

Education, Children and Young People Committee
Attainment inquiry virtual engagement session with care experienced young people (via MS Teams)
Monday 21 February 2022

In attendance:

Two young people supported by Aberlour
Stephen Kerr MSP
Ross Greer MSP

Note of discussion:

The discussion began with one of the young people talking about the support they received in school through the support base. This was a quiet, calming space without disruption or distraction, which helped them to focus on their learning. The other young person agreed with this and thinks the support base is really important for pupils who struggle in the classroom.

The young people spoke about the importance of the need for a flexible approach in schools about when pupils are in class and when they can access the support base. Pupils can ask to go there if they are finding it difficult in class but feel there is a stigma attached to this and pupils going to the base are seen as 'bad kids'. Sometimes pupils are sent there if teachers 'can't handle them' which again adds to the stigma. Teachers do sometimes look out for pupils struggling who might benefit from going to the support base, but not all teachers encourage this and sometimes pupils are not allowed to go when they ask.

They described the support base as a large room, with separate rooms off to the side, with desks, bookcases and windows. Support staff are based there and everyone who goes to the base has to check in with them. The separate rooms can be used by pupils needing 'chill time' or a quiet space, and the main area for pupils needing more support. They talked about the base being a place to see people you wouldn't usually see during the school day, and there was less of a boundary between learning and socialising which helped with building relationships. You could stay in there after you finish your work.

One of the young people also talked about their school having a sensory room which was great for all pupils.

They talked about the importance of Educational Support Workers, for both learning support and emotional support. Having that extra person there to support you if you need it and to help others see you are not a bad kid. One of the young people spoke about not feeling supported enough with their learning during the pandemic, especially in relation to exams. This meant they left early as a result, which they didn't want to do. They enjoyed school and think many care experienced young people do. It is an escape and a familiar, consistent safe space where you can be yourself with no judgement. They felt they discovered themselves through school life rather than home life. But there was too much confusion and uncertainty, so they spoke to one of their

teachers and they helped them decide not to continue with school if it no longer felt right for them. The young person recognised the difference that good teacher support can make, this was a teacher they had a good relationship with since S1.

Both young people talked about the importance of conversations with support staff and that having someone to talk to is sometimes the most useful thing. This could be about problems with learning or if they are not getting on with a teacher. Sometimes just having a conversation helps them to go back to the classroom.

They spoke about coming back to school after lockdown and what that was like. One of the young people thought that online learning helped them get through work more quickly than in school. It supports pupils to work at their own pace and teachers in class can spend more time focusing on those needing extra support. The other young person mentioned that the school still sometimes puts work on Teams, not everything is classroom based now.

One of the young people spoke about the difficulties of online learning during the first lockdown. They went for 5 or 6 months without being able to access it, and had to go out of their way to apply for a laptop. They felt alienated from the rest of their class. The offer of technology and support did get better, but they had to use their Christmas holidays to catch up on everything they had missed. They said they felt lucky because they had some access but they know lots of people had none at all. The other young person talked about having no WiFi access during the first lockdown and needing to use data on their phone. This made joining meetings really difficult.

One of the young people spoke about choosing subjects for S3 during the pandemic, and that they had good support with this and it was explained really well.

The young people were asked about the attainment gap – what support works and what is missing. They agreed that every pupil who needs extra help and support should have an Educational Support Worker. Support should be designed to fit each individual pupil and not a one size fits all. Smaller class sizes also help. School should be a place where everyone can learn equally, with extra support as needed. Teachers should be more supported to know and understand when extra help is needed and what this can look like. They need more support in classrooms.

They spoke more about the importance of Educational Support Workers – sometimes they are the person to encourage a pupil to get up and go to school, or attend evening appointments. It's not just about the support they provide in school. It's helping with the other things that impact on learning. This again helps with the relationship and you are more likely to ask for help with your learning from someone you have a good relationship with. Getting access to this help and support outside of school can help with the stigma faced in school.

The discussion ended with the young people talking about the language used about pupils needing additional support and how this needs to change. The 'bad kid' label doesn't come from children. But the way adults talk about children can affect self-esteem. Anyone, child or adult, can have a bad day and some cope with this better than others. Support should be available to everyone equally to help change stigma.