Developing Learner Participation:

Understanding Practice in a Pilot Phase

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Linked Policy Guidance Document:
https://education.gov.scot/improvement/Documents/learner-participation.pdf

Introduction

Pilot Settings

Ahead of final publication, a pilot study of the implementation of the guidance *Learner Participation in Educational Settings (3-18)* was conducted with a small number of education settings. This involved establishments in early years, primary and secondary sectors. Staff from establishments who agreed to be in the pilot met together at Education Scotland offices and on visits to selected schools. There was also opportunity for researchers to meet young people to have dialogues sometimes involving pupils and staff together. A field researcher visited each of the pilot schools and pre-schools in spring and summer terms in 2018. Evidence about practice-based response making to the new guidance was gathered through these conversations. The following 'Main Findings' and the following four 'Case Reports' document some of the key understandings that emerged.

Main Findings

The analysis of this evidence indicates that the call for new directions in learner participation in these settings led to rich, varied and thoughtful practice solutions which were nuanced and refined to reflect the opportunities, issues and constraints of the given setting.

Users found that the guidance on 'Learner Participation' to be user-friendly, understandable, accessible, and catalytic in generating practice-based responses and thinking among staff and, as a result, with learners too. Especially noticeable was that the four arenas were easily understood from the guidance to be overlapping and connected; this understanding also played out in the way participation practices were designed and spoken about in all pilot cases.

For some, the guidance document was providing a framework for a newly invigorated conversation about practice-based responses to the rationale, purposes, and outcomes associated with learner participation and how this connected to wider initiatives within each setting. For all pilot settings, the sense of an on-going journey of change and a shared striving for innovation and improvement was palpable. The new guidance appeared to provide a scaffolding for this effort, getting staff thinking about what is already being done well across the four arenas of school/early years' life, and what else might be considered necessary as next steps.

Key factors influencing a school or pre-school's predisposition to enhancing learner participation included:

- the training and experience of staff in relation to initiatives,
- the values of teachers (especially the head teachers and senior staff) concerning learner participation and children's rights,
- the degree of trust among staff and between staff and leaners which was seen as critical for taking learner participation on board, and
- the historical context of the setting with respect to learner participation.

Key aspects of how different settings took the guidance forward included school/preschool culture, vision, values, as well as the degree to which connectivity among initiatives was seen to help with addressing participation across the culture of the setting.

It was noted that an ethos of trust and participation among staff themselves was a bedrock for all for actualising learner participation. The implication perhaps is that if this is not widespread and based on shared understandings, learner participation may be more challenging to develop. In all settings, whilst change is of course an ongoing phenomenon, there was ample evidence the use of the guidance played a role in:

- communicating the main ideas to staff,
- advancing new work on participation, catalysing change in settings,
- noticing and developing 'learner participation' as a feature of the four connected arenas,
- changing traditional perspectives on what counts as learner participation; embracing the view that learner participation is much more than listening to pupils or solely the work of formal 'councils',
- providing senior management teams with starting points and tools to promote staff development,
- addressing particular issues around inclusion and developing a more democratic school culture.

Case Report 1: **New Cumnock Early Years Centre**

Introduction

New Cumnock Early Years Centre in Ayrshire serves a small rural community. Many generations of families live locally, with historical links to the area.   The centre is situated next door to the primary school, and has strong transition links.

- in Learning, Teaching, and Assessment
- in Opportunities for Personal Achievement
- in Decision Making Groups
- in connection with the Wider Community

Fig. 1 – The four interlinked arenas of participation

At New Cumnock, the four arenas of participation are seen to be closely linked – (see knot diagram in the 'Learner Participation' document, and in figure 1 above). Staff explained how these four arenas resonated with the nursery's overarching culture based on their adoption of Reggio Emilia principles. These principles are based on a child-centred, constructivist model of learning in relationship-driven environments, encouraging respect, responsibility and autonomy, facilitated by exploration and discovery through a self-guided curriculum, in partnership with the wider community. In this setting, learner participation across these four arenas was seen as core to the educational ethos and culture and centrally contributed to how they supported learning processes and outcomes.

Fig.2 Outdoor tepee   Fig. 3 Dining/play shed   Fig. 4 Outdoor play area

Arena 1: Learning, Teaching and Assessment*

Children at the nursery often spend the majority of their day outside. Situated numeracy and literacy are embedded in play-based exploration and discovery which the children can lead and shape. With light-touch adult supervision, children move freely through different areas, including the allotment, a tepee, and outdoor play areas with sand, water and building blocks.

Fig. 5 Situated numeracy is addressed through play-based exploration and discovery

Staff have an over-arching year plan for the pupils, identifying key learning benchmarks and performance criteria. However, there are no set topics. Rather, staff use group floorbooks to purposefully harness ideas coming from the children and use them as catalysts for learning. A specific example came in the month of January when the anticipated interest in Robert Burns was realigned by the children's expression of interest in the Chinese New Year. None of the staff were experts on this subject, but involved themselves as co-enquirers alongside the children, using their professional skills to support and scaffold learning.
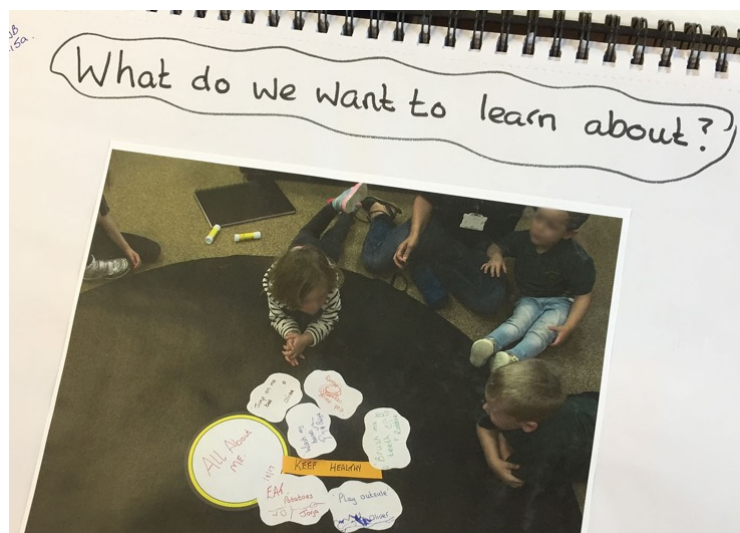

Fig. 6 Floorbooks are compiled collaboratively between staff and children

Children's progress is recorded weekly by staff and pupils together in Individual learning journals. Children have extensive opportunities to have a say in the material and textual content and form of their learning journals, through decision-making and dialogue. The

children can also have a say in deciding when they take their journals home whenever they choose.

Significantly, there is not a fixed day or scheduled time for updating the learning journals. Staff are responsible for groups of 6 to 8 children and have the autonomy to choose appropriate opportunities during each week to update journals with individual children. The benefits for all (staff and children) are clearly understood, and staff work flexibly and collegially to support each other in this.
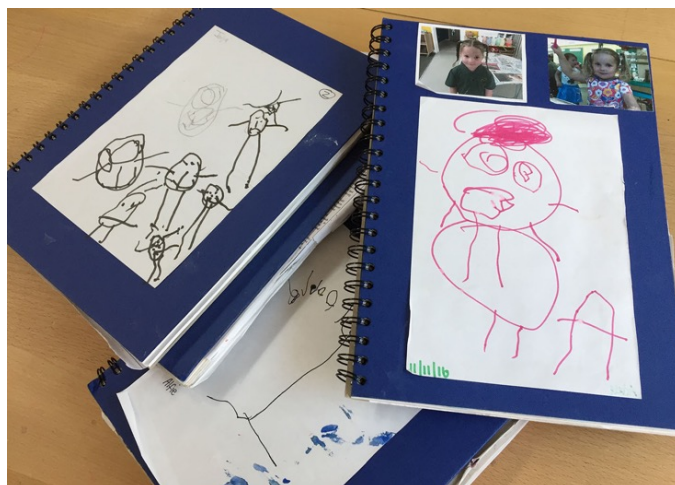

Fig. 7 Learning journals, produced collaboratively between staff and child

Arena 2: Opportunities for personal achievement**

Ideas and interests emerging from the children's conversations are captured collaboratively with staff in floorbooks. These are evaluated through a series of stages:
  ➢ *'What do we know?'* - explores existing understanding, and indicates possible lines of enquiry.
  ➢ *'What do we want to learn?'* – catalyses the learning process to explores possibilities.
  ➢ *'What have we learned?'* - evaluates new knowledge and understanding.
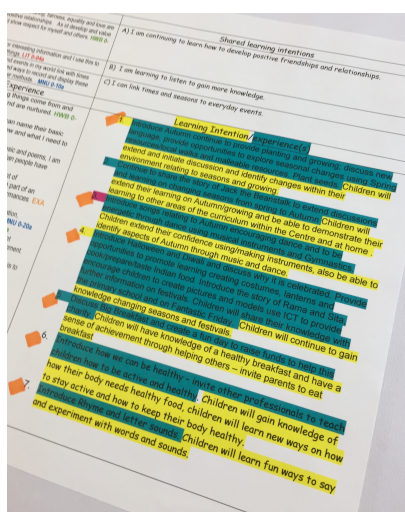 ➢ *'What do we want to learn now?'* – refreshes the process anew.
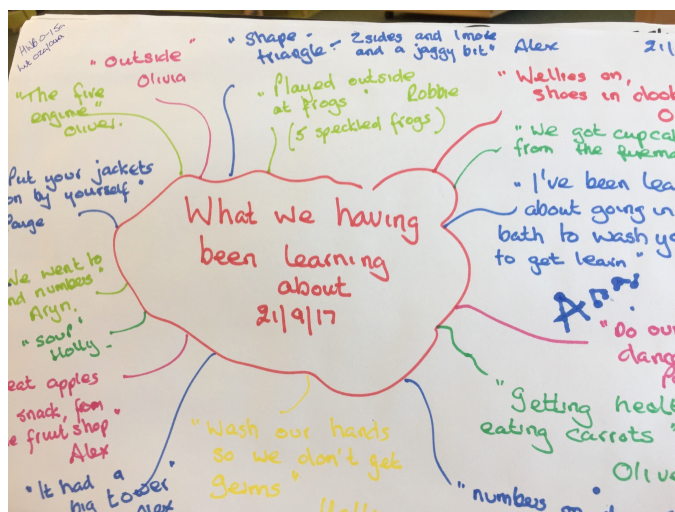

Fig. 8 Learning checklist for staff

Fig. 9 Floorbook

Arena 3: Decision-making groups.

There is no formal 'pupil council' at the nursery, however, all the children are involved in decisions about a wide range of matters affecting the nursery across arenas 1, 2 and 4. Alongside common eco-school and sustainability concerns, the children are able to make decisions about what and how they learn, the activities they'd like to be involved in at the nursery, and in connection with the wider community. Through this intergenerational collaboration, everyone involved in the nursery shares a collective sense of achievement.

Arena 4: In connection with the wider community.

Provision across the week includes many times and places when links to community are made. Once a month families are invited to "Fantastic Friday" when the nursery children show and tell what they've been learning. The nursery building has a family room which is used for informal discussions and meetings, but also by community groups, including a knitting club, a credit union and "Ladies' evenings". The children regularly visit elderly folk in a nearby retirement home, and walk to nearby forests and a 'lagoon' on field trips. They participate in undertaking prior risk assessments.

The nursery approached local businesses for sponsorship of outdoor equipment, including a shed that functions as an informal dining-room and shelter from bad weather, and raised beds for growing vegetables. The children choose what to grow and take joint responsibility with volunteers from the local community for planting, tending and harvesting. Vegetables grown at the nursery are offered for sale in the nursery foyer. Recipes cards developed with input from families and parents encourage cooking together and eating well at home.

Fig. 10 Nursery allotment celebrated and produce on sale in the nursery foyer

Responding to the participation guidance document

Senior staff explained that the document was particularly helpful in assisting staff to understand how learning and participation are linked and how activities can be flexibly timetabled to take account of the learners right to have a say in how the day unfolds.

In part, this is actioned, by reducing the number of fixed times when specific activities should take place. There is also a desire to empower staff to use their professional judgement about provision in the light of children's participation in decision making. Through these approaches, learning, achievement and decision-making are driven by children's enquiries and interests and activities happen across the nursery day at New Cumnock. Recent discussions between staff and children have also identified a number of interruptions to the working day when momentum is curtailed because staff are following pre-determined schedules.

Case Report 2: **Glendee Early Years Centre**

Introduction

Glendee Early Years Centre serves an urban population, serviced by a number of primary schools. At Glendee, the four arenas of participation are understood to be closely linked in their practice – (see knot diagram in the 'Learner Participation' document, and in figure 1 below). This interconnectedness was seen as important in affording opportunities for learners to participate meaningfully learning and decision-making.

in Learning, Teaching, and Assessment

in Opportunities for Personal Achievement

in Decision Making Groups

in connection with the Wider Community

Fig. 1 – The four interlinked arenas of participation

Arena 1: Learning, teaching & assessment.

The centre operates a strong culture of children leading their learning. Staff are skilled in questioning and listening, attending to the children's constant flow of new ideas and possibilities, which are collated in floorbooks. These co-authored documents serve as catalysts to inspire new lines of enquiry, and activity and produce valuable evidence for children's individual learning journals
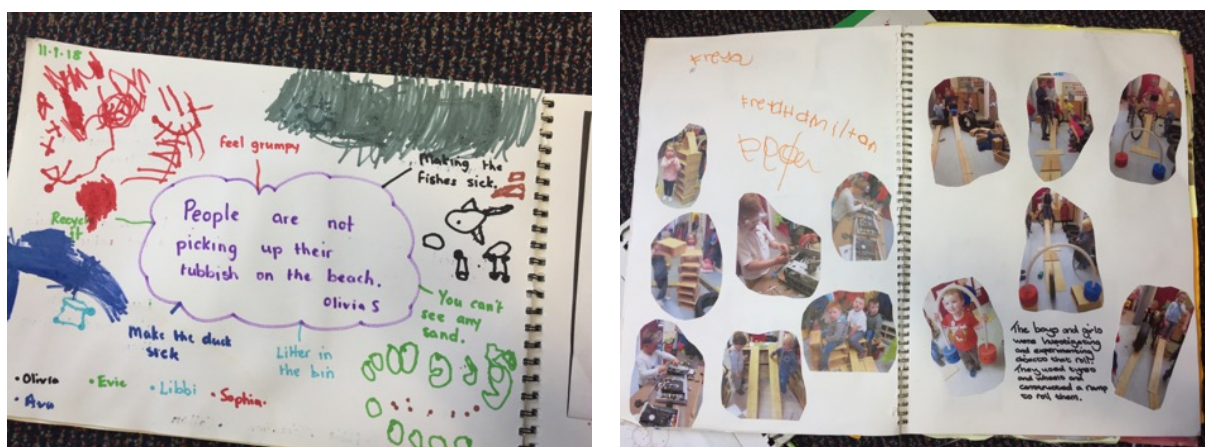

Fig. 2 & 3 Floorbooks compiled jointly by children and adults

Arena 2: Opportunities for personal achievement.

There is evidence of a lot of inter-generational dialogue and collaboration. The children engage in dialogue with adults about how to programme a variety of activities and projects. They regularly bake scones and organise exhibitions of their artwork. They work in the nursery garden and are involved in all the tasks to produce a community newspaper.
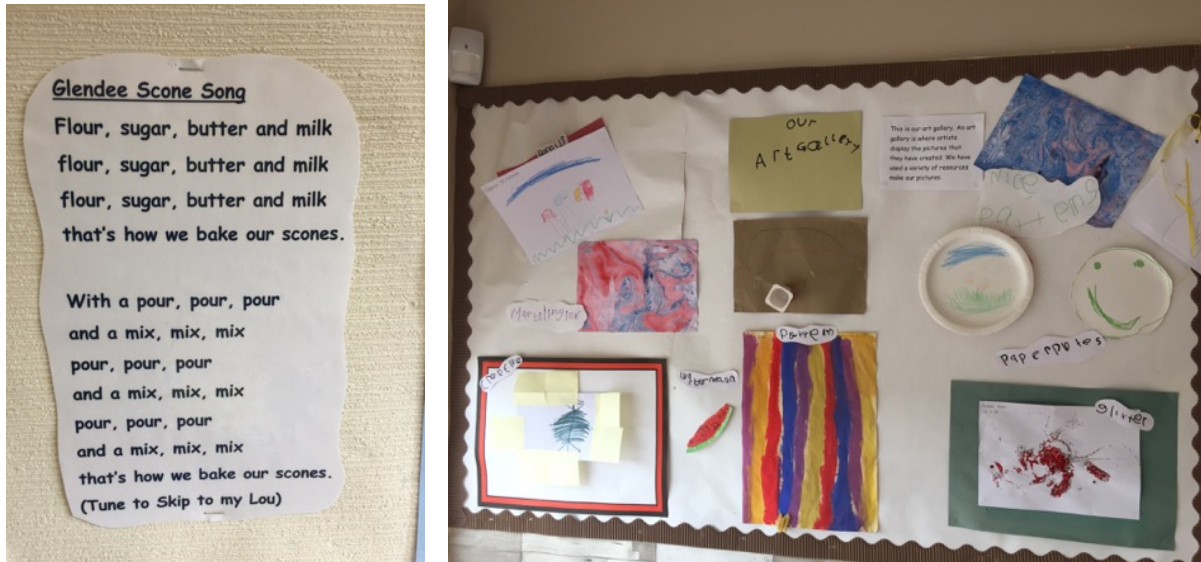

Fig. 4 & 5 Wall displays celebrating activity and artwork

Glendee Times

A nursery newspaper is produced several times over the course of the year. Children in collaboration with adults choose the content, write, design and take photographs. The newspaper is printed in-house, and sold within the wider community.
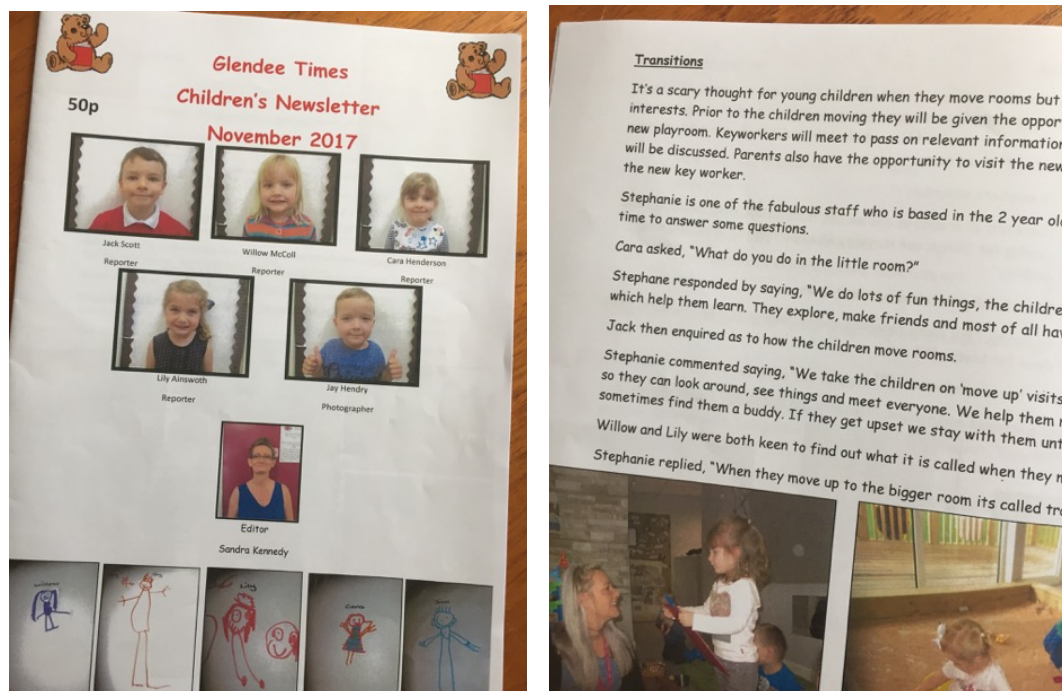

Fig. 6 & 7 Nursery newspaper

The nursery newspaper affords linkages with families and local businesses. For the newspaper, children interview professionals and members of the community who affect their daily lives: builders and gardeners working on new houses nearby, police, members of the fire brigade, and the local baker & café owner. A conversation at the tinker table lead to the newspaper featuring an interview with an enterprising local electrician who was the uncle of one of the children.
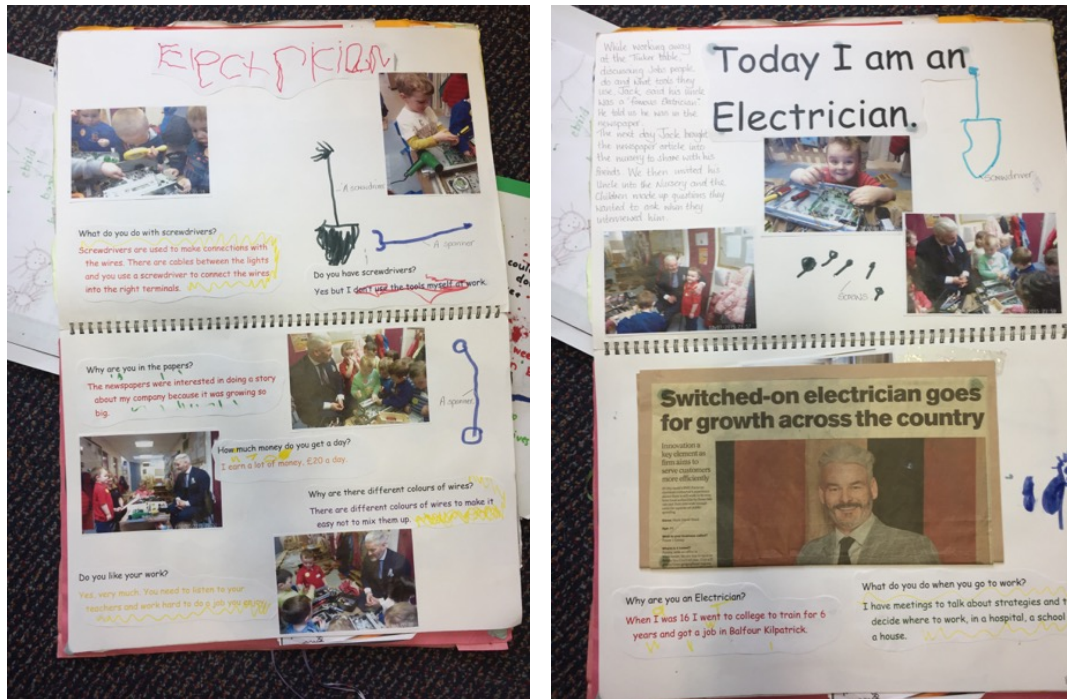

Fig. 8 & 9 Floorbooks showing links with the local community and the wider World of Work

Tinker Table
The nursery has a child-height workbench with real screwdrivers, spanners and pliers. The children 'tinker' with broken mechanical and electronic gadgets. We witnessed children taking apart a broken Satellite TV decoder box and a couple of landline telephones. Children are encouraged to explore and discover by deciding for themselves how they will dismantle and reassemble the equipment.
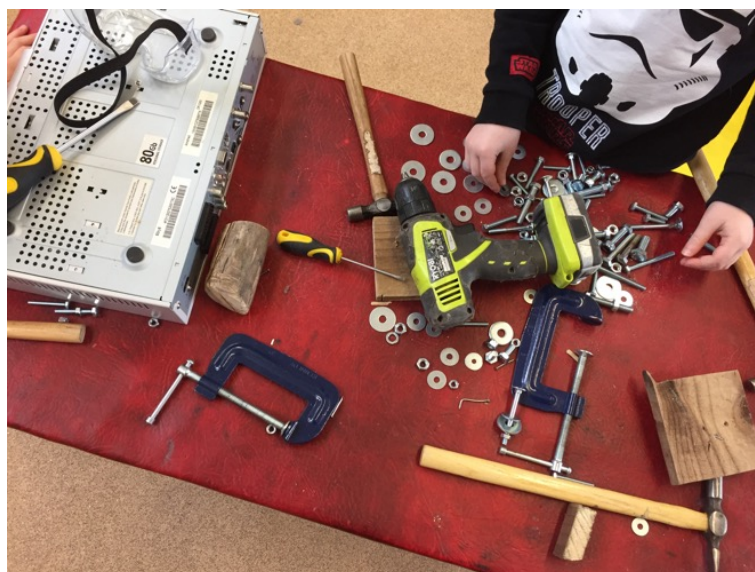

Fig. 10 Tinker table

Arena 3: Decision-making groups.

The nursery involves all children, and significantly, all staff in some capacity of decision-making in connection with aspects of arenas 1, 2 and 3. For example, the Library committee choose and discuss favourite books, and the children participate in a bedtime story club, encouraging literacy and reading at home for pleasure.
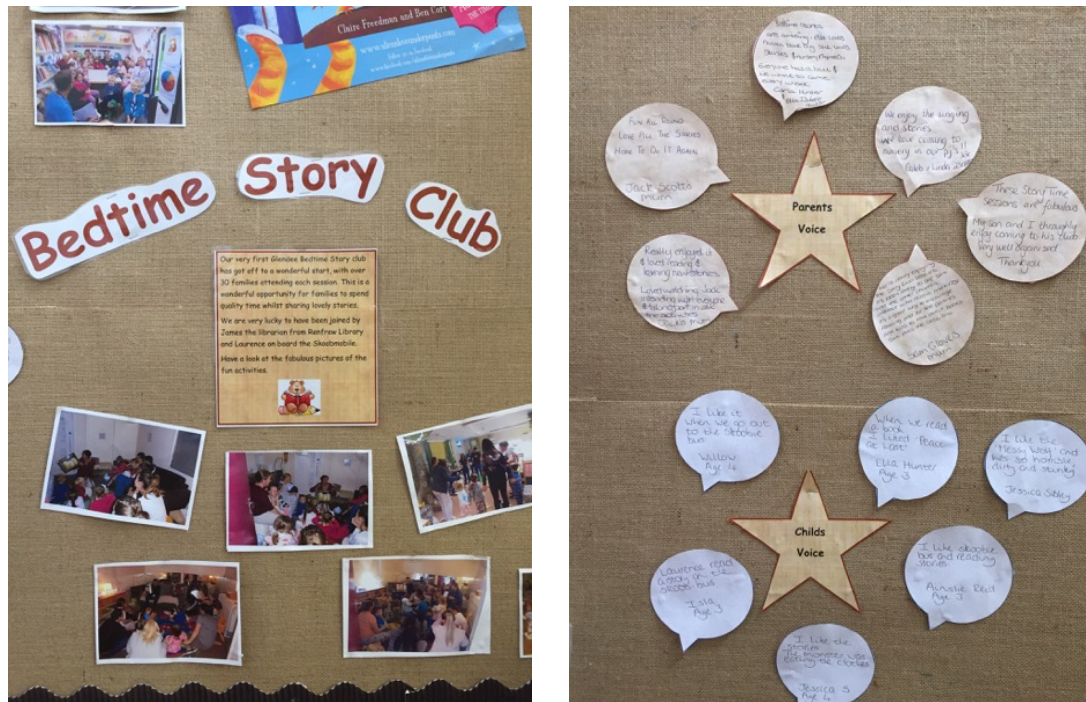

Fig. 11 & 12 Bedtime story club and Pupil & Parent voice

The Eco schools committee discusses the school's activities in relation to the wider local and global community. Children and staff have a say in the purchasing of material resources, such as indoor and outdoor play equipment.

Arena 4: In connection with the wider community.
There is meaningful inter-generational dialogue and collaboration. The nursery hosts Conversation cafés in November, January and June, where families can visit to see their children participate in running a fully-functional café, and to speak informally with staff. The nursery has an outdoor garden including an insect hotel made from old pallets, and an allotment, where children's ideas and intentions find expression through planting, tending and harvesting the vegetable crops with help from local volunteers.

Fig. 13 Bug hotel in the nursery grounds

The nursery offers home visits to all families of new children joining the nursery. This affords a valuable insight into the personal circumstances of each child, along with providing families with information to support the work and values of the nursery with their children at home. Similar attention is paid to managing the transition of children to local primary schools, with reciprocal visits to and from the schools.

Responding to the participation guidance document
The Head of the centre explained that the guidelines had been particularly useful to help staff to understand *why* they are doing things. The descriptions of the arenas and the interlinking knot visualise the interconnectedness of learning, decision-making and opportunities to participate meaningfully - for everyone involved in the nursery, including children, staff and families. A strong culture of continuous staff development at Glendee sees staff paired as mentors and mentees, sharing knowledge and experience as a relational resource. The Head of the nursery observed that, "mentoring takes time", but that the development of staff at the nursery is equally as important as the development of children.

Case Report 3: **Newtongrange primary school**

Introduction

Newtongrange primary school serves a small town just outside Edinburgh. The school is working towards increasing opportunities for participation across the four arenas identified in the 'Learner Participation' document (and exemplified in the knot diagram - figure 1 below). The four arenas resonated with the ongoing changes to the culture of the school.

in Learning, Teaching, and Assessment

in Opportunities for Personal Achievement

in Decision Making Groups

in connection with the Wider Community

Fig. 1 – The four interlinked arenas of participation

Arena 1: Learning, Teaching and Assessment*

At Newtongrange, pupils nominate and elect class representatives, for a range of individual and collective roles. Each class has a 'reading rep', promoting the first minister's reading challenge.
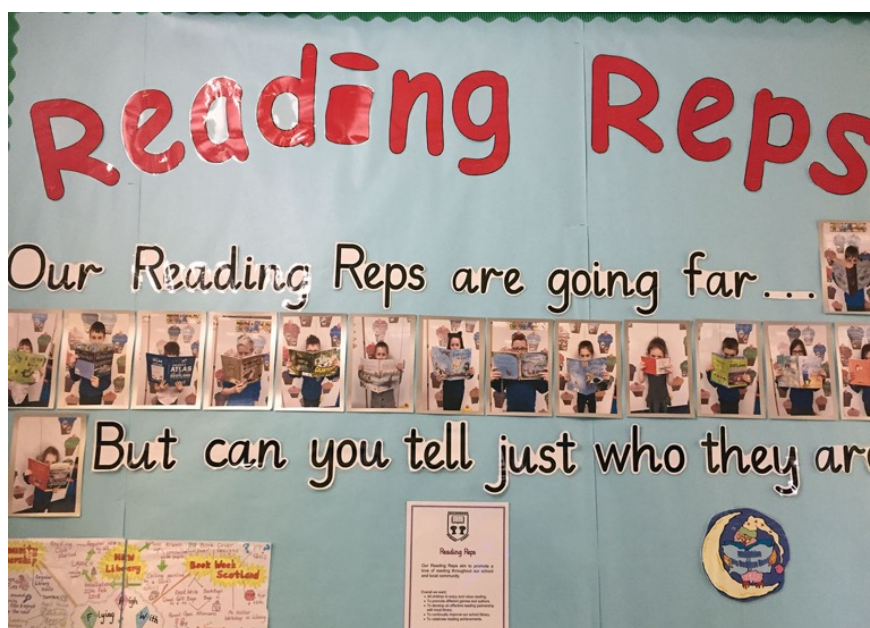

Fig. 4 Wall displays celebrating learner participation and responsibility

A learning council meets monthly to discuss issues around the lived experience of school for pupils and staff. This also connects with the work of the parent council. Matters arising from this intergenerational dialogue feed into the ongoing evaluation of learning, teaching & assessment (Arena 1), and continuing staff development. During the school week, there is time set aside for P7 pupils help lower school pupils in reading and numeracy skills. This relational resource builds confidence for both parties making a positive impact on literacy.
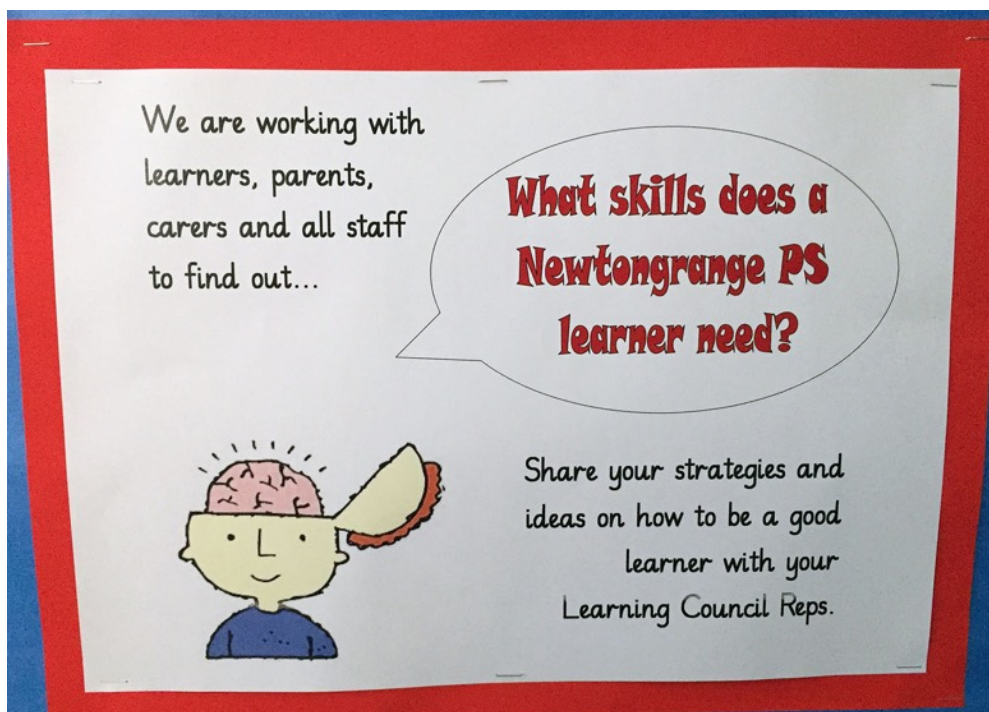

Fig. 5 Pupil and parent voice initiatives

Arena 2: Opportunities for personal achievement**

At Newtongrange, Arena 2: Opportunities for personal achievement appeared to be the main conduit through which arenas 1, 2 & 3 were addressed. Arena 2 was referred to by the pupils as the 'Wider curriculum' (the term used in the pilot version). The pupils understood this arena to be distinctively *different* from the formal curriculum (Arena 1). Evidence of activities and achievements were showcased in wall displays around the school and in the reception area, on a scrolling TV display of school tweets.

Fig. 2 School tweets

At Newtongrange, opportunities for personal achievement take on a formal dimension. The third Friday in each month is a "wider curriculum day" when pupils participate in a range of

activities supported and facilitated by staff. The elective wider curriculum activities connect to a new behaviour policy – based on greater consistency and cohesion in reward and sanction.
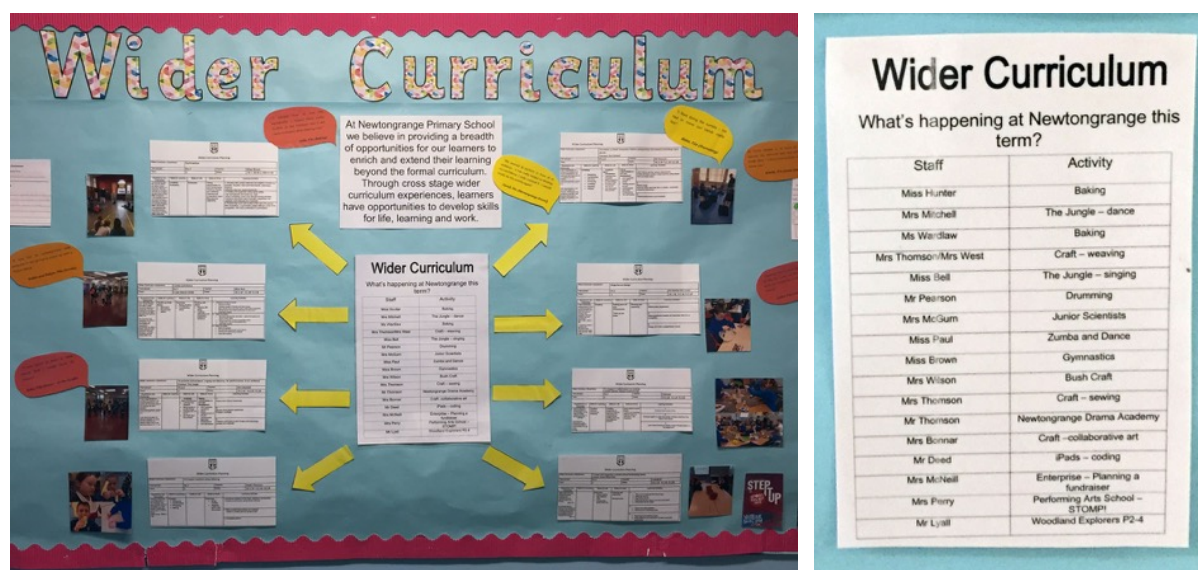

Fig.3 Opportunities for personal achievement

Arena 3: Decision-making groups.

The school has initiated a number of decision-making groups, including Eco warriors, playground reps, a learning council and community explorers. Pupils have access to channels and forums to voice their opinions on a range of operational matters across arenas 1, 2 and 4, including the purchasing of material resources and how the school can support pupil achievement and attainment. These initiatives are contributing to a renaissance of collective pride in the school.
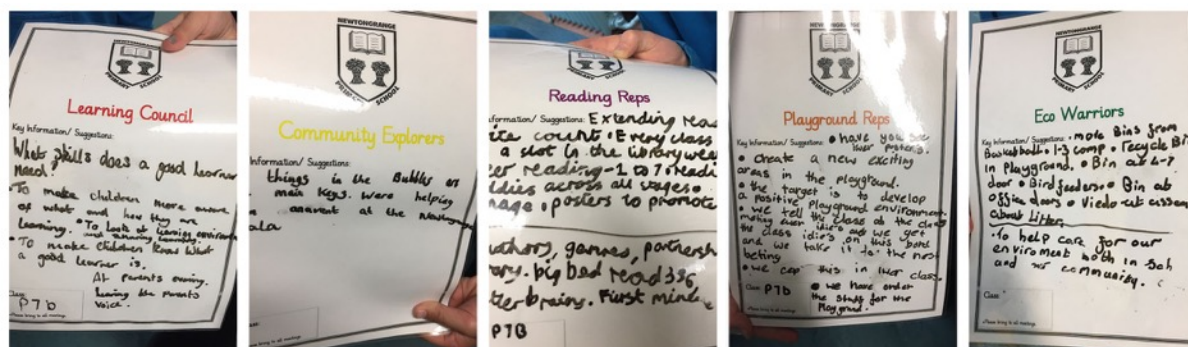

Fig. 6 Class representatives and areas of influence

Toast
A small but significant example of pupils influencing meaningful change came from a pupil who asked why there was only one long queue at 'Toast club' (a breakfast session for pupils arriving early). Catching the ear of a member of staff who was 'onboard' with the principles of pupil participation, the pupil's observation was acted upon swiftly and following a discussion with the pupils, two queues for toast were introduced and the change has been received well by all. More importantly it has been perceived as an example of a genuine willingness to listen and to change.

Fig. 7 Proactive links with the wider community

Arena 4: In connection with the wider community.

Community explorers are a form of decision-making group, forging links with individuals and organisations within the local community. Pupils are involved in the co-ordination of visits outside the school, and visitors to the school. Fund raising for Sport Relief focused entrepreneurial thinking and skills to raise a significant amount of money. Regular parental involvement extends to sports coaching and a science club run by a real-life Scientist.

Responding to the participation guidance document

The document and accompanying resource materials have been particularly helpful in assisting staff to evaluate current levels of pupil participation. Additionally, the guidelines have helped to consolidate a collegial understanding that opportunities for learner participation are not 'another thing to do' that impinges detrimentally on teaching time. The brevity of the document and the visualisation afforded by interlinked knot diagram have both been significant factors in communicating the potential benefits afforded by participation for individuals, the school as body, and the wider community.

Case Report 4: **St Mungo's Secondary School**

Introduction

St Mungo's Secondary School serves a large urban catchment. The school has played a key role in the development of the 'Learner Participation' document. At St Mungo's the four arenas of participation identified in the guidelines are closely linked, as represented by the knot diagram (figure 1). PSE lessons have presented opportunities for pupils discuss the four arenas and explore emerging issues and concerns. At St Mungo's pupils have extensive opportunities to influence the organisation and running of the school through a number of decision-making groups. The influence of these groups impacts positively on personal achievement, the wider community and in learning & teaching.

in Learning, Teaching, and Assessment

in Opportunities for Personal Achievement

in Decision Making Groups

in connection with the Wider Community

Fig. 1 – The four interlinked arenas of participation

Arena 1: Learning, Teaching and Assessment.

A 'Teaching and Learning Committee' seeks pupils' opinions on what happens in classrooms, through a dialogical approach including learning conversations. Although no pupils currently sit on the actual committee, its work seeks to involve young people more in the planning of their next steps for learning, the ways that they learn, and their personal targets. The participation guidelines are in-step with on-going staff self-evaluation which indicates that young people want more of a say in the classroom.

Arena 2: Opportunities for personal achievement.

There are several initiatives at the school, led by pupils, or co-facilitated with adults. These examples of personal achievement link closely with Arena 3: Decision-making groups. 'Changemakers' is a group of young people predominantly from first to fourth year, and also includes representatives from fifth year and sixth year. The group meets regularly, usually on Fridays after school to talk about changes that are happening in the school, the way that the school is being run, and how things can be changed. The thoughts and feelings of learners from across the school are sampled through questionnaires and conversations in PSE classes. Concerns emerging from this consultation process led to action in the form of a pupil-initiated and organised 'Show Racism the Red Card' day. Everyone in the school was invited to wear red and to contribute £1. The group planned and delivered and anti-racism

workshops for fourth year pupils.   Attentions have now turned to confronting sexism and discrimination.

'Emerging Leaders' is a group that seeks to better manage the transition for learners between primary and secondary school. The group decided that the issue of respect needed addressed. They felt some pupils showed less respect for teachers, but also reciprocally, they explored if and how teachers could show pupils more respect. The group has drawn up a charter to present to teachers, looking for their co-operation to develop and maintain a culture of mutual respect at the school. The pupils at St Mungo's see possibilities to develop an orientation programme for primary school pupils reinforcing these ideas of mutual respect. This would take the form of visits and a presentation, delivered by St Mungo's pupils to P7 pupils in primary schools.

Arena 3: Decision-making groups.

The six 'House Councils', forming the wider pupil council, provides a structure that is core for encouraging participation. Each 'House Council' is a committee of pupils drawing upon feedback from pupils across the school. They identify issues of concern and explore potential interventions. Minutes are taken and shared with staff, parents and pupils. The approach to raising of concerns allows child-led agenda setting. Some raised concerns are everyday issues such as school uniform, lockers, and food in the canteen. But mental health emerged as a widespread and more complex problem and senior stage pupils took this on as a focus. The pupils have been working with the charity, Young Minds, to work on a number of initiatives that responded in an on-going way to young people's ideas and inputs in mental health. Significantly, at St Mungo's a culture of learner participation based on dialogue means that staff and pupils are willing to tackle both everyday and, with support, more complex or challenging issues in a responsive way.

Arena 4: In connection with the wider community.

Pupils have been collaborating with a young people's charity called PEEK to make a change in the local community. Some facilitators from PEEK are still in their teens, or early twenties and co-create projects around issue-based themes. These intergenerational activities develop confidence and sense of personal achievement.

Attendance at parents' evening was seen as important for the House Council. Pupil engagement in encouraging parents along led to a 34% attendance rate from parents of senior phase pupils. The council see a collective approach to addressing this. They propose that increased pupil participation across the school could lead to even more parents taking an interest in what their children are doing at school, and becoming involved in parents' evenings.

Responding to the participation guidance document.

A culture of learner participation often based on sustainable models of leadership development, service learning, and rights-based practice, was part of an on-going in-depth focus for development at St Mungo's. The participation guidelines document and the accompanying tools have enabled pupils and staff to foreground how they evaluate current levels of participation and to address new avenues of practice. At times, adults catalyse different kinds of mostly collective participation wherein there are opportunities for group intergenerational dialogue. In other cases, more predominantly individual participation leads to child-led conversations about areas of concern. Teacher-led initiatives were at times concerned with issues and challenges associated with school improvement agendas (especially within teaching and learning). Each approach and initiative, in different ways allowed for degrees of teacher-catalysed, child-led, and child-adult shared decision making across all arenas which often led to important outcomes and raised awareness of issues.

NOTES:

*During the pilot phase, the arena 'Learning, Teaching and Assessment' (see https://education.gov.scot/improvement/Documents/learner-participation.pdf) was known as the *Formal Curriculum*.

**During the pilot phase, the arena, 'Opportunities for Personal Achievement' (see https://education.gov.scot/improvement/Documents/learner-participation.pdf) was known as the *Extended Curriculum*).

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