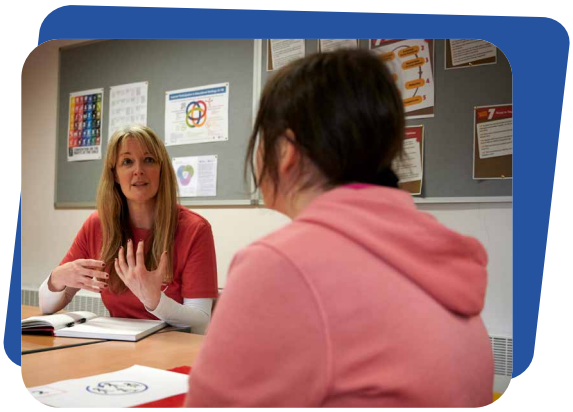
THE SHOOGLE LAB

CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE'S Commissioner Scotland

Why we must really listen to children in education

By Professor Laura Lundy

Introduction from the Commissioner



One of my office's strategic priority issues is education, as laid out in our Strategic Plan 2024-28 which was fully informed by the views and experiences of children and young people across Scotland.

All children have the right to an education that develops their personality, talents, and abilities to their full potential. Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) on a child's right to express their views is well known; it is worth exploring more detail in relation to education.

Children are experts on how they experience the education system. They are its ultimate stakeholders and they have been very clear that they want change in education to be a priority. However, there is currently no consistent or systematic way of gathering their views and feedback and ensuring this drives the education reform plans at a local, regional or national level.

My office is leading a series of sessions where children, young people and education leaders come together. This collaboration – called the Shoogle Lab – aims to look at what might need a 'shake up'; both small changes, and more seismic shifts.

To support this, and to inform wider discussion I have asked global participation expert Professor Laura Lundy to set out the compelling arguments for, and show the benefits of embedding the right to participation in education at all levels.

Nicola Killean
Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland

Why we really must listen to children: there's no better time to involve children in educational decision-making in Scotland

Professor Laura Lundy, November 2025

What if there was a way that you could improve children's attendance, attainment, relationships with teachers and other staff, sense of inclusion, wellbeing, and self-esteem while delivering interactive teaching of an increasingly relevant curriculum, all while reducing bullying and school exclusions and improving mental health and contributing to a more democratic society?

And what if this strategy also happened to be a legal requirement? Complying with the latter would be an obvious choice. Yet, what is often not known or acknowledged is that this legally required (and morally justified) 'approach' is simply to afford children dignity, equality and respect by seeking their views and taking them seriously.

Article 12 of the UNCRC gives children the right to be heard in all matters affecting them, including in all aspects of their education. It applies to the decisions that affect them individually, such as the school they go to, subjects they learn, additional support they might receive, and the decisions that affect them collectively (school, regional and national law and policy). Even though this right is long-established and increasingly well known, it continues to be patchily implemented in practice, including in Scotland. Part of the reason for this may be that some educational duty-bearers are unaware of the extent and implication of the right and/or are not fully convinced by the need to engage with children, especially when there are many other pressing demands on their time.

The Children and Young People's Commissioner has emphasised that children are the most important stakeholders in the education system and that their participation must therefore be systematically embedded throughout. However, we know that this will only happen when all education stakeholders across the system are first convinced of the need to do so. To support this, I have collated the main arguments for complying with Article 12 of the UNCRC in education.

Just before I do that, it is worth stressing that one of the single strongest arguments for complying with Article 12 is that it is not just a right in itself, but a means of realising all other human rights for children. I have described it as a barometer for children's rights: in contexts where there is a high degree of respect for children's views, there is a high degree of compliance with their other rights. Article 12 is therefore a way of implementing the UNCRC more generally. Every one of the benefits that are discussed below can be mapped directly onto children's rights obligations.

Legal
Complying with the law

Moral
Affording dignity, equality and respect

Democracy
Learning through experiencing it

Inclusion
Understanding what children need from their perspective

Wellbeing
Enhancing a sense of belonging

Pedagogy
Providing more interactive learning

Curriculum
Making it relevant and engaging

Pastoral care
Keeping children well

Safeguarding
Protecting children from harm

Attendance
Understanding what is needed to encourage regular attendance

Behaviour
Emphasising positive approaches

Personal development
Developing skills through participation

Attainment
Engaging and doing better academically

Legal

Truly the case for student engagement should not have to go a single step further. It's a requirement under international law, since the adoption of the UNCRC by the UK in 1992. And, of course, in Scotland, it's been an obligation on public bodies for over a year due to the UNCRC (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024 as well as a statutory requirement for education authorities under the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc. Act 2000. It shouldn't need justified any more than the right not to be protected from harm, the right to privacy, or indeed to education itself. Yet, experience tells us that for law to be fully effective, it needs to win hearts and minds. So here goes the rest of the arguments.

Moral

Human rights laws are legal manifestations of human rights values. These core values – dignity, equality and respect for the worth of the individual – provide the moral foundation for listening to children. Article 12 recognises that children often (and rightly) do not get to make the decisions that affect them most but, recognising their ongoing moral entitlement to be treated with dignity, equality and respect, it affords them the opportunity to be involved in these decisions – to have their views given due weight. Many school mission statements will emphasise that they are child-centred and refer to values such as respect and equality. None of that is possible if the children are not involved in the decision-making that affects them.

Democracy

We live in a democracy and, while schools themselves are rarely founded on democratic principles with notable exceptions, Scotland's curriculum aims to develop 'an understanding of the principles of democracy and citizenship through experience of critical and independent thinking'. Children's participation is an obvious means of putting this into practice in a school environment, with those engaged in pupil voice activities reporting more critical reflection, sociopolitical efficacy, and participation in political action than their peers who were not engaged in such activity.

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Inclusion

Children have a right to an inclusive education and children with disabilities are entitled to be heard 'on an equal basis with other children' (Article 7, UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities). It is impossible to provide a child with an inclusive education without understanding what that requires from their perspective. Even though children who are typically seen as 'hard to reach,' (better expressed as 'seldom heard') are often not involved in decision-making, the benefits for them and for inclusion generally are profound.

Wellbeing

The correlation between child participation and children's subjective wellbeing is well established. When adults take the time to listen to children and demonstrate respect for their views, there are numerous benefits in, for example, teacher-pupil relationships which in turn has benefits for the classroom atmosphere. Child participation that fosters recognition such as giving and receiving respect leads to a greater sense of belonging and in turn, wellbeing.

Pedagogy

Educators the world over strive to create learning experiences where children are engaged and interacting. Involving children in shaping the content and mode of delivery is an obvious way to understand how best to do that in ways that they find engaging. Children are more engaged, motivated, and interested when they are consulted and have choice and flexibility regarding their teaching, learning and assessment.

"It is impossible to provide a child with an inclusive education without understanding what that requires from their perspective."

Curriculum

Involving children can help make all aspects of the curriculum more relevant and engaging. This can be especially important for those who may otherwise be disengaged. More generally, it enables the implementation of Article 29 of the UNCRC (the goals of education) by tapping into children's own perspectives about the knowledge and skills they need to develop respect for human rights, tolerance, the natural environment and much more. Moreover, children learn about human rights by seeing them practised in their school environment. Those rights, of course, include their right to be heard both individually and as a group.

Pastoral care

Children have many pastoral care needs, with bullying and mental health issues often at the top of the challenges they face, in and out of school. Schools have staff and policies that seek to prevent harm and to provide support. However, these mean little if a child does not seek help or is not taken seriously when they do. Pastoral care policies and practices will also work best for individual children when they are developed in collaboration with them, harnessing the input and expertise of children as a group.

Safeguarding

Promoting pupil voice is a crucial dimension of any safeguarding strategy. Children cannot be protected from harm, including physical and sexual abuse, if they are not heard. However, children won't speak up if they don't feel safe. Part of feeling safe means that they believe they will be listened to, and taken seriously. Working with children as a group to design polices and processes that keep individual children safe from harm or able to report concerns is key to this.

"Children learn about human rights by seeing them practised in their school environment."

Attendance

Schools need to understand the issues affecting the individual child to support them to come to school and that cannot happen without speaking to them. Schools must also listen to pupils generally to understand the ways in which schools can offer safe and supportive environments. In schools that children regard as responsive to their opinions, pupils have better attendance and reduced rates of chronic absenteeism as well as greater satisfaction and engagement with school generally.

Behaviour

National guidance emphasises positive approaches to behaviour and most schools will consult with pupils when developing school rules. It is common sense that children will be more likely to follow rules that they have had a role in shaping. The more general value for positive discipline lies in improved relationships with teachers and peers and a general school climate which creates a sense of belonging. However, research has also shown, for example, that children's perceptions of how much their voices are heard and valued at school has a predictive association with levels of suspensions and expulsions.

Personal development

The links between child participation and personal development in areas such as self-confidence, self-esteem, self-efficacy and self-advocacy as well as critical thinking and communication skills are all now well established, both generally and in education. This won't be a surprise to anyone in education who has experience of promoting pupil voice but is now also well documented in research.

Attainment

For some educators, this is the holy grail of participation – that pupil voice will lead to more engaged and better performing students. This is hard to divorce from the other educational benefits that are discussed above since children are likely to perform better academically if they attend school and are engaged with their teaching and learning. However, there is a small but growing body of evidence of a direct association between listening to children and improved attainment.

Children's participation in decision-making is, of course, not a panacea for the many challenges that children, and schools face, any more than schools can solve all the issues affecting children's lives more generally. However, there is also little question that it can play a positive role in most and it is essential for addressing some. Faced not just with a legal imperative but also with a growing body of evidence of the many benefits of children's participation, educators would be wise to do as much as possible to involve children in decision-making, individually and collectively, as often as possible.

That said, we know that schools and teachers have so many demands on their time that involving children in decision-making can fall by the wayside. We also know that, even where listening to children is recognised and implemented, not all children are involved and therefore benefit from existing initiatives. Taking this all into account, this seems to be a good time to remind everyone that, not only is this the entitlement of *all* children in international and domestic law, but that there is a myriad of other potential benefits to be gained from doing so which align fully with the aspirations of the government, schools, children, and parents/carers.

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Scotland's opportunity to set a global bar on child participation

Scotland is uniquely placed to become the global leader in listening to children in education. It ***can*** establish itself as the best place in the world for children to be included in educational decision-making. Not only is the UNCRC, and Article 12, enshrined in domestic law, but there is an appetite for and wealth of local expertise to embed it. Currently, approximately 83% of schools are UNICEF RRSA schools and have therefore already committed to implementing a children's rights approach in education, including the right to be heard. That is truly remarkable. And, of course, there are many other examples of good practice right across the education sector.

When I talk about child participation across the world, I often reference the innovative work in Scotland's children's sector, not only the work of the Commissioner's office which has already shaped understanding of child participation locally and globally on issues such as Children Human Rights Defenders, but also initiatives led by children and young people such as the Scottish Youth Parliament's fabulous The Right Way. The Children's Parliament Dignity In School project is another powerful example of pupil voice in the delivery of human rights more broadly.

Moreover, many of the best examples of innovative practice that focus on the most seldom heard children have originated in Scotland. These include, among others, the pioneering work of Talking Mats and Includem alongside the ongoing work with children in care and on early childhood such as the Infant Mental Health Pledge. Scotland's expertise on the participation of the most marginalised and least heard children is world-leading, and there to be harnessed in schools and education as elsewhere.

Child participation is everyone's business and everyone in the education system can play a role here. Policy-makers and statutory education bodies should be engaging with children's views in developing policy and evaluating its implementation. This can be done through both established participation mechanisms alongside bespoke engagements, with a renewed focus on including those who are seldom heard. Schools should be doing the same: school councils have an important role to play here but they are not able to capture all children's views on all the issues that matter. And, of course, teachers and other school staff are crucial as they are the front face of the

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education system. It is often in the classroom where children most need and want to be heard and have their views respected. For this to happen, participation needs to be made a national educational priority and for the necessary support and training to be provided so that all children enjoy opportunities to be heard that are safe, inclusive and meaningful.

In my view, what is currently missing is a broader vision and strategy to (a) promote understanding of safe, meaningful and inclusive child participation; (b) foster collaboration; and (c) embed a common approach. Ireland is an excellent example of how to do this: not only does it have a national strategy and framework on child and youth participation as well as a national centre of excellence but the Department of Education has established a dedicated Student Participation Unit and action plan, developed with input from children, to promote best practice within the Department and across the education sector. While Ireland is currently leading the world at the strategic and policy level, Scotland's distinctive advantage in this journey lies in the widespread commitment to children's rights across its schools, underpinned by law.

Child participation generally, and student voice, in Scotland are akin to the pieces of a very colourful and promising but unfinished jigsaw that are scattered across a table. All the core elements are there, if you go looking, but the overall picture is patchy and incomplete, with the result that some children (often the ones who would most benefit from being heard) fall outwith.

The Commissioner has rightly decided to start to change that with the people at the beating heart of the education system – educators and children. She will do this by bringing them together in an exciting intergenerational conversation on how best to advance children's participation in decision-making in education in ways that are safe, meaningful and inclusive. Called the Shoogle Lab, the aim is to give education a wee shake – to find out what is working well and what can be done to make it better.

I have had the privilege of collaborating with six of the Commissioner's Young Advisors to shape and guide this conversation in the forthcoming Shoogle Lab. It's going to be an exciting conversation, full of ambition, but it needs to be honest. It's time to really listen to each other, to understand how far Scotland has come but also how far it still needs to go. Working together to build that jigsaw, piece by piece, creating a realistic vision of an education system that truly ensures that every child has their right to be heard respected, protected and fulfilled.

"Participation needs to be made a national educational priority and for the necessary support and training to be provided so that all children enjoy opportunities to be heard that are safe, inclusive and meaningful."

The Author

Laura Lundy is Honorary Professor of Education Law and Children's Rights at Queen's University, Belfast, Professor of Law at University College Cork and a barrister at law. She is co-Editor in Chief of the International Journal of Children's Rights. Her expertise is in law and human rights with a particular focus on children's right to participate in decision-making and education rights. Her 2007 paper in the British Educational Research Journal, "'Voice' is not enough" is one of the most highly-cited academic papers on children's rights ever. The model of children's participation it proposes (based on four key concepts - Space, Voice, Audience and Influence) is used extensively in scholarship and practice.The "Lundy Model" has been adopted by numerous national governments, including Ireland in its national strategy and framework on child and youth participation, as well as international organisations including the European Commission, Council of Europe, and UNICEF.

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