



Youth Voice Social Action

“We need to be heard”

Report



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Introduction

Youth Voice is a social action project funded by BBC Children in Need and The Hunter Foundation.

The fund was set up to enable children and young people to look at the things that matter to them and raise these issues with decision makers to help improve how and what is currently happening.

The How

Interplay provides support for children and young people with disabilities and additional support needs in Swansea and Neath Port Talbot, aged 4 -25. Supported by Interplay staff, a group of young people came together to look at what is important to them and how they would like to use their voices to change these things for the better. The young people then put together a plan for a Social Action project.

What is Social Action?

A practical action in the service of others to create a positive change. The young people who are members of the Youth Social Action Group would meet with other young disabled people in Swansea and Neath Port Talbot at workshops to talk about the issues that are important to them. To look at what issues/action/activities they wanted to highlight. With the support of interplay staff, they would develop a project and budget plan.

Once completed they were given the opportunity to present their plan to BBC Children in Need and The Hunter Foundation, who granted them funding to deliver their project. From this grant the Youth Voice project was launched.

Who are Youth voice?

We're a group of young people with disabilities and additional support needs from Swansea and Neath Port Talbot who want the voices of young people to be heard.

We want to improve the way that young people view themselves, their opportunities to keep fit, help with healthy eating, and address how they get to express their own individual identities. Through funding by BBC Children in Need and The Hunter Foundation, with Support from Interplay, we have looked at the areas of our daily lives that we feel do not cater for us as individuals.

As a group we looked at the three areas that were highlighted by the majority of young people that we spoke to. In all areas we were looking at what this meant in terms of our daily school lives. In secondary school we spend the majority of our lives in school. We are there to be educated and learn subjects that will help us as adults.

However, there are areas both inside and outside of the classroom that we feel need to improve and change. These changes would mean schools can better cater for all children and young people as individuals in our changing world where a lot more young people have increased anxiety, personal preference and sensory issues, not just those children and young people with disabilities and neurodiversity.

These areas were :-

Healthy Eating



Keeping Fit



Individual Identity



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The Consultation & Seminar Event

During the course of this project Youth Voice visited 10 school and youth groups, spoke to 96 children and young people ranging from the ages of 11 to 19, across Swansea and Neath Port Talbot. During the Youth Voice “We want to be heard” seminar event, we also got to speak to professionals from different sectors who support children and young people. We spoke to all of them about the three main areas and asked them what they thought, what needed to change and asked for ideas how these changes could be achieved.

Due to the success of the consultation and the wide variety of issues raised from young people across Swansea and Neath Port Talbot, we wanted to take this further and offer the opportunity for others to share their thoughts and what issues they were having. This led us to put on an event at Swansea’s Swansea.com stadium to showcase the work we had already achieved and to gather further information. At the event we had the opportunity to speak to other young people that we had not previously spoken to, their families and also professionals from other organisations working with children and young people with disabilities and neurodiversities. During the event we ran individual workshops that addressed the topics in a way that enabled each group to better understand the issues and look more deeply at the solutions. This enabled us to gather new evidence and feedback to add to this final report.

At the end of the event we asked people to let us know what they felt about the workshops

“We enjoyed how interactive they were.”

“It was positive to hear other people’s opinions and having conversations with different people.”

“The workshops ended on a positive note.”

“I enjoyed the activities.”



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“There was a lot of confidence with the young people leading the topics.”

“The introduction was good.”

“Everyone has good ideas.”

“Was good to meet other people who agree changes need to be made.”

“The workshops showed that there are a lot of issues in schools and public especially for the LGBTQIA+ community and having the ability to voice our opinions is needed.”

“Shows that a lot of issues are ignored which needs to change.”



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Areas for Change



Healthy Eating

Young people wanted to address the problem regarding healthy eating at schools. However, this was not just about chips and turkey Twizzlers, it was the whole experience.



Healthy Eating consultation feedback

Youth Voice asked the groups what school dinners were like for them. This is what they said:-

“Mucus.”

“Never seen a veggie burger.”

“Need educating on food hygiene – do they have a food hygiene rating, don’t wear gloves at my school.”

“My school feels that a small salad with every meal makes it a healthy option even when it’s not appropriate, I don’t want a salad with curry.”

“Attitude of dinner ladies towards eating habits and sensory issues is inappropriate.”

“We do have chips on a Friday, but the food at my school is quite good.”

“We only had a choice of chips with gravy or beans on a Friday. We also had canned spaghetti which was cold by the time it was served.”

“The hot food would change from week to week, but the cold food would stay the same.”

“They don’t consider that there are children that are uncomfortable eating in front of other people.”

“Meals change every day, but the only vegetarian option is the bean bake – which for me cause sensory issues.”



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“Stale chips, lumpy gravy and mash, all textures that caused sensory issues which are not considered – plus it is often cold.”

“I feel that what we currently have isn’t good enough for young people.”

“School dinners are not inclusive, do not consider different needs and issues with texture. There is a lack of catering for these needs.”

“We get bullied by other students because of what we eat. Even if it’s a packed lunch, I get bullied for eating different foods from them.”

“I get very insecure of eating in front of other students, I am generally anxious of eating in school.”

“I need food that is Gluten free, but they do not cater for people with food allergies.”

Youth Voice found that the answers differed depending on which school the young people went to and that what was offered in secondary schools at lunch times was not consistent. Some schools offered a variety of options, but at others they had no choice.

As part of the workshops Youth Voice also discussed eating habits.

Lots of the young people talked about being unable to eat in front of other people and hiding this by eating with something covering them or their food.

Others would try and eat away from the dining hall, but this was not allowed, so they either had to break the school rules, or just not eat.

If there is no food provided that they like, i.e. suits their dietary or sensory needs, then they won’t eat until they get home where they have food they enjoy. Some said they don’t eat much at all and have extremely limited dietary options.



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Healthy Eating workshop feedback

This workshop was delivered in two parts. Firstly, we had a discussion enabling people to talk about their experience in regard to healthy eating and meal times at secondary school. The second half of the workshop focused on building a healthy menu and looking at what solutions the group felt would help to change the current situation.

Discussion feedback

We found that a lot of what was being said was the same as we had been told by others during the consultation. People said that the food on offer in secondary schools did not cater for many of the young people, not just those with disabilities and neurodiversity. With the rise in allergies and specialist dietary requirements now needed for a rising number of children, school dinners are no longer suitable.

Within the food workshop a variety of people took part and they were all looking for something different due to dietary needs and allergies.

The young people in the workshop told us at school that:

“The vegetarian options are limited, sometimes there is only one option and this can remain as the only option for a few days.”

“The food is bland, doesn’t go together or just doesn’t taste nice.”

“The menu doesn’t cater for my dietary or sensory needs.”



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“I would like more quiet spaces and spaces for those who don’t feel comfortable eating in front of others.”

“There should be more continuity across county and in schools/colleges as some schools/colleges get better or healthier options than others.”

One person sent us an article after the event about a Head Master in England who had openly apologised to parents about the state of his school’s meal choices. Jason Ashley, head of Redbridge Community School in Southampton sent the letter to parents saying *“Frankly, the food that is served in the canteen is completely unacceptable, so much so, that if my own children’s school served this I would be exceptionally unhappy,”*

<https://www.itv.com/news/meridian/2024-03-13/headteacher-apologises-for-unacceptable-food-served-at-his-school>

Although this report is from England it showed us how important it is for us to take this conversation higher, speak to the people who makes these decisions and help them understand why these changes need to be made. Article 24 of the UNCRC, health and health services states that *“Every child has the right to the best possible health. Governments must provide good quality health care, clean water, nutritious food..... so that children can stay healthy.”* The information that we have gathered shows that Article 24 is not being considered for all children during school meal times.



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Summary

For a number of years there has been a push for people to protect the planet by consuming a plant based diet however schools have not done anything for this movement. From young people's feedback it shows that the vegan / vegetarian option is often bland, limited to one option or an option that doesn't change often all week.

Young people felt that what is available in secondary school did not consider the majority of people attending school anymore. The food served did not consider sensory issues, allergy or dietary requirements or provide for vegetarians and vegans. They all agreed that with the current changes in this generation's dietary requirements, and the environmental push to eat less meat, the guidelines currently set out in the Welsh Governments "Healthy eating in maintained schools: Statutory guidance for local authorities and governing bodies" does not include consideration for a growing number of children and young people. Although the young people feel that changes have been made, such as banning things like nuts in primary schools, this is still not inclusive enough and the change is happening too slowly. They feel that in many schools there is the same rotation of the same foods with not many vegetarian options and, that generally, in Secondary or Comprehensive things have not changed. One of the main issues highlighted was that there is not enough time to eat food, so even if there was choice, not everyone would get time to eat. One young person stated, "On some days I end up being sent home because I am in pain because I haven't eaten.."



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Solutions

At workshops, Youth Voice asked the young people what they would do to make things better. As the experts in regard to the issues at their individual schools, we asked “*what would they do to make these changes happen?*”.

- There should be an application form to show what you would want to eat at school.
- As part of the induction of the next year pupils, schools should consult with them as individuals about what their dietary needs are and find ways to ensure that every child and young person gets a positive lunch time experience.
- Have schools create and disperse some form of survey regularly to the students to get frequent, regular feedback on the lunch service.
- Catering from the event – during the event we had positive feedback from attendees that the catering was inclusive and had a range of options.
- Giving the choice for young people to design a menu would give a more suitable menu for young people.
- Deli Systems- Build your own sandwiches, build your own pasta with your ideal toppings etc.
- If school could find a better alternative and accommodate for dietary, allergies and sensory needs then it would be more positives for pupils to eat at school.



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- Having teachers eat in the canteen can promote conversation between staff and pupils and having them to experience the canteen environment so they can relate/support when they know if the environment is positive/negative.
 - Provide quiet spaces for pupils to eat, like they do at clubs and events where they provide quiet spaces for children and young people with ASD and ADHD.
 - Having moderation would be positive and mean that there is not an all healthy or unhealthy menu.
 - Having a fresher menu so school ensuring food is cooked fresh on the day and not the day before as I have had stale food from the canteen.
 - Ensuring schools and colleges have good hygiene standards as it can put you off if you see bad hygiene when handling food.
 - When providing alternatives for those who are vegan, gluten intolerance etc. label the items so that the student does not have to actively ask for those which could take confidence and time.
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Keeping Fit

One area that all the young people felt need addressing the issues with P.E in school. They feel that is it exclusive and only provided for children and young people that are competitive and not about positive choice and wellbeing.



Keeping Fit Consultation feedback

The young people felt that:

“Males and females don’t get treated the same in the lessons and they want to try and change that.”

“When it comes to PE, it’s not healthy, it was not about wellbeing, but about who is the best. PE teachers are pushy and don’t treat people fairly. If you are the first out, you are ridiculed by others, made to sit on a bench. The blip test is the worst. It’s not about teamwork.”

“Even when PE has competitive and non-competitive options there is still a hierarchy with the non-competitive options because of the way PE is delivered.”

“Teams of good players against pupils that are not good at football – it breeds selfish behaviour.”

“It identifies individuals as who is the best, not how they work as a team player.”

"The PE Curriculum is at fault – they choose by picking numbers, I end up faking illness not to have to be part of it."

“Attitudes have changed from generation to generation, but not in PE.”

“In PE lessons if we don’t want to get involved in the main activity or football, people were left to their own devices.”

“Teams were unfair – no teamwork, more focused on competition, competitive verse people who weren’t into sports.”

“Our school has Just dance as an option instead of outdoors P.E”

“We have the option of being in a group and practicing something that is not football, as long as we stay outside and are behaving during the lesson.”

“We sit on a bench and have nothing to do.”

“We have options of Volleyball, badminton or Just dance.”

“At my school, the female students are being given detention for using the gym and weightlifting equipment, while male students were allowed to use it without any issues.”

Keeping Fit Workshop feedback and solutions

During this workshop we focused on P.E. in schools, what people did and did not like about their current P.E. lessons.

One of the new issues that came up from this workshop was about the expectation of schools for pupils to wear clothing from lost property if they did not have their P.E. kit. Although to many this would seem to be a way to stop that child forgetting their kit in future, for many children, not just those with diagnosed neurodiversity, find this extremely upsetting and it has a very negative effect on them.

“At my school we have to wear school logo P.E. kits and if we do not have them we have to wear somebody else’s dirty kit from the lost box. I cannot do this, it makes me feel ill, so I do not do P.E. just in case I forget my kit.”



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One issue that has been at the front of the conversation from the start was the level of competitiveness and even punishment for not being good enough.

“Teachers need to be more understanding of why someone cannot do a sport and have other options – training may be needed.”

“I feel it is a punishment if I am not doing as well as someone else in my class and this affects my self-esteem and I do not want to take part P.E. lessons. They should also look at and improve the reward system as rewards and punishments effects how people react to competition.”

There was lots of discussion about P.E. not being inclusive, but also about the need for it to focus on wellbeing as not every child is good at sport. Therefore, they are either forced to do something they do not like or be made to sit out and be isolated from their peers.

Summary

What is offered in PE lessons has to change. The Wellbeing of Future of Generations act states that “In order to make things better, everyone needs to work together.” For the young people, the most import word is Wellbeing. Currently PE lessons are still based around post war attitudes, be the best and physical activities such as team sports where only the best do well. Today’s generation want PE lessons that help them maintain a healthy mind as well as a healthy body, lesson that are fun and accessible for all.



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The Solutions

With all groups, Youth Voice asked the young people about their ideas for alternatives to competitive sports during P.E. lessons.

Young people would like to see PE lesson that focus more on fitness and less on competitive sports. Young people understood that competition is healthy, but this can breed bullying when the activities or sports provided mean that if you can't actually do those sports then you are a bad person or a failure. They feel that schools should offer activities like dancing, swimming, rock climbing and other physical sports that are not just based around competition but still have elements of teamwork in them.

- There should be less competitiveness and only focus on healthy competition and having fun during the session overall.
- Choosing teams needs to be inclusive with a friendly balance.
- There should be no punishments for not doing as well as someone else as this can lower self-esteem and make pupils not want to take part in future lessons.
- Schools also need to look at the reward system and improve it to remove the punishments element that has a negative effects on some young people.
- More consistency in mixing genders and the sports should be available for all gender.
- More team building / teamwork activities.



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School should provide calming activities not just high intensity lessons. Lessons that focus more on wellbeing such as, yoga and meditation would be really good for less active or anxious pupils. These activities help to regulate our mind and feelings which would in the long turn help improve a young person's focus in school.

- Make the rules of games / activities more clear and inclusive.
- For young people, taking part is huge and what counts.
- Adapting games and activities within the curriculum.
- “There should be more focus on general wellbeing and put this into p.e., such as yoga / the inclusive chair yoga that we had during the workshop.”
- “If available a quiet environment would make me feel less pressure and judgement during P.E.”
- “More activities aside from sport like moving, dancing and finding your groove.”
- Inductions to equipment, spaces and activities.

Also providing simple playground games in lessons like stuck in the mud and obstacle courses etc. creates more activities that encourage teamwork and team support, while also being fun, carefree and positive.

With the rise in numbers of children and young people with disabilities and neurodiversity accessing mainstream schools, P.E. lesson must become more inclusive. Not just in the games and activities that are played, but also when it comes to kit. School uniform is expensive and therefore having to have kit that is also expensive can make this difficult for low income families. However, in the case of children with sensory issues, much of the kit fabric can trigger some very negative emotional responses leading this group of young people to miss out. P.E. kits should be inclusive and accepting, with recognition of sensory issues when wearing certain fabrics.



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It is every child and young person's right to attend their P.E. lesson. Article 31 (leisure, play and culture) promotes every child's right to relax, play and take part in a wide range of cultural and artistic activities and Article 23 (children with a disability) states that *"A child with a disability has the right to live a full and decent life with dignity and, as far as possible, independence and to play an active part in the community."*

However, we feel that the current delivery of P.E. in schools discriminates and in some case removes any possibility of dignity.



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Individual Identity

Identity in secondary and comprehensive schools is a major problem for many of the young people who identify differently to mainstream social expectations. Schools try to keep clubs like the LGBTQIA+ club secret to prevent bullying, but this is not always manageable in a school environment. This means that those who attend the group are still recognised as a group member and are bullied. The secrecy can also impact the young person as it leads others who are not part of the group to believe it is bad to be LGBTQIA+ as it is hidden.



Individual Identity Consultation feedback

Due to the many issues that children and young people face in regard to gender and sexuality not all of those consulted by the project took part in this workshop.

What young people said to Youth Voice about identity and LGBTQIA+ clubs in school:

- The young people felt that schools do not recognise individual identity, or support them about being open about your individual identity. There is a lot of homophobic bullying. LGBTQIA+ clubs actually single them out and get them bullied. “I have had kids threatening to break my knees.”
- School nurses don’t understand additional needs and have a one size fits all approach that does not consider difference or identity.
- “Uniforms prevent our individual identity.”
- The young people felt that the way LGBTQIA+ clubs are run in school, the fact they are kept as secret is not healthy and just makes people targets.



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- LGBTQIA+ school clubs were not spoken about and kept secret as those attending were viewed as potential targets, so it means young people hiding the groups and their part in the community.
 - In some schools, an individual's identity is not being considered at all.
 - A Trans student in school was faced with the school not recognising their identity and their names not being used or respected after they had changed names - "My school doesn't use their chosen names and dead names them."
 - One young person mentioned the register in school and how there was a "normal" and "gay" register.
 - One young person told Youth Voice that their school "doesn't want to endorse children in need, sports relief and comic relief and other organisations because they believe these organisations are enforcing cardinal sin because they support identity and other things that the Catholic school won't support.
 - In one school a young person told us that teachers would purposefully say the young person was a girl and would not accept their answer when they said they weren't.
 - At another school, a pupil told of not being allowed on the bus because they look older than their age.
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Individual Identity Workshop feedback

During this workshop the group took part in some very frank and open discussion about their identity and how difficult it is or was to be themselves at school.

Issues that came up were very personal and individual, however the overarching feeling was that things need to change. The young people felt that school, specifically teachers, do not understand. In one case a teacher continually told one male person at the group that they obviously wanted to be a girl, as they looked and sounded like a girl. The teacher could



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not understand that the young person's identity was that of gay male and it was not about how they looked and sounded, but about how they felt inside.

Another young person told the group how the lack of support that they had had during school had lead them to making some very negative choices. The person that eventually "supported" them to understand their identity and sexuality was abusive and has left long term issues for the young person. With the right help this would never have happened.

Through many of the issues raised during this work we have gone back and looked at some of the Estyn and Stonewall reports because one person in the workshop mentioned that although Estyn inspections require a school to support a child's chosen identity, it is just a tick box exercise because the guidelines are too broad.

- Estyn states that children and young people must be supported with their chosen identity.
- Young people stated that the guidelines are loose so this can just be a tick box exercise rather than meaningful support. The ESTYN reports should be clearer on what the requirements are.

However, figures from a Stonewall report show that:

- 62% of LGBT pupils in Wales say that there is not an adult at school they can talk to about being LGBT.
- 62% of trans pupils indicate that staff at their school are not familiar with the term 'trans' and what it means.
- 58% of LGBT pupils are not taught anything about LGBT issues during their time at school.
- Nearly all LGBT young people (95%) say the Internet has helped them understand more about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

https://www.stonewall.org.uk/system/files/the_school_report_2017.pdf



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Although this report is from 2017, the young people that we spoke to did not think there has been much, if any, improvement in this area at the secondary schools they attended.

A long discussion was had regarding the roles of teachers and what support they should provide, with many people asking the same question.

“Teacher training- questioned what level of LGBTQIA+ training is included in PGCE.”

“What are the schools doing to educate staff and pupils?”

One question raised was whether the lack of support and understanding in school was due to legal barriers.

“Young people cannot legally change their name until 16 and when they collect exam results it only has their legal name showing and not their chosen one.”

There was also a concern over faith schools, many who believe that being gay or wanting to change identity is against their religious practices. However, as one person said, the choice to go to a faith school is rarely chosen by the child. Therefore, it is unfair when they have to hide their identity to conform to other people’s beliefs. Also, young people may not be supported at home and if they are then not supported at school they can become isolated, leading to, in some cases, some extreme outcomes.

“The bible doesn’t say you cannot be gay.”



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It was felt that some of the clubs that exist in schools are just there to tick a box and offer a surface level support. In fact, in some of the clubs that young people have experienced, they did not even talk about LGBTQIA+, offer any support or discuss experiences.

“Identity clubs should be about rights, about the community and to support each other. The clubs should be a place that is inclusive and open to those wanting equality for all with support for LGBTQIA+ communities as part of the bigger community. “



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Summary

Generally young people understood the need for LGBTIA+ clubs to be closed clubs and the attendees being secret as it was not always easy for them to talk openly about the gender and sexuality. Also, that this is not something that needs to be discussed openly, it is a private and individual thing. However, schools need to be more supportive, show that they acknowledge and support a young person's right to be referred to by their chosen name and pronoun. If teachers in schools showed support, instead of behaving like it is a big secret, other pupils would be less inclined to see it as a bad thing and that it is okay to bully someone about.

The Solutions

Although young people would like LGBTQIA+ clubs to be open and not have to go ahead behind closed doors, they do understand that this would not work for those who are still unsure of who they are or who have family that would not understand. Therefore, they have looked at solutions that are open to every child or young person and do not single out a specific group.

Schools to more openly support individuality by:

- Schools could have a register that would not only include the students name, date of birth etc, but also the students chosen name. This could be a nickname or shortened name that they prefer and their preferred pronouns. Youth Voice have been in contact with Neath College as they have this system in place to see how it works.



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- Ensuring that school staff are trained to deal with some of the very complex issue that can arise when a young person first starts to question their identity and of how to support that young people when they make their choice.
- Giving all teachers, nurses and support staff (such as dinner staff) further training. This will give them the tools to help approach and address a child's or young person's chosen gender. They would also be able to better support those who deal with gender and sexuality bullying.
- If they educated staff on how to support and defend LGBTQIA+ pupils from bullying, then this would lead to a safer school environment.
- Gender bullying should be challenged by teacher. If not other pupils may think it is acceptable to do so without being punished.

Although a young person cannot change their name or gender identity until at least 16, the UNCRC is very clear on the right every child has to their own individual identity. Article 2 (non-discrimination) states that *"The Convention applies to every child without discrimination, whatever their ethnicity, sex, religion, language, abilities or any other status, whatever they think or say, whatever their family background."* Other Articles, such as Article 12 – respect for the views of the child and Article 13 – Freedom of expression show, to us anyway, that without doubt, every child has the right to support and respect whatever their chosen identity. For a young person who has to apply for jobs with their dead name on their certificate, means them having to re-live this, every time.

- It should be an option for both legal and chosen names to appear on exam certificates.
- The use of pronouns and nicknames by staff (including supply staff) would be a positive move.
- More pastoral support is needed in schools, providing somewhere children can openly talk about their identity and receive the correct support.
- There should be trusted adults in school who can be available to support pupils.
- Faith/religious schools should be made to consider the rights of the child and not just the religion of the family.



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Call to arms

Delivering education for all young people in our country is no small task and if a thousand people were asked, you would probably get a thousand differing views as to what should be taught. The rights based approach adopted by the Welsh Government in 2004 and put into law in 2011, should however, ensure that *how* we deliver education in Wales, the experience that children and young people have of their years in school and college, will broadly be a positive one.

The work undertaken by the Youth Voice members in relating their own experiences, as well those of the children and young people they consulted with, demonstrates that in a lot of ways, they are being let down, whether by institutions and their policies or individuals and their actions and that there is work to be done to improve their experience in school or college.

Would these changes need time, effort or money to enact them? Absolutely yes, but that should provide no barrier or reason to stop us, as a society, from trying to improve the lives of an increasing number of young people who find themselves enduring their education rather than participating in it fully.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is unequivocal in that children and young people are rights holders; they do not have to “earn” the rights they have nor justify their need to exercise them. It is also unequivocal in stating that these rights are universal and apply to ALL children and young people. If we tolerate the erosion of rights from one group in our society, then we erode them for all.

So can we, in all good conscience, not answer a call to arms to address these issues raised?



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We think that raising awareness of the issues is an important start to changing things around for the better, so please share this report with anyone you think may be able to have influence on the situation – school governors, teachers, local councillors or MPs and so on. The more people who start talking and thinking about these issues, the quicker they will stop being issues and children and young people can start fully enjoying their education.

Thank you

Firstly, we would like to thank all of the children, young people, family members and professionals that have shared with us their thoughts on, what for some, were very difficult things to talk about; and for their ideas of how things could be changed to make a difference.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank BBC Children in Need and The Hunter Foundation for their funding and support. The opportunity has made a difference to how we see ourselves and has given us a voice.

Lastly, but by no means least, thank you to everyone that has given their time and expertise to enable this project to go ahead.



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