

EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

Attainment and achievement of school aged children experiencing poverty

Discussion group with Community Learning and Development professionals

30 April 2018

Background

The Parliament's Outreach team is undertaking a series of training events for front-line public sector workers to improve knowledge and understanding of the Scottish Parliament and how to engage directly with committees' work.

These training sessions are also an opportunity to tie in with the current work programmes of committees to add value both to the training and committees' engagement. The Committee identified Community Learning and Development ("CLD") workers as being a group that it had not had a great deal of contact with this session and whose views and experience could add value to this inquiry.

The Committee worked with the Parliament's Outreach team to deliver a programme for 17 local authority CLD professionals that included a focus on the attainment and achievement of school aged children experiencing poverty. At the end of the programme, the participants, who were mainly youth workers, spoke to Ruth Maguire and Gillian Martin about their views and experiences in relation to the inquiry.

Discussion group

Added value of youth work approaches

The group were committed and passionate about the value of youth work and youth work approaches and the benefits for children and young people. The group suggested that benefits are particularly marked for young people who, for a variety of reasons, do not fit into the school system. The group suggested that youth work is developed around the young person in contrast to schools, which sometimes ask the young person to adapt to the school.

One participant spoke about her work with young people who had been removed from mainstream classes. She offered alternative education which promoted achievement, such as the Prince's Trust's Achieve programme and Duke of Edinburgh Awards ("DofE"). She works with small groups and has reduced exclusion.

Another spoke of her experience of working with young people who had disengaged with schools. She explored the reasons for this and developed packages, including early intervention packages, around the needs of the young person. In doing so, she drew on the expertise and knowledge of the school staff and, where appropriate, social work. This meant that the support to the young people was timely and relevant.

Another practitioner who also delivered Achieve explained that she was working with young people who were unlikely to get five National 5 qualifications and so provided a more meaningful and useful education for those young people. A number of participants highlighted the value of having a variety of approaches available in a school.

A number of attendees told the members about vocational programmes they had developed and delivered. One participant explained that he had designed these courses around local community plans and so the work (e.g. landscaping) had also contributed to wider community development and the sense of community for the young people involved.

One participant highlighted the importance of engaging with young people approaching 16 and have disengaged with school. She helps young people get into employability or college courses and sometimes back into school. This process highlights the importance of education and training.

Some of the CLD professionals are working children in P7 who are about to go to high school. They have found that by doing this they support children through this important transition.

One participant spoke about her work with families. She said that once the relationship had been established with parents, she found there were often complex poverty related issues, for example in relation to benefits or lack of food. This can impact on attendance of young people who may need their parents to collect money before being able to catch a bus and this complexity is sometimes missed by schools and treated as a discipline problem.

Barriers to success

One of the main issues, which was raised by the majority of the group, was the lack of knowledge and esteem many teachers have about youth work. Youth work and CLD approached is not valued by teachers.

The group had a number of examples of teachers of all levels not being supportive of CLD in their schools. One said that academically high-achieving schools in their area were poorer at including CLD into the school because "it doesn't fit with the school ethos". Another participant thought that some schools see CLD programmes as an admission of failure.

One suggested that it is the lack of understanding of youth work that leads to not valuing it. They pointed out that the outcomes that youth work seeks to achieve are not always the same as what the schools' performance is measured on.

One participant said that some teachers have commented that they object to the pupils with issues are participating in DofE, John Muir and Youth Achievement awards or getting extra-curricular activities, they feel these pupils are being rewarded for bad behaviour. Often courses are co-delivered with teachers and the importance of having the right teacher was stressed.

The CLD workers agreed that there needed to be changes in how teaching staff viewed CLD. There needs to be proper recognition of CLD and their work should be recognised in itself and not as the poor cousin of statutory education.

One professional highlighted timetabling as a barrier to being able to deliver programmes. Furthermore she said some awards are too restrictive and there should be more flexibility to design the programme around the young person's interests and capacity to engage.

Many in the group noted that CLD and specifically youth work is not a statutory function of local authorities. They considered it therefore to be an easier target in a climate of budget cuts for local authorities. Short-term funding leads to uncertainty about the long term sustainability of projects, which hinders long term planning. Several had experience of programmes being cut and good relationships being severed.

One participant expressed her frustration that she could not support young people who were not attending school during the day. The only option was to say that they should go to school. This meant that the young person, who was keen to engage with education albeit not school, didn't receive any education.

What works well.

While the group had instances of where relationships with schools and teachers could have been better, they also shared lots of examples of where that relationship was positive and had enabled them to support young people.

All of the participants were enthusiastic about building relationships and partnerships with schools, their senior leadership team, individual teachers, families, and young people.

Good relationships with the senior leadership teams in schools were identified as crucial. Where a member of the SLT understands and values CLD the school will be more supportive and make CLD a part of the way the school works. This will also mean that CLD programmes are planned in and space created for projects through the year.

Being a part of the ethos of the school allows CLD to take a more proactive and early-intervention approach which improves its impact and the outcomes for the young person.

For a practice that is often focused on progress which can only be measured in a qualitative way, formal awards were highlighted as beneficial in embedding the youth work approaches into schools.