

Primary School Pilot Report

June 2024



Introduction and background

The Inclusion Ambassadors are a group of secondary school-aged pupils who have a range of additional support needs and attend a variety of educational provision across Scotland. Children in Scotland delivers the group, with support from Enquire.

There are currently 17 members of the group from across 15 local authorities. The group share their experiences of accessing additional support in school through online and in-person meetings. The group meets regularly to discuss their vision for additional support for learning, guided by their vision statement:

School should help me be the best I can be.

School is a place where people learn, socialise and become prepared for life beyond school.

Success is different for everyone. But it is important that all the adults that children and young people come in to contact with in school get to know them as individuals. They should ask, listen and act on what they young people say about the support that works for them.

In the last few years, the Inclusion Ambassadors group has grown from strength to strength. They have contributed to a number of important pieces of work relating to national discussions about additional support for learning, have created the Success Looks Different Awards and grown in number. However, as adults who support the group, we identified a gap regarding the views of younger children with additional support needs. After sharing our thoughts with the Inclusion Ambassadors, they fully supported our plans to run a short pilot project engaging with younger pupils.

As a result of these observations and discussions, between 27 February and 27 March 2024 we delivered a pilot to trial running an Inclusion Ambassadors group in a primary school setting. The aim was to help increase the diversity of children and young people sharing their experiences about additional support for learning.

We believe that expanding the project to include younger children will support a broader understanding of the successes and challenges in delivering additional support for learning in Scotland. It will also ensure the work of the Inclusion



Ambassadors is truly reflective of the wider population of children and young people who access additional support in school.

This report lays out our approach to the pilot project, discusses key findings and provides recommendations for future activity.

Children's rights, participation and younger children

As outlined in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), all children have a right to be heard on issues that affect them.¹ Ultimately, the Inclusion Ambassadors project aims to realise this right for children and young people who are entitled to additional support with their learning. However, the project is currently only funded to work with pupils in secondary schools. We believe it is important to develop approaches to ensure that the group engages with children of all ages who are entitled to additional support with their learning. This will guarantee that the project is truly rights-based and fully aligns with the UNCRC. The pilot project undertaken was developed in recognition of this, and to support understanding of how the Inclusion Ambassadors approach and model could work within a primary school setting.

It is important to recognise that whilst there is a lot of engagement with primary school aged children on their experiences of school, we are unaware of this being specifically focussed on the delivery of additional support for learning.

Based on our existing knowledge and experience of delivering meaningful participation and engagement opportunities (and in line with our own Principles and Guidelines for the Meaningful Participation and Engagement of Children and Young People²), we have developed an approach that is tailored to the age and stage of the children involved.

Pilot Activity Outline

For the pilot activity we worked directly with Williamston Primary School in West Lothian. Williamston won the Primary School Category of the 2023 Success Looks Different Awards³ and this example of existing good practice provided a solid foundation for working with the school on the pilot.

Activity took place across four weeks with two groups of children (a group of P1-3 children and a group of P4-7 children). In total, we worked with 15 children across the four-week block. There were seven children involved in the P1-P3 group and eight children involved in the P4-P7 group.

Both groups had children with a range of additional support needs and ethnic backgrounds. The groups also included children who do not access additional support but have a keen interest in the topic or who the school felt would benefit from being involved.

All children were identified by the school and provided informed consent to participate.

¹ [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)

² [Children in Scotland, Principles Guidelines for the Meaningful Participation of Children and Young People](#)

³ [Inclusion Ambassadors, Success Looks Different webpages](#)



Approach

Activity was delivered across four weeks between 27 February and 19 March 2024. This focused and intensive approach was taken to support the team to build relationships with the children. It also allowed continuity between sessions as the children were able to recall the previous week's activities.

As highlighted, we worked with two groups of children, dividing participants by age:

- Group 1: P1-3 (ages 4-7)
- Group 2: P4-7 (ages 8-11)

The decision to split the pupils into different age groups was taken to reflect the different needs and experiences of the children at different stages of their primary school journey. It also supported us to trial different approaches and methods most suited to each age group.

All delivery was supported by the Support for Learning Teacher based at Williamston Primary School. This meant we could benefit from the existing relationships this teacher had with the children. It also allowed us to develop approaches that would be meaningful for the children, based on the existing knowledge and relationships school staff already had with the children taking part.

This is a different approach to our work with the secondary school aged Inclusion Ambassadors group. It supported us to identify ways of working which were meaningful for the children and build on the nurturing relationships the school already had with pupils.

We also hope that involving the Support for Learning Teacher will ensure the findings from the pilot project will have a direct impact within the school community.

P1-3 Group

With the P1-3 group we delivered four distinct 30-minute sessions with the children. These sessions were explicitly play-based and drew from existing methods that we know work with younger children. All sessions were planned in an open way with a range of options available to the children. Preferred activities were then chosen by the children each week. This approach was also adapted across the four weeks, based on our developing understanding of the needs, preferences and interests of the children.

Approaches included:

- Drawing
- Storytelling
- Lego-based play



All play-based approaches were ultimately used as a stimulus for conversations with the children about their understanding of what support they require in school.

P4-7 Group

The P4-7 group had longer weekly sessions, each lasting one and a half hours. Our approach here broadly replicated what we do with the existing secondary school group, but with the inclusion of more play-based activities. These sessions focussed on the following key topics:

- Relationships and adults who work with children
- The school environment
- If I was Head Teacher for a day



Findings

The findings from our primary school pilot have been grouped against the main areas covered by the groups. We have explored key themes across these areas of work and identified where findings resonate with existing evidence on the views of children and young people in relation to additional support for learning. We have grouped the findings under the key headings below.

What supports us to learn/what support do children need?

The P4-7 group clearly identified the different reasons why children might need additional support in school and how they are supported with their learning. This included sharing experiences such as being autistic or neurodivergent. We also heard about how children's experiences outside of school could affect them in school.

The children also shared their understanding of support that individuals might need and the importance of getting support with specific aspects of learning, such as numeracy or literacy. The group also identified how the wider culture and environment of the school affected how they learn. They spoke about individual strategies that support them to learn in specific subjects, but also reflected on how whole-class approaches can influence the culture of the school. They discussed the importance of their learning environment and things like a school-wide focus on recognition and understanding of neurodiversity.

For the P1-3 group, we were clearly able to identify the central importance of play to supporting their learning. We heard from children how this made them feel full of energy, and conversely, when they did not get enough opportunities to play, they do not feel in a position to learn. We heard from children how if they were in charge, they would have even more time to play and make sure everyone had time to have fun in school.



Across the groups - both from what was shared but also from staff observations - it is clear that choice and individualised approaches are key to supporting pupils. Children in the P4-7 group shared that they feel teachers should engage with pupils about their learning and support to find out what works best. It was also clear from our work with the P1-3 group that the children already have a keen awareness of their needs and preferences. The activities they chose to participate in also subsequently demonstrates a wide range of factors within school which supported them, including building Lego, doing PE and art-based activities.

Relationships with adults

From our work with the groups, it was evident that the people who support children in primary school play a key role in supporting the learning of all children. For both the P1-3 group and the P4-7 group, we heard about the importance of kind, supportive adults in ensuring children feel safe and happy at school. A member of the P4-7 group shared that the one thing they would change about school would be to make sure everyone got more time with teachers to ensure they got the support they needed.

What we heard from across the groups reflects what we have heard in the wider work of Children and Scotland and Enquire.⁴⁵⁶ Both groups told us about how good teachers and support staff are kind, encouraging and supportive. The pupils placed importance on adults giving out praise, being calm and recognising when pupils had done well. They also were clear that adults shouldn't shout.



The pupils also shared the qualities they thought underpin these relationships in primary school. These included the importance of having a balance between being fun, but also being firm and fair at the same time.

The children felt that the adults that work with them made sure they got help when they needed it. This included help with their learning but also help if they were upset. They felt teachers and support staff showed they were trying to improve things for them when there were issues.

We also heard about the importance of positive body language in ensuring children feel happy, welcomed and safe. It was clear that the way adults presented themselves had a big impact on how children felt in school, and this had a knock-on impact on their learning.

The importance of relationships within a school setting is a theme we consistently hear about in the wider work of Children in Scotland and Enquire. The findings of the pilot project not only underline this as a key area of importance for pupils, but they also demonstrate the importance of supporting younger children to share their views on this topic.

Understanding of additional support for learning

As part of our sessions, we facilitated discussions about what additional support for learning is and how it is delivered. What came across from the groups was the importance of having a strong understanding of the needs of

⁴ Children in Scotland (2018), [Review of the Professional Standards for Teaching, The Experiences of Children and Young People](#)

⁵ Children in Scotland, [Promise Partnership Project: Pupil Support Staff Learning Programme](#)

⁶ [My Rights, My Say Case Study pages](#)

individual children but also having a knowledge of the different reasons why other children might need additional support in school. We heard from the P4-7 group particularly about the importance of knowing about things like autism or ADHD. However, they were also clear that the adults who work closely with children need to know about what works for them as individuals. The group highlighted that when teachers don't understand their needs it can make them feel lonely and sad.

“Teachers should listen to us – kids can tell teachers what we need”
(P4-7 Group Member)

Interestingly, even from this young age, the children were able to identify the importance of communication between staff members as central to ensuring they get the right support in school. They recognised that when staff do not communicate this can make people feel worse as their needs are not met.

“They should talk to each other, so everyone knows about your support and so you don't get made to feel bad”
(P4-7 Group Member)

Relationships with peers

The P4-7 group spoke a lot about the importance of peer-to-peer relationships in primary school. This was both in terms of how these could explicitly support learning but also about the importance of friendships for ensuring children feel happy at school.

We heard how being alone at school stops you from having fun and how this affects how people learn. Some children suggested there should be specific spaces for people to go if you feel alone where you could meet people and have fun. They felt that these spaces should be relaxing and have tactile resources.

Some of the children shared that if they were the Head Teacher they would make sure that people got to sit with their friends in school.

Both groups talked about the importance of buddies, where older children are given younger children to look after and befriend. Both the older children (who were buddies), and the younger children made it clear that these sorts of relationships made children feel safe in school and supported all children to feel part of the community.

Learning environment

We explored the importance of the learning environment with the children, which is a topic covered in detail by the secondary school group. It was an engaging topic for the primary-aged groups and much of what we heard across the primary school pilot reflects what the secondary school group have told us. We grouped the different areas of the learning environment into the 'physical learning environment' (in the classroom), the 'learning environment and concentration' and 'sharing learning in a classroom setting'.



Physical Learning Environment

We heard how children want engaging learning environments which can stimulate their interest in learning. For older children this can involve environments which provide opportunities for sensory learning opportunities and for them to try new things like music or water play. For younger children, they felt that learning environments needed a range of play opportunities and the resources to support this such as Lego, games and books.

We also heard about how classrooms should be colourful and have engaging wall displays which stimulate children. However, the children also spoke about needing to avoid this becoming overwhelming. This highlights the need for balance in the visual design of classroom spaces.

Children told us how they felt that bigger desks would make a positive difference to their learning environment as they would have more space. They also felt that wobble stools were good as they could move around while using these.

Pupils also told us about how they liked having a story corner in their classroom. The P4-7 group said that they enjoyed having comfy seats and a place that feels more relaxed within the classroom space. We also heard how this environment helped support people to read, even when they did not normally like this.

Learning environment and concentration

Through both groups we heard about the impact that noise has on the learning environment. The group told us about how some elements of the design of the school contributed to them feeling uncomfortable, such as open plan classrooms. Members of the group described how noise from the corridors could be distracting and make it harder to concentrate.

Children also reflected that not all classrooms in the school were open plan and they preferred the rooms with doors. Making sure that there were doors on the classrooms was a regular choice for children when they were thinking about things they would change about school. They felt that doing this would help them get more work done as they could concentrate more.

There were differing opinions on whether there should be music playing in classrooms, some were in favour while others find this distracting. We also regularly heard about how some children like to use ear defenders to minimise noise in school and help their concentration. However, the children also described situations where ear defenders had not been available and that sharing them was hard to manage as too many people wanted to use them. The P4-7 group reflected that they felt ear defenders should be available to people who need them and there needs to be more understanding of why some people use ear defenders.

All members of the group felt that schools should allow fidget toys as these



can help people concentrate, however they also recognised that they could act as a distraction.

Sharing Learning

We spoke with the group in detail about how displaying work on the wall can be a particular challenge for some children, particularly those who may require additional support. Some members of the group shared that seeing examples of “good work” on the wall reminded them that they weren’t as far on as some peers, and this made them feel excluded. This discussion reiterated the importance of finding ways to celebrate the successes of all children in inclusive, supportive ways. While the **Success Looks Different Awards** were not explicitly referenced in these discussions, much of what we heard from children involved in the pilot reaffirms what we heard from the Inclusion Ambassadors about the awards, that schools need to share and recognise the success of all children but that this should be led by what works for individual children.



Some children also told us that the way the learning environment was set up could help ensure they were able to get the right support from their teacher. They felt that classrooms should have a space for sitting on the carpet where you can see the board and listen to the teacher. They also felt this could be a good space to be in to get support from your teacher.

Our pilot activity has also reaffirmed the importance for some children of getting to work with their friends. They see this as being supportive of their learning and helps them feel happy at school. However, it is important to recognise they also want consistency with this. The P1-3 group in particular spoke about the importance of having a place where they sit each day.


It is clear that schools need to find a way to support all pupils to have access to resources within the learning environment that work for them, whilst also ensuring this does not negatively affect other children. Based on our engagement across the pilot and our other work in this area, teachers and other school staff should adopt a rights-based approach to this. This would involve working closely with children to identify individual preferences and discussing access to ear defenders, fidget toys or music with the whole class to identify approaches that will work.

Wider school environment

The impact of the wider school environment on the children’s experiences of school and how this can affect their learning was an engaging topic in our sessions, especially for the older group.

Both groups talked about a range of spaces outside the classroom which were viewed as positive spaces and that they enjoyed being in. This included the music room, the support for learning base and other designated quiet spaces.

“I don’t like anywhere else in school [apart from the Support for Learning room] because it is too loud” (P1-3 Group Member)



The children discussed how they generally preferred having quiet spaces separate from the classroom. Although their classrooms often had access to quiet spaces, pupils did not feel as comfortable using them as other people could see them. It was also clear from our pilot that children want more autonomy over how they use these quiet spaces. They want to be able to decide when they want to work in a quiet space and be able to openly and confidently discuss this with their teacher.

We also heard how for some children, the dining hall can be extremely loud and that this can make the lunch period feel less like a break for children. This came up across both pilot groups and clearly has a significant impact on the children's experience of school.

“I don't like the dinner hall it's crazy loud” (P1-3 Group Member)

The children suggested that all pupils, even the younger ones (who currently aren't allowed) should have the option to eat outside as this would mean there was less noise in the dining hall. They also had lots of suggestions about how to make the dining hall a more enjoyable environment including having flowers on the tables, keeping it cleaner and having fewer people at each table.

The impact of the noise in the dining hall appears to be affected by it being an enclosed space. This is made clear by the fact that, while the groups all identified the playground as being a noisy space, they did not have the same negative association with it. Many participants recognised the importance of getting outside to play and said this was an environment they liked being in and that this space supported their enjoyment of school.

However, the children felt that the outdoor spaces could also be used to further support their learning. They wanted more opportunities to learn outdoors and for this to be more active.

What else would we change?

In addition to the themes we have outlined, there were a range of other things that the children in the pilot activity would change about school. They told us that P7s should get benches in assembly as this would help them focus.

We also heard from children that it would be good to have class pets to help people calm down.

Other ideas included allowing children to wear slippers in class or taking different children for pupil council for each meeting.

The range of opinions and ideas reflected the range of pupils who participated in the pilot. It also clearly demonstrated the importance of building sessions where every child feels supported to share their ideas and thoughts about their school.



Evaluation of the pilot

Evaluation of activity from the children was extremely positive overall. The pupils enjoyed their involvement each week and reflected a positive experience in our end of project evaluation as well.

Ongoing evaluation supported us to adapt our delivery approaches, including a move to an explicitly free-play approach with our P1-3 group. This was particularly important for facilitating the participation of the group, with staff moving to more observational approaches.

The Support for Learning Teacher supporting the delivery of the project shared that children felt empowered because of their participation and that they enjoyed the opportunity to share their views.

“Children felt so empowered, and I could see that they were excited to be able to share their thoughts and experiences.”

(Staff Member, Williamston Primary School)

They also noted that a longer pilot would have worked more effectively, with a six-week period being suggested as the optimal length. This was also reflected in discussions among the Inclusion Ambassadors project team.

Importantly, the staff member who supported the delivery of the project has highlighted opportunities to continue to embed the approach and use the learning within the school. They also felt that this approach should be rolled out to other schools.

The Inclusion Ambassadors project team has also reflected on the experience, identifying that there are clear differences in delivering the work in a primary school setting. This is both in terms of the approaches required, but also in terms of how children reflected on their ‘support’. However, the team saw a clear value in a wider roll out of the Inclusion Ambassadors in primary school settings.



Conclusions

It is clear from our Inclusion Ambassadors pilot project that there is an understanding among primary school children about the things that support their learning. Across the project we have heard from the children about the role of the adults who support them and how the environment affects their learning. Much of what we have heard reflects our findings from the secondary school group. This is important learning as it provides further evidence that the existing Inclusion Ambassadors resources have relevance for professionals working in a primary school environment.

It is important to reflect, that while there were similarities between the experiences shared in the pilot compared to our secondary school group, there are also some clear differences. In particular, the discussions we had

with the primary-aged children were about more general support for all children, rather than the secondary group who reflect a lot more on individual experiences. This may be because the pilot only ran for four weeks, rather than being ongoing like the secondary school group. However, it is also likely to be down to the age of children involved and their experience of different types of support.

Ultimately, many of the key topics addressed by the secondary school group about additional support for learning are the same or similar. Kind and supportive staff who build relationships are key across school settings, as are flexible learning environments where children have a range of resources to support their learning. The main difference in topics between the two primary school groups was an emphasis on the importance of play for P1-3s.



Future work in this area

As we have articulated throughout this report, all children have a right to be heard on issues that affect them.

Following the completion of the pilot, we believe that expanding the Inclusion Ambassadors project to include younger children will support a broader understanding of the successes and challenges in delivering additional support for learning in Scotland. It will also ensure the work of the group is reflective of the wider population of children and young people who access additional support.

Currently, children's views about additional support for learning in P1-P7 are not being actively sought. This is not in line with children's rights under the UNCRC and is a significant barrier to ensuring children get the support they need early on.

Further activity with children in primary school settings will continue to support the delivery of the additional support for learning action plan by developing our understanding of the needs of younger children. It will also add value to the existing Inclusion Ambassadors work by ensuring resources are relevant for a wider range of professionals involved in the delivery of additional support for learning. We also believe that it could be a valuable tool to build on work being done on the transition between primary school and secondary school, which we know can be a challenging time for pupils with additional support needs.

During the pilot, we focused topics that aligned with areas of discussion already addressed by the Inclusion Ambassadors.

We found that the topics and responses from the younger pupils resonated with existing evidence on the views of children and young people in relation to additional support for learning. This confirmed to us that younger pupils are more than capable of engaging with topics relating to their support for learning.

In order to meaningfully engage with the primary pupils, we had to adapt our participation approach. We would continue to do so for any future Inclusion Ambassadors work within primary school settings. This would include ensuring a longer period of work with participating schools. We would also consider how to ensure sustainability within our future activity, ensuring that schools are able to take forward learning from the project after the activity is completed.

By extending the Inclusion Ambassador offer to younger pupils, we would be actively building on the network of children and young people, schools and families who have engaged with the project and creating further opportunities for all children to engage in decisions made about their support for learning.



If you would like further information about this report and the Williamston Primary School pilot project, please contact

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