

"What is the purpose of a meeting anyway?"

Meaningfully involving children and young people in meetings

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Summary

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024 has been enacted to embed children's rights into Scots law, particularly emphasizing their involvement in decision-making, as outlined in Article 12 (UNICEF, 1989). Individual child's planning meetings - known also as Wellbeing meetings, Child's Plan meetings and Team Around the Child meetings - are a forum where this right can be enacted. However, in practice, the authors have observed a gap in ensuring the participation of children and young people within meetings as a result of inadequate pre-meeting planning and support. These meetings are often adult-led, reflecting a power differential termed "adultism." Childism, a prejudice against children, further exacerbates this dynamic, challenging the implementation of children's rights practices.

Effective meetings require clear goals and preparation, with young people benefitting from knowing the purpose and agenda beforehand. Additionally, fostering communication, collaboration, and trust within meetings is essential for meaningful participation. Practitioners face challenges in integrating child's voice into meetings, often resulting in tokenistic involvement (Lundy, 2018). Suggestions for improvement include routine gathering of children's views and planning ahead for their integration into decision-making processes. This think piece is therefore aimed at all professionals working in education, such as Teachers, School Leadership Teams and Educational Psychologists. It concludes by offering practical tools such as a sample agenda and flow chart to support practitioners in enhancing their practice and involving young people meaningfully in meetings.

Introduction

Legislative Context

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024 enshrines children's rights into Scots law, placing them at the forefront of practice and ensuring compliance with the Convention. As many will undoubtedly be aware, Article 12 of the UNCRC has stipulated that Children and Young People (CYP) have a right to be involved in decisions relating to their education. The manner that this is achieved operationally can vary, from pupil councils making their ideas on whole-school change known, to a learner conveying their preferences for their individual learning support. The authors' extensive experience of attending meetings highlight a particular gap in the inclusion in meetings of children and their views. Typically, these meetings involve CYP who require a targeted, bespoke approach to learning which also requires to be applied to their meaningful inclusion in a meeting.

Through the 'National Practice Model', getting it right for every child (GIRFEC) has promoted children's best outcomes by offering a child planning framework for partnership working and a shared language. Yet despite the well-established nature of GIRFEC and key supporting legislation, particularly the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 focused on supporting those with Additional Support Needs (ASN), challenges persist in applying this to practice. The Morgan Review, which considers the implementation of this Act, heard consistently from education staff at various levels that additional support for learning (ASL) is perceived as "somebody else's problem" and "not their responsibility" (Morgan, 2020, p.65), despite it being the responsibility of all in education. Involving CYP in their own planning meetings has been regarded in practice as a platform to deliver on children's rights, by providing a space where their views can be included in decision-making. If done inclusively and effectively, this would alleviate some of the above challenges identified in the Morgan Review by demonstrating that professionals approach child planning meetings as another space where supporting ASN is accepted as their responsibility. This delineation between not only pupils with and without ASN, but also staff responsibility, prompts us to wonder who views CYP involvement as their job, and how do we ensure that all the adults around the child are working to purposefully involve them in child planning meetings?

Thinking Space

What is motivating you to call a meeting?

Do you have clear objectives, goals, and aims?

Are these objectives, goals, and aims shared by the child or young person?

Can you justify this being achieved through a meeting forum?

Defining the purpose of meetings

A meeting is a planned gathering of three or more individuals and can have different functions informed by their goals or purpose, such as exploration and brainstorming, information sharing, problem-solving, decision-making, negotiation, resource allocation, and morale building meetings (Cook et al., 1987). Meetings where young people participate can be any of these types of meetings and sometimes a combination within the same meeting (see Table 1).

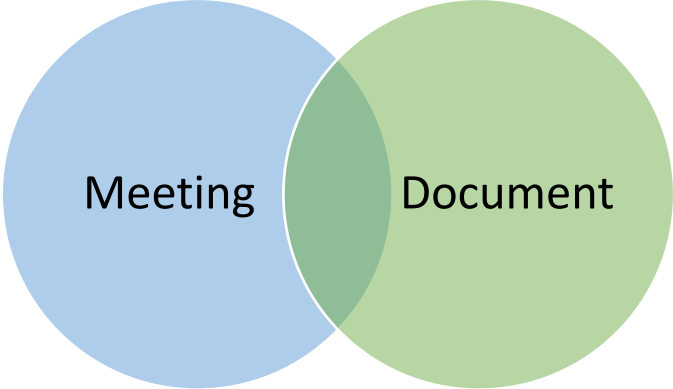
Table 1: Examples of meeting topics by meeting function

Function of meeting	Example
Information gathering	Finding out a young person's views about their new timetable.
Information sharing	Review the action plan e.g. the Individual Education Plan (IEP) or Coordinated Support Plan (CSP).
Problem-solving	Young person cannot access after school activity due to public transport times changing.
Decision-making	Explore options for transitioning to secondary setting and making a choice.

Where CYP's additional support is planned and coordinated, this is often recorded within documentation such as a Child's Plan, Individual Education Plan (IEP) or Coordinated Support Plan (CSP). The link between the meeting and the documentation can be a challenge to tease apart. Doronkin et al., (2020) found the structure of the child's meeting was determined by the IEP document. The title used to describe the meeting has been used to communicate an assumed purpose e.g. "you are invited to an IEP meeting", the assumption being that the invite relates to the IEP. It is therefore

understandable that the meeting structure is then determined by the document (see Figure 1). But is this the most effective way to run a meeting or to plan for a CYP's needs to be met?

Figure 1: Relationships between meeting and document



Adultism vs. Childism

Meetings are held for a purpose. It can be assumed from the above discussion that meetings are typically adult led interactions, driven by adult goals or intentions, although may be planned to be as child friendly as possible. Within this, it is possible that we can identify a power differential. There are two key concepts which are used within the literature to explore this differential: 'adultism' and 'childism'.

The concept of adultism (Wall, 2022) articulates this subconscious bias: the view that adults are superior to children, who likely have less skill, resource and general power (Bertrand, et al., 2023; Kennedy, 2019). These adult core beliefs are likely drivers in making a judgement regarding the competence and capacity of a CYP (Moran-Ellis & Tisdall, 2019). Common adult views include viewing children as not possessing the knowledge and/or having the understanding of what is being asked of them, perhaps not being capable of being reflective, or being too vulnerable to be able to assess their needs accurately (Sutterlüty & Tisdall, 2019). Often practitioners' views such as these are well intentioned but can have a significant impact on the view we have of CYP and how we involve them.

Thinking Space

At what point do you view a child as having sufficient capacity to make decisions on their own educational needs?

Have you observed 'adultism' in action?

Do your school/educational establishment systems offer children the opportunity to identify their own purpose for their meeting?

Do you gather feedback from CYP on how they feel the meeting went?

The concept of childism builds on adultism, explained simply as a “*prejudice against children*” (McGillivray, 2022). McGillivray (2022) describes childism as being of a similar nature to racism or sexism. The movement aims to challenge the current observation of adultism (Wall, 2019). It is important to consider however, that there can be some difficulties for practitioners in effectively actioning children’s rights. Some concepts within children’s rights practices can raise a challenge or conflict between one another (Perry-Hazan, 2021). Furthermore, it’s important for us as adults to reflect on the developmental journey required to articulate ones thoughts and feelings, and consider that children will not contain the fully developed “message-like thoughts” required to match the situations imposed on them (Komulainen, 2007). Considering this, how can we make CYP’s planning meetings more meaningful for them?

Meaningful meetings

Fostering communication and collaboration to build trusting relationships

“too many questions at me” (Corrigan, 2014, p. 277)

Children and young people report feeling they are asked too many questions in meetings (Corrigan, 2014), and that their contribution tends to be in response to direct questioning (Doronkin et al., 2020). What might this tell us about the perceived purpose of the meeting and the young person’s attendance - are they there to provide information? Whose needs are being served by the meeting – the CYP’s or adults’? Does the CYP have something they would like to take away from the discussion too?

Children and young people with ASN are not a homogenous group and have their own unique ways and environments in which they best communicate. A level of person-centred creativity and an understanding of the child is fundamental to meeting their communication needs. This creativity should target the child's unique communication preferences and needs in a way that is tailored to them as an individual. To gain this understanding of the CYP, and their thoughts and wishes, the listener would arguably need to foster a comfortable relationship, free of power imbalances, that enables them to fully understand the child's needs and for the child to have an equitable opportunity to convey their views.

When communicating, we may draw upon explicit, structured techniques and approaches to demonstrate that we are listening, such as nodding or parroting, or use resources such as visuals. Yet the implicit, emotion-based aspects of engagement are also pertinent. In the latter respect, the Morgan Review stated that inclusion involves a "pattern of small and large informal and formal interactions and relationships, which combine to create the school community and culture" (Morgan, 2020, p. 23), expressing that the nature of these are difficult to put into words, rather, they are felt by children and adults within the school. Therefore, the measure of success is not just in our use of techniques, but in how the child feels and how they experience the connection. Interaction that connects us to others also meets our fundamental need for human connection and a sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 2017; Prowle & Hodgkins, 2020).

Relationships and our sense of felt safety are arguably based on trust. Feltman (2021) claims that building this is a competency that can be practised and improved. He proposes four principles that inform our judgement of how trustworthy a person is:

- Sincerity
- Reliability
- Competence
- Care

The latter being especially integral to building trust as it concerns decision-making that considers another's best interests. This aligns well with Rogers' (1957; Horvath & Luborsky, 1993) established core conditions for relationships – empathy, congruence,

and unconditional positive regard, allowing us to look beyond accepting somebody else as they are, to actively espousing those values into caring decision-making, felt by the recipient. Brooker (2010) emphasises the value of creating a triangle of care from the outset between the child, parent/caregiver, and professionals in order to foster a trusting triadic relationship between those parties. This also has the advantage of enhancing parental ability to advocate for their child.

Further, Hodgkins (2019) describes advanced empathy in relation to younger children, where a professional can intuitively understand a child's emotional state from unspoken cues such as body language, even if the child is not consciously aware of their feelings, arguing that this ability is relationship dependent. This would enable the professional to organically involve the child in an emotionally responsive way, with children's views hopefully emerging as part of the fabric of that practice. However, this ability comes at a cost; being so attuned, or linked, to another's feelings and experiences can lead to stress or guilt in the adult. Therefore, it is important that professionals are also reflective and responsive to their *own* emotional needs when engaging in this way.

Thinking Space

How might you build relationships to support a child?

How might these relationships help the child to advocate for themselves in meetings?

How does the team around the child support each other to make best use of meetings?

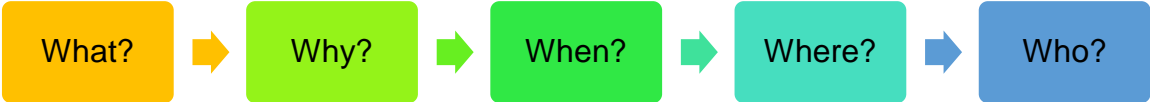
How could Educational Psychologists develop the capacity of other professionals to better involve the child in meetings?

Preparation for meetings

“The agenda was clearly the teacher's and not the students” (Doronkin et al., 2020, p. 210).

Children and young people are no different to adults, they benefit from knowing the purpose of meetings, which determines their engagement and affects their motivation to attend. A set of clear goals for what needs to be accomplished during the meeting is essential (Odermatt et al., 2015). An agenda available prior to the meeting can be used as a planning tool for attendees, allowing for adequate preparation (Kreamer et al., 2021). Children and young people want to know in advance, what the meeting will be about, and this can be through being given an agenda (Doronkin et al., 2020; Roesch-Marsh et al., 2017) or co-creating the agenda (Diaz et al., 2018). The agenda can act as a roadmap to the desired outcome. The agenda offers a ‘template’ of the topics to be addressed, as well as key practicalities such as where, when and who will be in attendance (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Practicalities of meetings



As well as the importance of emotional safety in the relationships with attendees, the physical environment contributes to a sense of safety. A challenge faced by those organising a meeting can be finding a suitable location, with young people reporting they would be embarrassed if their social care review took place in the school environment (Roesch-Marsh et al., 2017). However, other young people have attended meetings in the school (Barnard-Dadds & Conn, 2018) whilst others have joined online (Hagner et al., 2014). Understanding the young person’s preferences could inform decisions about the physical environment.

<p>Thinking Space</p> <p>When you are an attendee, what does the organiser do which helps you prepare?</p> <p>How do you prepare all attendees for a meeting?</p> <p>Do you take a different approach when preparing children and young people?</p>
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Following the preparation of the meeting, is this the best forum for the child or young person to share their views and participate in the decision-making process?

Integration of CYP views

An ongoing challenge for practitioners with regards to running effective meetings, is how CYP's views can be fully and meaningfully integrated within the meeting. While it could be hypothesised that adults, particularly professionals arranging meetings, are well intentioned and aim to follow the principles set out by GIRFEC, does the required purpose match the needs of CYP?

While some components of adultism are unavoidable, it is the role of all professionals to consider ways to mitigate for this. The following suggestions could be considered in addition to discussions held above:

Tokenism or meaningful involvement

Often, CYP's views are gathered for inclusion within a meeting and as a result, the adult feels good because they have done so. Lundy (2007) described this as the 'chicken soup' effect: it feels nice but it does not change anything. It is important to reflect on whether the view gathered is used to influence any decision making within the meeting or to shape the purpose of the discussion.

Routine

It could be generalised that the gathering of CYP's voice is typically carried out for a specific purpose, so is a unique or one-off event (Mitchell and Colville, 2022). Where this is the case, adultism is then often exemplified as the team around the child recognise that the child's view provided is not representative of the norm and is therefore discounted. Furthermore, children, like adults, can be influenced by a recency effect; they have had a bad day and so that is represented in their views (Lundy, 2018). In order to reduce the impact of adultism and the recency effect, the team around the child should consider gathering the voice routinely and by more than one professional in order to increase the validity of the voice gathered. The gathering of the views of CYP requires to be part of the ethos and culture of the school, extending to all aspects of school life beyond simply the attendance at meetings.

Planning ahead

Children and young people's views are often an add-on to the main body of the meeting, shared at the beginning or at the end with no consideration of how these will be integrated and influence discussions. Planning ahead for how the gathered views are going to be an integral part of decision making is key for ensuring the effort in compiling the views has impact.

Now what?

This think piece aimed to highlight the two key components of an agenda and CYP's voice as core to a successful meeting.

- As discussed earlier, an agenda can be a useful tool to communicate the plan for the meeting. This format can be used to support the preparation of CYP, ensuring they are aware of the arrangements and further this can be used to co-create the plan with CYP. A sample agenda is available in Appendix A.
- Whether a CYP chooses to attend the meeting or not, it is helpful to gather their views about the topics on the agenda. The flow chart provided in Appendix B signposts to a range of techniques available to support practitioners to do this.

To conclude, the authors would like to ask you:

'What will you change in your practice as a result of reading this paper?'

'Is there anything else you need in order to make these changes?'

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Appendix A - Sample Agenda

Meeting for [Child or young person's name] [Date of Birth]

 <p>What</p>	<p>GIRFEC meeting / Child's Plan meeting / Wellbeing meeting</p>
 <p>Why</p>	<p>Purpose of meeting: to plan for moving from primary to secondary school. By the end of this meeting, we hope to...</p>
 <p>Where</p>	<p>Venue: [School name] Location: Room 2</p>
 <p>When</p>	<p>Date: Monday 4th March 2026 Time: 1.15 (after lunch break)</p>
 <p>Who</p>	<p>[Name] – Parent [Name] – Primary Teacher [Name] - Guidance Teacher from secondary school [Name] – Educational Psychologist [Name] – Social worker</p>

Topics to cover in this meeting:

- Welcome and introductions
- Review current support (What is working? What could be better?)
- Questions about secondary school
- Brainstorm ideas for support
- Agree action plan
- Arrange date for review

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Appendix B - Flow Chart for gathering a CYP's view before a meeting.

Following the above detailed considerations, the proceeding flowchart will provide prompt questions to ensure you are considering how children's views can be gathered and included meaningfully within a meeting. It is not anticipated that this flowchart requires to be linear, but all factors should be considered.

