

Inquiry into the Purposes of Scottish Education
Final report of the findings
from the focus group consultation

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Kindergarten Wall

When I was a little kid
Not so long ago
I had to learn a lot of stuff
I didn't even know
How to dress myself, and tie my shoes
How to jump a rope,
How to smile for a picture
Without looking like a dope
But of all the things I learned
My favourite of them all
Was the little poem hanging on the Kindergarten Wall

*Of all you learn here
Remember this the best:
Don't hurt each other and
Clean up your mess
Take a nappy every day
And wash before you eat,
Hold hands, stick together
Look before you cross the street.
Remember the seed in the little paper cup
First the root goes down
And then the plant grows up.*

Well it was first, second, third grade
Fourth grade too
Where I had to learn the big things that big kids do.
To add, subtract and multiply
To read and write and play.
How to sit at a little uncomfortable desk
For nearly half a day.
Of all the things they taught me,
Of all the great and small,
Still my favourite was the poem on the Kindergarten Wall.

Of all you learn here, etc.

But lately I've been learning
To look around and see
An awful lot of grown-ups
Acting foolish as can be.
I know there's lots of important things to know I haven't mastered yet
But it seems there's real important stuff that grown-ups soon forget.
I'm sure that we'd be better off if we could just recall
That little poem hanging on the Kindergarten Wall.

Of all you learn here, etc.

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Contents

	<i>Page</i>
Acknowledgements	iv
Executive Summary	vi
1. Introduction	1
1.1 Background	1
1.2 Aims and objectives	1
1.3 Research questions	1
1.4 Method	2
1.5 Focus group overview	3
1.6 This report	3
2. Coping with change	5
2.1 Introduction	5
2.2 Life is elsewhere	5
2.3 From small beginnings	6
2.4 The triumph of hope over experience?	7
2.5 Grasping the nettle	9
2.6 Conclusion	9
3. Engaging with ideas	10
3.1 Introduction	10
3.2 A balanced curriculum?	11
3.3 Education – an end in itself or a means to an end?	12
3.4 Keeping everyone involved with learning	12
3.5 Conclusion	13
4. Developing personal identity and skills	14
4.1 Introduction	14
4.2 Promoting a sense of identity	14
4.3 What makes for a good teacher?	15
4.4 Developing necessary skills	16
4.5 Conclusion	16
5. Fitting structure to purpose	17
5.1 Introduction	17
5.2 Short-term gratification vs. long-goals	17
5.3 Continuity and progression	18
5.4 Conclusion	18
6. Conclusion	19
References	20

Appendices 1-10: digest of the main issues to emerge from each focus group

Appendix 1: Mothers using a crèche facility; play leader and cleaner

Appendix 2: Young unemployed men

Appendix 3: Ex-offenders

Appendix 4: Semi-skilled workers

Appendix 5: Mothers using a crèche facility

Appendix 6: Retired elderly people

Appendix 7: Disabled people

Appendix 8: Women from ethnic minority backgrounds

Appendix 9: Women from ethnic minority backgrounds and asylum seekers

Appendix 10: Young people who have been in public care

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Executive Summary

1. Introduction

This is a report of the findings of three-month study conducted by the Scottish Council for Research in Education (now the SCRE Centre). The study was commissioned by the Research and Information Group on behalf of the Education, Culture and Sport Committee at the Scottish Parliament.

The aim of the study was to conduct focus group research in order to inform the Education, Culture and Sport Committee's inquiry into the Purposes of Scottish Education.

The 77 participants in the study were recruited from sections of the public perceived to be at risk of social exclusion, and thus unlikely to submit written or oral evidence. These included single mothers in deprived urban areas; young unemployed men; disabled people; people from the major ethnic minority groups in Scotland; low-skilled workers; and older people.

2. The research focus

The research team engaged participants in informal discussions of the six themes that provided the framework of the inquiry. These were drawn from the Discussion Paper (SP Paper 533) provided for the Committee by its educational advisers. The six themes were:

- Coping with change and uncertainty
- Engaging with ideas
- Keeping everyone involved with learning
- Promoting a sense of identity
- Developing necessary skills
- Fitting structure to purpose.

The main findings in relation to each theme are reported below. As the research findings indicated that the development of a sense of identity was inextricably linked with the development of necessary skills, we have decided to treat these two themes under the same heading.

3. Coping with change and uncertainty

- Many respondents believed that Scottish education had indeed become more flexible and inclusive in recent years. Truancy was now considered less likely to be condoned than it had been in the past; and young people with special educational needs (SEN) were now perceived to be more likely to receive help.

- Concern was expressed that young people did not show enough ‘respect’ for their teachers. Allied to this point was the view that some teachers were too informal in their dealings with secondary school pupils.
- Many of the young people we interviewed had a highly instrumental view of education. They believed the main purpose of education was to help them get a job. Those who were still unemployed some two years after leaving school felt badly let down by the education system.
- Most respondents believed that high levels of teacher-pupil interaction were essential if young people were to be adequately prepared for coping with change and uncertainty.

4. Engaging with ideas

- Education was perceived by many respondents to have a key socialising role. Indeed, this was considered to be one of its primary purposes. Enabling children and young people to engage with ideas was perceived by most respondents as being of secondary importance.
- There was little support for the idea that education should develop children and young people’s intellectual capacity in order to enable them to challenge authority.
- Education was seen by many participants as having the potential to provide a bastion against the relentless pressure exerted upon young people by a pervasive marketing culture.
- There was the perception among many respondents over several groups that too much emphasis was currently being placed on academic achievement, and that this was detrimental to the development of vocational and key life-skills.
- There was no consensus amongst the focus group participants on the issue of breadth vs. depth in the curriculum. For some, subjects like history, geography, modern languages, economics, religious and moral education all had their place in the curriculum. Others believed that attention should be focused on the basic skills of literacy and numeracy.
- Relatively few respondents took the view that education was an end in itself. This view was confined to those who had been successful in the education system.

5. Keeping everyone involved with learning

- The findings add credence to the view that some ‘young people are alienated specifically from learning and education’ (SP Paper 553, p. 4). Young adult males, ex-offenders and people with disabilities were more likely to feel deeply alienated from school and brushed aside by teachers.

- These participants wanted teachers to treat them like people rather than as obstacles. They also thought that lessons should include more small-group interaction and take place within a climate of mutual respect.
- Our findings suggest that minor adjustments of curricular content are unlikely to have a profound impact on the educational experiences and therefore, the self-confidence and motivation of the most alienated young people in our society.

6. Developing personal identity and skills

- Most participants expressed the view that individuals need to have sufficient self-esteem and confidence in order to make the most of the available opportunities for the acquisition of basic skills.
- Respondents generally construed ‘a sense of identity’ as personal rather than national identity. Developing a sense of personal identity was seen as one of the fundamental purposes of education.
- For many participants, particularly the young unemployed, those responsible for the care of young children or those in full-time work, there appeared to be rather little scope in their lives for the ‘artistic, emotional and imaginative aspects of individual development.’
- Self-esteem and self-confidence were considered to be prerequisites for the development of higher-order skills such as problem-solving skills, communication skills and a range of inter-personal and co-operation skills.
- Those in full-time employment considered the workplace as the primary locus of their skills acquisition.

7. Fitting structure to purpose

- Respondents did not challenge the way in which the education system is currently organised, namely in three largely separate age-segregated types of institution.
- Several participants thought that children in Scotland (and by implication the rest of the UK) started school too early, or at least before they were ‘ready to learn’.

1: Introduction

1.1 Background

In April 2002, the Scottish Council for Research in Education (SCRE)* was commissioned by the Research and Information Group, on behalf of the Education, Culture and Sport Committee, to provide research services to the Scottish Parliament.

The aim of the project was to conduct focus group research on behalf of the inquiry into the Purposes of Scottish Education. The research conducted by SCRE was designed to complement the written and oral evidence submitted to the Education, Culture and Sport Committee from other sources.

The study was conducted over a three-month period, between May and July 2002.

This report presents a summary of the main findings.

1.2 Aims and objectives

The aim of the research was to organise a series of ten focus group meetings, and to engage the 6-8 participants in each group in an informal discussion of the six overarching themes that provided the framework of the inquiry¹, namely:

- Coping with change and uncertainty
- Engaging with ideas
- Keeping everyone involved with learning
- Promoting a sense of identity
- Developing necessary skills
- Fitting structure to purpose.

The focus of the research was very much on those sections of the public at risk of social exclusion, and thus unlikely to submit written or to present oral evidence at official hearings. Within time and budget, every reasonable effort was made to recruit focus group participants that met this criterion.

1.3 Research questions

This report addresses, in whole or in part, the following research questions. These are drawn from SP Paper 533 which was provided to the Education, Culture and Sport Committee by its four educational advisers. It is this

* On August 1st 2002 SCRE became a discrete unit within the expanded Faculty of Education at the University of Glasgow and is now known as the SCRE Centre.

¹ These can be found in the Discussion Paper for the Inquiry into the Purposes of Scottish Education, available at <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/official-report/cttee/educ-02/edr02-discuss.htm>. This document is henceforth referred to as SP Paper 533.

document that provides the framework to the inquiry into the Purposes of Scottish Education.

- Is there a need in a rapidly changing world for radical change in the education system?
- How can the education system help children and young people to cope with high levels of uncertainty and the rapid pace of change?
- How far should education encourage children and young people to be capable of engaging with existing knowledge and developing innovative ideas as the basis for questioning authority and social convention?
- Is what we are currently doing in schools an adequate proxy for what we think education ought to do?
- Is there something distinctive and special about the way Scotland should respond to change?
- What skills are needed to make sense of large amounts of information, and to bring them together into a coherent response to change?
- Are schools the right places for all young people?

1.4 Method

1.4.1 Recruitment

As stated above, our main aim was to elicit the views of small groups of individuals who were disadvantaged in some way – for example, as a function of socio-economic circumstance, ethnic origin, geographical location or disability.

Given the limited timescale, we sought to identify groups of individuals who were already meeting on a regular basis, or were regular users of a particular facility or service – for example, a crèche or community centre. In order to expedite matters further, we worked through intermediaries, some of whom were already known to us. This ensured both timeous organisation and relatively good attendance at the meetings, all of which took place in locations with which the participants were familiar. Participants were offered a fee of £10 to cover expenses. In some cases, this provided an incentive to take part.

1.4.2 Conduct of the focus groups

Two members of the research team were in attendance at each group. One assumed the primary responsibility for facilitation; the other made extensive notes.

Participants were invited to draw upon their own experience, and, where applicable, upon that of their children and grandchildren, in order to address the issues outlined above. By engaging with the diverse nature of participants' experiences of education, the researchers were able to encourage them to extrapolate from these experiences, and to engage with, in as far as was possible, the six main themes. As the aim was to promote fairly natural conversational

exchanges, the emphasis varied to some extent between groups. Overall, participants showed great readiness to engage in discussion, and therefore the contribution of the researchers as facilitators was fairly minimal.

1.4.2 Analysis and reporting

The written accounts of the proceedings from each focus group were circulated and discussed among the research team. The researchers undertook a content analysis of the proceedings of each meeting, and related this to the six overarching themes outlined in 1.2.

Our task was to extrapolate from examples of individuals' experience, and to relate the emerging themes to the key questions outlined in SP Paper 533. Given the readiness of most participants to engage in discussion, our primary role was to bear witness to the events and experiences that people recounted. The challenge for us in preparing this report has been to preserve the immediacy and vividness of some these accounts. We hope that we have succeeded in this respect.

1.5 Focus group overview

Table 1 provides a brief overview of the nature and scope of the ten focus groups.

It is well-documented in the research literature that women play a key role in all aspects of their children's education (cf, for example, West *et al*, 1998). As Table 1 shows, the majority of the participants in this study were women, most of whom had children. Indeed, the fact that they had a personal stake in the future of Scottish education was the prime reason they had agreed to take part in the research in the first place. This partly explains the gender balance in the current study.

1.6 This report

This report may be read in a variety of ways. Those readers who are particularly interested in the issues raised in the ten focus groups may wish to read the appendices first. Appendices 1-10 comprise brief accounts of the main issues to emerge from each meeting. The participants' responses are organised under the six overarching themes drawn from SP Paper 533 and outlined in 1.2 above.

Those more interested in a discussion of the implications of the findings reported in the appendices would be advised to read it through from beginning to end.

All names have been changed in order not to reveal the identity of those concerned.

Table 1: Overview of the nature and scope of focus groups

Appendices	Nature of group	Date	Location	Number/gender of participants
1	Mothers using a crèche facility ; play leader and cleaner	15 May 2002	Crèche in an urban housing estate, west of Scotland	4 women, aged 33- 58
2	Young unemployed men	15 May 2002	Drop-in centre in an urban housing estate, west of Scotland	4 men, aged 16-19.
3	Ex-offenders	5 June 2002	Housing project for homeless ex-offenders, city centre, west of Scotland	17 men, aged 19-60
4	Semi-skilled workers	6 June 2002	Large retail warehouse, city centre, east of Scotland	7 women, aged 23- 45
5	Mothers using a crèche facility	7 June 2002	Community centre in an urban housing estate, west of Scotland	6 women, aged 32 -49
6	Retired elderly people	7 June 2002	Community centre in an urban housing estate, west of Scotland	8 women, aged 58 - 79
7	Disabled people	13 June 2002	Residential facility for the disabled, semi-rural, central Scotland	9 adults (5 female; 4 male) (including 3 care workers)
8	Women from ethnic minority backgrounds	14 June 2002	Community centre in an urban housing estate, north of Scotland	6 women, aged between 24-50
9	Women from ethnic minority backgrounds and asylum seekers	18 June 2002	Housing association in inner-city area, west of Scotland	10 women, aged between 22 – 60 + interpreter (f)
10	Young people who have been in public care	23 July 2002	Youth project, remote, semi-rural, north of Scotland	6 men, aged 16 and 18.
Total no of participants:				77 (46 female 21 male)

2: Coping with change

2.1 Introduction

In this section, we examine the extent to which the education system was perceived to help children and young people cope with change and uncertainty.

We should state at the outset that for the majority of participants in this study, notions of global competitiveness, and of responding to the challenges posed by the rapid development of the ICT sector were very remote indeed. It is thus not surprising that they had little to say on how, if at all, these developments should impact upon the education system.

As far as the curriculum was concerned, the emphasis was on basic skills: literacy and numeracy. Some older participants thought more attention should be given to cooking and home management. We note too that some of the young people leaving care felt ill-prepared for the challenges of managing their own budget and with the everyday challenges presented by running a home and working. Moreover, as we shall see later in this report, participants believed that the key enabling factor in coping with change was to emerge from the period of compulsory schooling with one's self-respect intact.

2.2 Life is elsewhere ...

The general tenor of many of the focus group discussions in relation to the theme of coping with change also challenges one of the assumptions contained in SP Paper 553, namely that education occupies a central position in peoples' lives. For many of those interviewed, school had just been something that was there – education was something that you had to go through. It was a shared cultural experience, but it remained a largely abstract concept. For those without academic leanings, life had very definitely been elsewhere. Many looked back with fond regret at the 'carrying on', and the going out that had been at the forefront of their lives between the ages of 12 and 16. Some reported that they had spent much of their time sniffing glue, drinking, or 'terrorising' people (usually other children, but sometimes their teachers). Others had had to cope with difficult family circumstances – like coming home from school to find that 'your ma's out and your dad's lying drunk on the couch'. Many expressed regret that they had not made more of the opportunities offered, but thought that, well, life goes on. They believed that in the years since they had left school, they had recouped some of their losses, and repaired some of the psychological damage.

Many of those interviewed appeared to have been relatively passive consumers of education. But they had aspirations for their children, and wanted the best for them. And, more importantly, most still believed that the education system could deliver. Moreover, the general perception was that, in certain key respects at least, things indeed had got better.

2.3 From small beginnings ...

The evidence certainly suggests that the respondents generally believed that there have been substantial improvements in the education system. Many respondents thought that Scottish education had indeed become more flexible and inclusive in recent years. However, the objective evidence for these claims was fairly slight. We suggest that there are significant cultural and psychological determinants behind such perceptions. We shall explore these further below.

As we shall see, some of the views expressed bear witness to the key assertions made in SP Paper 533. However, there are a number of issues to emerge from between the lines.

2.3.1 *‘Scottish education has become more flexible and inclusive over the last few decades.’*

Those over 30 generally acknowledged that, in some respects at least, Scottish education has indeed become more flexible and inclusive over the last few decades. We note, however, that this view was not entirely shared by the people with disabilities we interviewed (see Appendix 7).

This dimension of change was universally welcomed by participants. There was general agreement that schools were no longer perceived as threatening places. For a variety of reasons, (e.g. increased liaison between the primary and secondary sector and greater levels of parental involvement), ‘going up to secondary school’ was now less likely to be a ‘terrifying’ prospect than it had been in the past.

There was also the perception – derived from personal experience in a number of cases (3) that children with specific learning difficulties were now more likely to receive timely help than in the past. Three women (all in their mid- to late-30s) in different focus groups (see Appendices 4 and 5) recalled being publicly humiliated and laughed at by teachers on account of the difficulties they were experiencing in school. One even recalled being made to sit in a corner wearing a dunce’s hat. Everyone in the group (including the facilitators) gasped in disbelief. However, it was clear that this was no metaphorical dunce’s hat.

2.3.2 *‘The ideas of children’s and parents’ rights pose serious challenges to how schools are organized ...’*

It is difficult to imagine the incident with the dunce’s hat taking place in a Scottish school nowadays, not least because ‘the ideas of children’s and parents’ rights pose serious challenges to how schools are organized ...’ (SP Paper 553, p 2). Nevertheless, concern was expressed that young people did not show enough ‘respect’ for their teachers (and by implication for their elders, cf. Appendix 6). The following quotations illustrate this point:

You did what you were told, there was a line that you didn’t cross. (May, 59)

We looked up to teachers in our day. (Jean, 69)

They're all dead quick to chant the Childline number now. (Carol, 39)

This touches upon the issue of 'child-centredness', to which we return in 3.2 and again in Section 4.

2.3.3 'Scottish education has become more inclusive while remaining true to its strongest traditions'

One indicator of an inclusive school was perceived to be the extent to which measures were in place to reduce the incidence of truancy. Several participants in one focus group (men in their early 30s) (see Appendix 3) told us that in their day (the 1980s), truancy had been condoned, and it had been easier for teachers to 'write off' pupils who were categorised as 'problems' on account of family difficulties and/or lack of academic aspirations or prowess:

Some of them even encouraged you to stay away. (Bill, 32)

In our day, it was a lot easier for them [teachers] just to push us out of the way. (John, 28)

They were aye telling you to just go up the back of the class and look out of the window. (Steve, 32)

2.4 The triumph of hope over experience?

The young men quoted above clearly felt that the education system had let them down badly, and had contributed to the constant erosion of their self-esteem that they felt had so damaged their life chances by making them less able to cope with change.

However, the question arises as to the nature of the evidence base for the belief that things have got better, and that their children were less likely to suffer the ill-effects of having been 'written off' at an early age. In several cases, respondents were making direct comparisons between their own experiences and that of their children. For example, Steve (32) recounted how his dyslexia had only been identified once he was in a young offenders' institution. In contrast, his son's difficulties had been picked up much earlier. He attributed this to the way the school system was structured and to the availability of specialist support, rather than to his own early experiences. It is possible, after all, that his own difficulties might have enabled him to respond to his son's in a positive way, and to exert pressure on the school for change. The evidence may be slight, but it does nevertheless raise the question of the extent to which notions of children's and parents' rights pervade all sectors of society, and the implications for social justice if they do not. This particular case brings us to issues of personal identity, self-esteem and confidence. These are leitmotifs in the debate on the purposes of education, and we shall return to them below.

It is interesting that so many participants shared the conviction that things have indeed got better. We should point out that the evidence base for this is fairly narrow, and may partly be based on wishful thinking rather than fact. Many of

those we interviewed had children¹. Indeed, as we stated in the introduction, it was the fact that they had a personal stake in the future of Scottish education that had made them participate in the study in the first place. It may be that the very fact of being parents leads people to take a more sanguine view of the future of education. There can be few parents who can live with the thought that things will be worse for their children. It is difficult to determine to what extent these changes in perception are a direct result of changes in the way schools are organised (more contact between primary and secondary schools, for example, or a more highly-developed guidance system), or are merely a function of ways of seeing that have broader psycho-social origins.

However, not everyone believed that things were getting better. It is salutary to compare the findings reported above with the evidence gathered in the course of discussions with much younger men (see Appendices 2 and 10). One of the ten young men interviewed recalled ‘being made to feel dead wee in there [in the classroom]’; others to being humiliated or ‘given a ragging’ in front of the class; or to being disruptive because the teacher did not have the time to give them the attention that they needed.

The picture that emerged from the discussions reported in Appendices 2 and 10 was of fairly demoralised young people, some of whom had a highly instrumental view of education (namely, that it would lead to a job); and by implication, of a group of demoralised teachers struggling to give individual pupils sufficient attention, and coping with a small but significant number of ‘nutters’ who routinely disrupted lessons and ‘brought everybody down’. In short, the picture was one of a downward spiral fuelled by mutual disrespect.

Giving somebody a ragging in front of the class, that’s going to make pupils want to shout back at you. (Mark, 18)

It became evident in the course of the meeting that what many of these young men craved was a degree of personal attention that it had not been possible to achieve in the school environment. ‘They’re just no there for you [i.e. the teachers]’, one told us, and there was a litany of complaints about ‘being stuck in front of a video or given a booklet’, or being required to copy out large quantities of information, some of which they had already copied down on previous occasions.

The importance of meaningful teacher-pupil interaction, and the key role this played in developing pupils’ self-respect and enabling them to cope with new challenges, was a theme that was echoed in another group (see Appendix 1). Susan (33) had witnessed her 6-year old nephew who was in a composite class ‘lose interest’ as he was ‘just left to get on with page after page in the workbook’ while his teacher attended to the needs of other children:

¹ In view of the size of one group (see Appendix 3), it was not possible to determine the precise number of respondents who had children. However, if we exclude the groups described in Appendices 2 and 10 (young men aged between 16 and 19), then the majority of those who participated in the study had children.

If they're not having the contact with the teacher, they're just going to lose respect for them. (Susan, 33)

2.5 Grasping the nettle

It is evident from the above that many of focus group participants did not share the radical agenda for change set out in the Discussion Paper (SP 553). As we said at the outset, education was perceived as a shared cultural experience. In the abstract at least, it could 'set you up for life', or 'help you get on in life' and 'give you more choice'. Some respondents believed that educational success could result in enhanced social status – it means you're regarded more highly' (see Appendix 1). The implication was that for those privileged by educational success, coping with change was something they would take in their stride.

It must be said that, *prima facie* at least, the educational agenda that emerged across all the focus groups was a rather conservative one. Many respondents were in favour of school uniforms, and invoked a more authoritarian teaching style that was met with greater compliance on the part of pupils. Some even favoured the return of corporal punishment. The implication of these findings is that there is little sympathy for the notion of education 'developing innovative ideas as the basis for questioning authority and social convention.' (SP Paper 553, p. 3).

The research evidence thus challenges one of the underlying assumptions contained in SP Paper 553: namely that rapid social and technological change should necessarily be paralleled by changes within the education system.

2.6 Conclusion

The main finding in relation to the theme of 'coping with change' is that participants laid considerable emphasis on having the *personal* resources for facing new challenges. The key personal resources were considered to be self-respect and self-confidence. And as we shall see, schools were perceived to place too much emphasis on academic prowess, and this was considered detrimental to the development of these personal attributes in those with no academic leanings.

But there is yet another issue at stake here. The references to 'setting you up for life', and 'helping you get on in life' demonstrate the extent to which the concept of 'strongest traditions' of Scottish education has become part of the public consciousness in Scotland. It is interesting that these beliefs were expressed by individuals whose own education had singularly failed to deliver on all of these counts. In practice, however, such appeals to the strong tradition of Scottish education may have made it more difficult for people to engage in debate about the key issues in respect of the future of education. For although such appeals may invoke the notion of a civil society, it is one that is firmly associated with the democratic *intellect* (Davie, 1961) rather than with basic life and social skills. We shall further examine the implications of this in the succeeding sections.

3: Engaging with ideas

3.1 Introduction

In this section, we examine respondents' views on the following questions. How far should education encourage children and young people to engage with ideas and values? And, by implication, is what is currently on offer in schools an adequate proxy for what education ought to do?

Education was perceived by many of participants in the study to have a key socialising role, ie to help people live and work in society. However, there was relatively little support for the idea that it should develop children and young people's intellectual capacity in order to enable them to challenge authority. For challenging authority was construed almost exclusively as engaging in anti-social behaviour. This was particularly evident among the older respondents (see Appendix 6), and among the many others whose lives were blighted by the social and physical degradation of their communities (see Appendices 1, 3, 4, 5 and 8).

However, there is a danger that we overplay this apparently reactionary agenda. For many of the challenges to authority were perceived to result from the relentless pressure of consumerism on young people. Much of the discussion, particularly among those over 30, focused on what Rowan Williams has so eloquently described as 'the conscription of children into the fetishistic hysteria of style wars.'¹ Education was seen by many participants as having the potential to provide a bastion against the relentless pressure exerted upon young people by a pervasive marketing culture. In this respect, many participants were implicitly propounding a radical agenda for change.

On a more fundamental level, education was perceived to be about promoting citizenship, and was considered to have an important socialising role. In one group (see Appendix 1), the perception emerged that educated people were 'decent' people, worthy of respect. In this respect, participants' subscribed to some of the views expressed in the Discussion Paper (SP Paper 553) as to what education might be for. What was at issue, however, was precisely how these objectives should be achieved. As we shall see, discussion on this issue revolved around notions of authority and respect, and the nature of the pupil-teacher relationship (see Section 4 below).

These are the issues to which we turn below. We begin by examining respondents' views of the curriculum, and consider some of the implications of the thesis that 'well-informed thinking requires depth of study as well as breadth.' (SP Paper 553, p. 3). We also briefly touch upon the issue of child-centredness, an issue to which we shall return in Section 4.

¹ From *Lost Icons* by Rowan Williams. Cited in 'The new head of the Anglican church ... in his own words', *The Guardian*, July 25, 2002.

3.2 A balanced curriculum?

There was the perception among many respondents over several groups that too much emphasis was currently being placed on academic achievement, to the detriment of vocational skills and key life-skills. (We have already referred to the highly instrumental view of the purposes of education that emerged in one group, see Section 2.2.4). As one 32-year old respondent explained: ‘the teachers weren’t interested in you, they were only interested in the high-fliers’ (Appendix 4).

It was generally acknowledged that ‘paper qualifications’ were important in as far as they were seen to provide a passport to employment and relative prosperity. Here too, the instrumental view of the purposes of education was once again apparent. However, ‘paper qualifications’ were often perceived to have value only in the short term, and were not necessarily considered an adequate reflection of a person’s competence. They were also perceived to have a relatively short shelf-life. As one woman in her 30s put it, ‘what’s the good of having the piece of paper when you cannae do it in two years?’ Another older woman in the same group expressed great concern at the lack of important life-skills in her grandchildren’s generation:

Some lassies can’t even boil an egg’. My granddaughter[aged 14] ‘has nae a clue how to peel a potato ... ‘It’s all paperwork, paperwork, paperwork.. (May, 59)

This example is worth quoting in full, particularly in view of the fact that another older woman (of Indian origin) stressed importance of diet, and of teaching children how to provide themselves with nutritious food. (Her husband was a paediatrician, and both had been shocked at the rising incidence of diabetes in Scottish school children.)

The small number of people with disabilities we interviewed (see Appendix 7) referred to what they perceived as an overemphasis on literacy and numeracy. For some, all the education they had received had focused on these two areas. One young woman with cerebral palsy thought that education ‘should help people know how to get on with other people...to boost their confidence’. Another told us that she ‘had got more out of Sunday school than school.’

As the above examples make clear, there was no consensus on the issue of breadth vs. depth in the curriculum. For some, particularly those who were ‘well-educated’², subjects like history, geography, modern languages, economics, religious and moral education all had their place in the curriculum. According to one young woman (see Appendix 8), an in-depth knowledge of many of these subjects was an essential precondition for living in a multicultural society. Others who had more limited educational aspirations, and for whom education had played a less central role in their lives, took the view that ‘reading, writing and arithmetic, that’s all you need.’

² In the present context, we are aware that this conventional expression is in fact a value-laden term. It is used to refer to those who have been (academically) successful in their school education.

The real issue, however, is not what should be added to or subtracted from the curriculum in order to engage young people at risk of social alienation. To construe the dilemma facing educationalists in this way would be to fall victim to the very consumerism referred to elsewhere in this section.

Many believed that it was not so much what was included in the curriculum, but the way in which it was taught that was important. We shall return to this issue in Section 4.

3.3 Education – an end in itself or a means to an end?

We conclude this section by seeking to provide an answer to one of the questions posed in the Discussion Paper (SP Paper 553, p. 3), namely ‘should education be seen as an end in itself?’

In the event, relatively few respondents took the view that education was an end in itself. This view was largely confined to those who had been successful in the education system, for example the highly-educated women of Indian and Pakistani origin we interviewed in the north of Scotland (see Appendix 8). The very fact that these women were recruited through an adult education class is in itself a demonstration of the fact that living the life of an educated person was one of the key purposes in their lives. Interestingly, the other participants who shared this view were from the other end of the social spectrum – ex-offenders who had finally had the opportunity to develop intellectual pursuits while serving long prison sentences.

There appeared to be a strong cultural dimension to this issue, which was also perceived to be related to the pressures of consumerism referred to above. One young Turkish woman living in a deprived inner-city area told us that ‘people here [in Scotland] don’t value education’ (see Appendix 9). Children and their parents were considered to be at the mercy of a consumer culture that was progressively rendering them incapable of focusing on longer-term goals and more abstract intellectual and spiritual values.

In the view of both the ethnic minority groups, western society was also suffering the ill-effects of several decades of extreme child-centredness in respect of parenting and educational practice in schools. In their view, such extreme child-centredness, which was in part fuelled by an all-pervasive consumer culture, posed a very real threat to the very idea of citizenship and citizenship education.

3.4 Keeping everyone involved with learning

The focus group interviews reported in Appendices 1 and 10 certainly add credence to the view that some ‘young people are alienated specifically from learning and education’ (SP Paper 553, p. 4). Certainly, several of the young adult males we interviewed were deeply alienated from school (see 2.2.4 above). They felt that they had been let down, brushed aside, swept under the carpet, and they were still raw from the experience. We were told repeatedly that the

teachers ‘weren’t there for them’ and that they looked down on them’. What they wanted was that teachers had more time for them, and treated them like people rather than as obstacles. This was particularly evident in relation to Personal and Social Education (PSE), including health education. They were highly critical of resourced-based learning in this area of the curriculum. What these young men wanted was more one-to-one or small group interaction in a climate of mutual respect. In this context, we should recall the comment of the young disabled woman who told us that ‘school should be about helping people to get on with other people’.

These themes were echoed in the focus group with ex-offenders (see Appendix 3); and in the meeting with people with disabilities (Appendix 7). There is one chilling anecdote from the former which is worth recounting in some detail, as it provides a vivid illustration of the complete breakdown of interpersonal relationships in the classroom. One ex-offender recounted how one of his teachers had once cut his own toenails in front of the class. It would be hard to find another example that illustrated such a profound lack of respect for another human being in this particular setting. Such accounts were, of course, one-sided, and one can only speculate on what the behaviour of the pupils in this particular class had been like.

What these examples illustrate, however, is that minor adjustments of curricular content are unlikely to have a profound impact on the educational experiences of the most alienated young people in our society. Indeed it is questionable whether a system that is largely self-referential and focused on academic achievement can provide young people with the innate self-belief and confidence that they will require in order to meet the demands of a rapidly-changing world. This brings us to the theme of fitting structure to purpose. We shall return to this issue in Section 5.

3.5 Conclusion

The main point to emerge here is that the primary purpose of education was considered to be socialisation. The development of the individual’s self-respect was viewed as a necessary precondition for full participation in civil society.

A perceived emphasis by schools on academic achievement rather than on vocational or life skills had meant that those without academic leanings considered that they were, to a greater or lesser degree, marginalised from the mainstream concerns of schools as institutions. It is thus not surprising that these respondents in particular did not consider schools the primary locus in which to encourage children and young people to engage with ideas. This is consonant with one of the main messages to emerge from Section 2, namely that for many, life was simply elsewhere. And it was about acting and reacting, rather than thinking.

As we saw above, the notion that engagement with ideas might under certain circumstances be tantamount to challenging authority was comprehensively rejected.

4: Developing personal identity and skills

4.1 Introduction

Everybody should be given the chance to shine. (Focus Group 1)

In this section, we turn to the themes of promoting a sense of identity; and developing skills. The rationale for addressing these two issues together is that the latter was seen to be dependent upon the former. That is, the consensus to emerge from the focus groups was that individuals needed to have sufficient self-esteem and confidence in order to make the most of the available opportunities for the acquisition of basic skills such as literacy, numeracy and ICT.

4.2 Promoting a sense of identity

The evidence gathered in the course of this study underlines the key role education was perceived to play in the further development of a civil society. However, there was little evidence to suggest that there was anything distinctive and special about the way Scotland should respond to change. For with few exceptions (see Appendix 10) ‘promoting a sense of identity’ was construed to refer to personal rather than national identity. Developing a sense of personal identity was seen as one of the fundamental purposes of education.

All the people we talked to would subscribe to the view expressed by one focus group participant (a play leader in a crèche) that everybody should be given the chance to shine, regardless of aptitude or ability. However, the consensus was that even in a comprehensive system, this was just not happening. There was perceived to be too much emphasis on academic success, to the detriment of those that either could not or would not succeed.

Many participants were primarily concerned with the stresses of bringing up children in a competitive consumerist society; of trying to ensure that their children received the individual attention that they needed at school; with bullying; with the financial implications of putting their children through university; and with what was perceived to be a general lack of respect for persons and property evident among many young people. It was widely acknowledged that these were wider societal issues, and that schools could only do so much to address these.

For many participants, particularly the young unemployed, those responsible for the care of young children or those in full-time work, there appeared to be rather little scope for the ‘artistic, emotional and imaginative aspects of individual development.’ It is thus not surprising that these issues did not come up in the discussions. However, there was considerable discussion on the theme of the optimal relationship between teacher and pupil. It is to this issue that we now turn.

4.3 What makes for a good teacher?

Some of the discussion focused on the nature of the pupil-teacher relationship. Several participants – and not just those in the older age groups (see Appendix 6) – felt that relationships between pupils and teachers had become rather informal in recent years, and that this was ultimately not in the pupils' best interests. One young woman (aged 32) described how 'the teachers tried to be your friend ... they would sit on the edge of your desk.' She personally had found this difficult, especially as it had become more marked in S3 and S4, a stage at which she described herself as having 'lost it a bit'. She felt in retrospect that she had needed more guidance and support at this stage in her school career, and that the informality of the relationships between teachers and pupils had effectively precluded this.

There were several references in this group to what was considered an inappropriate dress code among teachers. The following quotation is one example:

You should have seen the way she [the teacher] was dressed. You'd have thought she was going up to a club in the town.

There was also widespread concern that there were few sanctions open to teachers. The issue of excluding difficult pupils was raised in 5 of the focus group meetings (see Appendices 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 9). None of those who expressed a view on this issue was in favour of excluding pupils from school. The consensus was that 'some kids pushed for it', and that it was neither an effective deterrent, nor in the individual pupil's best interests.

Teachers were perceived to be under pressure, sometimes even by young people who had just left school themselves (see Appendix 10). More support for teachers was advocated, and it was suggested by two groups (see Appendices 5 and 10) that both pupils and teachers would benefit if there were classroom assistants in some secondary classes. Some participants from ethnic minorities (see Appendix 9) believed there was considerable scope for drawing on existing expertise within local communities and providing extra support in the classroom for children from ethnic minorities. Some mothers reported that their children were often unclear as to what their homework entailed, and were sometimes reluctant to ask the teacher for help. These children were often not technically in need of bilingual support. Nevertheless, they were often disadvantaged in the classroom, particularly if there was a sizeable minority of disruptive pupils present.

It was recognised that teachers were under pressure to deliver results, and were being expected to cope with changes in pupils' behaviour that were perceived to be the result of wider social changes. At the same time, however, they were considered, by certain groups at least (see Appendices 1 and 6), to be doing themselves a disservice by dressing inappropriately and behaving too informally in the classroom.

4.4 Developing necessary skills

As we have seen throughout this report, considerable emphasis was placed on the acquisition of basic skills such as literacy and numeracy. This was as much a reflection of the pressing nature of the concerns (such as working or bringing up a family in a difficult neighbourhood) as an indication of the value attached to learning. Self-esteem and self-confidence were considered to be indistinguishable from the higher-order skills referred to in SP Paper 533, namely: ‘problem-solving skills, communication skills and a range of inter-personal and co-operation skills’.

Those in full-time employment (see Appendix 4) considered the workplace as the primary locus of skills acquisition. One participant told us that everything she had learned she had ‘picked up from work.’ The human resources manager at the retail outlet where this focus group was conducted thought that schools were still not providing quality careers advice to young people – particularly to those who aspired to enter employment rather than education or training. In her professional capacity, she encountered many school-leavers who lacked the presentation skills to make a good impression at interview. This certainly fits with the views of the younger people we interviewed, who reported feeling ill-prepared for finding employment. For the human resources manager, the challenge for education was not necessarily to equip young people with the skills they would need in the workplace, but to ensure that they retained the disposition to acquire new skills.

Learning to learn and developing critical thinking were considered to be particularly important by several of the participants in one of the ethnic minority groups (see Appendix 8). Once again, the importance of high levels of teacher-pupil interaction in a climate conducive to learning was emphasised. The involvement of parents was considered by this group in particular to be especially important in inculcating a ‘study ethic’ in young people, in building their confidence and in making them ‘open to all things’.

4.5 Conclusion

Many of the issues raised in this section adumbrate those discussed in Section 3. Most of the individuals to whom we spoke were coping with a variety of personal and socio-economic pressures. Consequently, there was little scope in their lives for the ‘artistic, emotional and imaginative aspects of individual development’. For the majority of participants, who construed ‘identity’ as individuality rather than as national identity, what mattered was being ‘given a chance to shine’ – in whatever sphere. The development of an individual’s self-confidence and self-respect was considered to be a crucial enabling factor for the acquisition of key basic skills, and a necessary precondition for a disposition to acquire new skills and develop other interests throughout life.

Teachers were perceived to have an important role to play in developing young people’s self-confidence and disposition to learn by developing sustainable relationships based upon mutual trust and respect.

5: Fitting structure to purpose

5.1 Introduction

As we have seen, most respondents appeared to take education for granted. The way in which the education system is organised, namely in ‘three largely separate age-segregated types of institution (primary, secondary, tertiary)’ (SP Paper 533, p. 6) was not really challenged. Nor was there any indication of a constructive reappraisal of the concept of comprehensive school. Most of the findings reported below are drawn from the two focus groups with ethnic minority representation. This is partly because these groups appeared less likely to take the system for granted; and because some participants (cf Appendix 8) had the benefit of being able to compare two or more rather different education systems.

5.2 Short-term gratification vs long term goals

The consensus was that schools should provide for the needs of *all* children, irrespective of aptitude or ability. This may be considered as an endorsement of the comprehensive system. Nevertheless, it was widely acknowledged that the system was under pressure. There was widespread concern at what respondents believed were high levels of indiscipline in schools. Nevertheless, the root cause of many of these problems was perceived to reside in the importance accorded to short-term gratification in contemporary society. In short, there was a general perception that many young people between the ages of 12 and 16 were simply not prepared for the long haul. One of the participants of Pakistani origin commented on the lack of a ‘study ethic’ among young Scots. She found this surprising, particularly given the strength of the ‘work ethic’. One young Turkish asylum seeker told us that ‘kids here don’t think about the future’. The implication of these statements was that in the countries of origin of several of the participants, education was seen by all groups, including the most disadvantaged economically, as the passport to a better life. The welfare system in the UK was regarded as reducing some young people’s motivation to succeed, and to ‘better themselves’ – socially, economically, and culturally. There was a strong feeling that ‘kids were being spoiled by the system’ and that parents were colluding by giving in to consumer pressure and attempting to provide their children with a wide range of consumer goods.

The consensus was that children were acquiring the trappings of adulthood earlier. For example, one participant told us how her 14-year-old nephew had taken his girlfriend out to dinner. She vividly recalled entering a restaurant with friends for the first time after she was in full-time employment, and being somewhat overawed by the experience. However, in other respects, children were considered likely to be financially dependent on their parents for longer, and their parents were more likely than in previous generations to be paying for the trappings of early adulthood for their offspring. In contrast, one older respondent (a 59-year-old woman) recalled:

... jumping on and off buses at 15, wearing ankle socks, but I was working! (May, 59)

The implication of the above was that school management and teachers were having difficulties identifying the right response to many young people – both in terms of the structure of the curriculum and in terms of the quality of interpersonal relationships.

5.3 Continuity and progression

There were some interesting views expressed by the two ethnic minority focus groups (see Appendices 8 and 9) in respect of school starting age and the pace of learning in primary and secondary schools.

Several participants thought that children in Scotland (and by implication the rest of the UK) started school before they were ‘ready to learn’. There were many comparisons made between the school system in Scotland and those in India and Pakistan, where many of the children of the professional classes begin formal education as young as three or four. There was some criticism of the rote learning and pressure exerted on children and their families that were features of early education on the Indian sub-continent. Nevertheless, it was considered that children reached the later stages of primary school and the early stages of secondary school with a greater disposition to learn than many of their Scottish counterparts.

There was also a perception shared amongst several of the participants from ethnic minorities that many Scottish pupils were ill-prepared for the various transition points within the system. One particular point of difficulty was perceived to be the transition from S2 to S3, where the pace of learning was considered to increase considerably. Some also felt that the ‘soft start’ of nursery persisted too long into the early years of primary education, and that children were taken by surprise when the pace of learning increased markedly in the later years of primary school.

5.4 Conclusion

There was tacit agreement that schools, whatever their faults, were basically the right places for all young people. However, a small minority of participants (mostly in the ethnic minority focus groups) took issue with the issue of age at school entry. Some pupils were believed to be starting school before they were ready to learn.

The implication of much of the above was that in some communities in Scotland, there were perceived to be profound dissonances between the respective value systems of home and school. Moreover, these dissonances were considered to result in anti-social behaviour and poor educational progress.

Finally, it appears that compliance with the immediate demands of the school system does not necessarily breed conformism. Indeed the evidence from the two focus groups referred to above appears to suggest that it may first be necessary to succeed in a system in order to be able to challenge it effectively.

6: Conclusion

It has been a privilege to conduct the focus group research reported above on behalf of the Education, Culture and Sport Committee. We are greatly indebted to all those who took part in the ten focus group meetings, and to those many people behind the scenes who made it possible to convene the meetings at such short notice.

It is evident that for many respondents, education was a side issue. They were primarily concerned with bringing up their children, or combining family life with full-time employment; looking for work; overcoming disability; or attempting to become reintegrated into society after time spent in prison or in public care.

The theme that came through most strongly in all of the discussions was the perception that within the education system, the emphasis was still very much on academic achievement. Young people were still considered to be leaving school with poor life-skills and ill-prepared even for the basic challenges of working life (such as time-keeping and presentation skills). The participants in this study believed that one of the purposes of education was to prepare people for working life by developing their self-confidence and giving them ‘the chance to shine’.

Some readers will perhaps be disappointed with the apparent paucity of findings in relation to some of the key themes, most notably Theme 2 (engaging with ideas) and Theme 6 (fitting structure to purpose). Nevertheless, the fact that most participants did not engage with this theme is in itself an important finding. Indeed, it calls into question part of the very framework of the inquiry. It is also of particular significance given the promises set out in *Making It Work Together* [1999]¹: namely, to promote social inclusion; to modernise Scottish schools; and to raise standards and achieve excellence, in order to give children ‘the best possible start in life so that they have the opportunity to play their full part in Scotland’s future’.

¹ The Scottish Executive [1999] *Making It Work Together: a programme for government*. Edinburgh: The Scottish Executive.

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