Education Reform: Let's Talk Scottish Education
The views of young people participating in youth work

Introduction

YouthLink Scotland is the national agency for youth work. We are a membership organisation representing over 100 regional and national youth organisations from the voluntary and statutory sectors. We champion the role and value of youth work and represent the interests and aspirations of our sector.

Our vision is for a nation that values young people and their contribution to society, supported through critical relationships with youth workers to achieve their potential. As the collective voice of the youth work sector, we represent their interests, policy and practice needs to the local and national government. We achieve this by supporting the sector to demonstrate the impact and value of their work and by promoting a positive image of young people and youth work.

We campaign for equality of access to high-quality youth work for all young people, supported by a confident, skilled, well-led and effective workforce while playing an essential role in delivering Scotland's national outcomes. As part of this process, we have been calling for Education Reform to drive a transformed education system that addresses the purposes described in Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Response from young people participating in youth work

This response to the national discussion summarises the views of 738 young people participating in youth work across Scotland. Responses cover local authority youth work, voluntary/third sector youth organisations and community-based youth work including youth groups and local area associations of Youth Scotland. Young people are participating across 22 local authority areas.

Youth workers provided opportunities for young people to consider what they need from education, what needs to change and the role and impact of youth work as part of education. These conversations happened in youth work settings, including youth clubs, schools, youth award groups, uniformed organisations, online and outdoors.

One group of young people discussed the topic while digging and clearing mountains of earth to make way for new raised beds to grow vegetables for food banks in the local area.

Understanding Scottish Education

Young people identified that 'education' is learning and development that takes place across various settings. It includes learning that happens outside of the 'school day'. Many people support their learning, such as teachers, youth workers, friends and family.

What is education?

> *"Education can happen anywhere and everywhere, through social media, in our house, in the community, youth clubs, it just happens everywhere."*
>
> *"It is a wide range of things that help you develop skills."*
>
> *"Youth work is education: helps you learn about communication, working together, confidence."*
>
> *"The education I take part in during university prepares me academically and gives me the knowledge I require to understand the career into which I am going. On the other side, I have benefited much more from the informal education offered to me during my work in the community centre."*
>
> *"Taking part in discussions in the (youth) club where we can learn about different issues."*
>
> *"Learning about how the environment is important and how it has an impact on their futures."*
>
> *"Education is any learning experience, whether it's about something you're passionate about or something to help you progress in an academic environment, employment, an apprenticeship or training."*
>
> *"Education is for life. Whether it's a basic skill you've picked up or a piece of knowledge, education should serve you for the rest of your life. It shouldn't always be for any specific purpose – or rather, education should serve a wide variety of purposes".*
>
> *"Education is about learning things we need to know for the future."*
>
> *"It helps us gain experiences that prepare us for the future."*
>
> *"Being ready for work."*
>
> *"Doing Prince's Trust. Work experience at nursery which is preparing me to be a child care worker."*

Places where we learn and develop

football-pitch
university school in_the_street
youth_awards apprenticeships
libraries
online
college community
home
sports
youth_work

What do young people need from Scottish education?

Young people said they need Scottish education to help them prepare for future life and work. In particular, they spoke about the importance of a holistic experience that includes:

- Feeling safe, respected and included
- Developing and applying 'life relevant' skills
- Access to the support they need
- Qualifications and other recognition of achievement
- A broad range of experiences, choices and pathways to meet their individual needs and aspirations.

"To be prepared for the life you want to lead."

"To learn important stuff like how to pay your bills and get a house."

"Want good grades from education so we can get a good job."

"Broaden horizons."

"Equipped for life ahead."

"Good choices of subjects and courses."

"We need to learn by doing."

Is Scottish education fulfilling its purpose?

> **22% of young people feel they are getting what they need from Scottish education**

Findings from this consultation show that 22% of young people feel they are getting what they need across all the places where they learn. Another 50% think they are partly getting what they need, with just under a third of young people saying they are not.

These figures reflect findings from the consultation undertaken by Professor Ken Muir, which identified that *"only one in three secondary school learners who responded to the survey agreed that they are having the best possible education experience while just over half (56%) were of the view that their education helps them to develop their personality, talents and abilities to their fullest potential.[1]"*

Are you getting what you need across all the places where you learn?		
YES	149	22%
NO	191	28%
PARTLY	333	50%
TOTAL	673	

How does youth work help deliver what young people need from education?

Youth Work Outcomes and Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) Capacities

The purpose of youth work in Scotland is to facilitate young people's personal, social and educational development. Young people told us about the difference youth work makes to their education, learning and life. Responses show that youth work supports young people to:

• Build their health and wellbeing

• Develop and manage relationships effectively

• Create and apply their learning and describe their skills and achievements

• Participate safely and effectively in groups and teams

• Consider risk, make reasoned decisions and take control

• Grow as active citizens, expressing their voice and enabling change

• Broaden their perspectives through new experiences and thinking

---

[1] https://www.gov.scot/publications/putting-learners-centre-towards-future-vision-scottish-education/

> *"Youth Work has helped me recognise my skills and abilities, my mental health and how to be a better person."*
>
> *"Doing youth work has made me feel like I can be myself and that I have a voice."*
>
> *"At Link Living, they have been teaching us skills that we can use in the real world and to gain confidence and motivation to challenge ourselves."*
>
> *"Duke of Edinburgh has really helped me build my resilience."*
>
> *"I get to learn about and practice taking on responsibilities, leadership skills, problem-solving, teamwork, try new things."*

Young people's responses also show that youth work is helping them to develop across the four capacities of CfE and that they can articulate the skills and competencies described under each capacity.

<u>Successful learners</u> with enthusiasm and motivation for learning	*"Youth work makes learning about the things we need to learn about a lot more fun and it feels easier to learn because it's fun."* *"We learn to do things in more creative, interesting ways so that helps us remember."*
<u>Confident individuals</u> with a sense of physical, mental and emotional wellbeing	*"I feel more comfortable in myself."* *"More self-aware."*
<u>Effective contributors</u> who are able to: communicate in different ways and in different settings, and make informed choices and decisions	*"My communication skills are much better, I am able to talk to others easier than before."* *"It's helped me realise the effects my behaviour can have on others, it's improved my communication skills and I've made more positive life choices."*
<u>Responsible Citizens</u> with: respect for others and commitment to participate responsibly in political, economic, social and cultural life	*"I feel good helping the environment and the community. I think school should get care packages for vulnerable people who need help with food etc."* *"Learned more about rights and opportunities."*

<u>Develop and apply 'life relevant' skills</u>

83% of young people said their skills and achievements through youth work are very important or important to their future

Youth work supports young people to develop, recognise and articulate their skills. Young people identified various skills they develop through youth work. This included the essential skills articulated in the Youth Work Skills Framework[2] - looking after myself, confidence, communication, leadership, resilience, building relationships, organising and planning, decision-making, problem-solving, teamwork and creating change. Young people described their skills development through youth work as having relevance to their life now and for their future. Importantly, young people expressed that youth work supports them to develop skills through practical, experiential opportunities and understand their relevance and application to their future. This is seen as an essential element of what they needed from education.

83% of young people (603) said their skills, qualities, experiences and achievements gained through youth work were very important or important to their future.

How important to your future are your skills, qualities, experiences and achievements gained through youth work?	
Very important	408
Important	195
Quite important	64
Not important	11
Don't know	45
Total	723

"We get experiences from youth work that we don't get from other places."

"Through youth work I gain skills that will benefit me when I'm older. When I leave school I doubt I'll need to know Pythagoras theorem or how to write an essay which I've learnt in school. I'll use confidence and resilience etc. that I've gained doing youth work."

"The skills through YVS provided more skills to bring to my job and career than school did."

"Work experience; built on my confidence; helped understand how people feel and understand their background."

"Opportunities to learn life skills not taught in school."

"You get really transferable skills from youth work."

---

[2] https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/policy-research/outcomes-and-skills/

> *"Youth work makes us what we are, not exam results."*

Engagement with learning

Young people's responses also indicate that youth work supports them to engage with learning. This includes re-engaging with formal education such as school. Building confidence and resilience and accessing the support they need can help young people feel ready to learn. The provision of an informal, safe, nurturing environment in which to learn also made them more likely to engage. Young people could see the connection between engaging through youth work and their ability to achieve and attain.

- *"Increase attendance at school."*

- *"Better/softer start to the school day."*

- *"It makes me want to come to school."*

- *"Helps me not to be stressed to go to other classes."*

- *"Some days I wouldn't want to come in, but then I see I have this so I come in."*

- *"I would do this as a full timetable if I could."*

- *"I'm a bit more confident in learning I think and a lot more comfortable in school."*

- *"Made it more fun, made us more confident, learned skills like cooking, cleaning, personal care, communication. Made it easier to go to school knowing Nikki is in school if we need her."*

- *"It has encouraged me to attend groups and school."*

- *"If I didn't have youth work then I probably wouldn't attend school."*

What works?

Young people identified the key elements of youth work that help them to:

- Feel safe, respected and included
- Access the support they need
- Engage with learning
- Develop life-relevant skills
- Progress across the four capacities
- Work towards qualifications and other recognition of achievement
- Learn through a broad range of experiences, choices and pathways to meet their individual needs and aspirations

The supportive relationships with youth workers, combined with the non-formal youth work approach, help to create a safe space and individualised experiences that lead to positive, relevant learning and outcomes.

Relationship with youth workers

"Youth work makes me feel wanted."

Young people told us that the relationship with a youth worker was vital to their ability to feel safe, trusted, supported, respected and heard. This helps them to learn, develop and grow. In particular, young people feel cared for by their youth workers, who understand what they need and can respond appropriately.

> *"I feel I can be more honest with youth workers and that they don't judge me. Then it's easier to learn cause I can be open and feel like its ok to be me."*
>
> *"I am comfortable in speaking with workers as they don't dismiss me and they will listen."*
>
> *"I am very lucky to have a youth worker as I feel less like an outsider."*
>
> *"Youth workers will give us advice and help us."*
>
> *"They speak to us and we can talk back to them. Youth work and youth workers respect our voices."*
>
> *"Youth workers help us, teachers teach us we notice the difference."*
>
> *"The staff understand us and try to find opportunities and skills and awards that can fit into our lifestyles. We are given so many opportunities to get experiences that we need for jobs, college and everyday life skills."*
>
> *"Treated with kindness and respect."*
>
> *"You get support and more understanding of my circumstances and what I need."*
>
> *"Teachers have set curriculum and teach us subjects where youth workers walk us through and about our life and our experiences."*
>
> *"Help to support in my personal life."*

Youth work approach

"Youth work allows us to design our own learning."

Young people described the impact of learning through a non-formal youth work approach. This helps them engage in learning and achieve through a broad range of experiences, choices and pathways to meet their individual needs and aspirations.

There were many positive comments regarding the experiential nature of learning through youth work and the tailored opportunities to develop and apply relevant skills that they feel are important for their future.

They also spoke about learning in a youth work environment compared to a classroom. In contrast to the words used to describe their classroom learning experience, young people spoke about 'fun', 'safe' and 'calm'. Additionally, small group sizes and working together were positive approaches. This helps them to engage and learn. The voluntary nature of their participation in youth work is also seen as essential to young people and contributes to their ability to feel comfortable and engaged.

The positive impact of a youth work approach was evident in comments relating to both youth work in school and in the community:

> *"Youth work is more focused on the individual rather than meeting class targets."*
>
> *"We focus on things that matter to us and learn more about the real world."*
>
> *"We make new friends, they give us alternative things that give us awards or help us to learn new skills for life."*
>
> *"So many different opportunities, it isn't just the one way of learning, there is different ways to learn in a youth work setting and you can freely make mistakes and be supported while doing so."*
>
> *"More satisfying and more proud of myself because I am doing this because I want to and turn up because I want to, not because the government says so."*
>
> *"We have a say in how things are done and it feels like it's more tailored to us It gives you a more informal way of learning, it gives you options. It doesn't feel like learning as it's so enjoyable. There is so much variety for topics you are interested in."*
>
> *"I didn't know what I wanted to be when I'm in school but I've learned more about what I want to do next by coming here."*
>
> *"It is a more relaxed environment and less people so more support."*
>
> *"As it's more fun it makes you want to learn more."*
>
> *"Learning is easier because you learn stuff here while doing activities."*
>
> *"I get to work in an environment where everyone gets more than one chance and no judgement whether you have qualifications or not."*
>
> *"I can relax and learn what I want at a pace I can understand, without feeling like an idiot."*
>
> *"You are allowed to be the person you are."*

> *"Feel heard, I have a voice I speak up to people, I feel more confident speaking to people that are like me."*

What needs to change across education?

Young people said they need Scottish education to help them prepare for future life and work through opportunities to:

- Feel safe, respected and included
- Access the support they need
- Achieve relevant qualifications to progress towards and into employment
- Explore and progress through tailored pathways
- Develop and apply relevant skills for life and work

They offered ideas and solutions to improve their experience of education.

<u>Feel safe, respected, supported and included</u>

"I sit at the back of the class but it's lonely but I can avoid everyone that bullies me."

"School caused me depression."

"School left me feeling like I was a failure!"

"It would be so much better if education could be more open and supportive and understanding of us."

Some young people spoke about schools not feeling like safe spaces. This included classrooms and the lack of other areas where they could use. There were also comments from young people who felt unable to approach teachers for support. Some young people recognised the competing demands on teachers' time. Others related this to the approaches, knowledge, skills and attitudes they said they needed from those who support learning. Young people suggested that more support could be provided for teachers to understand how to identify and best support young people. Examples were given around mental health, ASN, LGBTQI young people, racism, ESL and bullying.

Other suggestions included having a non-judgemental approach to young people - pausing to consider what might be impacting their ability to engage in learning – and listening to young people. One young person said *"If you are always seeming to be disrupting the class, instead of punishment and detention (which most teachers don't really carry out or care whether you do it or not so not really a big deal) They should ask why you are causing trouble. It's usually because you can't keep up, don't understand or something happened at home that you are still angry about, or just bored."*

Patience, understanding and respect were crucial words frequently cited in young people's responses regarding the qualities they needed from those who support their learning.

"Some teachers are great and supportive, it would be good if there were more like this. "

"To be treated like a real person."

"School amplified my mental health issues instead of helping it."

"Better support through the transition from BGE to Senior phase."

"More ways to engage neurodivergent young people in learning – ask them what would help them learn."

"School is challenging especially when you don't speak English well, more support with this."

"Make it less intimidating to ask for help, being able to access the pupil support base when I need it is good, if I feel like I need to be on my own I can be, I can ask for support in here and not feel judged. I am understood in here, I can relate to the PSB staff, I can talk to them about anything, we have trust."

"There is racism. Lots of racial and homophobic slurs from teachers and students."

"Teachers refusing to use pronouns, using deadname."

"I tried skipping school and they phoned my mum – they don't care about me in school but they care about me out of school."

"More patience and understanding from teachers."

"I feel different to other people in my classes, I find it hard to understand things and feel like others learn better than me. This affects me all the time especially with my self esteem."

"I don't feel the school will be fully supportive with me coming out. I would like to come out but I don't think will support me well. This scares me."

"They need to have conversations with us."

"I want to feel like I am wanted there and that I am not just annoying them (teachers)."

"Not enough support for people with additional support needs."

"People's attitudes towards pupils who have personal struggles and are not identified and supported."

> *"Teachers need to be more supportive and aware that not everyone learns the same way."*
>
> *"I don't feel I'm in the right level the same as others in class. The teacher explains it but I struggle to listen and to understand. I'm slower at listening so sometimes the teacher has explained it but I haven't heard all of it so I don't understand what I am doing."*
>
> *"No – I'm not getting what I need from school because teachers don't understand that I get anxious a lot in school and I need people to understand that how I feel is real."*
>
> *"Mum told them about my learning difficulties like three times and they didn't care they didn't listen."*
>
> *"I need a gender neutral toilet at school."*
>
> *"I want teachers to stop touching me on the shoulder in class."*

Young people want those who support their learning to be…

motivating
passionate approachable
interested supportive creative
understanding encouraging
calm listeners
non-judgemental able_to_communicate
compassionate fun honest
respectful
caring
patient considerate
kind

The learning environment also has an impact on learners' experience of education. This includes the physical building and spaces for learning and socialising. Young people identified that teachers, youth workers and other people who support their learning can influence the learning environment but some of the changes identified related to accessible buildings, safe spaces within schools, access to digital resources and the length/structure of the school day/week/year. These factors also influenced whether young people got what they needed from education.

Young people want to learn in environments that are….

stimulating
respectful practical
relaxed discrimination_free
accessible vibrant safe
quiet outdoors clean
supportive
bullying_free happy comfortable creative
visual calm flexible
non-judgemental
collaborative experiential

"There should be options for environment, some people learn better in busy spaces whilst others prefer total silence."

"Options based on your learning style."

"An environment that isn't angry or shouty."

"One that is okay for kinetic learners to move around in."

"Like an environment where it was a mixture of formal and informal education – academic and "youth work" classes."

"It depends on the environment for what I am learning I dislike it when it's very quiet like silent. Silence makes me feel awkward. I don't want to ask questions in front of the class when it's silent."

"I'd like an environment where, when being taught something, we can ask as many questions as is necessary so that we can understand it and make it make sense in our own way – but we should also be able to access an environment where we can demonstrate our knowledge and understanding and be able to apply it in the real world."

<u>Achieve relevant qualifications to progress towards and into employment</u>

88% of young people said their skills and achievements through youth work should be recorded and acknowledged alongside formal qualifications

Qualifications are important to young people, but they also want their education to focus more on preparing them for life and work through opportunities to develop and apply 'life-relevant' skills.

"You need opportunities to gain a variety of qualifications that suit your needs and not a timetable."

"Good qualifications to have options."

"Value youth work as much as you value schools and teachers."

Related to the importance placed on qualifications for their next steps, young people want their learning, skills and achievements through youth work recognised. They recognise this is also important to helping them progress towards and into employment.

88% said their skills and achievements through youth work should be recorded and acknowledged alongside formal qualifications and progress through school. They felt this should happen because they have worked hard to develop these essential skills and achievements. They are part of the holistic picture of their progress and should be recognised alongside formal qualifications. Young people feel their skills, qualities, experiences and achievements through youth work were either more important or just as important as their achievements in formal settings (82%).

"So that everyone knows how hard we work outside of school because these achievements are just as important."

"There are apprenticeships, SVQs, and training which is fully practical but results in a formal qualification. Youth work is no different."

"It helps if going into further education and future jobs and shows your progression."

"It should because it's learning."

"Should not just be based on exams as course work and alternative curriculum should be counted as you are still learning."

"What we do in youth groups is just as important and that should be awarded."

<u>Access to youth work</u>

87% of young people said all young people should be able to access youth work during the school day

Young people value youth work. Several comments spoke about its life-changing impact. These relate to those who access youth work during the school day and those who participate in youth work outside of school, in their wider community. Having access where they need it is important.

When asked if they thought all young people should be able to access youth work during the school day, 87% responded 'yes'. Young people currently accessing youth work during the school day felt that this was a vital component of their education. There were some concerns expressed about this being removed, or changing the voluntary and flexible nature and purpose of the experience that works for them.

"The youth workers in school listen to us."

"Please have youth work as part of school. It would make learning more fun and interesting for us. Youth workers have a different way of explaining things to us."
Please don't take this away because I'm not going to learn if I don't feel comfortable. I'm now more confident because this is helping me."

"We learn different things in different ways but sometimes the informal way is not recognised."

"Youth work would make such a good and different change to our education as youth work is more relaxed. It helps and encourages us to be ourselves and education gets us to pass an exam."

"There is a difference in what I have learnt in youth work and what I have learnt in formal education. In the community centre I have learnt life skills that I can use regardless of where I find myself working. Because youth work focusses on individuals rather than a vague picture of majority, I was able to develop many interpersonal skills. Through formal education I have also developed many skills which are applicable in life. However, these skills were acquired under a lot of stress. This to me is an important difference between formal and non-formal education. Each is carried out in a different way but ultimately for me, non-formal education has showed me that learning does not have to be stressful. There does not have to be rules on what you learn like in a school curricular. Instead, learning can be interactive, suited to your needs and interests and applicable to the real world."

<u>Improved collaboration between school and youth work</u>

"If they worked together, they can create a learning environment that is good for young people."

Young people suggested that there needs to be improved communication and collaboration between formal and non-formal educators (such as teachers and youth workers). They identified the benefits this would have for their education, such as being able to provide better support, including mental health and delivering the broad range of experiences and approaches to learning they need. Young people also felt that greater collaboration would provide the opportunity for practitioners to learn from each other. For example, youth workers could help teachers better understand the wider needs of young people in their class. Better collaboration would also improve attainment and achievement, such as youth workers supporting subjects like PSE and ensuring the learning and achievements of young people in the community were recognised.

One young person's comments demonstrate the potential for youth work to complement and enhance formal learning within a transformed education system:

"Youth work tends to fill a lot of the gaps that secondary schools leave, but it shouldn't be a situation where one works to solve the issues created by the other – they should work together and develop a way of helping students as one combined force. Many young people don't realise that youth work is a thing, and even less know what it is and what it can offer, and that's not the fault of youth workers."

What difference would it make if teachers and youth workers worked together more?
"Yeah, because they see other skills you have and see you happy doing something and not just the guy that doesn't listen or is not great at homework and stuff."
"The education system is supposed to create well-rounded people but it needs to know that it can't do that alone, it needs to involve things like youth work to help make us better people."
"Youth workers are more approachable and should be in schools to help with things that teachers can't."
"Teachers would see you differently when they see you be good at something, like show them the real person they can't see in the classroom, maybe they would have more respect for you."
"It would make sure that young people's voices are more consistently heard."
"Education should involve youth workers to help them make some changes like more working together and being equal to each other."

<u>Greater flexibility within the curriculum</u>

Young people commented that they needed a broad range of experiences, choices and pathways to meet their individual needs and aspirations. This was not the experience of all young people. Some noted that there is inconsistency across schools regarding curriculum options and access to opportunities such as youth work. One young person commented, *"Too many young people are not getting access to the course they want because of this – because of lack of resources or options or not enough young people wanting to do it."* Another said, *"Some schools have so many options and others don't – it's like a postcode lottery depending on what school they go to when it comes to alternative curriculum or extracurricular opportunities – consistency is key!"*

<u>Life relevant skills</u>

"I wish school helped prepare you for life more."

The need for education to provide more opportunities to develop, recognise and apply relevant skills for their future was one of the most common themes in discussions. Many comments identified this as a gap in their school experience. *"Better prepare young people for life beyond school - qualifications yes but also life skills."*

Young people identified the skills they felt they needed for their future. Overwhelmingly 'life-relevant skills' were cited as the most important. This included resilience, confidence, teamwork, leadership, communication, building relationships, decision making and career management. Responses suggest that young people need to understand and have the opportunity to experience the practical application of these skills, to feel confident in their ability to use them in their future life. It is these experiences that they identified youth work best supports them with, compared to formal education.

"Education that is relevant that you can use in the real world, for example, money skills and bills."

"Not enough skills given in school for the working world."

"Academic life, it doesn't set you up for 'the real world'. Education values your academic achievements over hands-on skills. It prepares you for college or university most of the time which then prepare you for a job. Education prepares you for more studying or work but not life outside of these things."

"I wish school helped prepare you for life more."

"I need to learn stuff like how to budget and pay bills, life skills that I don't get taught at school."

Summary

YouthLink Scotland is grateful to the 738 young people and youth workers across Scotland for participating in these discussions and sharing their thoughts with us.

Young people have been courageous in sharing difficult experiences through these discussions. Some of these relate to their curriculum entitlements and rights not being met. There were also many positive experiences – identifying that teachers, in the main, were doing the best they could with existing resources, skills and structures.

Pursuing a rights-based approach to Scottish education means we must listen to the experiences and views of all young people. This includes equally valuing those who learn across different settings. Our young people have spoken clearly and articulately that youth work is education. They want their learning through youth work to be better recognised, valued and included within Scottish education. This includes considering the role of youth work within the formal education setting and how we better recognise all of a young person's achievements. Overwhelmingly they are telling us that all those who are part of Scottish education need to work better together.

Their asks of those charged with reforming Scottish education are:

- **To feel safe, respected, supported and included by the people who support our learning**
- **To have our skills and achievements through youth work recognised**
- **To have access to youth work where and when we need it. This includes school**
- **Youth workers and teachers to work together**
- **Equitable access to a broad curriculum offer which includes opportunities such as youth work**
- **A better balance across the curriculum, with a focus on life-relevant skills development.**

ENDS

For more information about this response please contact YouthLink Scotland's Youth Work and Schools Manager, Marielle Bruce, mbruce@youthlinkscotland.org or Kevin Kane, Policy and Research Manager, kkane@youthlinkscotland.org