

# Children's Parliament Investigates Learning

Exploring how learner participation and children's insight can build learning capabilities and teacher/learner relationships.

At **Children's Parliament** we work with children from their early years through middle childhood to early adolescence. Children's human rights (to be healthy, happy and safe) and the idea of human dignity are at the heart of everything we do.

Our interest is in children's voices and effective participation at home, in school, and in the community. We use creative and participatory approaches and in doing so our work recognises the effort we need to make to engage all children and to learn from their insight.

We model how we want others to be with children; we provide training and support. We love and value children. It's all about relationships.



## Children's Human Rights and Learning

So, what have children's human rights got to do with attainment? The right to an education is described in articles 28 and 29 of the UNCRC and enshrined in Scots law. Education must be concerned with "the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential". But what does this mean?

The Scottish Government has identified the attainment gap experienced by children from our most disadvantaged communities. In doing so this recognises that there are specific and complex barriers for some children which we need to understand and overcome to ensure their experience of school and of learning meets the standard we have set for ourselves. To fail to address the poverty related attainment gap is an infringement of the child's rights to an education.

From the start of the national focus on attainment, initially through Raising Attainment for All (RAFA), Children's Parliament was impressed by the improvement methodology being used, we could see how there was better use of data, how small step changes were being made, and then we were hearing about some of the challenges and success of scaling up the work.

When we watched the representation of the RAFA work via a series of short films, what we were seeing was not just a technical, functional process or approach, we were watching a relationship change. We were witnessing children, often individually, having a dialogue with a caring, listening adult, learning together and building confidence and skills. However, we were not hearing that this transformed relationship was being recognised or valued. We decided to develop and test an approach that would explicitly use learner insight and pupil participation, facilitated by a caring listening adult, to foster the child's self-perception of themselves as a learner while helping them develop improved approaches to learning. The programme sought to explore whether enhanced conversations with and between learners might be an additional tool to help the national drive to address the attainment of children living in the communities of interest to the Scottish Attainment Challenge.

## The Approach

Across our six partner schools Children's Parliament facilitators worked with six classes, some of these composite classes, but with children from P3 to P7. A total of 111 children in all.

We began with an interest in learner self-perception. Educationalists have long known that this matters.

'A child's learning is directly influenced by the way he feels about his school and his teacher. How can school and home, working together, develop more favourable attitudes on the part of children?' Paul Eiserer (1954)

'Ability alone is not enough: how we think about ourselves matters too.' Bob Burden (2000)

We have used the Myself as a Learner Scale (MALS) to help us think about the important elements of learner self-perception: whether children have a sense of agency related to learning optimism, for example do they think carefully about what they do or do they feel they are good at discussing things; whether they have learned helplessness, expressed through anxiety about new work or finding a lot of school work difficult; and also whether they enjoy and get involved in problem solving for example by feeling that they know how to solve the problems they meet or like having difficult work to do.

This initial project was not designed as an intervention, children used the MALS scale at the outset but only to help us identify whether learning self-perception matters and is useful to consider. We have found that there is great value in using the measure to identify children for whom there is a need to build understanding, skills and confidence in themselves as learners. This is particularly true for boys in our programme. We believe that any future programme of work could use this scale at the outset and end of the programme to ascertain impact.

The tasks and conversations which followed, also represented visually in this report, created a developing conversation with and between children about their learning capabilities. Informed by the work of the originators and authors of the Building Learning Powers approaches children explored learning and being a learner. Across activities children recognised and valued the learning treasures which they can use and develop. They celebrated themselves as great learners. They worked together to identify and understand that learning happens best when children are in classrooms and schools within which they are healthy, happy and safe and understand what 'doing your best' actually means.

## The Importance of Continued Reflection and Questions: Where Next?

Our Children's Parliament Investigates Learning Project has attempted to create new opportunities for dialogue and respect between learner and adult. We would like to continue our work as part of the Scottish Attainment Challenge. Our initial project has been an exploratory piece of work; we believe we have constructed a useful approach. The questions we started with remain questions we want to encourage colleagues to consider:

1. Can we improve how we talk about learning?
2. By talking about learning (with their teacher and with each other) can children become better learners?
3. By talking about learning (with children) can teachers become better teachers?
4. By talking about learning and changing relationships can we create learning environments where everyone feels respected and included, meaning we enhance children's experience of learning and their learning self-concept?
5. If we do these things (and use the other tools and skills at our disposal) can we be more optimistic that we can impact on attainment in the long-term and in ways that are sustained for the individual child and the population of children for whom we are concerned?

### Children's Parliament Investigates Learning Part of the Scottish Attainment Challenge



Funded by the Scottish Government's Attainment Scotland Fund Schools Programme and delivered in partnership with the children and staff of: Burnfoot Primary and St. Margaret's RC Primary (Scottish Borders), Carstairs Junction Primary and James Aiton Primary (South Lanarkshire), Logan Primary (East Ayrshire) and St. Thomas' RC Primary (West Lothian).



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## 1. Learner Self Perception

Myself as a learner  
 "Ability alone is not enough. How we think about ourselves matters too."  
 - Bob Burden

The scale captures the child's general perceptions of their learning capabilities. Using 20 statements it tells us about 3 aspects:

- A sense of agency related to learning optimism
- Learned helplessness
- Enjoyment and active involvement in problem solving

### Learning from the project

1. To be a learner who fulfils their potential, children need to be nurtured and to know they are loved. This is at the top of this short list because it is not just what facilitators have learned from this work, it is what all our work with children and young people in schools and communities tells us. Children do not learn when they are stressed, removed, shouted at or punished. Children who come to learning with experiences or beliefs that say learning is not for them are disadvantaged, their right to an education is infringed, for some this has already happened at the very start of their experience of school. While specific nurture interventions might be helpful for some children we need to create classrooms that are nurturing environments for all learners from the early years throughout childhood and adolescence. Learning happens when children are happy and safe.

2. It's not what we do to children it's what we do with them that will last. This project informs a view that the poverty related attainment gap will not be fixed quickly. To affect meaningful and sustainable change there is a need to slow this down; improving learner self-perception and creating relationships based on human dignity is a process – when we do things with children we build a foundation.

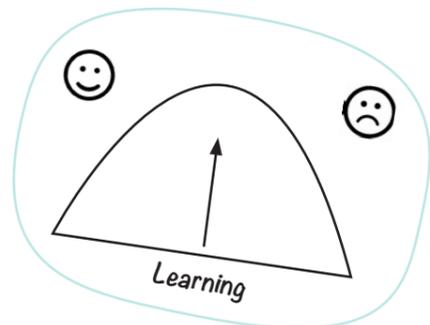
3. Learner self-perception matters for all learners but there are children for whom it needs to be an explicit focus: We would suggest both universal approaches to learner voice and participation to build learning self-concept of all children in schools that are part of the Scottish Attainment Challenge, but also targeted interventions for those children for whom adversity and disadvantage has already made too deep an impact.

4. External support from an agency like Children's Parliament is best used when we are able to get alongside the teacher, work together and model approaches, and create space for the teacher to do individual and small group work. Children's Parliament facilitators have had insightful discussions and communicated these to class teachers, but our view is that it is the class teacher that needs the skills, the tools, the empathy, the confidence and the space to get alongside the children to have this invaluable dialogue. This can then be used to build more effective teacher-led strategies for learning as well as give a foundation for the mentoring and support each child needs to value themselves as a learner and build their learning capabilities.

5. The empathic teacher is the key. Our interest began with the view that rights are made real when the child's lived experience is valued, understood and when adults fulfil their responsibilities as duty bearers to deliver the care, love and professional interventions that the child requires. The child's right to an education concerned with their development to their fullest potential means getting alongside the child, valuing their lived experience, giving them love and care, and using our best professional knowledge and skills to make a positive difference. It's all about relationships.

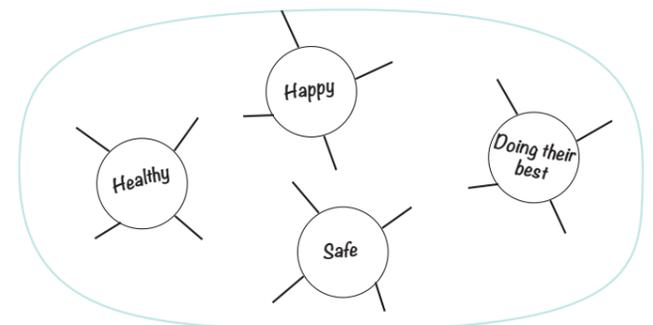
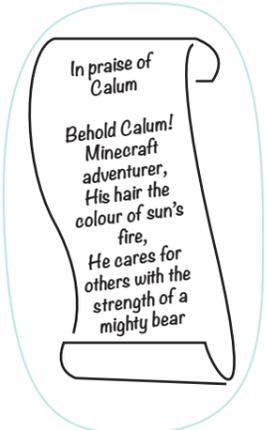
## 4. The Learn-o-meter

Children reflect on what supports learning and what gets in the way. They begin to reflect on differences and similarities on their views of the learning environment.



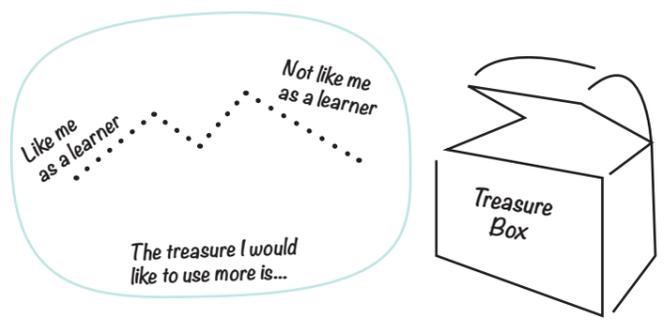
## 7. Praise Poems

Ancient cultures celebrated their greatest thinkers, leaders, poets and warriors. As we do here - every child is celebrated as a great learner.



## 6. The healthy, happy, safe school

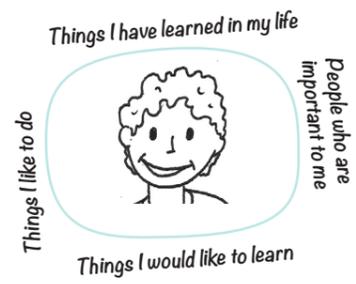
Looking to the learning environment and relationships children identify the characteristics of a school that would see children as healthy, happy and safe learners. Finally, the characteristics of a school where everyone does their best are imagined.



## 5. The Learning Treasures

Parchment scrolls in the treasure box reveal individual learning treasures like, 'I ask questions' or 'I notice things'. One by one the children plot the treasures on their own treasure map. They can pick a treasure to develop further.

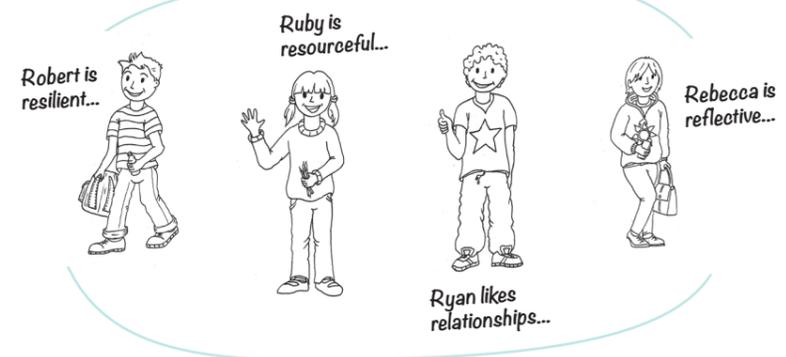
## 2. Learning Selfies



Drawing and talking means children begin to view learning as being life-long, happening in all areas of life, involving aspiration and supported by the important people in their lives.

## 3. The Learning Team

Children meet 4 characters they can relate to different degrees. Their learning characteristics may be familiar or new.



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