



Inclusion Ambassadors
Independent Review of Exams and Assessments
November 2022

The Inclusion Ambassadors are a group of secondary-aged pupils who have a range of additional support needs and attend a variety of educational provision across Scotland. Children in Scotland has supported the Inclusion Ambassadors since 2016, and formally took over running the group in 2019.

At present there are around 20 members of the group from across 16 local authorities. The group share their experiences of being a young person with additional support needs in Scotland through online and in person meetings. Each meeting focuses on a particular issue that the group have identified they wish to discuss, or Children in Scotland have selected as being helpful to gather their views and experiences.

At the October meeting of the group, we focussed on the Independent Review of Exams and Assessments being led by Professor Louise Hayward. Below summarises the discussions had and further reflections on recent learning from the Success Looks Different award. Children in Scotland also plans to submit an organisational response to the ongoing public consultation on the review.

Success Looks Different

Across 2022, we have worked with the Inclusion Ambassadors to design and deliver the Success Looks Different Awards.

The awards were developed in response to Angela Morgan's review of Additional Support for Learning and the subsequent Additional Support for Learning Action Plan. Both of these recognised the need for greater awareness, understanding and recognition of success outside of the exam system.

The awards provide a chance for schools to share how they are helping pupils with additional support needs feel included, supported and celebrated. In line with the Inclusion Ambassadors Vision Statement for education, the awards aim to encourage schools to look beyond exam results and consider success in more than just attainment levels.

The inaugural 2022 Success Looks Different awards were given out for Primary, Secondary and Special Schools. Winners were chosen by the Inclusion Ambassadors based on the following criteria:

- Evidence of celebrating individual successes and positive relationships.
- Evidence of creativity and doing something different

- Evidence of sharing success with the wider community
- Evidence of respecting and promoting children's rights
- Recognition through awards or certificates

Winning schools were announced in September 2022:

- Primary and Early Years Category – Braehead Primary School, Stirling
- Secondary Category – Alva Academy, Clackmannanshire
- Special School Category – Cedarbank, West Lothian

The award winners all have highlighted ways in which schools can celebrate and recognise different forms of success for children and young people who access additional support. Ultimately, it reinforces that while formal exams are important, they are not central to the experiences of all children and young people.

We have highlighted the awards here as it helps frame the Inclusion Ambassadors views on the role of exams and assessments. A short case study outlining initiatives from each of the winning schools has been shared with the review team alongside this submission. These case studies will be publicly available over the coming weeks.

Inclusion Ambassadors views on exams and assessments

At the October 2022 meeting of the Inclusion Ambassadors, we discussed members' views on exams and assessments. It is important to recognise that the group have different experiences of being involved in exams and assessments.

Too much focus on exams

Generally, members of the Inclusion Ambassadors are aware of why there are exams and assessments within school. They understand why it is important that pupil's learning and progress is tracked. However, for many members of the group, the current approach can add stress and detract from other important aspects of school.

We heard from some members of the group that the ongoing focus on exams - particularly in the senior phase - can dominate the school experience. This was prevalent even for members of the Inclusion Ambassadors group who did not have much experience of the formal exam system and who may not sit exams.

There was a feeling that the way exams happen at present does not capture what is important for young people. Some members highlighted how they feel much of what is included in exams is not relevant in the real world. This reflects what we have heard in previous discussions with the group. They have highlighted that school generally does not focus enough on life skills. They also feel they do not get enough support for life beyond school that isn't related to higher education.

"Sometimes things you learn they aren't for the real world. I don't know about bills or money or taxes, I don't learn that." (Inclusion Ambassador)

How do exams make people feel?

We explored what sort of words came to mind when the group thought about exams. For many of the group they were seen as stressful, anxiety inducing and frustrating.

One member of the group (who is currently sitting exams) spoke about how the level of homework and revision required , alongside pressure from the school, made them feel stressed and burnt out. They highlighted how much this was eating into their time out of school and meant they had less time to relax at the weekend. They explicitly highlighted that this pressure takes away from their chance to be children/young people.

Others also highlighted how the 'high stakes' element of assessments could make them feel stressed as they felt like their futures rested on how they performed on one specific day. These levels of stress were also felt by people who were not sitting exams yet. There was also a fear among some members about feeling like they have let people down if they do not do as well as expected.

"I don't really know that much of exams but it sounds like a ton of work." (Inclusion Ambassador)

Another member of the group highlighted how exams can add to feelings of exclusion as they highlight differences between young people. For some members of the group and for some young people with additional support needs more broadly, the formal exam system is not something they will go through. However, as has been highlighted, for many it feels like this is what is most valued by schools. This lack of recognition of wider success and achievement is in part what the Success Looks Different award tries to tackle.

It is important to recognise that there were some feelings of excitement about exams in the group. They highlighted how it is exciting to find out how you are getting on and the progress you have made. However, it is obvious from our discussions that while there can be excitement, the way exams are structured undoubtedly causes stress.

Flexible and Holistic Approaches

There was unanimous support among participants for a more flexible exam and assessment system. The group wanted a move from high stakes exam environments to continual assessment across the year and for these to have more of an impact on pupils' grades and outcomes. They also wanted more flexibility and choice in how people are assessed and how they share their learning; this could include more creative methods of presentation, such as posters for example. Their views reflect what other groups Children in Scotland works with have told us, including Changing our World, our children and young people's advisory group and what we hear through the Enquire helpline and the My Rights My Say service.

"I've had quite good support. My family say it doesn't really matter about the score as long as you try your best. And the school just help me along with it. It made me feel calmer that they weren't worrying about my score but about my health."
(Inclusion Ambassador)

Summary and recommendations

It is clear that for members of the Inclusion Ambassadors, there are challenges presented by the structure of the current exam and assessment system. The current process is seen as stressful with the high stakes elements only adding to this.

As we have highlighted above, the group want:

- more flexible approaches to assessment, led by what individuals need
- more opportunities for ongoing assessments which count towards final grades.

The focus on exams and the extent to which this dominates thinking within schools has a negative effect on the school experience as well as education. It can contribute to some young people feeling excluded as the perception is that exam passes are the only things that matter. The independent review of exams and assessments needs to find a way forward which not only reforms the structure of the exam system but also changes the narrative and perceptions of what is valued.

As the Success Looks Different award highlights, there are a range of ways schools can celebrate success outside the exam system. These could include: pupil led celebrations of differences, creative approaches towards awards and certificates or support to try alternative course options. Such approaches need to become the norm and celebrated equally alongside exam passes.

With this in mind, we have made 4 recommendations based on the Inclusion Ambassadors discussions:

- The future of Scottish exams and assessment must prioritise flexibility and choice for individual learners. Pupils need to have the opportunity to inform how and when they are assessed.
- Ongoing assessment needs to be prioritised over high stakes end of school exams. This should also include opportunities for shorter courses that reflect different needs.
- Recognition of wider success and achievement needs to be given parity with formal exams. This will require changes in culture as well as structures.
- Schools need to find ways to make the exam process feels less pressured and reduce the negative impact on children and young people's health and wellbeing.

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