

Children's Parliament

Education Reform

Huddle 1

Learner Empowerment

July 2025

 Children's
Parliament

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Introduction

Background

Children's Parliament, Children in Scotland, the Scottish Youth Parliament and Young Scot are working together to support the Scottish Government to deliver a programme of engagement with children and young people to embed their voices within education policy, with an initial focus on the education reform programme.

The aim of this partnership project is to deliver a series of 'huddles', at which children and young people consider specific thematic areas identified by Scottish Government. The collective views and experiences of each huddle will feed into a central report highlighting shared messages, priorities, and recommendations.

This summary report covers Children's Parliament's first huddle on Learner Empowerment. This huddle focused on how children can become more empowered in their learning, specifically understanding how children experience power, participation, and voice within their learning environments. Central to this was a commitment to capturing children's perspectives in ways that could meaningfully inform policy and practice.

To ground the conversation in lived experience, Members of Children's Parliament from Clackmannan Primary School were consulted. These children are part of an established research group with a strong foundation in rights-based participatory practice. Their insights provided a valuable lens into how empowerment is understood and felt by children.

The huddle explored how educational settings can become more inclusive, responsive and empowering, shifting the narrative from children being passive recipients of education to active partners in shaping their learning journeys.

The Approach

Building on our ongoing work within the Dignity in School programme, we ran two in person sessions specifically exploring Learner Empowerment. These sessions were an extended part of an established programme of school and community-based research, with children as co-researchers. The session took place in a familiar, welcome setting - the school library - where children had previously participated in Children's Parliament's work. This foundation allowed conversations to begin at pace, rooted in existing relationships and trust.

Participants in the huddle included:

Children: 10 learners across P4-P7, aged 8-12.

Adults facilitating: 2 staff members.

Session duration: 60 minutes for each of the two sessions.

While the sessions centred on the theme of learner empowerment and its related concepts, we found that the initial framing with specific questions in respect of attendance, attainment, behaviour and curriculum, was too narrow and potentially leading, and chose to take a broader approach.

Instead, our starting point was to explore children's understanding of empowerment and to then discover where they felt empowered and what supported learning empowerment.

Activities were interactive and discussion-based across both sessions. The first session was more conversational, helping to build comfort and rapport, while the second was more active, incorporating school mapping exercises, art activities, and the use of creative prompts such as puppets to encourage deeper engagement and to help children articulate feelings. Wherever possible, the sessions were child-led, allowing participants to steer the direction of discussion.

Ethical practices were embedded throughout, including informed consent and the option for children to choose whether and how to share their views. Observations, note-taking, and recorded conversations formed the basis of qualitative analysis.

Summary of Discussion

Step 1: The Children's Definition of Empowerment

Children described empowerment as motivation and energy, often symbolised through imaginative, child-friendly and relatable metaphors like 'Mario power-ups.'

"Power is like energy"

Member of Children's Parliament

"You feel like you have just got a Mario mushroom, you are heightened up."

Member of Children's Parliament

To the children, feeling powerful means being able to express choices and opinions. Empowerment was understood as the process of becoming stronger and more confident, to be able to better control aspects of their lives.

This dicussion of what empowerment means helped to ensure subsequent conversations about learner empowerment were grounded in children's reality.

"When I feel powerful, I can make choices, tell other people my thoughts"

Member of Children's Parliament

Step 2: Mapping school spaces - where children feel empowered

The children had an opportunity to consider the map of their school and think about where they feel “empowerment” - and why.

During the discussion, the children mapped their school and identified spaces where they felt heard and safe. They emphasised:

Strong relationships with trusted adults were very important, and if the adult was kind they would feel more empowered and more comfortable in that space.

They also shared examples of teachers who weren't doing this.

“Where teachers listen to us.”

Member of Children's Parliament

“She always thinks I am being cheeky, even though I am just asking questions.”

Member of Children's Parliament

“When teachers get aggressive and shout - they make you scared and this doesn't help you learn.”

Member of Children's Parliament

It was clear children felt safe in the school spaces where adults were present. Throughout the conversation, children explained they felt less safe where there were no adults.

“It depends on who is in the space.”

Member of Children’s Parliament

The significance of open, inclusive environments like the library and lunch hall were regularly mentioned as places where children felt safe.

“Lunch hall, as this is where my friends listen to me.”

Member of Children’s Parliament

“Library, as this is where I do Children’s Parliament.”

Member of Children’s Parliament

Friendship was a key aspect of this, places where children know people and felt listened to, were considered safe. Interestingly, the classroom was not mentioned as a place to support friendships.

“Friends often encourage you to learn, if they trust you. If you don’t have friends, it’s hard, you distance yourself from people.”

Member of Children’s Parliament

It is clear through these discussions that children felt safest, and empowered, when they are surrounded by people who care about their wellbeing in the school environment - namely friends, and some teachers.

Children also explained that it is important to make schools bright, beautiful and welcoming places. That helps their desire to be at school and learn, however, this was alongside and less important than the relationships with people in the school.

“Having someone to talk to makes you positive. When you feel better, you want to do other stuff and be productive.”

Member of Children’s Parliament

Step 3: What supports learner empowerment?

The children reflected on the choices they had in school, and initially these reflections appeared surface level.

The conversation then naturally shifted toward deeper themes of empowerment, relationships with teachers and the emotional experiences tied to that.

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“I have the same teacher - it’s a good thing.”

Member of Children’s Parliament

The children expressed a strong desire to have their opinions genuinely listened to. They acknowledged that while the school may offer choices, the overall classroom experience was largely shaped by the teacher, and specifically, the quality of the relationship they had with that teacher.

“We get to vote for our topic.”

Member of Children’s Parliament

“Sometimes when we’re planning our day, we get to choose but usually we don’t.”

Member of Children’s Parliament

“Good teachers treat us all the same.”

Member of Children’s Parliament

“If we like our teacher, we are happy and learn better.”

Member of Children’s Parliament

“It is important to have someone who we trust and who can relate to us, as this helps us do our best in school.”

Member of Children’s Parliament

“I would feel a lot better if adults explained decisions to me. Reasons are important.”

Member of Children’s Parliament

Although the discussions did not specifically discuss attainment and attendance, the concepts came out naturally in the discussion. The children’s conversations centre around how adult behaviour affects learning.

Relationships with adults at school was a central theme that took up much of the discussion time in the first session. The children described qualities of empowering adults and highlighted issues tied to attendance:

- The absence of consistent teachers was demotivating.
- Good relationships with teachers boosted attendance and engagement.
- Children disliked being taught by unfamiliar or disengaged supply staff.

“The teachers who could take a joke and build a relationship with us were people’s favourites.”

Member of Children’s Parliament

“When your normal teacher is off, the new teacher doesn’t know the subject. I might just stay off until my proper teacher is back.”

Member of Children’s Parliament

The children discussed and developed a list of behaviours of adults in school, that included what helps them learn and what puts them off.

What makes a great adult who we want to learn with	What behaviours of adults makes it harder to learn
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• They are a good listener• They are someone who shares their life with you• They are happy you are there• They are funny• They share responsibilities with us	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• They don't talk as much• They ignore you, or do not listen to you• They don't allow you to speak, a conversation is "talking back"• They have favourites and pick on people

“I quite like how classrooms are colourful. It makes them feel like a happier place to be.”

Member of Children's Parliament

Key Themes

The childrens responses helped develop a picture of what impacts their learner empowerment, and in doing so have also given a striking analysis of what makes learning fun and thereafter would support with attendance, attainment and behaviour. From the huddle, the key takeaways to ensure learner empowerment includes:

Prioritising Relationships

Staff absences and inconsistency can disrupt a child's learner empowerment. In building continuity in staffing, and nurturing strong, trusting relationships between learners and educators, children feel more inclined to attend school and engage in their learning.

Amplifying Children's Views

Children should be provided with authentic opportunities to share their views, ideas and opinions. This should be built into the curriculum to ensure ongoing meaningful participation, not just a tokenistic choice. Schools should ensure a visible impact from the children's input to further encourage learner empowerment through engagement with their school decision-making.

Designing Empowering Spaces

Environment and space can affect a child's ability to participate and engage in their learning. By creating emotionally safe and inclusive environments, where children are listened to and taken seriously by trusted adults and their peers, children feel empowered to take part and share their views.

Children's Human Rights Practice

At school, children want to be treated with dignity, kindness and trust. To further learner empowerment, educators should be encouraged to share, listen and invite rights practice in classrooms, fostering a culture of dignity and respect.

Additional Content from Children's Parliament Programmes

Mapping with Dr Amy Hanna

In research carried out in partnership with Dr Amy Hanna, children clearly expressed concerns about the condition and safety of school toilets, a concept that didn't come up strongly in his huddle. In particular, the children discussed the concern about this space, as well as other spaces within the school that felt unsafe. They also drew attention to the distinction between adult and peer spaces within the school environment, noting that each

operated with different structures and expectations.

While peer-only spaces offered more freedom, children often reported feeling less safe in these areas when adults were not present, highlighting the importance of supportive adult presence in creating a secure and empowering school environment, encouraging learner attendance and attainment.

Child Human Rights Defenders: Calls to Action

Children's Parliament's Child Human Rights Defenders have historically explored education topics including how we learn, bullying and dignity in school.

In 2023, they presented key calls to action on 'How we Learn' to First Minister Humza Yousaf and his Cabinet.

They were as follows:

Prioritising Dignity in School

- Children have the right to feel healthy, happy and safe in their school.
- When children are compared to their classmates, embarrassed, shouted at or punished by a teacher, they feel humiliated and upset. This prevents children from wanting to go to school and negatively impacts their learning.
- Children see positive relationships with their teachers as key to making school the best learning environment.

Making learning active and relevant

- Children don't want to just sit and learn at a desk. All children learn differently, and need the opportunity to learn in lots of different ways.
- Children are excited about their future and want to learn key life skills at school. They want:
 - To work in small groups, where they can learn better and support their classmates
 - A fun and creative approach to learning, with time outside
 - Learning achievements to be celebrated in different ways, not just by doing well in tests
 - Extra-curricular activities to be seen as equal value to homework
 - To learn life skills to support their future, e.g finance lessons and cooking.

“We don't want to just sit and listen, kids should be involved, be creative.”

Member of Children's Parliament

Valuing friendships in learning

- Friendships matter and have an impact on how children learn. When there are breakdowns in friendship, this affects learning experiences.
- Friends help children with their learning and make it fun.
- Teachers need to respect and value the impact friendships have on learning, positive and negative.

“Friends often encourage you to learn, if they trust you. If you don’t have friends, it’s hard, you distance yourself from people.”

Member of Children’s Parliament



Image: Members of Children’s Parliament, Clackmannanshire

Links

Dignity in School - dignityinschool.scot/

Research findings with Amy Hanna - childrensparliament.org.uk/news/our-research-uncrc-implementation/

Children having a say in what they learn - childrensparliament.org.uk/our-work/manor-park-parliament/

Child Human Rights Defenders - childrensparliament.org.uk/our-work/executive-team-takeover-2025/

Anti-racism Education - childrensparliament.org.uk/news/anti-racism-education/

