Issues In Early Education In Scotland

Early years education in Scotland is always looking for areas in which to improve, and the Scottish Government provides drivers in which schools should focus to ensure this improvement. This essay will consider drivers from the 2019 National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan (Scottish Government, 2018 b). Improvement areas discussed will be parental involvement, improvement in achievement considering pupil voice, and assessment of children's progress considering Scottish National Standardised Assessments (SNSA) in P1.

Parental Involvement

Parents are acknowledged as being the first educator a child will have and in being this educator, parents hold the knowledge of their child that would be most beneficial for the development of their child (Education Scotland, No Date, a.; Scottish Executive, 2007). Many argue that a parent's involvement in their child's education has shown to have a greater impact on their child's attainment than any other potential factor (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Sylva et al, 2004; Gorard, See & Davies, 2012; NPSF, 2017; Scottish Government, 2018 b). The Early Years Framework (Scottish Government, 2009) outlines the importance of parental influences on children and states the importance of developing a partnership between parents and school to contribute to the best outcome for each child.

Having clear communication between school and parent can support a child and benefit the school setting as parents can provide crucial information about the child (Education Scotland, No Date, a.). Goodall and Vorhaus (2011) agree with this understanding as they believe parents should be involved in planning to provide a learning structure that best suits the child. Education Scotland (No Date, a.) states that when parents are involved in this planning process, pupils' behavior and attainment improve. In the early years, this communication provides children with continuity between settings, thus encouraging a feeling of trust and security with staff (Sheridan et al. 2010). Unfortunately, there are many parents – particularly working class- who feel as though they are not able to communicate with staff as they do not have the language and social skills to do so (Cullingford & Morrison 1999; Power & Clark 2000; Harris & Goodall, 2007; NPSF, 2017; Scottish Government, 2018). Being approachable, building a professional caring relationship with parents and children, and creating an open, comfortable and safe space for parents to discuss their family's needs can encourage parents to see the teacher as their first line of contact when required (Scottish Government, 2014; NPFS, 2017).

Parental involvement in the early years often encourages the learning of literacy and language, considering the importance of the language used by parents in the home, and the amount of reading that takes place (Kurtulmus, 2016). When reading takes place at home, children have been found to recognize the significance of letters and tend to be able to write their names earlier than those who have little to no reading at home (Nord et al., 1999). Pillas et al (2014) suggested that children are likely to follow by example when they see their own parent reading for pleasure. Not all parents have the time or capability to read with their children. Studies have reported that parents' work schedules prevent them from being involved in their child's learning (Anning, 2000; Harris & Goodall, 2007). Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) noted that many parents do value their role as educators, however, they only involve themselves to the point

where they feel capable of doing so. The feeling of being incapable of supporting their child's learning is often due to the level of education the parent has (Harris & Goodall, 2007). Whether it be a feeling of self-efficacy towards a specific subject or the lack of understanding of what the child is learning, Feiler et al. (2006) suggest tailoring home-learning activities to the child and their family. This idea prioritizes finding out about the family and communicating with parents to tailor learning to the child's needs, ensuring learning can be supported by the parent, e.g. videos in the family's first language (Feiler et al, 2006) or as the Scottish Government are aiming to do, provide parents with learning opportunities that will support their child's learning (Scottish Government, 2009).

Another barrier to parental involvement in schools is the number of children whose parents do not have time to talk and children who are dropped off by other childcare workers (Mahmood, 2013). The Scottish Government (2014) states that schools should do what they can to find out how they can communicate best with parents and what parents would like to find out about their child's learning. In recent years, schools have used technology as a platform for communicating with parents (Chairatchatakul, Jantaburom & Kanarkard, 2012). In consonance with this approach, Goodall and Vorhaus (2011) found that communicating with parents through technology has provided a convenient way for parents to be kept up to date with information and that there is a higher return rate on surveys and questionnaires in comparison to paper copies. The Scottish Government (2018 a) stated that schools should utilize the use of social media and technology to inform parents of their child's learning, however, staff should consider parent-friendly language and appropriateness of the content. Although the use of technology appears to have made an improvement in parental involvement, consideration should still be taken not to exclude parents who do not have access to the required devices.

Children's voice

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states that every child has the right to be heard and this is held in importance as one of the general principles of the convention (UNICEF, No Date). Hart (1992) uses the term 'participation' to describe the process of involving children in discussions about decisions that will impact their lives and treating the child as an equal within the discussions. Education Scotland (2018 a) found that rich learning opportunities were provided when children were involved in the planning process in the early years.

It may be easy for schools to claim they are meeting the rights of article 12 by having a class council where children state their opinions on different aspects of the school, however, Hart (1992) would place this level of participation under tokenism. Hart (1992) argues that there are some instances where the voice of the child is heard, and used in these circumstances, though more often than not the opinions are either manipulated or not transparent enough to be counted as true participation (Hill, et. al., 2004; Kelley, 2006). Researchers have stated that when engaging with children in discussions, it is important to provide information about how the opinions provided by the children were used (MacNaughton, Hughes & Smith, 2009). Education Scotland (2013) still encourage the use of class representatives and pupil councils within the school, but mainly as a means of representing the pupils as a whole. The idea in this circumstance is to have the representatives create a questionnaire in which all pupils respond to and the representative's feedback on the opinions of pupils (Davies, et. al., 2006; Education Scotland, 2013).

In the early years, it may appear as though children are too young to be making decisions based around their learning (Smith, 2007; Alderson, 2008) however, according to Building the Curriculum 3, the basis for learning is a shared trust and respect, regardless of age (Scottish Government, 2008 a). The OECD (2019) emphasizes the importance of having staff, parents, pupils, and the community as equal stakeholders in the decision-making process in anything that may affect their lives. The OECD (2019) states that in providing this opportunity for an equal say, children will develop reflection skills that will support future decisions and it will encourage them to grow up to be active participants in their community and the country's politics. It has also been said that in schools in the UK that promote democratic practices, the pupils have increased academic achievement in comparison to those who do not (Davies et. al., 2006). Holdsworth (2015) questions the argument that young children have nothing to say about their life, and rather believes that the debate should be more about whether anyone is listening to what the young child has to say.

The improvement in the aforementioned study by Davies, et. al. (2006) was also mentioned to have been due to an emphasis being placed on students being actively engaged in the teaching and learning throughout the school which led to equal and positive relationships and strong communication. Education Scotland encourages teachers to be involved in the "life and work of the school" and view this as a strong step forward to ensuring children meet the requirements of the four capacities from the earliest age (Scottish Government, 2008) Encouraging children of all ages to participate in the planning of their own learning has shown to increase pupil engagement and the length of time they can stay focussed within their learning (Dumont, Istance, & Benavides, 2010), furthering the importance of listening to children's thoughts and opinions in their learning.

For years it has been encouraged for schools to be a place of mutual respect and equality (Scottish Government, 2008), however, Markström & Hallldén (2008) and Mannion, Sowerby, and I'Anson (2015) found it important to mention the clear power imbalance that still occurs in all school settings which - even when unintentional - can cause children to feel as though they cannot voice their opinions freely. Implementing children's rights is not just something that can change with a new policy, but rather requires a change in the way that we view the child (Bae, 2009; Woodhead, 2009). Younger children are more difficult to support in participation than older children as we need to observe how children interact in their everyday life and use these observations to construct an activity for the children to share their opinions (Björk-Willén, 2007; Bae, 2009). Ensuring power-sharing is clear (Markström & Hallldén, 2008; Mannion, Sowerby, & I'Anson, 2015), activities are well planned (Björk-Willén, 2007; Bae, 2009), and children feel they are equal participants in their learning (Davies, et. al., 2006; Scottish Government, 2008; OECD, 2019) appear to be the key recommendations throughout reading to establish true pupil voice in and outside of the school community.

Scottish National Standardised Assessments in P1

SNSA has been under scrutiny from the media since it was announced in 2016 that testing would being in 2017, especially with concerns regarding primary 1 pupils (BBC, 2016; TES, 2018). The debate stems from a question of harm for good, as many are concerned about the pressures of testing at such an early age (in comparison with the gain of data and perceived improved achievement.

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