

# SCOTTISH YOUTH PARLIAMENT INVESTIGATES

## PERSONAL AND SOCIAL EDUCATION (PSE) CURRICULUM, STRENGTHENING LEARNER VOICE

Exploring young people's response to the PSE Review and specific actions in relation to participation, engagement and co-design of PSE programmes.



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



Thank you to members of the PSE Review group for their commitment to this project, along with other members of the Scottish Youth Parliament's Education and Lifelong Learning Committee.

Also, thank you to the 500 young people who took part in the survey consultation and provided us with the data for this report and the members of the community in schools and youth groups for facilitating consultations.

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# INTRODUCTION

The Scottish Government's Mental Health Strategy 2017-2027 includes an action committing the Scottish Government to review Personal and Social Education. In 2019, the report, Personal and Social Education: Preparing Scotland's Children and young people for Learning, Work and Life, published an analysis of findings along with a set of recommendations. This report is known as the PSE Review.

In its recommendations the PSE Review expressed a commitment to ensuring that learner engagement and co-design of PSE/HWB programmes are taken forward. Supporting this recommendation is a strong focus on learner participation and an empowered system whereby learners feel valued and have their voices heard, as underpinned by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Education Scotland commissioned the Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP) to progress this recommendation by following an investigative process which will uncover young peoples' views and opinions of participation and engagement in education from across a range of local and national projects. This will be supplemented by more recent data from the SYP Education and Lifelong Committee.

# PART 1: DESK-BASED RESEARCH



## SCOTTISH LEARNER PANEL, CURRICULUM, PARTICIPATION AND VOICE

### OVERVIEW OF PROJECT

During the 2018 Year of Young People, the Scottish Government commissioned several new and innovative projects designed to increase the participation of children and young people in decisions which affect their lives. The Scottish Learner Panel was commissioned to explore children and young people's views of education. The project was delivered by Children in Scotland, Children's Parliament, Young Scot and Scottish Youth Parliament. For the purpose of this report, the focus will be on the views and experiences of young people.

### AIM OF PROJECT

The aim of this project was to improve the voice of children and young people in the formulation of national education policy. Evidence will be drawn from two themed workshops with young people. These themes are Learning, and Participation and Voice.

# WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE THINK ABOUT LEARNING?

One particular aspect of learning that was discussed by young people was the curriculum. More specifically, many of the older young people on the panel cited views in relation to improvements to the curriculum. For example, one was the development of life skills classes that should be incorporated into the national curriculum and delivered through PSE. Suggested topics should cover finance management and areas such as understanding bank accounts and mortgages. Young people expressed that these topics should be included to fully prepare them for life after school. Overall, young panel members called for a wider range of subject choices within school and provide learners with opportunity to participate in how subjects are taught.

# WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE THINK ABOUT PARTICIPATION AND VOICE?

This theme looked at how young people felt their voice was being heard and encouraged. Young people cited that they enjoyed participation surveys which allowed them to have a say on many school specific matters while remaining anonymous, which meant they could voice opinions without judgement. In a discussion about meaningful participation, young people understood this as ensuring all pupils have a strong sense of feeling included and that their views are taken into account. In addition to this, young people were clear that meaningful participation was about acting on and making changes, evidence that their voices have been heard and their participation is valued.

Panel members said that:

“Inclusion... making sure everyone is included but don't force participation”

“Talking, listening is important”

“Meaningful changes”

“Communication - making it clear”

“Feeling confident enough to speak out”

In relation to ways in which young people can share their views, most had heard of the concept of pupil councils and were aware of one in their school. However, there was a consensus that they all felt it was limited in relation to how well pupil voice was encouraged. Young people argued that to strengthen and promote active pupil voice across all schools, there should be some form of consistency in approach which allows equal opportunity for all. Young panel members also noted that respect for learners' opinions was important and implementing new ideas would further encourage more active participation.

Panel members said that:

“Most people don't really know what happens in these.”

“Pupil councils are not always utilised well.”

The Scottish Learner Panel project showed that young people do want to be leaders - of their own learning. In an ever-changing world, young people are calling for flexibility in the range of subjects available and for their input into a curriculum for the modern world. Young people highlighted that a lack of consistency in approach meant that not all learners have equal opportunity, such as participating in effective pupil councils.

**EXCITE.ED**

## OVERVIEW OF PROJECT

The Excite.Ed project was part of a review undertaken by the Scottish Government which was seeking views on 'how to deliver excellence and equity in Scottish Education'. The partner organisations Young Scot, Children in Scotland and the Scottish Youth Parliament worked together on the delivery of this initiative between September 2016 and January 2017. A total of 1,428 pupils from across Scotland took part in this project, either by completing a survey or by participating in classroom activities.

# AIM OF PROJECT

The aim of this project was the motivation of the Scottish Government to raise attainment and make demonstrable progress in closing the gap between those children and young people who are least and most disadvantaged. The project partners delivered direct engagement activities with children and young people to understand their perspective, as experts of their own experience and to explore the changes needed if ambitions for a change in Scottish education are to be achieved. For the purpose of this report, evidence will be drawn from four themes, Increased Participation, Choice in the Curriculum and Feedback, all which are of relevance to this report.

## INCREASED PARTICIPATION

A common thread throughout this project was that young people do want to participate and engage in decisions about their education. However, not all young people feel able or have the confidence to participate. Young people offered suggestions to support empowerment.

- “Young people should have a say in decisions that affect them, on decisions such as changes to the curriculum, teaching staff and schools closures.”
- “Pupils want more opportunities to participate, and to feel like their opinion mattered, they want to be asked what they want and to be told about any outcomes.”
- “Pupil councils should meet more often. Young people felt they didn’t have power or time to make change and non-members didn’t know much about it or how they could get involved. It was clear that pupil council could be improved and put to good use.”
- “Young people want to be able to share their ideas, but they also want to be involved with any new school development projects and see/hear when something is being done that came from a young person’s idea.”

## CHOICE IN THE CURRICULUM:

Having an opportunity to have input and their views and opinions heard within the curriculum was important to young people. Young people understood that education was preparing them for life after school, but they felt that choice in the curriculum is something they should be consulted on. This view links to the Scottish Governments’ PSE Report calling for young people to engage in the design and delivery of the PSE programmes.



For full inclusion and participation to be successful, young people have called for an empowered system as noted above and this is echoed by education authorities which states ‘an empowered system creates a culture of collaboration and collegiality with learners, parents, colleagues and multi-agency partners’ (Education Scotland, 2021). The excite.Ed project was carried out in 2016/17, and at that point young people called for more options within the curriculum and suggested online classes as an option, so that every pupil had an opportunity to explore new subjects that can be easily accessed online.

## THE PARTICIPATION LOOP - FEEDBACK:

When young people give their time to become involved in decision making, it is important that decision makers feedback to participants showing that their input is valued and that they can affect change. This process ensures that participants feel like their time has been used effectively and this encourages young people to get involved again with consultations or engaging with decision makers.

- “Closing the decision making loop and sharing final decisions with children and young people is something that is missing.”
- “It would be easier to understand the decisions that are being made through making the process more visible and providing channels for young people to reach out and question the decisions makers.”
- “A greater level of consultation and feedback would improve relationships, where pupils can feel like they have been listened too.”

The evidence from the excite.Ed project shows that young people want to be active participants within their school setting. However, to be active participants, they need to feel empowered and confident to use their voice. An empowered system is where young people feel their contribution and time is valued and this would also build relationships for a strong foundation of cohesion within schools.

# PART 2: SYP EDUCATION AND LIFELONG LEARNING COMMITTEE RESPONSE



In early March 2020, the PSE Review investigation group and other members of SYPs Education and Lifelong Learning Committee set out to explore what young people think about the current PSE curriculum. All members of the Education and Lifelong Learning Committee are passionate about education, are well informed and actively participate in consultations, ensuring the Scottish education system is fit for a modern world.

A PSE survey was conducted just before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic which resulted in young people accessing education in their homes in an online format. Due to the pandemic, participation in this project by the PSE Review group was also carried out in an online format. A robust and modern PSE curriculum has the ability to set up a young person with the skills and qualities they will need in later life to grow and be successful.

At present, PSE covers six separate subject areas and is defined by the Scottish Government as:

‘A specific timetables lesson which covers aspects of planning for choices and changes, substance misuse, relationships, sexual health and parenthood, in addition to aspects of physical activity, sport and health.’

Despite this, since 2010, SYP have produced 10 policies which reflect young people’s desire for adequate, up-to-date, and effective PSE to be taught in schools. Young people remain fully engaged in this matter as nearly 500 young people from across Scotland completed the survey covering three main questions. These questions were:

- What curriculum they are currently covering in lessons
- What curriculum they want to see covered in future lessons
- How they want PSHE to be delivered in the future.

The results of this survey are present below.

# SURVEY FINDINGS

## WHAT IS ALREADY BEING TAUGHT IN PSE?

Question 1 of the consultation focused on what was already being taught in PSE classes, the following results were found:

Mental Health



Nearly a quarter of pupils have covered topics under Mental, Emotional, Social Wellbeing in their school career.

Planning for Choices and Changes



20% of pupils have covered topics that look at planning for choices and changes in later life.

Food and Health



Less than a sixteenth of young people say that they have covered topics around food and health in their PSE class.

Substance Misuse



Only one fifth of pupils covered topics focussing on substance misuse in society.

Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood



Well over a third of young people are covering topics related to relationships, sexual health and parenthood in PSE.

# WHAT DO YOUNG PEOPLE WANT TO BE TAUGHT IN PSE?

Question 2 of the consultation focused on what young people want to see included in the future PSE curriculum in Scotland's Schools:

Mental Health



Almost 20% of young people want to learn more about mental, social, emotional, and physical wellbeing in PSE lessons.

Planning for Choices and Changes



Just under half of school pupils want more information and guidance on choices available to them in school, out with school, and in life after education.

Food and Health



Almost all young people feel that the education around food and health they are receiving in Home Economics class is enough.

Substance Misuse



Only a small number of young people said that they want more lessons about substance misuse and the effects of it.

Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood



Over a third of young people want to see more lessons focused on Relationships, Sexual Health, and Parenthood in school.

# HOW DO YOUNG PEOPLE WANT PSE TO BE DELIVERED?

The third question asked young people how they wanted PSE to be delivered in their school. The results are as follows:

Practical



Half of young people want PSHE to be delivered in a more practical method.

Consistent



20% of pupils are satisfied with the way PSE is being delivered and are happy to keep teaching methods consistent.

External Educators



Just under one third of young people want to see more external educators, those not employed in the school, to deliver lessons and workshops in PSE classes.

In a classroom environment



Young people want to see PSE being delivered in a classroom environment instead of in the form of assemblies or talks.

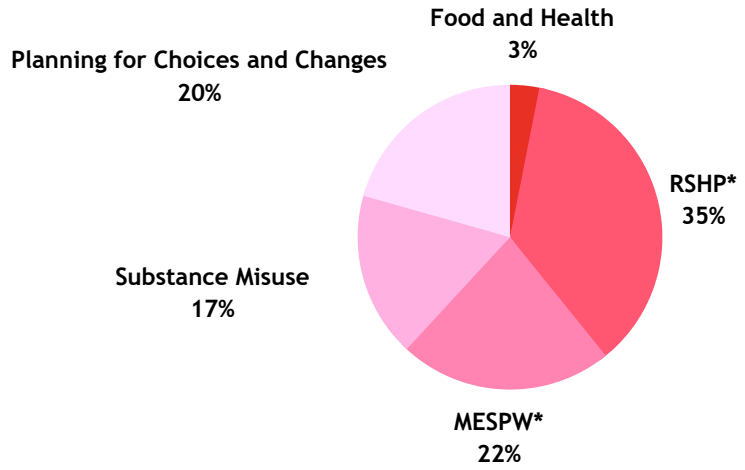
Dedicated Teacher



A quarter of school pupils want to have a dedicated PSE teacher who has received adequate training.

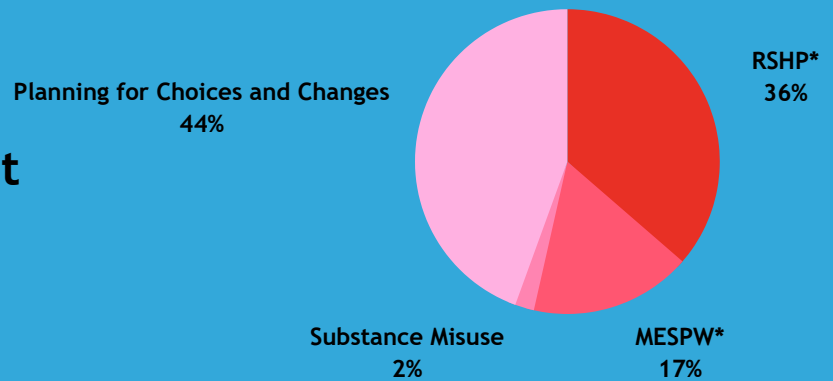
# QUESTION 1

What have young people already been taught in PSE?



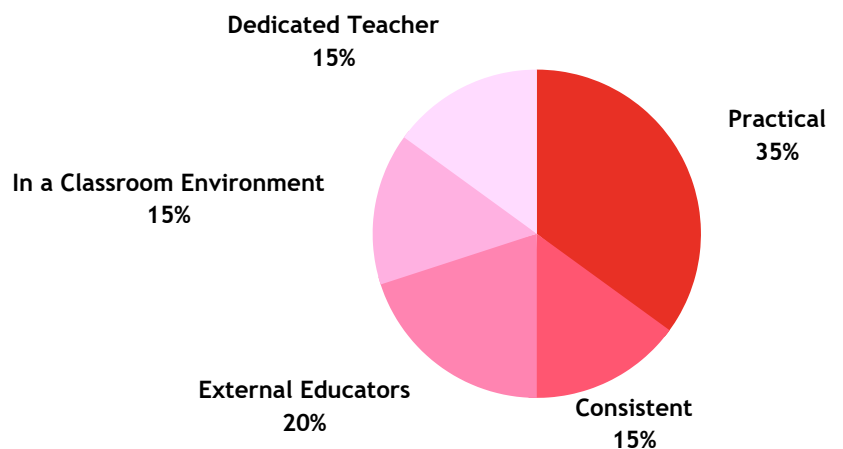
# QUESTION 2

What do Young People want to be taught in PSE?



# QUESTION 3

How do young people want PSE to be delivered?



\* RSHP = Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood

\* MESPW = Mental, Emotional, Social and Physical Health

In addition to this survey data, the PSE Review group attended an online meeting to discuss their experience of PSE and returning to school, in person in September 2020. Suggestions and recommendations were also given on 'how to' engage young people in the design and delivery of a modern PSE curriculum.

## WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON THE CURRENT PSE CURRICULUM?

“We spend one year discussing smoking and alcohol.”

“I have continuously asked for pupil voice to be included.”

“We just discuss drugs, alcohol, smoking, bullying and UCAS stuff and not getting what we asked for at the beginning of term.”

“We spent 4 weeks on sex education watching a video, it's not enough.”

“I have asked can we do stuff on finance but no take up from teachers.”

“I go to a Catholic school and we get no sex education, the teacher actually said she felt uncomfortable teaching about consent.”

“Two weeks on mental health is not enough - it should be incorporated fully into the PSE curriculum.”

## WHAT HAS YOUR EXPERIENCE BEEN OF PSE SINCE RETURNING TO SCHOOL IN PERSON, IN SEPTEMBER 2020?

Pupils were really disappointed that PSE classes were acting 'as normal' like nothing had happened:

“When we had our first PSE after the first lockdown it was straight into looking at UCAS statements, there was no mention of COVID and the impact on our mental health, even a brief discussion would have been good, just to show that we have all experienced this difficult, stressful time and understand what support we need.”

# HOW DO YOU THINK YOUR SCHOOL COULD ENGAGE PUPILS IN THE DESIGN AND DELIVERY OF PSE LESSONS?

“I think the best way to engage pupils would be to do a survey for the whole school asking what they want to be taught and then anyone who would be interested in providing more feedback or being more involved in designing it could join some sort of advisory group.”

“An advisory group - Possibly made up of senior pupils with leadership roles or a pupil council (Would be a great way to encourage democracy in schools).”

“Have a suggestion session with teachers - at the start of every school year, pupils may be unengaged because they feel they don't get listened to but if their ideas are reflected to them in lessons, it could improve this.”

“School doing their own survey - this would be good, but I think their needs to be national change to the curriculum.”

“Through pupil voice structures already in place in schools, plus wide consultations throughout the school.”


# WHAT IDEAS OR SUGGESTIONS WOULD YOU GIVE EDUCATION SCOTLAND SO THEY COULD THINK ABOUT DEVELOPING 'A HOW TO' GUIDE TO ENGAGE LEARNERS IN PSE?

“I think that there should be some sort of agreement between pupils and staff that pupils voices will not only be listened to but acted on, or they are told why something cannot be done. I think it's also important to have opportunities for feedback on how the engagement process is working for both sides so that it all runs as smoothly as possible.”

“Involve pupils in the development of any guidelines, perhaps take a co-design approach with consultation etc., as pupils would feel like they had a part in designing the lessons at all levels.”

“Make sure catholic schools and non-denominational schools have the same guidelines so everyone has an equal access to information.”





“With any charters or guidelines make sure they are updated regularly so that topics do not get outdated and if pupils say things aren’t working then listen to them.”

“Ensure a wide variety of young people in schools are consulted (if not all are!). Make co-designing PSE curriculums the norm.”

# CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS



This report set out to explore how learner engagement and co-design of PSE programmes can be taken forward. It concludes that young people want to be empowered to use their voice and be included in decisions in relation to their education and more specifically to the design and delivery of PSE. The desk-based review of the Scottish Learner Panel and excite.Ed projects reveal that young people do want to be leaders of their own learning, calling for meaningful participation and an active role in the design and delivery of the PSE content to reflect an ever changing world. To achieve this, young people actively call for their voices to be heard through a consultation process whereby decisions can be made and acted upon, leading to greater strength in relationships between young people and adults.

## THIS REPORT CONCLUDES WITH THE FOLLOWING RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. To achieve an empowered system, schools should consult with children and young people and respond to their views appropriately.
2. Include Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood in the PSE curriculum. Young people, including those attending faith schools, should be taught about the challenges of relationships, parenthood and more education about the LGBTQ+ community.
3. Involve all young people in the design and delivery of the PSE course content to ensure it is representative of what young people want to be taught
4. Ensure senior pupils receive appropriate life skills education, including financial education and post-school options.
5. Consider a range of teaching methods in PSE classes, such as practical lessons and external educators delivering sessions.
6. Have a dedicated PSE teacher in schools, in addition to guidance teachers, who are trained in the PSE curriculum and pupil support
7. Engage young people by asking them to complete a whole school survey about how they can be involved in decision-making.
8. Feedback to young people showing their involvement is valued and they can affect change.

# ABOUT THE SCOTTISH YOUTH PARLIAMENT



About the Scottish Youth Parliament The Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP) represents Scotland's young people. The charity's vision for Scotland is of a nation that actively listens to and values the meaningful participation of its children and young people. SYP's goal is to make this vision a reality, to ensure Scotland is the best place in the world to grow up.

A fundamentally rights-based organisation, SYP's mission, vision, and values are grounded in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Article 12 - "Young people have the right to express their views freely and have their opinions listened to in all matters affecting them" - is at the heart of all work carried out in SYP's name.

As a completely youth-led organisation, the words and sentiment of Article 12 have profound importance for SYP's work. The charity's democratically elected members (MSYPs) listen to and identify the issues that are most important to young people, ensuring that their voices are heard by decision-makers. SYP exists to provide a national platform for young people to discuss the issues that are important to them and supports them to effectively campaign for the change they wish to see. SYP was a key voice in the campaign to bring the voting age in Scotland down to 16 and played an integral role in the passing of the Marriage and Civil Partnerships Bill (Scotland) in 2014.

SYP is committed to being truly inclusive and works tirelessly to ensure the voices of every young person - from every community and background in Scotland - are heard.

Politically impartial, SYP works with stakeholders, groups, individuals, and representatives across the political spectrum who share the charity's values, to enable SYP to deliver the policies that are important to Scotland's young people.

# REFERENCES



- Empowering School Leaders, Education Scotland. 2021  
<https://education.gov.scot/improvement/Documents/EmpoweringSchoolLeadersFinal.pdf>