

Guidance in Secondary Schools: The Pupil Perspective

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All local authority schools in Scotland have guidance teachers whose role is to provide personal, curricular and vocational guidance to every pupil. Against a background of major changes in schools and in pupils' post-school opportunities, a recent SOEID funded project, *Guidance in Secondary Schools*, explored pupils' guidance needs and the effectiveness of provision. This *Briefing* summarises one aspect of the research - pupils' opinion and experience of the guidance system.

- **Pupils** strongly supported the guidance system and the idea of having a teacher whose explicit role was to be available for them as individuals rather than as a member of a class or year group. But they were more critical of how guidance operates in practice - pupils often found guidance teachers inaccessible because of limited time and large caseloads.
- **Pupils** believed that the guidance system should support *all* pupils but the majority felt that guidance teachers concentrated on those in trouble or with obvious problems and that "ordinary" pupils missed out. Pupils' experience of guidance varied and the system might not be maintaining minimum standards of provision.
- **Guidance** teachers and pupils frequently had a different perception of the effectiveness of provision. In particular, teachers tended to think they had a better relationship with pupils than the pupils did. There were also differences of perception about confidentiality and privacy.
- **Pupils** generally thought that the topics usually included in Personal and Social Education programmes were the right ones, but did not think they were taught in a relevant and interesting way.
- **Schools** gave pupils a lot of information and advice in second year to help them choose their Standard Grades. In contrast, pupils felt they had had much less help in fourth and fifth year and wanted more curricular guidance at this stage.

Background

All local authority secondary schools have a structure of promoted guidance posts. Every pupil is allocated to a guidance teacher who is responsible for the personal, curricular and vocational guidance of a caseload of pupils. Their everyday work includes: dealing with a range of individual casework; monitoring attendance; review of progress; advising on subject choice; and involvement in the design and/or teaching of Personal and Social Education provision. Most guidance teachers do not work full-time in guidance but retain a subject teaching role. There is a recommended minimum time allocation for guidance but in practice this varies between, and sometimes within, schools.

Pupils' opinion of the guidance system

While pupils were critical of some guidance teachers, all believed in the value of having a guidance system:

“Even if you don't have a problem and you don't go to them in the end, at least you know there's somebody there if you need them. The feeling re-assures you.”

Pupils had a clear view of the sort of guidance teacher they wanted: someone who listened, was understanding and who liked and respected children. A good guidance teacher, in their view, should be fair and listen to the pupils' side of an issue and not label pupils as good or bad. They also wanted a person they could trust to preserve confidentiality.

Pupils' opinion and experience of guidance was heavily dependent on the attitude and approach of their own guidance teacher. They frequently commented on the variation among guidance teachers in their school:

“Mr A is approachable, he listens, gives you information, he helps you ... so does Mr B ... it's not all guidance teachers you would say something to, Mr C shouts at you for nothing.”

Guidance teachers are also subject teachers and pupils often complained of difficulty in finding their guidance teacher when they wanted or needed to. But in complaining about access, they usually also remarked on their guidance teachers' workload and time problems:

“It's difficult to grab her and have a chat, she's too busy. Like yesterday, I was trying to find her and I just couldn't find her at all ... but she's got classes as well.”

Some pupils suggested that their school should appoint more guidance teachers but the more common suggestion was for full-time guidance staff.

Teacher and pupil perceptions

There was a difference in perception between guidance staff and pupils about the effectiveness of provision. The majority of guidance teachers involved in the research believed that their heavy caseload and limited guidance time allocation impaired their effectiveness but there was still a gap in their perceptions and that of pupils'. In particular, guidance teachers were more positive about the quality of their relationship with their pupils and the extent to which they knew them than were pupils. On the whole, pupils did not think their guidance teacher knew them well enough:

“They know you to say ‘hello, how're you're doing?’ but it's got to be a bit more ...”

Pupils thought that the most basic requirement of the job of a guidance teacher was that they know their pupils first-hand. They felt this was particularly important because guidance teachers advise them on subject choice and should know them better to write reports about them. In the schools where pupils did not have regular contact with their guidance teacher, they made the point that guidance teacher's knowledge of them was secondhand, gained from other teachers' reports, and lacked individual, personal insight:

“He just scans through the grades and writes a comment like ‘a credit to the school’”

Use of guidance

Whether pupils were prepared to consult their guidance teacher depended on how approachable and accessible they perceived their guidance teacher to be, on the nature of the problem and the age of the pupils. Around a half of pupils said they would be prepared to approach their guidance teacher with concerns or problems about school work, bullying, problems with other teachers and subject choice. Opinion was more divided about whether they would go to their guidance teacher about family and personal problems:

“I'm a bit shy and he sees you at school and you wouldn't want to pass him in the corridor knowing all the private things you had told him.”

Fourth and especially fifth year pupils were least likely to say that they would consult their guidance teacher on a personal matter. Pupils' trust in their guidance teacher to respect confidentiality had a major bearing on whether or not they would approach him or her, especially about personal matters. They were sceptical that confidentiality would be maintained although guidance teachers thought that pupils were satisfied about this. Lack of privacy and the tendency of

guidance teachers to expect them to discuss issues in public was a common complaint:

“We’ve got these referrals ... and she [guidance teacher] just comes out with it in class if you’ve got a bad referral slip, she’ll just tell you about it in class and discuss it in front of the whole class.”

A problem-driven system

The majority of pupils felt that, in practice, the role of guidance centred on pupils “in trouble” or those with obvious problems. Apart from this, course choice was the only other reason for contact:

“The only time really you see your guidance teacher is when you’re picking your course or if there’s actually something going wrong in the school ... if you’re in trouble.”

Many thought that if they were “good”, or, more particularly, “ordinary”, contact with guidance throughout their school career might well be minimal and that their need for guidance tended to be overlooked.

But the large majority believed it was important that guidance teachers should be there for *all* pupils. Academic pupils shared this view and clearly felt that because they were apparently successful, they were wrongly assumed not to need or want attention from their guidance teacher:

“All they do is deal with the problem kids, they just leave us to get on with our lives ... they really should be helping us more...”

Pupils suggested that regular interviews and small group sessions would be a good way to provide the basic level of contact with their guidance teacher which would encourage them to ask for help when they needed it.

Personal and Social Education

Guidance staff usually have some responsibility for Personal and Social Education (PSE) provision and the area was therefore included in the research. Pupils accepted the need for PSE but their opinion of provision ranged from the very positive to the very negative, with the majority view somewhere in the middle. Although there was much similarity in the topics and issues identified by pupils and the actual content of PSE programmes, pupils were not satisfied that the topics were dealt with in a way that reflected their own circumstances and needs. They complained of limited or superficial and impersonal coverage of education, drugs, and AIDS/HIV, and they wanted more input on study skills and careers-related issues.

A common criticism of sex education, for example, was that the approach taken was too scientific and did not allow them to discuss their feelings, to raise their questions and concerns and to explore how they might respond to real situations and experiences:

“It’s all so scientific, it doesn’t talk about how you feel when you’re going through puberty”

Pupils were divided about the impact on their behaviour of PSE provision on alcohol, drugs and smoking. Some pointed out that the effect of drug and alcohol education depended on its relevance to the pupils concerned:

“... it [drug education] was all about how to match the drugs and their real names .. but why their real names? How can they no’ get us to write the names that we know and then we could understand them ... it was just giving you the names, it wasn’t telling you what they can do to you...”

Pupils valued visits from external agencies such as Alcoholics Anonymous which drew on personal experience of the issues.

The way in which PSE was taught attracted considerable criticism. Pupils complained of lack of discussion, an over-reliance on worksheets and videos; large classes; and inappropriate classroom layout:

“... they just show you a video, plunk it in, take it out, jabber away about it. They don’t say ‘what do you think about it?’ That is when they should have smaller groups.”

Subject choice

Pupils received a lot of information and advice about subject choice in their second year as part of their PSE programme as well as having an interview with a guidance teacher. They had suggestions for improvement but were more critical of help with subject choice in fourth and fifth year. S4 and S5 pupils felt that they were given less information and support in choosing their subjects for fifth year compared with S2:

“It would be good if they had a talk on each subject, we got that in second year but they never even done that for Highers.”

S4 and S5 pupils wanted more information prior to their course choice interview at school and suggested at least two interviews. Fifth year pupils of all academic levels also felt that their course choice interview had been too narrowly focused and had not included enough discussion of their career ideas.

Implications for policy and practice

- The gap in teachers' and pupils' perceptions about the effectiveness of provision suggests that schools need to give more attention to identifying pupils' guidance needs and to seek their views on its effectiveness.
- The variation in pupils' experience of guidance and their perception that guidance teachers concentrate on a minority of pupils implies that schools need to consider how they can ensure consistent quality of provision for all pupils. This requires improvements in the management of guidance including the evaluation of provision and more emphasis on accountability and team approaches among guidance staff. Clear priorities for guidance need to be set and guidance teachers must be assured of an appropriate time allocation.
- Despite developments in Personal and Social Education provision, there are still weaknesses in its design and delivery and there is a need for more training and support for staff teaching PSE.
- Guidance has a central role to play in the Higher Still reforms by helping pupils make the best choices from the broader range of study options that will be available. The research suggests that curricular and vocational guidance in S4 and S5 needs to be improved and careers education programmes in the upper school developed further.

Further information

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Publications

Howieson, C and Semple, S (1996) *Guidance in Secondary Schools*, CES (price £15) (**The full research report**).

Howieson, C and Semple, S (1996) "Guidance in Secondary Schools", *Interchange No. 41*, Research

and Intelligence Unit, SOEID (**An Interchange summary of the project** available, free of charge, from The SOEID Dissemination Officer, SCRE, 15 St John Street, Edinburgh EH8 8JR).

About this study

In 1993 the SOEID commissioned CES to carry out a two year study of guidance in secondary schools. Six schools, contrasting in size, school roll and type of location participated in the research. The schools were identified as having better than average guidance practice. The project involved:

- an extensive programme of interviews with guidance teachers, other school staff and careers officers (119 interviews);
- group discussions with S2, S4 and S5 pupils (233 pupils);
- a postal questionnaire to 720 parents of S3 and S5 pupils in the project schools and interviews with 29 respondents;
- interviews with 12 key informants.

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