

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

Flexischooling in Scotland: What We Did and Why Dumfries and Galloway Parenting Science Gang Citizen Scientists, UK

Abstract

A study on flexischooling in Scotland designed and carried out by a user-led citizen science group using a variety of methods to ascertain flexischooling numbers and local policies in Scotland, parents views, and teachers views. Findings include: an estimation of flexischooling numbers in Scotland; the over-representation of Additional Support for Learning pupils in flexischooling numbers; the motivating factors for why parents choose to flexischool their children; the surprisingly positive experiences of teachers with experience of teaching flexischooling pupils.

What We Did and Why

In 2017 a group of parents came together on a Facebook group entitled “Dumfries and Galloway Parenting Science Gang.” We were asked, “What do you wish scientists studied about parenting?”; “What would you like to study?” None of us considered ourselves “scientists” or “experts.”

After much discussion we coalesced around an interest in flexischooling which is defined by the Scottish government as where a child attends school part-time and is home educated for the remainder of the week. Funded by the Wellcome Trust,

Parenting Science Gang enables parent groups (this is 1 of 8 PSG groups) to come up with scientific questions, then design, carry out and complete the research themselves. It is user-led citizen science.

The core team at Parenting Science Gang found us experts to consult with. This proved difficult because there was, at that time, no published research into flexischooling, no-one even knew how many children were flexischooling in Scotland. One educational researcher estimated there may be around 500 children in the UK as a whole. This was despite the fact that, between the four of us mums, we could think of around 20 flexischooling children in Dumfries and Galloway alone. We wanted to know: How many children really are flexischooling in Scotland? Why do families choose to flexischool and what is the effect on the child? Our anecdotal evidence suggested that often teachers and schools seemed wary of flexischooling. We were interested to know what teachers with experience of teaching flexischooled children think of it?

We designed our study to comprise of three elements:

1. Freedom of Information Requests to all 32 Local Authorities in Scotland to ascertain the numbers of flexischoolers in Scotland and what

their policies and procedures relating to this were.

2. Parent Survey to ascertain families' reasons for and experience of flexischooling.
3. Interviewing teachers with experience of teaching flexischooling children to explore their views.

Ethical oversight and approval was from the University of York Environment Department Ethics Committee, via Dr Sarah West, who is one of Parenting Science Gang's evaluators. All survey respondents and interviewees consented to their comments being quoted (anonymously) in this report.

The Scottish Picture: Freedom of Information Requests

In order to establish some baseline data on flexischooling nationally, we submitted FOI requests to the 32 Local Authorities.

Although flexischooling is briefly provided for in Scottish law, there are no accompanying national regulations, nor guidance. Furthermore, there is no central requirement to report flexischooling statistics. We therefore anticipated significant regional variation in all aspects of flexischooling management.

Method

Freedom of Information requests contained questions on the following areas: How the local authority manages flexischooling; (policies, processes, personnel and information); Flexischooling numbers in the Local Authority area.

Findings

30 Local Authorities responded, although one response was unclear, leaving 29. Only

17 responses were complete, with the remaining 12 being partially answered.

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|---|--|
| Total Local Authority Areas | 32 |
| Local Authority Areas reporting flexischooling unavailable | 2 (Aberdeenshire, North Ayrshire) |
| Local Authority Areas reporting 0 flexischooling pupils | 9 |
| Local Authority Areas that declared at least 1 flexischooling pupil* | 11 |
| Local Authority Areas that provided no or limited data due to s.38 exemption, used s.17 exemption or did not respond to request | 10 |
| Total flexischooling pupils reported across Scotland | 345 (0.05% of a total school roll of 682,305) |

*Note that only accurate pupil numbers are included here. Where approximate figures have been provided (some LAs responded with e.g. <5 pupils), they are not included.

The top five councils for flexischooling numbers

| Council | No. flexi pupils | %age of national total | Total pupil roll | %age of flexi pupil in LA |
|-----------------------|------------------|------------------------|------------------|---------------------------|
| Fife | 156 | 45% | 49,660 | 0.31% |
| Dumfries and Galloway | 62 | 18% | 18,752 | 0.33% |
| Edinburgh | 45 | 13% | 50,607 | 0.09% |
| Argyll & Bute | 38 | 11% | 10,303 | 0.37% |
| Highland | 12 | 3% | 30,734 | 0.04% |

There are difficulties with definition

Only 17 Local Authorities recognise the term “flexischooling.” Four Local Authorities did not practise part-time school attendance. There were eight different terms used by the remaining Local Authorities.

Establishing meaningful data was challenging due to partial answers

Of those 30 of 32 who did respond (excluding the one unclear response) three Local Authorities said they do not permit flexischooling and a further eight said they had no flexischooling pupils. Seven Local Authorities claimed either full or partial exemption on data. Two Local Authorities confirmed they have flexischooling pupils but do not collect data.

There is significant variance in managing flexischooling

Three Local Authorities said they did not permit flexischooling. 16 Local Authorities manage flexischooling as part of their Home Education system, (and only four directly reference flexischooling in guidance or information). Three Local Authorities manage it at Director/Head of Education Level. Four Local Authorities manage it within their Additional Support for Learning Team. Four Local Authorities manage it at Officer Level in other educational specialisms. Six Local Authorities manage it within Quality Improvement. Six Local Authorities defer the process to Head Teachers.

Flexischooling numbers are very small

In 2017 the pupil population of Scotland was 682,305. The data submitted to us records in the region of 352 flexischooling children nationally within Scotland, with

one Local Authority, Fife, accounting for 44% of those numbers. This equates to 0.05% of all Scottish school aged pupils.

Flexischooling requests are an upward trend

Of the 11 Local Authorities who recorded requests during the past three academic sessions (year), seven showed an upward trend. The most notable increases occurred where Local Authorities are actively using flexible arrangements to meet pupils’ needs such as in Fife and Argyll.

Flexischooling at secondary school level is policy-driven

10 Local Authorities provided a phase breakdown of flexischooling pupils. Eight Local Authorities reported flexischooling occurring completely or predominantly within primary level. Only two Local Authorities recorded significant numbers of secondary pupils: Fife (61) and Argyll (38). Both Local Authorities report actively using flexible learning models.

Additional support for learning needs are a significant factor

Exempting the figures for Local Authorities who did not report ASL data, nationally 35% of flexischooling pupils were recorded as having ASL needs. Pupils with ASL Needs make up approximately 24% of the total school population, therefore the figure of 35% of the flexischooling population is significant. Several local authorities noted alternative educational arrangements that were “not flexischooling” that they did not include in their figures. This raises the possibility that some councils have used a second classification for part-time attendance of

pupils with Additional Support Needs, not included in this data.

A special case: Fife Council

One response stood out from the other submissions and merits individual consideration. Fife actively uses Flexible Educational Arrangements across the local authority. They submitted significant policy, procedure and support documents; they recorded 156 flexischooling pupils: 44% of the total recorded; they have significant uptake in both phases; 61 Primary pupils and 94 Secondary; they recorded a 330% increase in requests between academic year 2015-16 (43) to 2016-17 (142). All flexischooling requests for the past three academic sessions have been accepted. It would be of interest to look at this local authority in more detail.

Analysis

The primary conclusion is that there remains a lack of clarity about flexischooling. There are significant regional variations in how government guidance is interpreted and implemented.

What guidance does exist makes clear that “The feasibility of each request [to flexischool] should be considered on its own merit” (see:

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/home-education-guidance/pages/3/>)

This guidance has statutory status. “It is not the law that local authorities must consider each flexi schooling request, but it is the law that they should have regard to the guidance which tells them that they should do this.” It would appear that the two local authorities who told us they do not allow flexischooling—Aberdeenshire and North Ayrshire—are unlawfully “fettering their discretion” in this matter.

These councils may be open to legal challenge from any parent in the region who has had a request for flexischooling turned down.

The data likely does not accurately reflect flexischooling numbers. The overall quality of responses was poor and it seems unlikely well populated areas like Glasgow have no part-time attendees. The lack of statutory collection of this data is likely to be a contributing factor.

This data would suggest that although numbers of flexischooling pupils are small, they are on the increase, particularly within Local Authority areas that support flexible education.

The data would also seem to support the theory that Additional Support for Learning (ASL) needs are a significant factor in requests for flexible learning arrangements.

Parent’s Views

We received 23 completed surveys, relating to 30 children ranging in ages between five (the starting age for school in Scotland) to 13 years. Six children represented in the surveys were identified as having Additional Support for Learning (ASL) needs. These were the six oldest children covered in the parent survey and also those starting flexischooling later in their school career.

The motivations for choosing flexischooling fell into two categories: those responding to the needs of their child, either due to ASL needs (six children) or due to a perception of the school week being too long for their young children: “He couldn’t cope with full time school so flexi schooling enabled him to have an education he could cope with.”; and those led by their own values and wishing their

children to have a broader experience of education than mainstream schooling could offer alone: “Knowing that there are different possibilities than just ‘the one way.’”

Children’s time educated outside of school ranged from a day a fortnight to two days a week, with most out of school for a day a week. The most common activities were free play, and alternative teaching with six specifically mentioning Forest School. Others used the time for child led learning or educational outings. A significant proportion focussed on meeting ASL needs or therapy. None said they followed the school curriculum.

Benefits and drawbacks

Overwhelmingly the parents completing our survey stated that flexischooling benefitted their child. Specifically, they recognised the benefit to family life of spending more quality time together and parents having a greater input into their child’s education. It allowed for ASL needs to be met or for the stress of mainstream schooling to be alleviated: “Less tired, stopped crying about going to school, happier and less anxious.”

Flexischooling changed the way children related to the world: enabling broader social experiences, improving relationships at home, and opening their minds to alternatives from the mainstream: “It made her realise school isn’t a completely compulsory activity, and there are other options.”

Parents also noticed an improvement in their children’s relationship to school and learning related both to the reduction in stress, and to allowing their children’s interests to lead elements of their

education: a sense that their child chose learning, rather than it being compulsory.

However, drawbacks were also recognised. Some expressed concern their child may miss some learning or activities at school, although others pointed to the flexible nature of the arrangement enabling children to attend school for particular planned events. A couple of parents were also concerned that their children missed out socially by being regularly absent from the playground: “I wonder if that contributed to their being excluded or picked on in primary school.”

Others perceived that the school or teacher found the arrangement difficult to accommodate. In fact many stated that bravery was required when approaching the school to arrange flexischooling: “Schools are so rigid, the teachers really struggled to work around even one day flexischooling.”

Thematic Analysis

The first of the two main overarching themes identified in our Parent Survey’s was in relation to parents’ motivations for flexischooling being either needs led or values led. Many parents felt flexischooling enabled them to respond to their child’s needs and provide alternative education or experiences, with a particular focus on spending time outdoors, or finding additional support or space for their child to cope better with their ASL need. There was also strong evidence of parents being led by their values and using flexischooling as a way to encourage their child to relate differently to the world including their peers, their family, their school and, more broadly the institutions or systems of authority.

The second theme to emerge from our Parent Survey was in relation to parents’

perception that the consequence of flexischooling (whether intended or unintended) was to enable more balance. This related to the balance of time spent between family life and school life. It also related to the balance of forms and areas of education. A few parents also stated the desire for homeschooling and the desire or necessity of mainstream schooling. These two themes were closely interlinked as those parents led by either needs or values described, in different ways, the balance flexischooling enabled.

It was clear that parents completing our survey did not want to reject mainstream schooling altogether. They saw benefits of it which they wanted their child to experience. However, whether motivated by responding to their child's needs, or due to their own held values, flexischooling offered a balance that neither exclusively homeschooling nor mainstream schooling could offer on their own.

Teachers' Experiences

We interviewed four teachers with experience of flexischooling. All four teachers taught in rural primary schools in Dumfries and Galloway.

For practical reasons, we conducted two interviews by telephone and two in person. Recordings were then transcribed, and analysed using a thematic analysis approach. We identified four main themes.

Flexischooling doesn't negatively impact anyone else

Anecdotally (for example in posts in the *Flexischooling UK* Facebook group), many parents would like to flexischool, but have their requests turned down by the school. We were interested to know, do teachers who experience flexischooling encounter

any negative effects, which might support this decision to reject it by schools? We foresaw three possible avenues of negative effect—an effect on the child themselves, or an effect on the teacher (perhaps increased workload), or an effect on the rest of the class (perhaps from disruption).

When explicitly asked this question, the teachers all said there were no negative effects on them as a teacher:

I wouldn't say there'd be a negative impact on that at all....I wouldn't suggest there was any extra workload. I haven't found any negative points in my respect that make it trickier or make it more difficult for me to do my job. I wouldn't suggest there would be any more paperwork.

Or on the rest of the class:

I don't think it has an impact on the rest of the class. Kids are very in your face, it's like here and if you are not there to talk to [them], they will just talk to somebody else."

Missing out?

When asked about the effects on the flexischooled child, the first thing teachers talked about was children potentially missing out in various ways. Missing out academically, i.e., missing parts of the curriculum, would seem to be an obvious worry, and most of our teachers discussed it as such, but then concluded that with the children they'd taught it wasn't, in practice, an issue: "I've not seen a difference in attainment in flexi-school children across our cluster":

Flexischooling in Scotland: What We Did and Why

It tends to be the end of the week that flexi-schoolers have their days at home which, to be honest, works better I would say. We tend to do the more teacher input, the more teacher-led sort of experiences in lessons in the beginning of the week.

One teacher did feel that with one student it had been an issue:

In my experience, and I'm thinking of a particular child, there was [an issue]. When I got them sort of in the middle school, so like P3/4, it became apparent that there were things there [about phonics] that they hadn't picked up on.

Teachers spent more time talking about the possibility of students missing out socially. One teacher seemed to feel this was a significant problem and talked about it a lot:

In my experience I've found that a flexi-school child can find it that bit more difficult to sort of fit back in to the social groupings, so week on week.

One teacher felt that actually it wasn't really an issue with young primary aged children:

In P2 I find that they have a group of friends and they move about still quite with the friendships...certainly, with the age range I teach, I've not noticed that that causes a problem with friendships or socially.

Two teachers thought that although flexischooling presented social challenges for the child, it brought potential benefits, but that it would depend on the child: "Now, that said, it's what comes of that. If the child gets past that or overcomes that then it is resilience. If they don't, then it can feel excluding" and "They are very good at listening and tuning in to what's gone on and filling in gaps. I would say they are better at that because they have to."

Benefits to flexischooling?

Some teachers felt that the extra time with their parents, more one-to-one attention, and the fact that parents were taking a conscious interest in their child's education had positive effects for the child. But this depended on the quality of the parent/child relationship and how the parents behaved:

You can tell the kids who've had time, somebody spending time sitting with them reading and following up at home, they gallop away, they are miles ahead, miles ahead, and it makes a huge difference.

And: "I think the children that I've taught that do have some flexi-schooling, they're quite... personalities and quite confident children, I think."

They also felt different learning environments and experiences like forest school were positive. Teachers mostly articulated reasons for wanting to flexischool which aligned with what the parents said.

Barriers to flexischooling

Given that many flexischooling requests are turned down, but our teacher sample who have experienced it seem broadly supportive, what is the reason for refusals?

Several possible barriers emerged from our analyses.

First, expectations of the child missing out—even though mostly our teachers concluded this wasn't an issue in practice, it was usually the first thing any of them talked about, and they discussed it quite extensively. Teachers who haven't experienced flexischooling, and haven't had a chance to see it work out OK, may see that as a significant risk.

Second, the idea that "School is what learning looks like"—teachers focused more on what children might be missing at school, than what they might be gaining with their home school days.

Third, teacher defensiveness:

I think there's an element of being a little bit defensive...we are developed in the mould that says that we can provide something for children that is valuable and if you believe that then you are always going to be slightly protective thinking, "Yes, I can do this job possibly better than you."

Fourth, lack of clarity and guidance—most teachers were hazy about the process of agreeing requests for flexischooling in their school, what policies might be in place and they weren't aware of any guidance on how they as a teacher should handle a flexischooling pupil.

Discussion and Conclusion

The overall result of our evidence shows that flexischooling is a significant and growing issue in Scotland, with both teachers and parents broadly seeing a variety of benefits and limited drawbacks.

Comparing the teacher interviews and the parent surveys gives an interesting insight into where these two perspectives converge and diverge. Teachers focussed more on what children might be missing out on at school such as social interaction and the potential for missing elements of the curriculum. Whereas parents focussed more on what children might be gaining such as more time outdoors, reduced stress, broader educational experiences, and improved relationships with peers, family and institutions. Teachers assumed parents would focus on curriculum at home, but no parents said they did. Both recognised the significant benefits of parents having a greater involvement in their child's education. Parents felt empowered by this and that they were being led by their children's interests. Teachers described those children whose parents spent time engaged in their education as being ahead academically, and more confident. Significantly, the majority of the data from parents, and all the data from teachers related to Primary aged children and may not be transferable into Secondary School. The FOI data, however, indicated a slightly greater incidence of flexischooling in Secondary aged children than Primary aged children.

Both parents and teachers shared concerns regarding children missing out socially. However some parents noticed the benefits of broadening children's social experience by being involved in activities such as Forest School. Similarly, teachers

downplayed social exclusion in practice, noticing instead a social resilience in flexischooled children as a result of learning to be more adaptable.

Parents perceived a negative effect on teachers' workload but teachers stated none. Both parents and teachers stressed the need for good communication and a partnership between schools and parents. It was felt that flexischooling parents were often more engaged in their child's learning and that this had a positive effect on children, and on the relationship between families and schools. There was some evidence from parents that this led them to have a greater involvement in their children's schools.

The lack of clarity and confusion about flexischooling policy which the FOI results reveal is echoed by teachers. It, and could be one reason why flexischooling requests are often turned down. Only one parent said they found out about flexischooling from the school. Many parents also referred to bravery or courage when asked what their advice would be to other parents, rather than to legislation, which indicates inconsistency of policy and a sense of pioneering spirit felt in each case. This was backed up in the FOI results by the lack of consistency about what is considered as flexischooling, even what term is used to describe part time schooling, whether ASL pupils are counted in their flexischooling numbers, what policies local authorities have relating to it, and who has responsibility for flexischooling within each local authority.

Both teachers and parents are operating somewhat in the dark in most local authorities. Given this lack of structural information or guidance, teachers and heads need to make up mental models

around flexischooling, which may focus on risk management rather than the potential benefits to children and families. This is particularly concerning as the FOI requests indicated an increase in the numbers of flexischooling requests over recent years. Our evidence points to the lack of clarity and consistency in statutory guidance causing additional stress both to families and schools.

In relation to ASL needs, our evidence showed a mixed picture in comparison to the national figures. ASL pupils make up 24% of the Scottish school roll. Only 20% of the children represented in our parent survey were identified as having ASL need. However, our survey figures were relatively small and our sampling method not carefully designed to get a representative cross section. The FOI results indicated 35% of flexischooled children with ASL needs. Although the FOI figures may undercount because some ASL pupils will be in school part time without being recorded as flexischooling.

As we did not ask teachers about any ASL needs we do not know how their experience relates to this evidence. It is clear from our data that children with ASL needs represent a significant proportion of flexischooling children, probably over-represented in comparison to the national school role. Additionally, our parent survey would indicate, that they access flexischooling later in their schooling and possibly continue until they are older.

The evidence we gained from both parents and teachers indicated that flexischooling enabled a bespoke and child centred arrangement for pupils which fits well into the Scottish policy of Getting It Right For Every Child, relating to most of the wellbeing indicators. The FOI data

showed small but significant and potentially growing numbers of flexischooling pupils in Scotland. Both of these factors warrant further research in this area.

Suggested Future Research

Talk to the children, what is their experience? Talk to more teachers. Deliberately talk to teachers in Fife and Argyll and Hollinsclough School in England, as well as other places - are teachers views or experiences different when they are in a flexischooling-supportive setting. Talk to staff at Fife and Argyll Councils about how they manage their flexible learning approach, what they've learned, and what challenges and benefits they have found is suggested. Talk to teachers with no flexischooling and compare. Get clearer insight into what might be making schools say no.

Talk to SLT's/Heads as they presumably are the ones who say yes or no. Further explore the special case of ASL needs children who flexischool.

The parent and teacher data in our study almost exclusively relates to primary aged children. It would be interesting to do similar research around flexischooling at secondary level.

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