



Learner Participation in Educational Settings (3-18)

Introduction



Curriculum for Excellence supports children and young people so that they can gain the knowledge, skills, attributes and capabilities which underpin the four capacities required for life in the 21st century. Children's rights, embedded in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, are at the heart of Curriculum for Excellence.

These rights include, amongst others, the right to participate through dialogues with adults based on mutual respect, and the right to an education. In education settings, children and young people need to be recognised more clearly as participants with rights alongside professionals and community members.

Learner participation is needed for Curriculum for Excellence's aims and purposes to be achieved across all contexts of learning. Learner participation is a key thread running through the *How good is our school?* (4th edition, hereafter, HGIOS?4) and *How good is our early learning and childcare?* (HGIOELC?) documents and is promoted as a key component within Scottish education policy.

In schools and early learning and childcare (ELC) settings, learner participation is core to a good education. As part of all educational experience, it is young people's right to have a say in matters that affect them. Our vision is that in all schools and ELC settings, all young people should have opportunities to...

- (i) **learn about their right to participate voluntarily in decision making**
- (ii) **be enabled to participate through a variety of ways of expressing their views**
- (iii) **have a say in shaping educational provisions in their setting and beyond**
- (iv) **learn through participating in decisions within a wide variety of educational activities and processes leading to meaningful impacts and outcomes**
- (v) **be involved in monitoring and evaluating young people's participation and its impacts**

Effective learner participation means that a good education can become relevant, valuable, and supportive of achievement and attainment. Teachers and school leaders are distinctively positioned to enable learner participation.¹

However, recent research shows that education professionals need now to reflect and evaluate on how all arenas of school and early years life can better support learner participation. We must help young people understand and exercise their rights regardless of age, gender, ethnicity and background, and help them contribute in all kinds of decision making both locally and through linking to the wider community.

This guidance provides:

- **A new definition of learner participation for Scottish education (ages 3-18)**
- **An evidence-based rationale and set of potential benefits of participation**
- **Principles and practices for authentic participation**
- **A four-arena framework for understanding and self-evaluation**

There is also a set of support materials in association with this guidance (available on-line).



Defining Learner Participation



Definition

Learner participation in schools and ELC settings includes all of the ways in which children and young people engage in practices and dialogue with educational staff, parents, carers, and community members to create positive outcomes and changes.²

Principles for Learner Participation:

- equal opportunities for inclusive, voluntary participation
- respect for children and young people's rights and differences
- transparency and accountability in decision making
- intergenerational power sharing
- relevance of content, purpose and outcome³

Participation is inclusive and respectful

As a human right, the participation of learners in decision-making is more than a reward that is won or a privilege to be given on the grounds of class, religious persuasion, ethnicity, gender or background. All children and young people – including those with disabilities, minority groups, and those in need of support for learning – are afforded both the right to an education and the right to have a say in shaping that education.

Participation is transparent and involves power sharing

Learner participation amounts to more than adults merely listening to young people – some form of intergenerational dialogue is required. Intergenerational dialogue requires

adults, children, and young people to engage in communications which are two-way, voluntary, sustained, deal with real concerns, and be based on mutual respect and children's rights. Through participation, staff, learners, and other community members will plan and act together. Participatory dialogues can involve individuals or groups.

Participation is relevant, authentic and consequential



For participation to be relevant and authentic, participatory dialogues must be influential and consequential rather than tokenistic. Effective participation should lead to new practices, relations and meanings. The processes and outcomes of these actions should be monitored in ways that include young people.

Using the principles of participation in practice:

In order to ensure that these principles are fully embedded in practice, any initiatives involving participation should include:

- safe and child-friendly approaches
- training and capacity building for adults and children and young people
- involvement of children and young people in all relevant governance practices
- liaison and dialogue with relevant and influential adults
- involvement of young people in internal and external monitoring and evaluation of progress
- feedback mechanisms for all children and young people and the wider public

In the use of this guidance, schools and ELC settings are encouraged to refer to:

-  [The 7 Golden Rules of Participation](#)
-  [How Good Is Our School?](#)
-  [How Good Is Our Early Learning and Childcare?](#)
-  [Getting It Right For Every Child](#)

Rationale and Benefits of Participation



Effects and Benefits

There is now considerable evidence from research that supports the view that addressing learner participation makes for effective policy making, enhances school life, and improves a range of outcomes for learners. A recent Scottish study⁴ has shown that schools achieving better than expected exam results, given their catchments in areas of deprivation, were all making comprehensive efforts to address learner participation across school life.

Across many studies, we can say the main evidenced effects⁵ of enhancing learner participation are:

- improved pupil-teacher, child-staff, and peer-to-peer relations
- improved wellbeing
- improved teaching and learning
- improved guidance and support
- a better school ethos and greater sense of a shared community
- a reciprocal sense of feeling valued, trusted and respected
- development of life skills such as teamwork, problem-solving, and citizenship
- improved engagement, empowerment, and commitment to education
- improved achievement and attainment
- an addressing of the 'attainment gap' between learners from more and less deprived backgrounds

Depending on the particular settings and approaches taken, a wide range of targeted improvements can be generated. Some examples of areas where learner participation can have an impact include:

- school building and estates design
- human rights awareness
- links between school and community
- staff appointment processes
- violence prevention initiatives
- learning, teaching and assessment

Involving learners in decision-making can bring a sense of legitimacy to decisions, policies and practices since they are not being imposed hierarchically from above. Learner involvement can help to bring fresh, new perspectives and ways of addressing a whole range of issues across school life.

The effects of learner participation are not limited to outcomes for young people or their attainment and achievement. Through taking a participatory approach, power is shared and consequential intergenerational dialogues become embedded in how the school or ELC setting functions.

Four Arenas of Participation

The 'Four Arenas of Participation' provides a framework to help us understand and develop when, where, and how learners can have a say in schools and ELC settings. Recent research in Scotland in high-achieving schools serving deprived areas has shown that, in order to do well, learners valued and availed of opportunities for participation in all four arenas.

The four arenas are indicative of the main overlapping emphases in learner participation in school or ELC settings. As the diagram shows, all arenas are inter-linked: for example, a pupil-led group could decide on possible destinations for an international trip. Similarly, dialogue with community members about an environmental issue could lead to a curriculum project about sustainability.

Importantly, learner participation will not be limited to the work of formal pupil councils but will be richly and deeply experienced across the four arenas by all children and young people. Learner participation must not be considered as an 'add-on' but be experienced as intrinsic to everyday ways of working.



in Learning, Teaching, and Assessment



in Opportunities for Personal Achievement



in Decision Making Groups



in connection with the Wider Community



Participation Arena 1: **Learning, Teaching, and Assessment**

The first arena of participation concerns learning, teaching, and assessment. This comprises educational experiences that can happen in, for example:

- **classrooms**
- **playrooms**
- **sports and performance spaces**
- **science laboratories**
- **libraries**
- **outdoor settings**
- **and other studios, workshops and learning spaces**

In this arena, all young people have opportunities to influence and participate in decisions about the approaches taken, the topic, content, timetabling, sequence, structures and emphases in how they learn, are taught, and assessed.

Through participation, learners will exercise a key role in actively supporting curriculum making within Curriculum for Excellence through on-going dialogue with teachers and others.



Participation Arena 2: **Opportunities for Personal Achievement**

Opportunities for personal achievement constitute the second arena of participation. Schools and ELC settings routinely offer a diverse range of learning experiences such as:

- **volunteering**
- **award schemes**
- **visits and visiting speakers**
- **sports events: as player, coach or supporter**
- **enterprise, fund-raising, and developing the young workforce**
- **public performances of music, dance, theatre**
- **competitions**
- **other school or school-community events**

Through dialogue with adults in this arena, learners can influence a variety of important decisions. Opportunities for personal achievement can be shaped, designed or initiated by young people themselves or may be provided in collaboration with teachers, community groups, non-governmental organisations and other bodies.⁶ Through engagement in this arena, young people are able to significantly influence school ethos and culture.



Participation Arena 3: **Decision Making Groups**

The third arena involves participation in many kinds of decision making groups. In committees, councils, and other groups, learners take part in the everyday and more strategic decisions that steer and provide school-wide direction. This comprises, for example:

- **child-led groups**
- **pupil councils**
- **Eco-School groups**
- **children and young people's involvement in parent-teacher associations**
- **school grounds and estates groups**
- **other management and steering committees**

These groups and committees influence:

- **management and leadership**
- **school budgets, systems and structures**
- **school rules, policies and procedures**
- **staff selection**
- **advocacy, guidance and support for children and young people**
- **community councils**
- **school building and grounds development and design**
- **other governance issues**

In this arena, children and young people can address effectiveness and accountability to shape the culture, systems and processes of schools and ELC settings. Learners engage in effective forms of intergenerational decision making which is real, consistent, transparent, systematic, and sustained.



Participation Arena 4: **Wider Community**

The fourth arena is about working in partnership with other services, parents, carers, and the wider community.

Through learner participation, schools and ELC settings can reciprocally build links with the wider world and collaborate more deeply on new shared goals.

Learner participation will extend a sense of community, developing new relations with community members whilst generating commitments beyond existing routines and norms.

In this arena, there will be:

- **engagement by learners with a range of agencies, families, and other community members**
- **opportunities for community members to engage and participate in school life**

Learners will experience and contribute to new intergenerational dialogues, helping to support learning, and attunement to the needs of others within the wider community. These kinds of projects can lead to exchanges across the generations at local, national and global levels.

Initiatives addressing this arena may be developed by learners themselves or in a culture of collaboration with external agencies and partners.



Taking Learner Participation Forward



Creating further dialogue

This guidance positions learner participation across and within all aspects of life in school and ELC settings. Learner participation involves information sharing, active collaboration, and other forms of communication and expression through which young people and adults enter into dialogue so that each other's views are taken into account and become consequential. For many settings, learner participation is already highly valued, practically supported, and does make a difference. In other settings, there may be opportunities for improvement. In all settings, further development is possible and required as we continue to address learner participation.

Impacts of a rights-based education

Learner participation needs to be a key aspect of young people's lived experience of their education. This work is important because it addresses young people's rights, provides opportunities for all to have a say in how establishments are run, brings improvements in achievement, attainment, and in the quality of provisions. We know a rights-based education is needed for young people to do well at school. A rights-based education becomes apparent when there are ways for young people to influence change and participate across and within all four identified arenas. For genuine participation, adults must recognise that children and young people know when their contribution has been valued or when there is little discernible impact.

Support for embedding into practice

Addressing learner participation needs to be a process that is appropriately contextualised. A pilot study of the application of this guidance demonstrated that there are different starting points for developing this agenda which are dependent on the school's or early learning and childcare individual context. A number of videos, tools, and resources accompany this document to support practitioners in determining how they might take this agenda forward and ensure it is appropriate for their setting. The experience in practice showed that when opportunities to participate were well attuned to the needs of the setting, they were grasped by children and young people and were very transformative, sometimes with surprising outcomes.

We encourage you to use this guidance in association with the on-line support materials to develop learner participation in your establishments.

Footnotes

1. See Hulme et al (2011), but also Brown et al (2017) who found opportunities for participation in decision making was relatively low in some areas of concern (including teaching and learning) and Mannion et al (2015) who suggests there are significant gaps and room for development.
2. Our ideas here are, of course, based on the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's 2009 General Comment on the Right of the Child to be Heard but takes account of the distinctive context of an educational setting. Our expression is informed by 'Participation Works' who adapted Treseder's definition of participation but is firmly rooted in the spirit of Article 12. See Davey et al (2010). See also Mannion (2007) Lundy (2007) for a discussion of these issues.
3. See Mannion, G. (2012). *Children and Young People's Participation in Scotland: Frameworks, standards and principles for practice*. Edinburgh: Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland.
<https://www.cypcs.org.uk/publications/participation>
4. See Mannion, G. Sowerby, M. and l'Anson, J. (2015). *How Young People's Participation in School Supports Achievement and Attainment*. Edinburgh: Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland.
Available from <http://www.cypcs.org.uk/ufiles/achievement-and-attainment.pdf>
5. Useful summaries of benefits are available in Mager and Nowak (2012) and in Robinson (2014). See also sources at the end of this document.
6. Achievements can be captured within Curriculum for Excellence through various award schemes.



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