

Additional Support for Learning: a study of educators' experiences of adapting learning spaces at four education settings in Edinburgh



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Context

Over the past ten years, Scottish education policy has grappled with the challenges of inclusion and giving every child the best possible start in life through their Early Years and school learning. This has involved significant government investment in education buildings, some innovation in learning environments and tools, and a focus on health and well-being, particularly since the COVID-19 restrictions.

Organisations and working groups have contributed to the movement by creating frameworks and 'toolkits' to support educators in their reflection and planning. Funded partnership projects have also made the important contribution of bringing together representatives from different disciplines, including universities, to guide schools and Early Years (EY) settings through a process of design and adaptation. Whilst educators have come to new understandings of learning environments and tools, and are adapting their approaches in this post-pandemic context, there remains a significant lack of research in Scotland into how the attributes of a learning space – either indoors or outdoors – influence the teaching and learning process.

This study makes a contribution to education policy and practice by exploring the recent experiences of educators in designing and adapting learning spaces in one local authority. It builds on previous research in the field by responding to the question, **How can the adaptation of school and Early Years (EY) spaces support the learning of pupils with additional needs?**

Main Findings

- The national policy *Getting It Right For Every Child* (GIRFEC) states that all children should be and feel Safe, Healthy, Achieving, Nurtured, Active, Respected, Responsible, and Included. The evidence generated by this study shows that the design and adaptation of learning spaces in school and EY settings play an important role in achieving each of these holistic well-being principles that were created for practitioners and organisations.
- The local authority, the EY setting, and schools in this study present a positive example of how the *Learning Estates Guidelines* can work in practice, although educators encounter various challenges along the way. Learning space design and adaptation processes benefit from ongoing collaboration, including all education stakeholders, and following a cycle of empathetic design, testing, and reflection.

- Educators describe the positive impact of particular elements of learning spaces on pupil engagement and well-being, including that of Additional Support Needs (ASN) pupils. These elements include the learning environment - the buildings, and the style and functioning of the décor, light and sound, as well as the outdoor environment – and the learning tools: the furniture and its layout, and the portable items that are used in learning tasks.
- Adapting environments and providing learning tools does not in itself achieve the pedagogical and social aims of EY settings and schools: the effectiveness of environments and tools depend on the way they are embedded in learning (the pedagogical process), the relationships between educators and pupils, and the culture of the school or setting.
- The capacity of educators is crucial. Adapting learning spaces for pupil needs must look to supporting educator competence and confidence, coupled with adequate resources and the autonomy to test different approaches with pupils in a continuous cycle of change as part of ongoing school improvement.
- This study offers important insights into specific examples of learning space practice in Scotland, but where there is a clear lack of evidence from research to inform the landscape nationally and internationally. This is another challenge worth addressing in the future.

Recommendations for stakeholders:

EDUCATORS may consider:

- Working with colleagues to test small adaptations of space, considering the blend of spatial and pedagogical approaches, as well as different sensory elements;
- Actively involving pupils in the design and adaptation of learning spaces, including discussing the rationale for different options, and giving them some choice of environments or tools during learning tasks;
- Designing and creating learning spaces that are agile, including hallways and corridors, and have the flexibility for multiple activities as well as to be redesigned when needed;
- Both indoor and outdoor spaces, and bridging the two (biophilic design), and ;
- For those with more experience in learning space design, sharing expertise with colleagues and local networks.

SCHOOL AND EARLY YEARS SETTING LEADERS may consider:

- Dedicating staff peer observation and discussion time to the specific topic of learning spaces;
- Ways to ensure that the whole school community is actively included in design processes, including discussing the rationale for different options and making clear links between pedagogical theory and practice;

- Making sure that staff can take some ownership of the learning spaces, as well as appreciating the transition to new staff occupying those spaces;
- Appealing to the local community to offer ideas or resources for learning space adaptation, as long as they conform to fire and safety regulations and are of a high specification for the use of pupils in education settings.

LOCAL AUTHORITIES (PROFESSIONAL LEARNING, ASN SUPPORT, ESTATES TEAMS) may consider:

- How best to support professional learning on learning spaces across all schools and EY settings through partnerships and peer sharing of expertise and experiences;
- Providing sustained design guidance and construction support across all schools and EY settings, recognising that additional resources and expectations can be a burden on educators' workloads and that full implementation processes can last years;
- Support (guidance, contacts) for the cost-effective procurement of items by schools and EY settings.

POLICY MAKERS may consider:

- Including more explicit references to learning space design and adaptation in future policies regarding inclusion, well-being, and educator professional development;
- Making funding available for the generation and sharing of evidence about learning space design and adaptation.

RESEARCHERS may consider:

- Building on this study to investigate a similar topic in other contexts and regions, or using a complementary research methodology such as observation, large-scale survey, or action research. This will help to address current gaps in evidence relating to learning spaces.

FURTHER DETAILS

RESEARCH TEAM

This study was conducted under the *Shared Learning Spaces* initiative of the Moray House School of Education and Sport, University of Edinburgh in November 2022 – April 2023.

The university researchers were:

Principal Investigator: Professor Do Coyle, do.coyle@ed.ac.uk

Data analysis and report author: Dr Hannah Grainger Clemson

Researcher: Ramone Al-Bishawi

FULL REPORT

The full report is available at <https://blogs.ed.ac.uk/sharedlearningspaces/research/>

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