that it was harder to build relationships with teachers in secondary school due to the multitude of classes and a lack of consistent cover and designated class teachers due to staff shortages.

A Panel member told us:

"Some teachers hold a grudge. They might choose who they like and prioritise them. If teachers have favourites you might not get chances."

Inclusion

Panel members responded to this question in a variety of ways. Many discussed the importance of creating a welcoming environment, a culture that is embedded within the school to allow for a range of opinions and cultures to be present. The older learners voiced that for successful inclusion more responsibility should be allocated to the learners themselves and allow them to develop a stronger voice in the decision-making processes.

Panel members told us:

“Welcome different opinions and cultures”

“Teachers shouldn’t have favourite learners”

“Give learners a role in decision-making”

Teaching support

The presence of supportive teachers continued to be a popular discussion point focusing on how building a supportive relationship can lead to better communication and increased desire to learn. In terms of academic support, discussions centred around the benefits of visual and active learning techniques. Panel members believed these should be emphasised more for learners who don’t learn in the ‘normal’ academic way. Groups felt that these techniques were used less in secondary settings than in primary but noted the benefit of applying these to all age ranges.

An example provided by a panel member highlighted the increased engagement from learners when a Maths teacher played speed conversation games to practice difficult equation tasks. This was beneficial as the learners were able to learn different methods by talking to other students, and not just relying on the method the teacher had taught them. This also makes clear the benefit of peer support and the potential positives of integrating such methods into curriculum learning.

Panel members told us:

“Unique methods of learning support my learning”

“Teachers explaining stuff properly”

“Being able to talk about school work and not be given into trouble at school for not managing.”

Mental health support

When panel members were asked “What stops you from doing your best?”, the most common answers centred around ‘mental health’, ‘stress’ and ‘not feeling supported’. The importance in accessing support services was highlighted with an urge that support on offer should be more preventative than problem solving as it is often too late when learners end up speaking out. School focused mental health initiatives were rarely cited by panel members, many explaining that they weren’t aware of the role of counsellors within schools. Panel members also reflected on the relationship between teaching support and mental health support, noting that family and life matters can affect focus and wellbeing in the school environment.

Panel members told us:

“Someone to support you when you are facing hard times, like a friend or a teacher. School has a drop-in system when you urgently need to see guidance.”

“Many not getting support in school... only in serious cases”

“For pastoral care, you should be able to pick a teacher you feel comfortable with and go see them when you are feeling down.”

Case study – Wellbeing at Bramble Brae



Learners of Bramble Brae Primary School

At Bramble Brae Primary School, children talk positively about their relationships with their teachers and how these impact on their learning and ability to do their best at school. In P6 and P7 the teachers take these approaches to support children and develop their relationships:

- Class Charter, which is created collaboratively by learners and the teacher.
- Hugs. If children feel sad, the teacher gives them a cuddle to make them feel better.
- Calm corner with stress balls, mindful colouring in and Lego. Children can ask to use this space when they feel they need it.
- Emotions check-in. Children and the teacher share feelings and explain how they feel in order to develop empathy and understanding.
- A weekly club to support boys with reading and nurture. This is facilitated by a male teacher so that the boys have a positive male role model.
- Time to chat on a daily basis. Children write their names up on the board if they have a problem or want to talk with the teacher. During calm self-led reading, the teacher spends time with all the children that have requested their support.

“If something bad happens, my teacher always makes time to chat.”

Workshop 2 – Learning



Participants discussing different teaching approaches

The second themed workshop invited conversation around several contributing factors that can have an impact on the learning process.

School environment and spaces

Younger panel members proved to engage more with this discussion point than older panel members. This could be down to the promotion of outdoor activities and engaging surroundings featuring more heavily in primary school environments. Increased outdoor learning, access to natural surroundings and more playground equipment were the most prominent suggestions as to improvements in this area. The layout of the classroom was also cited as important for understanding what the teacher is presenting.

Panel members told us:

“Each kid gets a plant on their desk. It is their responsibility to water it, they will feel better”

“Backs to the board is uncomfortable”

Activities outside the classroom



Maureen McKenna and participants working on the 'ideal teacher' task

Panel members described the ways in which by engaging in activities outside the classroom they were not only able to develop a variety of skills but could also improve friendships and relationships with teachers alike. School trips not only expand learning but develop important skills. However, these trips sometimes come at an expense which some panel members suggested can be prohibitive; the consensus among the panel was that these types of activities should be more integrated into the curriculum and that parents should not have to cover the costs of this.

Panel members told us:

"Learn survival skills that don't just focus on the curriculum"

"Some parents can't afford school trips"

Support for learning

As touched upon in the first workshop, teacher relationships are vital for enabling children and young people to feel supported. Having support from class teachers seemed more important than the presence of guidance teachers, one panel member expressing it can be 'hard to make a bond with them' due to the limited time spent with guidance teachers. The benefit of school counsellors was discussed, and many believed this should be an option for all, or at least 'the people who really need them'. Older panel members discussed the need for better understanding and sharing between departments and teachers to ensure individuals receive the support they need.

Panel members told us:

"Greater communication between different school faculties."

"Even if it's a small issue, you need time to relax. Teachers should give this to you"

Curriculum

This subject drew particularly strong responses from older panel members. The vast range of comments provided show just how individualised curriculum issues can be and why choice is so important at an early stage. Secondary school learners discussed the hinderance of the 'column strategy'- where subjects were only available at limited times during a school week - which can discourage or prevent learners from taking 'similar' subjects even if they are passionate about them because of how they are taught in the same column time slots.

In terms of improvements, most agreed that development of life skill classes should be incorporated into the national curriculum. Suggested topics would cover finance management areas such as understanding bank accounts, mortgages, insurance policies and techniques to manage bills. They felt this would better prepare them for life after school. Another enthusiastic discussion point focused on testing and that sometimes the effort that learners put in throughout the year isn't recognised. Most agreed that other ways of evaluating and assessing learning should be considered.

Panel members told us:

"Regular testing to guide your progress throughout the year"

"Course choice – stressful in case you make the wrong choice"

Teaching approaches

The main message from children and young people in this area of discussion centred around how important individualised teaching approaches are. Panel members described teachers who were understanding and made an effort to create a fun, engaging and inclusive environment as providing the most valuable and enjoyable learning experiences. During the session participants were asked to describe their ideal teacher. Descriptions centred around having a positive attitude and creating an environment where the students feel comfortable and included.

Panel members told us:

"Caring, positive, inspiring, approachable"

"Makes others feel important"

Workshop 3 - Participation and voice

The third workshop set out to investigate how much of a voice children and young people have within their school community and beyond, and to what level this is encouraged.

Current participation

There were a variety of discussion points surrounding areas of participation that panel members were already involved in. For primary school learners there seemed to be more choice around activities engaged in, particularly towards the end of the week – Friday proved to be the day with the most opportunity for choice.

For secondary school learners they enjoyed participation surveys which allowed them to have a say on many school specific matters while remaining anonymous – which meant they could voice opinions freely without judgement. They also liked the opportunity to have a choice in the uniform they wear, but they felt they didn't have much of a say. For some panel members choice in uniform proved more important throughout secondary as a way to represent their personalities.

The opportunity to decide on activities within subjects at secondary school was limited according to panel members, however one member noted there is flexibility in P.E. where learners can decide which sport to play.

"Choice of four lessons on Friday afternoon"

"PAC (personalisation and choice) time on a Friday"

"Some choice in uniform but not very much.. perhaps more of a say at secondary than primary "

"Surveys work because it's anonymous"

"We get to choose what sports are done in P.E."

Meaningful participation

From panel members' responses this meant something a little different for most people, but common threads arose. Inclusiveness was the most widely used word in this discussion with the mention of strong supportive relationships and respect also being required to ensure all could participate meaningfully.

Panel members told us:

"Inclusion... making sure everyone is included but don't force participation"

"Talking, listening, acting – making meaningful changes"

"Communication – making it clear"

"Feeling confident enough to speak out"

Decision making

To understand the forms of participation that were accessible to the panel members we asked them what decision-making processes they knew existed or were involved in within their school communities. One panel member stated, 'my voice gets heard more as I get older' and there are more decision choices in secondary, such as choosing subjects, although there was significant input from younger children regarding the control they had over their classroom activities and learning styles.

A couple of panel members described being involved in their school's teacher recruitment process and having a say in the final decision of who was employed. They felt this was a really positive experience and the value to the learners was huge as, ultimately, they are the ones who will be engaging with the teachers regularly. Suggestions were made as to what further decision-making processes they would like to be involved in, with many focusing on aspects of learning and how they learn.

Panel members told us:

"Within the wider school community more opportunity should be given to discuss where money is spent in the school and the potential to have improvement plans starting earlier than S5/S6"

"Create course plans with teachers based on what we want to learn"

"The curriculum... learn what you want to learn"

"How to make work fun, so learning is enjoyable"

What school initiatives exist?

Pupil councils seemed to be a familiar concept for most secondary school learners, with many acknowledging the presence of one in their school. However, the degree to which this is useful for establishing pupil voice is under question. The phrase "popularity vote" was mentioned on several occasions. However, learners from Bell Baxter High shared their opposing experience with the other panel members discussing all the positive outcomes the school community has put in place through the actions of the council.

Panel members told us:

"Most people don't really know what happens in these"

"Pupil councils are not always utilised well"

Case study - Pupil voice in Bell Baxter



Learners of Bell Baxter High School with their certificates of achievement

To highlight how positive participation can work well we've provided an example from one of the secondary schools who participated. The pupil council in Bell Baxter has run for a few years, and council members have achieved the following:

Consulted with rector regarding voting

- Introduced a gender-neutral toilet
- Changed dining hall menu
- Worked with catering staff for the café.

Worked with deposes to improve and give feedback on the new behaviour management policy.

Focus Groups held to give feedback to members of senior leadership.

Learners are given the opportunity to complete an anonymous survey in class on faculty staff to share their experiences and give their views on ways the lessons can be improved.

Pupil voice working group is currently asking for feedback from all junior learners about the use of the Learning Standard in class as well as an overall experience in lessons.

How to encourage active participation?

When asked how schools could further encourage active participation answers included listening, asking, conducting more anonymous surveys and finding people to trust with your opinions. They believe that for change to be made and their voices to be heard a compromise may always need to be considered. Further to that discussions should be open, and everyone should be more proactive about items discussed at pupil councils to ensure they produce outcomes.

Extracurricular activities and community involvement

Panel members believed that it's not only what happens within a school setting that can influence participation. More choice in scheduling of clubs, more academic trips, mental health clubs such as mindfulness/yoga and increased equality in sports clubs were suggestions of how to better integrate these with improved participation. Several answers to improving community involvement were given. These ranged from local galleries running workshops and singing shows to health visitors, police officers and charities coming to schools to raise awareness of their work. Inter-generational initiatives were also suggested such as older learners teaching younger and older generations coming in to the school.



"I loved doing the activities with the learners and was so impressed by their answers. Very mature, responsible citizens they are indeed! They really feel they are not involved in a lot of decisions and feel they could have a say even in curriculum things such as selecting the genre in classes." Mrs Margaret Sproat, Principal Teacher, Glasgow Gaelic School.

Workshop 4 - Open theme



Ken Muir, participants and support staff engaging in discussions about the future of the Learner Panel

Determined during the initial three meetings and by the children and young people themselves; the final workshop acted as a summary session for the panel members to reflect on previous discussions, their experience and their hopes for the future of the panel.

Open discussion

Throughout the course of the workshop the panel members, described specific things that they wanted decision makers to know which would make a real change to their learning. Most actively, the children and young people discussed points that highlighted the impact the curriculum, subject choice and teacher relationships can have on school satisfaction.

Older panel members felt that there was a discrepancy between schools on curriculum choices such as the requirement to take a set amount of National 5's and the access to study and revision groups. They felt strongly that more value should also be given to wider achievement and not just to qualifications and attainment. "Funding equality – needs to be spread equally between departments"

Panel members told us:

"Exam times need to be taken into consideration"

"Extra-curriculars should be awarded for personal statements and CVs"

"Don't promote eating 3 meals a day, doing an hour of exercise, studying, having good mental health and managing work and expect everyone to be able to do it – it's too much"

"Set amount of NAT 5's each school is allowed to take – some take 8, some take 6"

Future of the panel

As part of the feedback process we asked the panel members to discuss how they would like to see the panel develop. Almost all panel members wanted to be involved in any potential next stages of the project. This was an encouraging as it showed that panel members enjoyed their experience, recognised the value of their participation and wanted to be part of an ongoing process of learner decision making.

Panel members told us:

"Online survey to get feedback from other learners and teachers from different schools"

"Feedback internally to schools e.g. at assemblies"

"Visit other schools and learn from what they do"

"Having more schools involved – more people = more voices!"

"Go out to clubs in the community"

"Participants to go to Parliament"

"Learn from children in other countries"

Early years engagement

Children's Parliament and Children in Scotland staff delivered sessions to a group of 6 nursery children and a group of 9 P1-P3 children, delivering three sessions for each group. The sessions were time and age appropriate: under one hour for the nursery children and just over an hour for the P1-P3 children, whilst the inclusion of different activities established an appropriate pace. The topics covered tied in with the Scottish Learner Panel meetings of older children and young people, including health and wellbeing, learning and participation in decision-making; extra thought was taken to ensure topics were as accessible and inclusive as possible for all. As with the engagements with the main Panel group, key messages from children have been considered under each theme:

Wellbeing and inclusion

Children love playing, especially outside. It was great to see the variety of activities open to the nursery children and they enjoyed all of them. The older learners talked about various aspects of the playground very enthusiastically too. Schools are working hard to cover the area of Health and Wellbeing with learners from the Early Years onward.

The children we worked with were aware of the role of physical activity and food in keeping healthy and that being happy and having good relationships (with adults and other children) means being healthy too. When discussing the health and wellbeing indicators with the P1-P3 children they were able to comment on all of them, revealing that this is something covered well in their school.

The children told us:

"Safe means you stay away from anything that could hurt you"

"Achieving means when you can't do something, you've got to learn and then you've done it"

"Nurtured means that you feel safe with all your friends and family"

"Included means if you are alone and don't have any friends, then you can be included in the game"

Learning

Support cannot be underestimated when discussing children's learning. Both groups of children identified the staff as being the most important aspect to supporting their learning in nursery/school. The children recognised the importance and complexity of this role and all the different things they do with and for the children. Family is also key to the lives of early years children. Even when reflecting on nursery and school they talked about their families. There needs to be a close connection between family and school, especially at nursery age, for them to feel safe and happy.

A child told us:

"Mrs C because she looks after the school - looks after kids and is very nice"

Participation and Voice

Children like to feel listened to by the adults in their lives, including all school staff. They like to make decisions and have roles with responsibilities but also appreciate having the security of adult guidance when they need it. Children want their school to feel welcoming to all and to have the resources to support children's variety of interests and needs, this includes nice and friendly staff. For older children it's clear that they are beginning to have more choices and responsibilities in school and beyond and expressed their enjoyment of this.

Children told us:

"It feels nice when I'm listened to"

"There is a box and tags for name- jobs in the class e.g. class helper, line-leader, tidy-monitor."



Evaluation with panel members

To ensure we delivered on the aim to value and hear all children and young people's opinions, evaluation and reflection was an integral part of delivery. Space to reflect was provided at the end of each workshop session and a more formal evaluation was conducted during the last workshop session to provide an opportunity for panel members to feedback on their experience as a Learner Panel member.



Participants rating the most important factors involved in learning

We asked the children and young people a few different questions, then asked them to note down their answers and anonymously 'post them' into a box. Some of the feedback we captured is presented below:

What did you enjoy about the meetings?

Panel members told us:

- "Being able to express what I feel about education"
- "Good opportunity for change to be made that suits children"
- "Important people that come can make a difference"
- "How to share opinions"
- "Liked to see the comparison between primary and secondary"
- "Working together in groups and jotting down all of your own suggestions"
- "How people were kind when you got embarrassed"
- "How a different learning environment could change your attitude"

What would you like to have discussed more?

Panel members told us:

- "Would've liked to talk more about understanding people's disabilities"
- "Speak more about improving teacher/pupil relationships"
- "More about equality and children getting treated fairly"
- "School traditions/raising money for charity by doing an odd socks day etc"
- "Talk more about the curriculum specifically"
- "Talk more about solutions to problems"

What could have been improved?

Panel members told us:

- "Hold follow ups to talk about changes being made"
- "Have more regular meetings"
- "High school learners don't care as much about what a teacher looks like or how the classroom looks but more about curriculum and exams"
- "Not so much sitting and talking"
- "More variety of schools from different areas"

Across the board all panel members valued expressing their opinions and having the opportunity to interact with peers outside of their normal school environment. The difference in age range meant that some methodologies worked well for younger panel members but were not as effective for engaging with older children and young people, and vice versa.

Insights and thinking points for decisions makers

From the outputs of the four workshops a list of key insights to consider has been compiled. These highlight some of the key messages and improvements to the system that panel members discussed. Alongside each set of insights are “thinking points for decision makers”. These are issues for policy-makers, strategic leaders and Scottish Ministers to consider as they decide the priorities for policy development as well as the detailed content of policies and improvement plans. The methods used to gather the insights of the panel members were varied and interactive. Points captured in each learner panel session were then “sense checked” with the panel at the next session. The material presented here is an attempt by the young person organisations who supported the work of the panel to summarise the points raised in discussion.

Teaching approaches

Insights

Building relationships with teaching staff was one of the most widely discussed topics throughout the span of the panel’s work, indicating its central importance in education policy and practice. The “ideal teacher” task drew attention to the power of this relationship and the positive connotations associated with panel members’ ‘favourite teachers’. The panel members spoke passionately about the need to develop strong relationships with teachers and for decision makers to consider how space and time can be built into the education system to do this. They also fed back the importance of having enough teachers to build consistent relationships with classes and learners avoiding over reliance on substitute teachers which can be disruptive. Learners believe teachers are at the heart of everything they learn and have a monumental impact on their progress and development. In turn, the development and training for teachers is crucial in ensuring every young person can access the levels of support required and a positive teaching environment is consistently nurtured.

Thinking points for decision makers

Based on the insights above,
decision-makers may wish to consider how they can:

- Ensure that professional learning for school staff emphasises skills that seek to encourage and develop supportive, respectful and impactful relationships between learners and their teachers, support workers or early years practitioners.
- Facilitate more staff professional learning opportunities such as in British Sign Language.
- Ensure that strong curriculum knowledge is embedded in professional learning but not as the only priority.
- Encourage peer learning activities and approaches where learners are empowered to shape lessons and share knowledge and skills.

Thinking about the best teacher ever...



Health and wellbeing support

Insights

The spread of answers and engagement on this topic was notable, eliciting a wider variety of different viewpoints and reactions compared to the other themes. A common point highlighted by many learners was that many barriers to learning are out with their control but could be reduced with further offers of school-based support, such as more talking time with teachers they “feel comfortable with” outside allocated lesson time. Most cited that teachers were a great source of academic and sometimes emotional support, even if this wasn’t a prescribed part of their role.

Many panel members weren’t sure what initiatives existed to support mental health and wellbeing in particular, with some mentioning the role of counsellors but only in ‘serious cases’. Most felt that support was on offer after it was too late, and that more should be done at earlier stages to embed a confidence in children and young people to discuss these matters.

Thinking points for decision makers

Based on the insights above, decision-makers should consider how they can:

- Develop initiatives that allow children and young people the opportunity to discuss and engage in the full range of topics relating to wellbeing and support from a younger age. Ideally, teaching staff that have played a role in the pupil’s lives would support development and delivery of these initiatives.
- Improve children and young people’s awareness of the initiatives, services and supports available to support their mental health and wellbeing.

Overall, children and young people wanted decision makers to think about the consistency of training and understanding among teachers regarding inclusion and diversity issues. They also wanted to see more opportunities to learn more about inclusion and diversity to help their peers. Children and young people also wanted decision makers to think about how early intervention can be promoted in school to avoid the escalation of difficulties.

Curriculum

Insights

For the secondary school panel members this theme proved to be the most engaging and provoking. Many discussions focused on how improvements to the curriculum could make a difference to their school life.

The panel members wanted decision makers to consider how wider achievement could be recognised more along with academic attainment, discussing the importance of extra-curricular activities in developing skills sets. They also wanted decision makers to think about the flexibility offered in the curriculum for learners to choose subjects which they enjoy and are interested in, especially if these are in similar fields such as science or social subjects.

Secondary school learners noted the increase in stress around exam time and felt the effort that is put in throughout the year sometimes isn't reflected in end of year assignment grades.

Panel members also asked for decision makers to consider how they may gain more control over how and what they learn and what approaches are employed in teaching to account for individual learning styles.

There also appeared to be a difference between primary and secondary learners in the extent to which they experienced outdoor learning. The lack of outdoor activities on offer for secondary learners may be a contributing factor to the stress experienced by older members of the panel.

Thinking points for decision makers

Based on the insights above, decision-makers may wish to consider how they can:

- Embed life skill learning into curriculum development, particularly in secondary school, along with greater recognition of the contribution of extra-curricular activities towards final grades.
- Offer a wider variety of subject choices in secondary schools.
- Promote the use of “continuous” or “formative” assessments throughout school to alleviate pressure on young people and ensure there is less focus on tests/exams/assignments.
- Provide enhanced advice and guidance on subject choices at an earlier age, with S1 and S2 learners.
- Develop greater opportunities for secondary learners to learn outdoors.

Decision-making and participation

Insights

Panel members felt positively around a couple of participation initiatives employed by schools. Primary school learners enjoyed the freedom to choose a variety of different activities, particularly on Friday afternoons. Secondary school learners felt that anonymous surveys worked well, however not all panel members experienced this within their schools.

Generally, the young people and children of all ages felt that there should be further opportunity for decision-making within their schools; all agreed that they’d like to have more influence in how and what they learn. Primary learners discussed how learning can be more enjoyable and engaging, and inclusive for all. Whereas secondary school learners noted they’d like to see more variety of subjects on offer and further promotion about learning as enjoyment as opposed to only academic reasons. Some suggestions were to create course/support plans with teachers based on individual needs.

The children and young people agreed that respect for learners’ opinions and implementing ideas that have been discussed as vital to ensure active participation. They also agreed that good communication between staff and learners is an essential part of the participation process. When asked what positive communication looks like, panel members were quick to discuss the importance of being respected and listened to by teachers. Pupil councils were acknowledged as one of a range of communication

approaches that can help to support and facilitate learner participation, although not always the most effective approach. Panel members spoke about decision making in schools being important at all ages. Panel members also wanted decision makers to think about how engagement with learners was built into every part of their learning as a core consideration as opposed to a token gesture.

Issues to consider

Based on the insights above, decision-makers may wish to consider how they can:

- Facilitate a wider range of subject choices within school and provide learners with opportunity to participate in how subjects are taught.
- Consider individual needs and tailored study plans to provide personalised guidance at an earlier stage.
- Improve practice in young person participation to ensure that young people are provided with an explanation of why things happen the way they do.
- Help young people to better understand their role and use their voice meaningfully.
- Ensure that the themes on which young people are being asked for views are meaningful - two key areas identified by the panel were budget decisions and curriculum design.

Method and approach – key learning points

This section of the report provides a summary of key learning points about the learner panel approach itself, what worked well and what could be improved in future. Some of the learning points identified in this section, as well as the outline of methods provided earlier in this report, may be helpful for local authorities and schools to consider if and when they implement similar panel style approaches.

Due to the nature of the engagement and the involvement of schools from across the country, distance and travel proved somewhat challenging. Factoring in the geographic spread of participatory schools – meetings were held in different locations. However, due to transport constraints and adverse weather conditions it was not always possible to have every panel member attend each workshop session. Sessions were still run in parallel, but this may have had a slight impact on fostering confidence and comfort within a group setting.

Exams and scheduling for higher level learners meant that consistency of secondary school learners sometimes presented an issue. An appropriate consideration over panel members' schooling commitments, especially for the older learners, should be agreed upon if the Panel is to continue.

Participation concerns were raised by some of the panel members around the different age ranges present within the group. Due to different experiences and insights some panel members felt it would have been more beneficial to split groups into 'primary' and 'secondary' to encourage more specific conversations around similar issues faced. This approach may be worth considering depending on the next stages of the project. However, it should also be noted that many commonalities were found between the different age groups, and an opportunity to integrate with those at different school stages encouraged empathy and understanding from their peers. If any division should take place, experiences and insights between groups should certainly still be shared to highlight the similarities and differences experienced throughout a school journey.

The early years engagement worked particularly well to include the views and experiences of younger children. Allowing the children to make use of toys and resources, along with them being in a familiar setting, supported their ability to express

themselves freely and creatively. A method which allows children and young people to make important contributions while feeling comfortable in their environment should be a priority when considering appropriate engagement methods.

Future actions

Since the pilot's end date two, participants have attended a meeting of the Curriculum and Assessment Board – the cross-agency group tasked with overseeing the curriculum framework in Scotland - in Dundee in March 2019. With the support of the Scottish Government and Young Scot the panel members were able to share their views and experiences with members of the Board. There is potential to support development of sessions and present at the Scottish Learning Festival in September 2019. Young Scot and partner organisations intend to conduct a follow-up with all panel members in their school environment. This follow-up will aim to investigate any lasting impact on the participants and their school community based on involvement in the project. The Scottish Government will consider the learning from the initial pilot year of the panel in deciding future learner panel arrangements for 2019/20 onwards.



Participants and facilitators reflecting on the workshop

Conclusion

Impact on policy makers and decision-makers

The Scottish Learner Panel is part of a broader set of policies and approaches at national, local and school or early learning setting which attempt to improve young people's participation and "voice" in determining priorities and deciding policies.

The attendance of Panel sessions by decision makers was an encouraging sign, highlighting the readiness to incorporate young people's views and the potential impact on future policy development. Education Scotland attendees have already used the outputs of the workshop they attended to thread into the development of the Scottish Learning Festival programme. Further to that, panel members have been given the opportunity to present their ideas during a seminar session at the Festival.

The value in establishing a panel group of children and young people cannot be underestimated. This project highlights the benefit of a panel approach, allowing issues to be investigated at a deeper level with the children and young people, while allowing them to develop their confidence in contributing. Including the perspectives of young people nationally allowed the panel's discussions to be reflective of the variety of education experiences throughout the country.

This final report, in particular the "insights and thinking points for decision makers" content will be published online, submitted to the Deputy First Minister, the Minister for Children and Young People and the Scottish Education Council. In addition it will be shared widely with Scottish Government civil service policy teams for consideration. It is recommended that decision-makers and policy makers consider the findings from the panel's work and how they may wish to reflect these findings in their respective areas of responsibility. Whilst it is too early to reflect on the ultimate impact of the Panel's work, the Scottish Government will take steps to ensure that the Panel's conclusions are disseminated as widely as possible.

Impact on children and young people

Increased engagement and confidence shown by children and young people who participated in the panel was another important aspect of project delivery; the children and young people developed bonds with their peers and continued to develop their own voice in the process. As expected, the panel members had lots of areas of feedback and points to discuss concerning their education. For all involved, this meant positives and

negatives to reflect on. Areas of reflection varied between different age ranges with younger panel members more vocal on their school environment, support and relationships, and older children citing curriculum concerns and teaching approaches as the most important aspects to learning.

The value lies not only within the content of these discussions, but the opportunity for the panel members to feel connected to the decision-making process, something they all agreed could be improved within their own education experience. An overwhelming response to be involved in future activity was expressed by panel members, a sign of the worth that children and young people see within these opportunities to engage. Now the opportunity has been extended, the next phases are equally important to allow the children and young people to engage in the full process of participation and change.



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