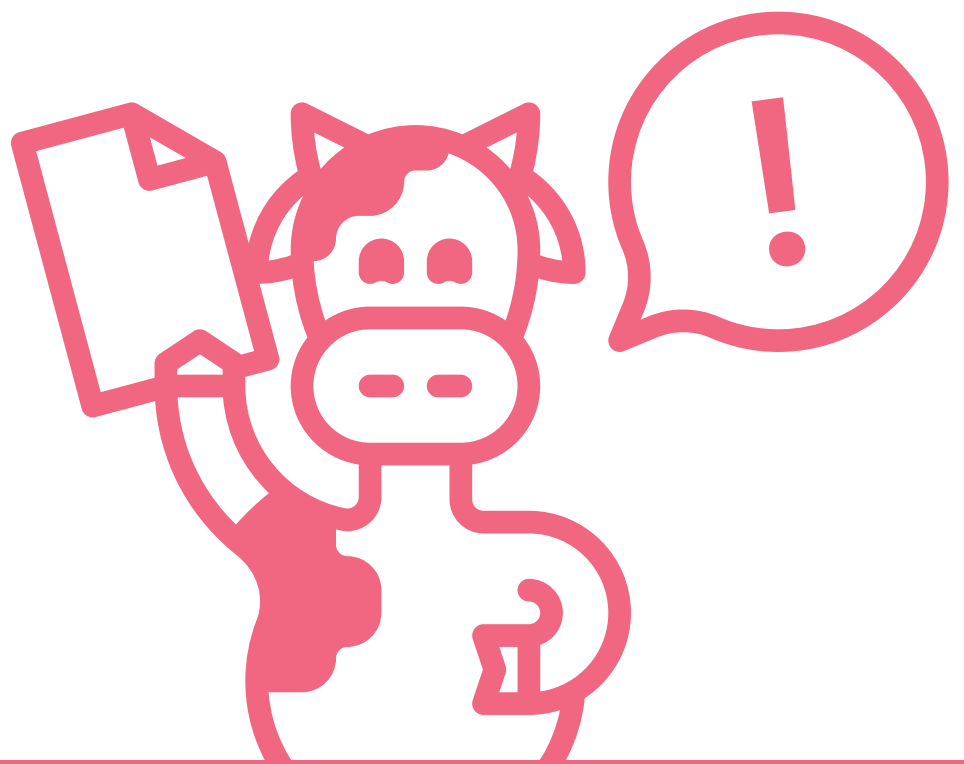




Changing
our **World**

Exploring our 'Hot Topics':
Education and Learning



"I hope that every young person will have the opportunity to experience amazing things and feel supported without any barriers"

1. Introduction and background

About Changing our World

Changing our World (CoW) is the children and young people's advisory group for Children in Scotland. Members of the group are aged 8-25, with different backgrounds, ideas, experiences and views. The group works with Children in Scotland to influence all aspects of our work and to ensure it is relevant to the lives of children and young people.

We offer the opportunity for new members to join the group every two years. The next round of recruitment is due to run in spring 2025.

About Children in Scotland

Giving all children in Scotland an equal chance to flourish is at the heart of everything we do.

By bringing together a network of people working with and for children, alongside children and young people themselves, we offer a broad, balanced, and independent voice. We create solutions, provide support, and develop positive changes across all areas affecting children in Scotland.

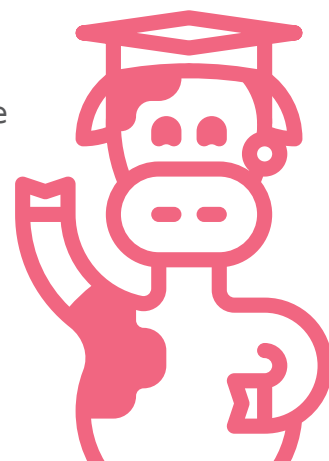
We do this by listening, gathering evidence, and applying and sharing our learning, while always working to uphold children's rights. Our range of knowledge and expertise means we can provide trusted support on issues as diverse as the people we work with and the varied lives of children and families in Scotland.

Changing our World and Education and Learning

'Education and Learning' is one of the 'Hot Topics'¹ chosen by Changing our World, reflecting its ongoing importance for children and young people. The group have been interested in this topic over a number of years. The current members of the group began work on this topic in September 2023 and have discussed it over a number of online and in-person meetings.

When working on this topic with Changing our World, it became apparent that individual members have different experiences of education and, as a result, have issues that they are particularly passionate about. This publication is intended to reflect the diversity of their experiences.

It is apparent from across our work with the group that they have a clear understanding of the importance of education. Members have spoken about how education is a **"huge part of young people's lives"** and that they want education to work for all children and young people. Changing our World have told us that it would be easy for adults and decision-makers to keep the education system the same, but members think it's important that adults don't **"just stick to an old system"**. Changing our World members think that change is important so we can have an education system that meets all children and young people's needs.



¹ Changing our World select two Hot Topics to work on each year. These are the topics that, as a group, they have decided are most important to focus on.

UNCRC

July 2024 marked an important step on Scotland's journey to fully incorporate the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) with the UNCRC (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act coming into force.

In line with the UNCRC, children and young people have a right to an education that recognises and helps to develop their individual personalities, talents and abilities in recognition of the fact that every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities, and learning needs. The importance of education is regularly highlighted to us by the children and young people we work with through our broad range of participation and engagement projects.

This paper supports greater understanding of how to realise children and young people's right to education. It also provides an opportunity for children and young people to be heard on a topic that matters to them.

Aims and focus of this publication

As highlighted above, this publication has been developed following a focus on education and learning over a number of months. It reflects the work of the group, which has been collated by Children in Scotland staff.

Throughout our work with the group, members of Changing our World have been able to identify what works well in Scottish education, as well as being able to highlight challenges that exist. The group has also been able to clearly articulate what would help to support improvement in the delivery of education across Scotland.

This publication brings together the views of individual Changing our World members. Staff at Children in Scotland have helped to pull out key themes that emerged across the group's work. This is done by clarifying discussions at our sessions and by giving the group the opportunity to check the final publication.

What is described in this paper reflects much of what has already been heard in a range of recent reviews of Scottish education.²

We believe this paper can support Scotland's ongoing process of education reform and help to provide a key source of evidence on the views of children and young people on this important topic. It also clearly demonstrates that children and young people have a key role to play in identifying how we ensure the education system meets their needs. Children and young people have told us that they must be involved in the process of education reform if we are to get things right.

As an organisation, Children in Scotland is committed to ensuring that the children and young people we work with can be meaningfully involved in these conversations. This publication highlights the scale of the change needed, and demonstrates the current gap between what is proposed in terms of reform to Scottish education and what children and young people want to see change. We look forward to working alongside Changing our World to ensure this gap is bridged.

² Recent reviews and reports on Scottish education have included: The Independent Review on the Implementation of Additional Support for Learning; Professor Ken Muir's Putting Learners at the Centre, the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessments, and the OECD's report into the Curriculum.

2. What do individual Changing our World members say?

Members of Changing our World have shared a series of individual inputs highlighting what they felt was most important. Children in Scotland staff felt it was important that Changing our World members were able to share their views in a way that suited them, so these inputs have been shared in a range of different formats.

These contributions cover topics including respect, additional support for learning, and exams. They highlight the variety of experiences across the group and provide key insights into areas for development and reform in Scottish education.

Respect and inclusivity in schools

A member submitted a graphic they made to convey the issues they wanted to discuss.

SCHOOLS SHOULD BE
INCLUSIVE AND RESPECTFUL



This member told us:

"When I was in school, I wanted to study bakery, but I was being pushed to study drama instead by my teachers. It felt like a boxing match and our Head of Year was even brought in as back-up and told me, 'we can take you off the register'. I felt I had no choice but to study drama even though I didn't want to.

"I know from speaking to other Changing our World members that they have had similar experiences. Teachers and staff should focus on the person more than the school.

"If a child or young person is not able to trust an adult, they don't want to work with them! I had a head of year who learned all of our names before she started and wanted me to do computing science for two years when I wanted to do it for one year. My computing science teacher put me in for the exam in the first year and I passed that exam, and my head of year told me I proved her wrong."

Inclusion

"I attended a religious school. When I came out as LGBT, this was called 'changes' by the school and not really accepted. We noticed how staff kept a close eye on the queer kids and talked about us behind our backs. There was a complete lack of inclusive education. I then found support through LGBT Youth Scotland. Because my school did not have inclusive education, it was a tough time. If had the support earlier, I would not have done things in a rush later on when figuring out who I was after leaving school."

Improving support for learners with disabilities

This member told us:

"I had a really bad primary school experience as I was given virtually no support with my ADHD and ASD. One of the ways my school handled people struggling with the loud noise was to let them go into the corridor and play chess which is what I had to do with one of my friends who also has ASD."

What would I improve?

"The main things I would look to improve would be:

- a.) I would improve teachers' knowledge on ADHD and ASD and what challenges children are faced with if they have ADHD or ASD.
- b.) I would make more resources and strategies available for teachers on how to give the same course but in a different way to children with ADHD or ASD."

S3-4 Transitions

This member told us:

"The S3-S4 transition is one of the most crucial points of a young person's high school experience, you are a senior now, in the 'big' school and some say no longer a child. You are now responsible for your own decisions and actions. The future is in your hands.

"During this time many changes happen; the work gets harder, the homework pile gets higher and expectations of you increase but the level of support does not. It stays the same when everything else rises. As an S4 pupil, my transition to senior level phase was not easy. I fell behind with the work as the level of difficulty increased too quickly for myself and others to keep up, plus having to spend my parents' money on my own books and materials requested by teachers, feeling distant from staff as their support seems to decline the older I get, along with the dreadful loneliness that comes with exams and tests. At the beginning of S4 and even to this day myself and other feel a lack of motivation when it comes to school as everything has suddenly gotten a lot harder than previously and it feels as if our support network within the school building is not as apparent anymore since we are made to feel like as senior we need to do everything on our own. In the fabulous words of Taylor Swift it's as if 'You're on your own kid'.

"I believe that counselling, mental health support and study support should be readily available to senior pupils as well as broad general election pupils. When you're a new senior, so much is happening and changing around you and staff need to be there to support and help with the anxiety that comes with this. This is an easy fix or change that could happen and I believe many new S4s could benefit from knowing they have a strong support network helping and guiding them through the new senior life and expectations!"

Physical space, getting the right support and improving the curriculum

This member told us:

"For most, school is mostly fun, and they will leave with the qualifications and skills they need to go into a job and life they want. But for lots of people, school is very stressful, and things like learning disabilities or bullying are a barrier to either coming to school or learning anything there. Some subjects cannot be taught in some schools, whether it is a lack of facilities, resources, or in my case, teachers.

"In primary schools, teachers are overwhelmed with young children who might not be able to communicate, aren't potty trained, or swipe at books. Pupil Support Assistants are few and far between, meaning teachers can't support children to learn the key skills they will need for the rest of their education, and life.

"Moving further forward, universities are reluctant to give extra places to Scottish students paying less, and apprenticeships can leave you with no qualifications and no job. For Scots learning from home or abroad, access to practical subjects, like art and drama, and support with learning disabilities, is limited.

"So how can we make sure everyone gets the support they need for their education, from the start to finish of their time with our education system?

"To start with, schools should be built properly, [is it called webbed concrete that was used in breaking schools?] and equipped with proper resources and facilities, especially secondary school, and in rural areas. Outdoor space and outdoor learning should be encouraged, if not enforced, and risk assessments should be hassle free for everyone so that they are not an excuse!"

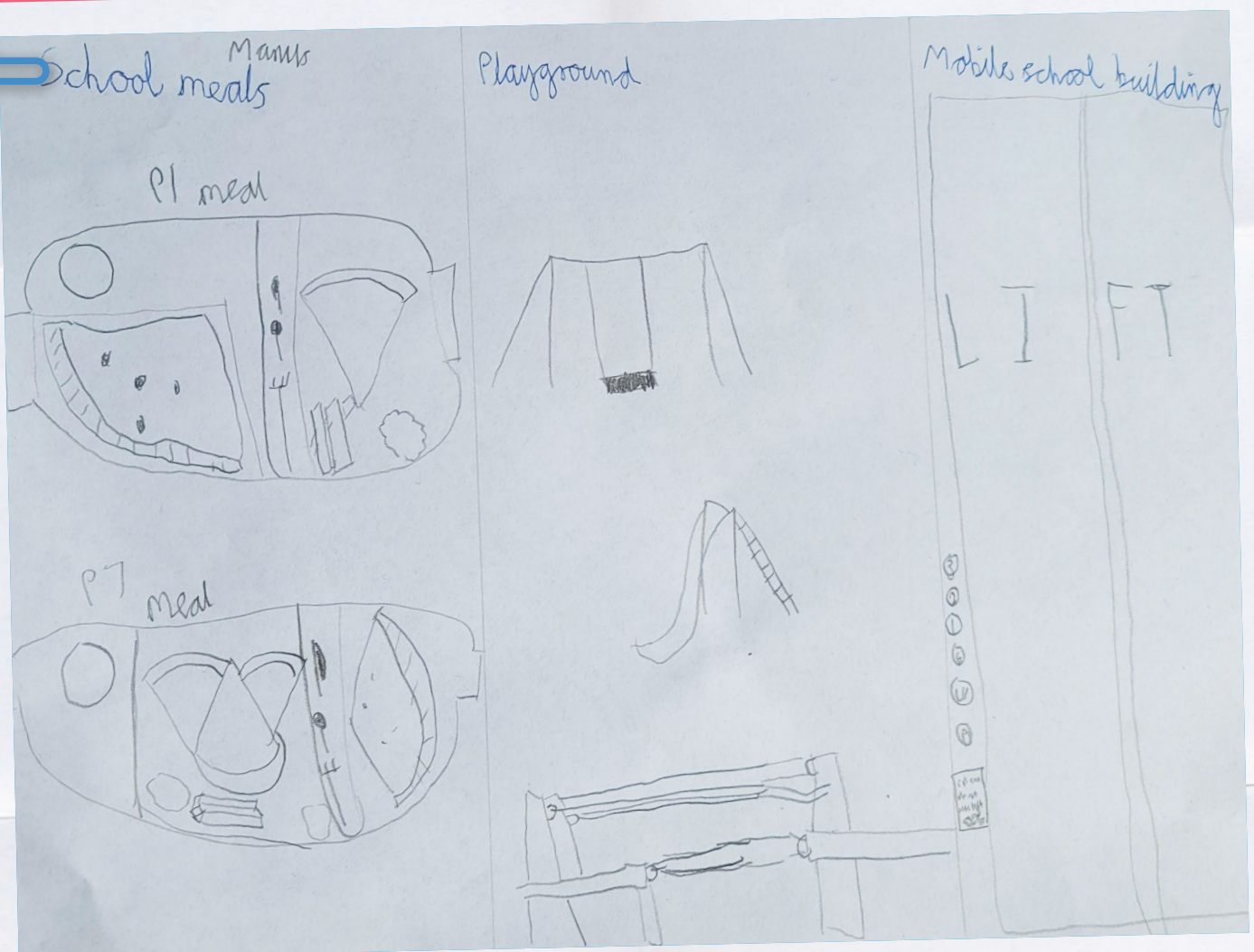


"Teachers should be educated on how to teach in a variety of ways to suit everyone, and more PSAs should be hired in younger years. And, of course, we should give the people educating the future of Scotland the salary they deserve! The SQA [or their replacement?] should give equitable support to children learning from home or abroad, as to those in schools in Scotland.

"People with learning disabilities should also have access to whatever support they need to gain skills and qualifications. The curriculum in both primary and secondary schools should be regularly reviewed, to reflect what is most important in the current world, from climate change to 3D modelling, and subject choices should be broad and accessible wherever you're learning. Apprenticeships should be well paid, and always leave you further onward than where you started, either with qualifications or, hopefully, a job offer. And finally, universities should be encouraged to take more Scottish students either by financial or legal means, but not just quotas."

School meals and accessibility in schools

For this submission a member of the group made a poster. We have also summarised some of the conversation on this topic as well.



School meals

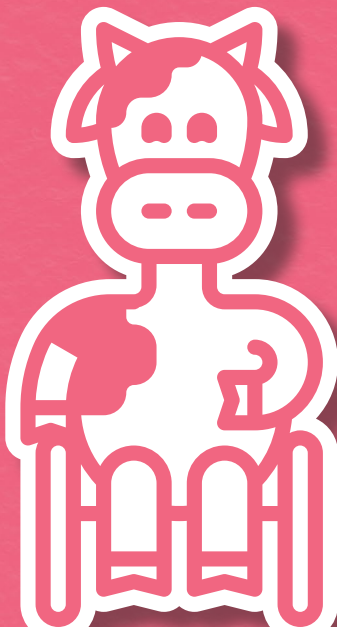
We heard from this member that:

- It feels like P1s get the same portion sizes as P7s, which means that P1s are able to have leftovers and P7s get smaller portions and ask for more
- This can be an issue because, if you are hungry, it's hard to focus.
- Pupils have noticed adults eating some of the food, meaning there can be less available for pupils
- P1s are served first and tend to get more, then portions get smaller as the different year groups come in
- People who forget to book or bring lunches get given a lunch, which means someone else might not get one
- If someone doesn't get a lunch, other pupils tend to share their food with them
- This could result in someone who has allergies/intolerances eating something and getting sick, which means they are off school for two days
- Positive impact of change would be fewer absences and pupils wouldn't be hungry.

Accessibility in schools

We heard from this member that:

- Lots of schools in Edinburgh are old, Victorian buildings with lots of stairs and no lifts
- A pupil in P5 broke her leg and the school had to change her classroom really quickly
- In their school there are steps to every door (even on the ground floor)
- Lots of people are affected when things aren't accessible.



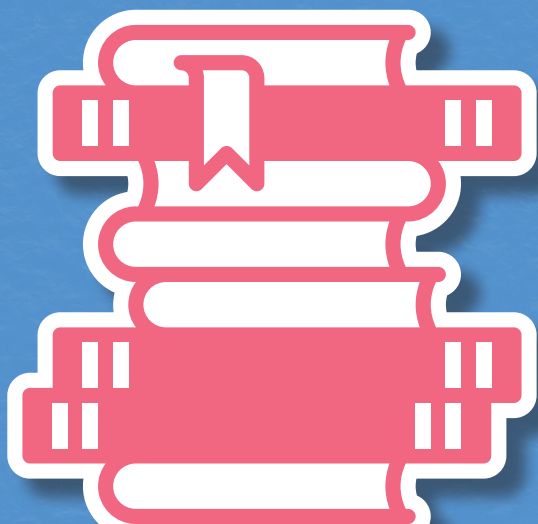
Inequality and education

This member told us:

“Education is a fundamental right for every child, but unfortunately, many children around the world face various difficulties when it comes to accessing quality education. These challenges can range from economic constraints to social barriers, language barriers, learning disabilities, and inadequate educational resources. However, despite these obstacles, there are numerous individuals and organisations dedicated to overcoming these challenges and ensuring that every child has access to a quality education. Historically, access to education has been limited for many children, particularly those from marginalised communities. In the early days, only the elite or privileged few had the opportunity to receive a formal education, while the majority of children were left without access to basic literacy and numeracy skills. This lack of education perpetuated cycles of poverty and inequality, as those with limited education struggled to break free from their circumstances.

“One influential individual in the field of education is Sir Ken Robinson, an educator, author, and speaker known for his groundbreaking work on creativity in schools. Robinson has emphasised the importance of fostering creativity and individuality in education, arguing that traditional educational systems often stifle students’ natural talents and abilities. His TED Talk ‘Do Schools Kill Creativity?’ has been viewed by millions of people worldwide and sparked important conversations about the need for educational reform. The impact of the difficulties of education for children extends beyond individual students to society as a whole.

“Without access to quality education, children are more likely to struggle academically, experience poor health outcomes, and face limited opportunities for economic advancement. This perpetuates cycles of poverty and inequality, making it crucial for educators, policymakers, and community members to work together to address these challenges. One approach that has proven effective in helping children overcome the difficulties of education is the implementation of inclusive and supportive learning environments. By providing tailored support for students with learning disabilities, language barriers, or other challenges, educators can help every child reach their full potential. Additionally, investing in quality educational resources, such as updated textbooks, technology, and school infrastructure, can ensure that children have the tools they need to succeed in school and beyond.”



Additional support for learning and improving support

This member told us:

"I care about this due to my own experiences and those of my friends. I had a teacher in school who was following me around and I had no idea who she was. I later found out she is meant to be my support teacher. I only found out as I saw a teacher ask her who she was meant to be supporting, and she pointed at me. I found this really strange and just felt that 'This lady is following me'. The support teacher would show up for random subjects, was not there for things I find difficult (like maths). My friends' parents had to push and push to get support for them.

"Schools should give information and ask pupils what support they actually need. Teachers should take the time to get to know pupils and the support they need. When you don't get the right support, you feel like you aren't valued, and it doesn't validate you. Schools should support you and provide the stuff you need to help with your learning. Adults need to make sure that pupils are able to get diagnoses needed for support faster and do what they say they are going to do."



3. Changing our World group discussions and findings



Across our discussions with the group, we have heard about a wide range of issues, and this section of the paper brings together the views shared across these discussions and highlights key themes. The intention of this section is to provide an understanding of key issues in education for children and young people.



Role and purpose of education

Changing our World members have spoken about how education is an opportunity to teach young people skills. They have told us how it helps children and young people access opportunities and how it supports them do what they want in their lives. Members have also spoken about how influential education can be in helping young people **“succeed”** in life and emphasised that this will look different for different young people.

Changing our World members have also told us that education and learning can teach children and young people knowledge for the future and **“skills to innovate and move the world forward”**.



Where learning happens

It was clear from our work with Changing our World that they understand that learning does not just take place in the school building, but something that happens in a much wider and holistic way.

The group told us about the different places they learn new information and skills outside of school. These included youth clubs, volunteering, caring responsibilities and at home. They discussed how these different environments can teach them things that they might not be able to learn in school. From our discussions, it is clear that a range of opportunities are required to support the holistic approach to education and learning that children and young people want to see.

We heard about how opportunities like volunteering help people to discover what they were interested in. One older member of the group identified how volunteering has supported them to identify their passion for youth work, something they have pursued in further education and potentially into employment. They told us:

“I had to learn [when I left school through volunteering for different projects] ... I found out through my choice”

Changing our World Member

We also heard how members of the group learned more about things like rights from volunteer groups like Changing our World than they do at school. While it is important these things are included within the school curriculum, this demonstrates the importance of opportunities outside school in supporting children and young people to learn. We are confident from other engagement work that this will be applicable to a wide range of topics, not just rights.

“It wasn’t until I joined a group like CoW that I learned the language [about children’s rights]”

Changing our World Member

“I didn’t get much [education about rights] in school and I would have liked more ... rights are an important subject, and you should learn about these”

Changing our World Member

Plans to adapt and reform Scotland’s education system must take account of the different places where children and young people’s learning happens. Any changes to the education system must build connections between these opportunities.



What supports learning

Members of Changing our World were clear about the sorts of things they felt can support their education and that help them to learn. Much of what we heard here reflects what has come up consistently within our work on education across a range of projects.

Group members stressed the importance of education staff knowing that different methods and ways of doing things work for different people. Children and young people should be treated as individuals and staff who work with them should make the effort to get to know what works well for them. They also feel it is really important for adults involved in delivering education to understand that pupils have different support needs and to have greater understanding of these.

We heard how positive, supportive teaching approaches are valued by the group and support their learning. As one member said, “If I am supported to work better, I become more interested, and I can achieve better grades”. We also know from across our work with children and young people the value of kind, supportive adults in delivering the sort of learning that children and young people want.

We also heard about the importance of kind, supportive and non-judgemental adults. Changing our World members want teachers to trust them and to recognise their work and contribution. We also heard about how punitive approaches were not appreciated – for example, the group told us that teachers should shout or send pupils out of class without a reasonable cause. This also reflects what Children in Scotland have consistently heard from children and young people.

The group also spoke about the way learning is delivered and how this affects the way they learn. They want adults to clearly explain things and to provide non-judgemental support when they are stuck.

Members of the group also said that a greater emphasis on learning by doing and more practical approaches in the classroom would help prepare young people for their future careers.



Learning about equality and diversity

Members of Changing our World have spoken consistently about the importance of equality and diversity being taught to pupils of all ages. They told us how different groups in society still experience unequal treatment and discrimination. They said that racism, homophobia and sexism still take place in schools. Changing our World members told us they want to spend more time learning about equality and diversity issues in school.

“We should have more time spent on it in class... We did one block on it in first year in modern studies, it’s not really enough”

Changing our World Member

Changing our World members said that if children and young people had better awareness and understanding of rights and equality and diversity, this would give them a greater understanding of these issues and would influence how they treat other people.

The group will be taking forward work on equalities and inclusion in coming months and will likely expand further on this.



Focus on exams and attainment

Changing our World members also spoke in detail about how it feels like exams and attainment are the main focus for their teachers. This reflects our work with the [Inclusion Ambassadors](#) and also findings from the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessments.

Members spoke about how completing exams and attending university feels like the “default” path expected of pupils. However, the group spoke about how they think exams are a **“tiny reflection of people”** and they are not an accurate depiction of an individual’s learning or ability.

They discussed how current methods of assessment focus on pupils’ ability to memorise and recite information. They queried whether this was actually preparing young people for the future. Members also told us that taking such a restrictive approach **“knocks the confidence”** of learners who are less able to share their learning in this way. Changing our World members believe that there should be more recognition for courses and qualifications that are not exam-based.

Members also spoke passionately about the negative impact exams and high workloads have on pupils. They told us how it can negatively impact young people’s wellbeing and how **“overwhelming”** school can be. They shared how pupils can sometimes feel additional pressure from teachers in the lead up to exams and how this can detrimentally affect pupils’ mental health.

“We should be able to learn and enjoy life!”

Changing our World Member

The findings of the recent Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessments identified a range of potential solutions to this and what we have heard from Changing our World reaffirms our support for implementing these recommendations.

The group also spoke about how in their experience they have often received unhelpful careers advice. They felt too often this promoted the idea that there was a single path to certain careers. We heard from members of the group about situations where members had been told that if you don't achieve the necessary Highers for a certain job, you need to reconsider, rather than promoting alternative paths.

The group also felt that young people are not being adequately prepared for opportunities and careers after education because the skills they need are not reflected in subject content in schools.



Barriers to learning

We heard about a range of barriers to their learning that members of Changing our World experience. Many of the issues identified reflect what Children in Scotland has also heard in our other participation projects including our work with the Inclusion Ambassadors.

Changing our World discussed how even in their group (a small sample of young people across Scotland), their experiences of education varied greatly. The group identified that the education a young person receives and opportunities available to them vary significantly depending on where they live.

They spoke about how some schools are able to offer a wide variety of subject choices, whilst others offer a more limited range. Members said this was unfair for pupils with more limited opportunities. They also recognised the impact on young people who access chosen subjects through different schools. One member of the group reflected on their experiences of having to travel to three different schools for their chosen subjects, adding up to 16 taxi journeys per week.

We also heard how certain aspects of the curriculum and the topics covered within subjects felt out of date. Group members told us that this can affect their engagement with learning opportunities at school. The group want learning to be relevant to them and reflective of their experiences.

Members of the group also highlighted their frustration at large class sizes and noted how having higher numbers of students can make class **“disruptive”** and **“noisy”**. We also heard how schools were running out of space to accommodate pupils, leading to facilities such as libraries and additional support bases being used as classrooms.

The group also spoke about their preference for smaller classes. They told us that lessons delivered to smaller groups were often better as it gave more young people an opportunity to speak. They also felt that working in smaller groups allowed materials and approaches to be more tailored to the individuals and that teachers had more time and could provide better support to pupils.

There was also a discussion about teacher attitudes and the way in which education staff work with children and young people. We heard from members that the way pupils are treated in schools can pose a barrier to learning. Members spoke about their experiences of feeling “put down” by some teachers when they have been struggling in class. They shared how this impacted their self-esteem and acted as a barrier to learning. We heard how it was more effective when teachers take time and make an effort to understand how an individual works. The group wanted teachers to work with pupils to find solutions and overcome challenges together.

Members of Changing our World have also highlighted issues related to additional support for learning. They have identified that they would like to work consistently with support staff so that staff can get to know them better and provide more individualised support. We also heard from members that there is often a lack of knowledge and understanding of support needs like ADHD and autism. Changing our World members want to see improved awareness and understanding of different additional support needs among school staff and they feel there needs to be more resources to support teachers in this area.

4. Our work on education and learning going forward

The issues identified by Changing our World in this publication are not new. Many of the key points identified in this publication reflect the findings from recent reviews of the Scottish education system.

The individual perspectives and group discussions shared here brilliantly shine a light on children and young people’s hopes for a more supportive and inclusive approach to education.

The issues highlighted here require responses at both a strategic and delivery level. This includes the structure and governance of education, education policy, and what is happening day-to-day in classrooms and school communities.

We will continue to support Changing our World to advocate for and influence change on this topic.

Currently, too many children and young people are not having their educational needs met. It is important that there is meaningful change in the delivery of education in Scotland to ensure all children and young people can fully access their right to education. In line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, there must also be meaningful opportunities for the views of children and young people to inform the ongoing development and delivery of education and learning in Scotland.

[Click here to find out more about Children in Scotland and our work](#)



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