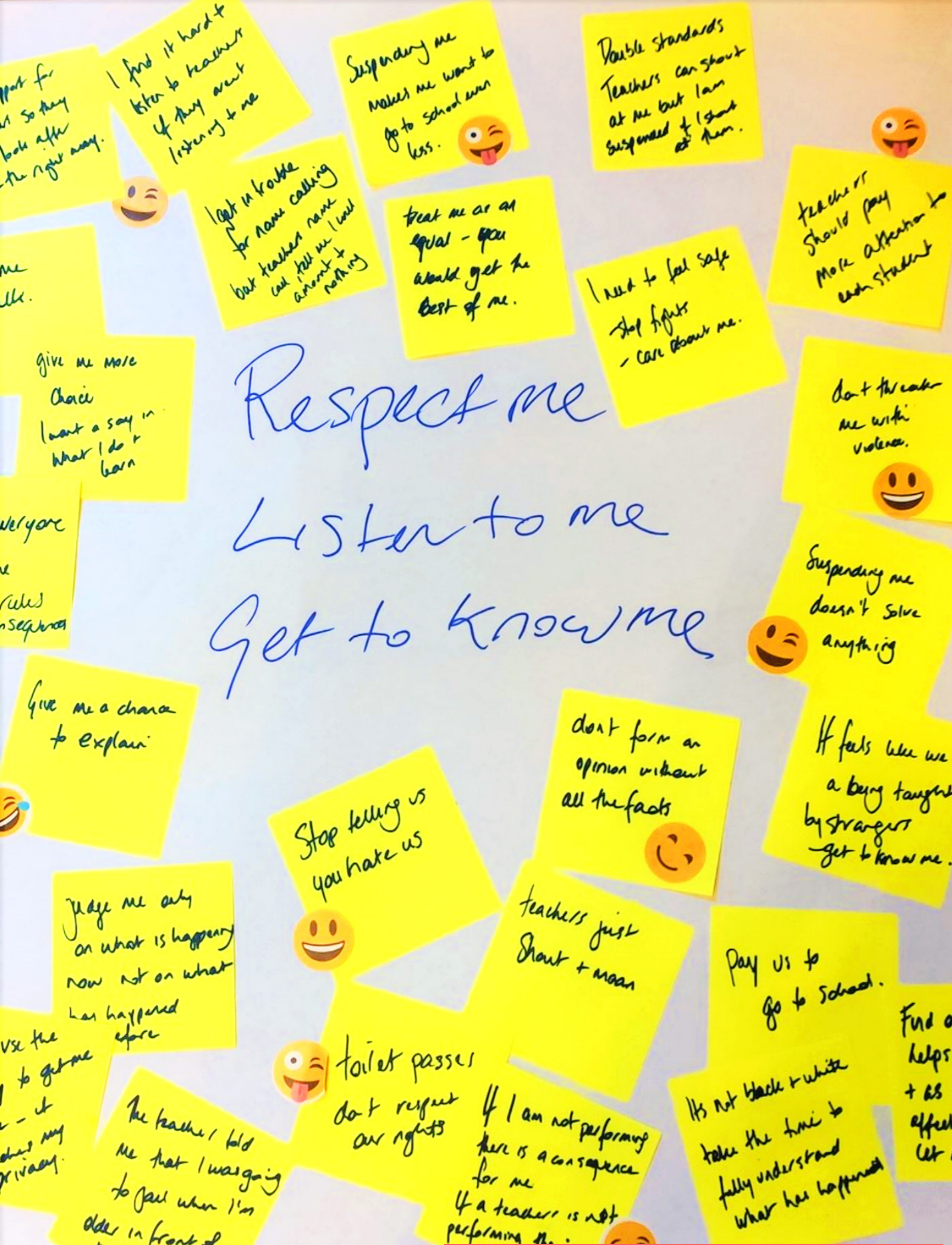includem presents

The School *Experience* of Young People

Pre & During Covid-19

includem

August 2021

The flip chart notes throughout this report are small captures of the conversations with young people from the Focus Group stage of the report.

Contents

We are includem

We work closely with children, young people, and their families, who are facing difficult challenges in their lives. Our trust-based, inclusive model of support is centred on the needs of each young person. We help young people make positive life choices and empower them to build better lives for themselves and their communities.

Our mission

To provide the support young people need to make positive changes in their lives, and inspire a more hopeful future for young people, their families, and communities.

Our vision

A world where every young person is respected, valued, and has the opportunity to actively participate in all aspects of life and society.

About this report

The research for this report was carried out across includem's services in Scotland between May and July 2021.

Focus group sessions took place adhering to the Covid-19 restrictions that were in place during this period.

This report was authored by Meg Thomas (Head of Research, Policy & Participation, includem) & Lewis MacLeod (Policy Officer, includem). All images used were captured during the research stage of this report.

Foreword
Martin Dorchester
Chief Executive

Children and young people have a right to education and a right to have their voices heard. These rights are inextricably linked: for children and young people to thrive in their learning, it is essential they are involved in its shaping.

However, the last seventeen months have posed unprecedented challenges for children and young people's education – including a shift from classroom to home-based learning for many due to Covid-19 related restrictions.

At includem, we support children, young people, and families across Scotland to transform their lives. Throughout the course of the pandemic, children and young people raised challenges they faced engaging with school during day-to-day conversations with includem's support workers. It is in this report that we explore these challenges further.

Those we support live predominantly in Scotland's most deprived communities and face a range of barriers to engaging fully in formal education – including those relating to poverty,[1] trauma, digital exclusion,[2] and offending. They are often prevented from reaching their full academic and social potential due to the persistent poverty-related attainment gap, which forms part of the broader wellbeing gap.

Many of these children, young people, and their families, have been in contact with services for many years and feel they have not been listened to previously. Their resulting distrust of services means their voices are less likely to be reflected in formal consultation processes.

Too frequently the voices of these children, young people, and families go unheard. Includem is committed to ensuring they are brought to the forefront.

In this report, we seek to understand the challenges children and young people faced – and continue to face – in their learning and identify what the solutions are. At its heart, this report puts the voices of those we support firmly in the spotlight.

Through a national survey and participative focus groups, children and young people told us what they need from their education moving forward. I was struck by the clear emphasis they placed on being supported, understood, and listened to in a learning environment that ensures their rights are respected and upheld, and is underpinned by a culture of mutual respect.

It is essential that we not only listen to what children and young people are saying, but that we act on it accordingly. Structures should ensure teachers have the time, space, training, and resources to provide the support that young people tell us they need.

We believe in the potential of every single child and young person, and it is our collective responsibility – across education, social work, justice, and family support services – to ensure they have both the tools and the environment in which their potential can be fully realised.

Introduction

During includem's day-to-day support of children and young people, the impact of the pandemic on their school experience was frequently discussed.

To understand this further, and identify solutions to improve their learning experience, we surveyed 111 children and young people and subsequently hosted four participative focus groups – three of which were conducted in-person, and one delivered online. Children and young people also took part in participative sessions to produce artwork featured in this report. Focus groups provided a space for children and young people to talk openly about their perspectives and build on themes identified in the survey.

This report provides an overview of what children and young people supported by includem's services in Aberdeen, Dundee, Falkirk, Fife, Glasgow, South Lanarkshire, Stirling, and West Dunbartonshire told us about their experiences of school and learning during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Part 1 of the report outlines key findings from the schools survey, where children and young people shared their experiences of learning during varying 'stages' of the pandemic.

Part 2 details key themes from focus group discussions.

Part 3 concludes the report with recommendations based on what children and young people told us needs to change at a Scottish Government, local authority, and individual school level.
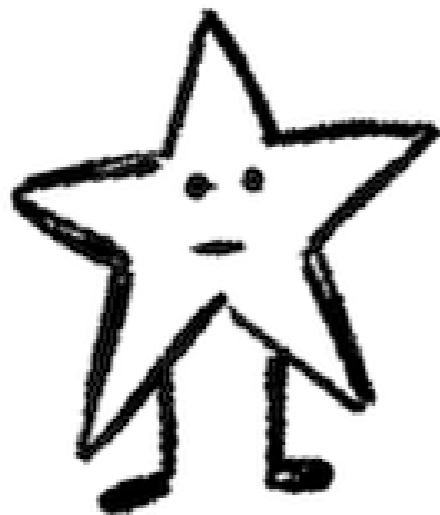
Summary of Findings

Our survey findings show that home learning phases posed significant challenges for children and young people.

Focus group participants stressed the importance of mutual respect, shared their experiences of feeling judged based on past behaviours, and reflected on what they need moving forward to be truly supported, understood, and listened to in their learning environment.

Below is a summary of our findings from both the school survey and focus groups discussions:

1 **Experiences of learning on the second return to school were more positive than pre-covid:** Children and young people enjoyed school more, felt more confident doing their homework, more interested in learning, and better supported by their teachers during the second return to school than they did pre-pandemic.

2 **Home schooling negatively impacted all areas of learning:** Children and young people's enjoyment of school, confidence in completing homework, interest in learning, and the level to which they felt supported, were lowest during home learning phases.

3 **Confidence in completing homework was particularly low during home learning phases:** Only 15% of children and young reported being interested in learning, and just 16% confident in completing their homework during the first home learning phase.

4 **Children and young people want to be heard and respected:** Feeling listened to and respected was a key issue for children and young people supported by includem, who emphasised their wish for school staff to get to know them and to understand the roots of their behaviours and their individual needs.

5 **An 'every day's a new leaf' approach to behaviour is crucial:** Young people expressed a clear wish to be treated with mutual respect, and to be judged on the 'here and now' rather than on previous behaviours and events.

6 **To enable effective learning, we must 'bridge the gap' between home and school:** Includem's relationship-based support model has been proven to 'bridge the gap' between home and school – helping young people to engage more fully with their education in a way that works for them and supporting school staff to build positive relationships and connections.

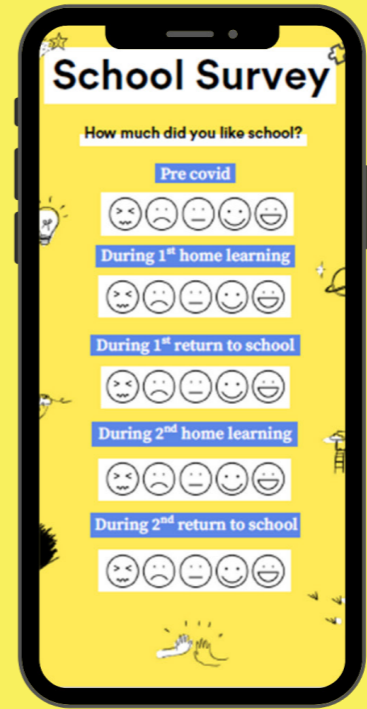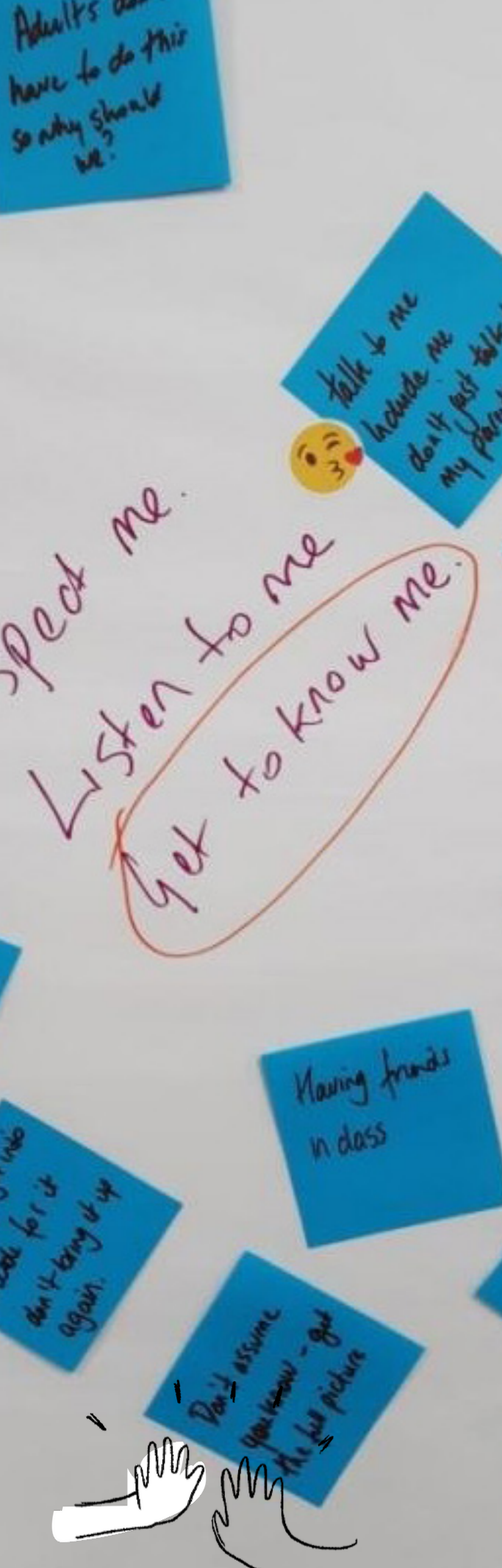"I like my teacher and I like seeing my friends. It's the best school."

"I like school and my teacher listens to me"

Part One
The Survey

Background

During May and June 2021, 111 children and young people supported by includem across Scotland completed a survey on their experiences of school and learning during the Covid-19 pandemic.

86 respondents were in secondary education, 22 in primary education, and 3 did not specify. Respondents represented the full breadth of includem's services across the following local authority areas: Aberdeen, Dundee, Falkirk, Fife, Glasgow, South Lanarkshire, Stirling, and West Dunbartonshire.

Survey – Section 1

In the first section of the survey, children and young people used a five-point scale, visually represented through emojis (☹ denoting 'very negative', and ☺ denoting 'very positive') to reflect how much they liked school, how confident they felt doing their homework, how interested they were in learning, and how supported by their teachers they felt during different stages of the pandemic.

These 'stages' were defined as:

- Pre-covid
- 1st home learning phase
- 1st return to school
- 2nd home learning phase
- 2nd return to school

Children and young people's responses to the first section of the survey are outlined here:

Disclaimer: Percentages may not add up to 100%, as they are rounded to the nearest percent.

Question One: How much do you like school?

	Negative	Neutral	Positive
Pre-Covid	41%	23%	36%
1st Home Learning	59%	21%	20%
1st Return to School	32%	37%	31%
2nd Home Learning	52%	30%	17%
2nd Return to School	32%	28%	40%

Question Two: How confident did you feel about doing your homework?

	Negative	Neutral	Positive
Pre-Covid	32%	31%	38%
1st Home Learning	55%	29%	16%
1st Return to School	35%	26%	38%
2nd Home Learning	53%	26%	21%
2nd Return to School	28%	33%	39%

Question Three: How interested were you in learning?

	Negative	Neutral	Positive
Pre-Covid	37%	32%	31%
1st Home Learning	64%	21%	15%
1st Return to School	42%	28%	30%
2nd Home Learning	59%	25%	16%
2nd Return to School	32%	31%	38%

Question Four: How supported by your teacher(s) did you feel?

	Negative	Neutral	Positive
Pre-Covid	32%	26%	42%
1st Home Learning	46%	30%	24%
1st Return to School	37%	27%	35%
2nd Home Learning	46%	29%	25%
2nd Return to School	28%	28%	44%

During the second return to school phase, children and young people enjoyed school more, felt more confident doing their homework, were more interested in their learning, and felt better supported by their teachers than they did pre-pandemic. The sharpest increase in positive responses over the course of the pandemic (pre-covid to second return to school) related to the question: **'How interested were you in learning?'**, rising from 31% pre-covid to 38% during the second return.

The most positive responses were in answer to **'How supported by your teacher(s) did you feel?'** across four of the five stages of the pandemic. Almost half (44%) of young people said they felt supported on the second return, rising slightly from 42% pre-covid. The first return is the exception to the rule – during this stage there was a greater positive response to the question **'How confident did you feel completing your homework?'** (38%) compared to feeling supported by teachers (35%).

Children and young people expressed a more negative perspective in terms of their enjoyment of school, confidence in doing their homework, interest in learning, and support from teachers during home learning phases compared to periods of time where schools were open. Only 15% reported being interested in learning, and just 16% were confident in completing their homework during the first home learning phase. The second home learning phase showed marginal improvements in these experiences (16% and 21% respectively).

The highest proportion of negative responses can be observed in response to the question **'How interested were you in learning?',** where just under two-thirds (64%) of young people answered negatively during the first home learning phase and 59% in the second home learning phase – the times in which challenges with digital access were most acute.[3] Negative responses were significantly lower both pre-covid (37%) and in the second return phase (32%).

Children and young people enjoyed school significantly more during phases where schools were open, with 36% of those we surveyed saying they liked school pre-covid, 31% during the first return, and 40% in the second return. This contrasts with just 20% and 17% of respondents during the first and second home learning phases respectively. While children and young people reported liking school more when schools were open, it is only in the second return phase where the percentage of positive answers was greater than negative responses.

3 https://includem.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Staying-Connected-Assessing-digital-inclusion.pdf

In the second section of the survey, children and young people were invited to share further thoughts in response to the following questions:

- **What do you think you need from teachers moving forward?**
- **Did you move school in the last year? How was that for you?**
- **Is there anything else you'd like to say?**

Responses were varied, with some emphasising their dislike of school in general: *"I don't enjoy school, I never have but I need to get on with it"* / *"I don't like school but know I have to go."*, and others talking about the barriers they faced during home learning phases: *"I didn't like working at home."* / *"Other than occasionally seeing my teachers who visited I did not do any at home learning"* / *"We don't have good wi-fi or signal"* / *"During online learning my teachers said I couldn't do the work as I couldn't finish tasks. The work was fine for me. I was just slow and they'd always start a new task at the next lesson so I didn't have a chance to finish."* When asked 'Is there anything else you'd like to say?' 14% specifically mentioned they did not like school.

For one pupil, their priority moving forward was to *"Keep the schools open."* However, re-adjusting to the physical school environment following another phase of home learning was challenging for another pupil: *"Covid has made things more difficult. I was and still am really nervous about what people think of me because I was away from school and people for so long."*

Others celebrated their improved school experience, outlining plans to progress in their learning and reach their goals: *"Liking school a bit better now and want to go on to 6th year to achieve my Duke of Edinburgh and attend prom."*

Overall, three key themes emerged from responses to Section 2 of the schools survey: **Support Me, Understand Me, Listen to Me**.

Support Me

Some children and young people took the opportunity to highlight that they had felt well supported by their teachers throughout the pandemic. Of those who responded to the question **'What do you think you need from teachers moving forward?'**, 32% said there was nothing additional they need from teachers, or that they currently feel supported: *"Happy with support already getting now"* / *"Feel supported right now"* / *"No changes I feel supported by my teachers."* / *"Overall I feel supported prior to covid and after."* One pupil said they missed their teachers during home learning phases: *"I wanted to go back and see them I missed school."* Two pupils told us they had moved school during the pandemic and that they feel more supported by teachers as a result.

Others stated they would like further support, with 45% of those who answered stating that support for learning was what they needed moving forward from their teachers. These answers were often general in nature: *"More support in home learning would have been useful."* / *"More help with my work – sometimes I don't understand."* / *"Support for learning."* / *"I think I would like more support from my teachers"* / *"I need more help with school work"* / *"Support as doing my exams.".*

Some answers were more specific: we heard from children and young people who felt that making learning fun is how they could be better supported: *"Help with my learning but make them fun because it's been a hard year"* / *"Make school more fun, it's boring."* / *"When online make the lessons more interesting."* Others talked about their wish for *"more practical skills"* and how they would benefit from *"smaller classes"* and *"more afterschool clubs".*

One pupil told us they would be best supported through additional help in the classroom to focus: *"Someone in class to help me if I'm struggling. Struggle to focus, so they could help me focus and then when I focus they could leave as I wouldn't need them there anymore.",* with another highlighting the importance of flexibility in improving their learning: *"There should be more options for me if I don't like a certain class."*

Explaining work in a way that works for different learning styles and individual support needs was also highlighted as key to supporting learning: *"Better explanations for home learning."* / *"More 1:1 explaining with me because I have autism."* / *"Help me with my English and Maths. Can help by reading the questions out to you because I struggle a bit reading myself."*

There was a strong feeling from one pupil that teachers should be more adaptable: *"Teachers always explain stuff in the same way, only one way, whereas if you don't get it they don't change the way they are explaining it to you so you are left being stuck."*

For children and young people with additional support needs in particular, it is crucial that strategies are put in place so they can engage in a way that works for them. One pupil told us about how their mum and includem worker collaborated with the school to get them a 'time out card' which supported their learning:

"I was struggling in school because of my autism things were too much for me and the teachers didn't really get it, they wanted me to come and tell them when I was upset but this was embarrassing. Then includem and my mum spoke to the school spoke to the school and got me a time out card that I just need to sit on my desk and have a time out, I am in control and I don't need to say anything. This is helping a lot better."

This young person has found school a struggle over the past two years. Here they explain why.

This young person we support struggles with school and put their feelings into words.

This young person built their classroom and explained the barriers to them entering the room.

This piece of art represents what the young person does in school - doodles. The young person finds school very difficult and cannot concentrate in class so doodles. The jigsaw piece represents wanting to fit in, football for fun, and the eye as they want people to see them and finally the star as they want to shine.

Understand Me

Children and young people clearly demonstrated a wish for teachers to be understanding of their circumstances and behaviours. One pupil said *"being more understanding"* was the one thing they needed most from teachers moving forward. Another pupil wanted teachers to *"be more understanding when you don't like a class"*.

Survey responses contained many examples where children and young people did not feel like their behaviour was understood, including the experience of one young person who told us they were *"kicked out of class for asking for help with a maths problem"*.

Pupils felt they were not always given a fair chance, and that past events dictated responses to current behaviour: *"It's like [teachers] feel like they are entitled to just give me a row, I get a row for anything or sent out, judge me on what happened last time and I don't get a fresh start."* / *"Sort things out when they happen not weeks later. Stop milking situations from the past."*

One pupil told us they feel that *"[teachers] always watch me and I'm causing all the trouble."* Another secondary school pupil, considering what they need from teachers moving forward, emphasised the need for proportionate responses to behaviour:

"Don't send me to gym hall for small things like swinging on my chair."

Another pupil was particularly self-reflective in their response to the survey, stating that they wished teachers could be *"more empathetic towards my behaviour, which I struggle with at times."* A clear message of 'understand me' percolated through responses, alongside a need for further support rather than punishment. As one young person astutely stated, they need *"more understanding […] not banning from class."*

Listen to Me

Many children and young people told us that they wanted to be listened to in school. 23% said what they needed most moving forward from their teachers was to be heard and respected: *"For them to listen more"* / *"For them to listen"* / *"More listening to us"* / *"Listen to me"*.

We heard from one pupil about how they wanted to be involved in shaping their learning, and ultimately to be respected, citing an example of where their includem worker helped them to negotiate a class move that better suited their learning needs:

"I'd like my teachers to respect me and ask my opinions. I hated my English class but it took my includem worker to tell my guidance this before they moved [my] class. I don't skip English now."

When asked what they needed from teachers moving forward, one pupil said powerfully that, more than anything, they simply need teachers *"to listen to me and not blame me for everything that happens in school."*
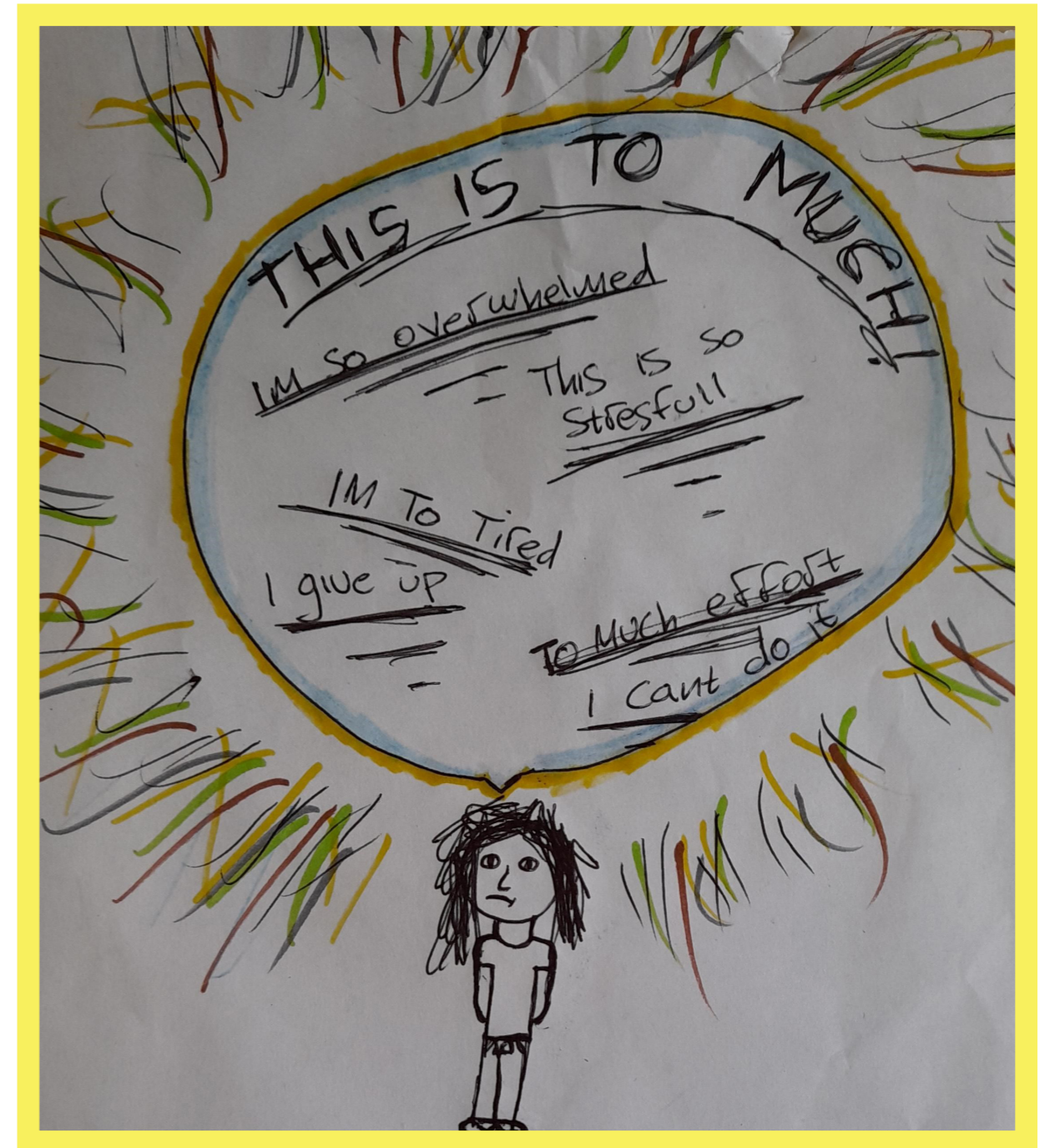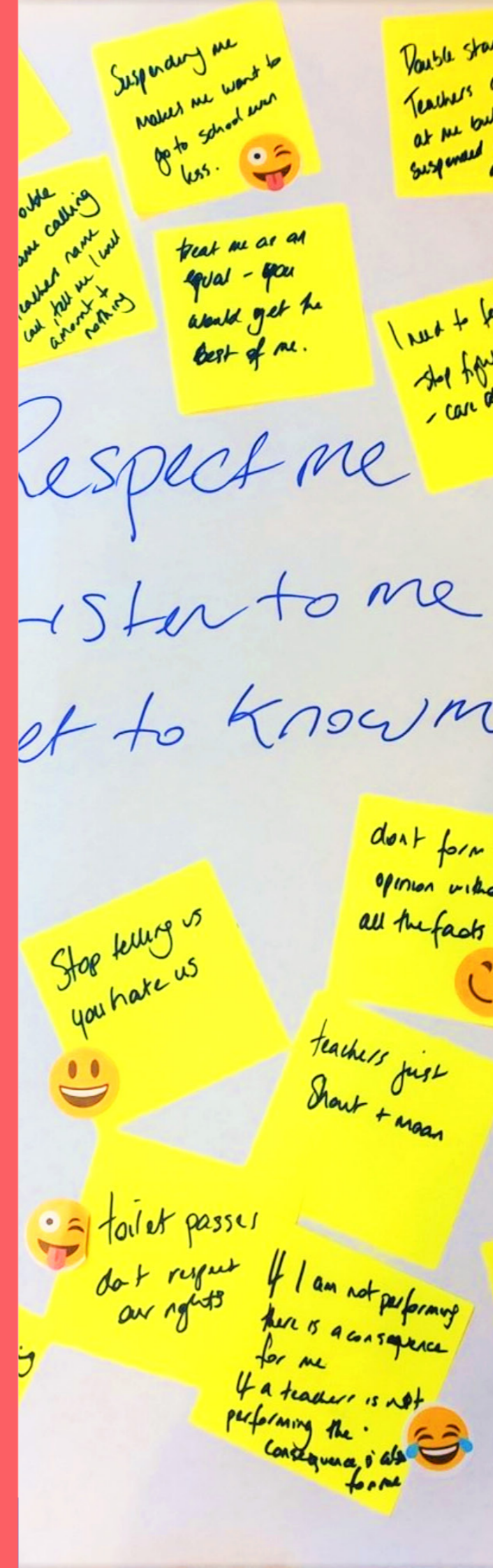

The young person really struggled with the amount of homework from different subjects during covid. She brought it up often during our support. She felt the school didn't listen when she was struggling and she would get anxious and overwhelmed with it all.

- includem worker -

Part Two
Focus Groups

Following the analysis of the survey results, includem hosted three in-person focus groups in June 2021 and one online focus group in July 2021 to more fully understand the barriers to learning faced by children and young people.

During focus groups, children and young people outlined what they need moving forward to improve their school experience.

The focus groups built on answers provided by children and young people in the survey – particularly relating to the themes on support with learning, understanding behaviors, and being listened to – but also provided opportunities for children and young people to share their perspectives more broadly.

The key themes from the focus groups involving young people supported by includem across Scotland were as follows:

- **Support with Learning**
- **Children and Young People's Voice**
- **Behaviour and Needs**
- **Exclusion**
- **Positive Relationships**

Support with Learning

Support with learning was the primary theme from Section 2 of the schools survey – as such, we explored this topic further during focus groups.

Children and young people supported by includem face a range of barriers to learning – including challenges with digital exclusion, poverty, mental health, and offending behaviour – which impact on engagement and attainment. Being creative, flexible, and responsive in creating learning experiences for children who find it difficult to engage with traditional school provision is a key factor that can contribute to improved life chances.[4] **Through collaboration between family support services and schools, we can work together to ensure a creative and flexible approach to young people's learning.** This in turn improves their wellbeing and ensures they get the support they tell us they need.

During focus groups, children and young people told us what they need to feel more supported in their learning environment. One group emphasised the need for increased safety in the school environment, with action to tackle bullying and to support improved mental health: *"I need to feel safe."* One young person highlighted that Physical Education (PE) changing rooms were the worst site for bullying and noted they did not have the same right to privacy that adults would have. Young people also raised that they required permission passes to go to the bathroom, feeling that this did not align with a rights respecting approach.

Some participants specifically highlighted the positive impact of pastoral care support within their school – strong relationships were at the heart of improving their learning environment.
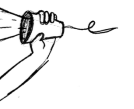
A key feature of improved support with learning was getting timely feedback, with those we support feeling that the effort they put into completing the work was not proportionate to the feedback they received: *"Give me feedback in a way that helps me"* / *"If I do the work you should take time to mark it."*

Children and young people clearly stated their wish to have an environment which suits their individual needs and learning styles, with teachers identifying what each student needs rather than just the class as a whole: *"We are not all the same!"* / *"I need you to make adjustments for my learning style because it's not something I can change."* / *"Don't just give me a sheet, find out what works [for me]."* / *"Give me privacy and space if I need it."*

One participant emphasised the need for greater support in the classroom environment, rather than just being sent to the base: *"If I can't learn in class please don't send me to the base where I can't learn at all".* Another young person said:

4 http://www.cycj.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/ILC-Common-Factors-paper-2020.pdf

> **"Find out what helps me learn, and as long as it doesn't affect anyone else let me do it."**

Choice in terms of both how and what they learn (including subject choice) was a crucial feature of what feeling more supported looks like in practice for focus group participants: *"Give us choices about what we learn"* / *"Give me more choice"* / *"Would do better in subjects we like".* Children and young people also talked about how they would like a choice in how groups are split for activities and group work, rather than an automatic gender split.

A primary school student with additional support needs supported by includem creatively uses lego to communicate the barriers they faced to learning in a school environment. These barriers were:

1. Teachers telling me what to do
2. Feeling that teachers are shouting
3. Classroom noise

They refer to the Special Educational Needs (SEN) school as their 'calm school' as classes are smaller and they have more one-to-one support in their learning, where their barriers are taken down.

Children & Young People's Voice

During focus groups, children and young people said they sometimes do not feel listened to in school, and that they would like more opportunities to have their perspectives heard. In line with the values of The Promise[5] and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (particularly Article 3 – best interests of the child, and Article 12 – respect for the views of the child), the voices of children and young people should be at the heart of decisions that affect them.[6]

In addition, the Standard in Scotland's Schools etc. Act 2000 states:

> 'Authorities have a duty to have due regard, so far as is reasonably practicable, to the views (if there is a wish to express them) of the child or young person in decisions that significantly affect that child or young person, taking account of the child or young person's age and maturity.'[7]

5 https://thepromise.scot/
6 https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx
7 https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2000/6/contents

Children and young people told us they felt school staff can sometimes make assumptions about the problem and their behaviour, particularly if they have been in trouble in the past for similar incidents. For those facing exclusion for retaliation, they feared that this would benefit the bully, or aggressor, as they did not have the opportunity to communicate their own version of events. They told us: *"Give me a chance to justify my behaviour"* / *"Listen to both sides of the story"* / *"Don't form an opinion without all the facts."*

Others told us that they often lacked clarity about why they were getting into trouble, stating: *"If I'm going to get into trouble, I need to know what I'm getting in trouble for."*

One child in Primary school shared their experiences of teachers *"only occasionally"* speaking to them – and noted that when they were temporarily excluded, the school would call in their parents but made them sit outside. They said: *"If they included me then maybe I would have understood that I did something wrong".*

School would be better, according to another young person, *"[…] if adults listened more. They're talking and don't even listen. You know they aren't listening if they aren't looking at you."*

Mutual respect was key for many children and young people with regards to being able to have their voices heard: *"I find it hard to listen to teachers if they aren't listening to me."* / *"Double standards, teachers can shout at me but I am suspended if I shout at them."* One pupil said:

> **"Treat me as an equal. Be bothered about me and I'll be bothered about you."**

Another focus group participant, who is no longer in formal education, reflected on their experience of school and said they felt like they were not respected: *"[…] they don't respect you – it's like being in a secure unit for six hours a day. That's not what school should be like. Yes you're going to learn but you shouldn't get sent out for doing nothing wrong, shouldn't be targeted."*

Focus groups participants were clear that they wanted to have a role in shaping their learning and wanted the opportunity to input into how they engage: *"I ken me, and I ken what works for me."* / *"[…] let me know things, "I want a say in what I do and learn."*

In one focus group, a secondary school pupil shared their experience of not being involved in a meeting that should have had their participation, particularly from a rights perspective:

> **"They don't involve the child – chuck them to the side and say they don't want to 'overwhelm them'. But I think you'll find it's about the child – so get them in there! I want to be part of meetings about me. There was a meeting [...] I was supposed to be at the meeting and I wasn't. I went absolutely mental about it, I was told I was going to be invited to it and wasn't there [...] Decisions are being made about me without my insight."**

At the heart of these issues raised by young people is the need for support for children, young people, and teachers to understand the root cause of behaviours, what their needs are, and to restore relationships. Building better communication means that all parties can have their voices heard meaningfully.

Behaviour & Needs

Children and young people have said that teachers often don't understand why they are behaving the way they are, and that they would benefit from a greater effort to understand root causes of behaviour. A key factor to improving life chances is looking beyond the child's behaviour to their needs, taking a trauma and gender informed approach which seeks to understand the distress they may be experiencing on a daily basis.[8]

One young person astutely noted that, if the root cause of why they don't like school – and thus are behaving the way they are – is not addressed, then they will *"just do whatever [they] can to get out of school".* They said this would mainly be through fights, and noted they had been excluded for two days as a result. They felt that teachers could have taken more time to understand them, and to talk openly with them, instead of simply taking them out of school – empowering and enabling them to get their views across.

Focus group participants felt that they were not given new chances or offered the benefit of the doubt, with past behaviour perceived to be dictating current decisions by teaching staff. They told us that previous issues were being brought up consistently: *"Once I've got into trouble for it don't bring it up again."* They said they would benefit from an *"everyday's a new leaf"* approach, with one participant stating: *"Give me a chance to start again."*

But what does truly understanding a pupil's behaviour look like in practice? One young person shared their perspective, outlining the need for teachers to get to know them well enough to spot physical cues of potential escalation, and to know their triggers based on events in their past:

8 http://www.cycj.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/ILC-Common-Factors-paper-2020.pdf

> "They need to know the way your mind and body reacts to certain things – fight or flight. They need to know if someone screams at you are [you] going to hit them or run away, need to know what's going to happen. And need to know how you're going to react, or if some things have happened in your past that might trigger you. Have a conversation with them each day or every second day – more pally, then they can understand you more and manage a situation because they know how you would act in that situation."

To ensure young people are able to build on their strengths, a dual approach of support within the school environment and within the community is crucial. Within the school environment, restorative conversations not just between peers, but between school staff and pupils, could lead to stronger relationships.

Restorative approaches are non-punitive and underpinned by the principles of safety, collaboration, trust, choice, and empowerment. The practice supports recovery from trauma by striving to remove the destructive feelings of shame. The Good Shepherd Centre has demonstrated the effectiveness of restorative practices within an educational setting that supports young people who have been referred through the Children's Hearing or Criminal Justice system, many of whom have had negative experiences of school and disengaged from education.[9]

As Leona Donnelly, Depute Head of Education at the Centre, observes: *'Restorative approaches provide us all with the skills and understanding to respond to and repair harm. It teaches us the importance of listening to others' perspective, linking feelings to behaviour and working together to find a way to move on from conflict and reduce the likelihood of further incidences.'*[10]

While children and young people did not use the terminology of 'restorative practices' during focus groups, they clearly stated they wanted teachers to get to know them, not to make assumptions, give them a chance to explain and be heard, and not to judge them based on previous behaviour: *"judge me on what is happening now, not what happened before."* As another example, one young person told us: *"When I got charged for the second time for supposedly assaulting someone the school immediately went against me because I had been in trouble before even though there was proof I hadn't done it."*

In terms of helping children and young people to reflect on and understand behaviours, includem's family support service is underpinned by restorative approaches and focuses on enabling children, young people, and families to build on their strengths, restore relationships, and embed positive behaviours into their everyday lives. In a recent report on how restorative practice is applied in an includem context, one practitioner reflected on its crucial role:[11]

9 https://www.cycj.org.uk/restorative-practice-in-the-good-shepherd-
10 ibid
11 https://includem.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/I-am-a-good-person.-I-like-to-be-good.-The-benefits-of-the-restorative-approach-in-the-chari-table-sector.-The-cases-of-Includem.-Report..docx

> "We use restorative justice in every single one conversation we have with young people on a daily basis. We have conversations about attitudes to crime, behaviours to crime, as well, we go through different things like the ABC what happened before the actual situation and the consequences to the end of it and then we have reflective discussions as well to say, alright 'where do you think you should have stopped, where do you think at this point I shouldn't have done that'. We look at the triggers from behind what they have actually done. We look at the trauma they had in their life as well, the gang culture as well and their peers, their education as well. So we're looking at everything, it's not just 'ok so you did this tell me all about it', it is looking back, scraping back and say why do you think this happened."

Feedback from school staff reflects positively on how includem applies this restorative approach in an educational context: *"Includem have been invaluable in supporting some of the most vulnerable young people on my caseload. One of my caseload was engaging in risk taking behaviours in the community and Georgina was able to take on a supporter role with them. Over the weeks they built a rapport and my young person began to open up about their feelings and why they think they were behaving in the way they were. I have no doubt that includem have played a significant part in helping my young person reflect upon and recognise their behaviours, and to think about positive steps forward. I would recommend includem as a valuable support service."*

A key element of delivering this support is providing the 'bridge' between school and home – and ensuring that all parties (young people, parents, and school staff) are working in tandem. One senior school staffer said:

> "I genuinely feel that the combination of support that you are able to offer to both the young person and their family is filling a void in the system at present that either seems to be for the young person or for the parent but rarely for both. Your combined service has ensured that the school, young person and parent are all working towards a common goal and understand the priorities and strategies to use, this makes for a much more joined up way of working."

Exclusion

Latest data shows that rates of exclusion are significantly higher in Scotland's most deprived areas (bottom 20% of SIMD), compared to the least deprived areas (top 20% of SIMD). The rate of exclusions per 1000 pupils is 35.4 in the most deprived areas, compared to only 8.2 in the least deprived areas.[12] The vast majority of the exclusions (over 99%) relate to temporary exclusions, with just three recorded pupils removed from the register in 2018/2019.

Children and young people supported by includem live predominantly in Scotland's most deprived areas and many have experienced exclusion from school, with almost all focus group participants sharing their experiences of exclusion. They told us they felt responses to their behaviour were often disproportionate. As an example, one young person discussed being temporarily excluded for going to the bathroom without a permission pass.

12 https://www.gov.scot/publications/school-exclusion-statistics/

However, guidance on preventing and managing school exclusions states that exclusion should only be used as a last resort. *'It should be a proportionate response where there is no alternative and it is important that the views of the child or young person and those of their parent(s) are taken into account. Schools and education authorities should also consider all the facts and circumstances surrounding the incident(s) leading to exclusion. The purpose of the exclusion and the impact on the child or young person should be taken into consideration, including the long-term impact on life chances'.*[13]

Glasgow City Council in particular has seen a successful reduction in exclusion rates by working in a more child-centred way, where teachers recognise the context children are living in and are encouraged to view all behaviour as communication.[14]

The medium and long-term impacts of school exclusion are significant for children and young people. The Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime highlighted that exclusion from school by S3 is one of the most important predictors of gaining a criminal record in adult life, with exclusion by the age of 12 increasing the odds of imprisonment by age 22 by a factor of four.[15]

The Promise's Plan 21-24 outlines Scotland's route map to Keeping the Promise, with a range of outcomes to be achieved by 2024 including a welcome call that *'Care experienced children and young people will receive all they need to thrive at school. There will be no barriers to their engagement with education and schools will know and cherish their care experienced pupils'* and *'the formal and informal exclusion of care experienced children from education will end.'*[16]

The majority of children and young people includem supports have experienced trauma and adverse childhood experiences. Around half of those we support are care-experienced and many reflected on their experiences of exclusion. One focus group participant said: *"[I] didn't care about being suspended. But it de-motivates me from going back to school when I do stop being suspended."* Another young person emphasised the importance of the school keeping in contact with them when they were temporarily excluded:

"When I was primary 7 was suspended for being in a fight but [the school staff] kept in contact with me. I wouldn't say that's necessarily part of being respected but just something they should do."

13 https://www.gov.scot/publications/included-engaged-involved-part-2-positive-approach-preventing-managing-school/

14 https://www.tes.com/news/scottish-schools-get-rid-exclusion-reflex_
15 https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1748895809360971
16 https://thepromise.scot/plan-21-24-pdf-spread.pdf_____
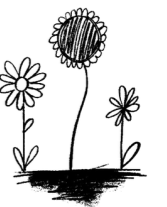
When asked what would make school a better experience for them, one young person said: *"Stop isolating me, let me be with my friends. If I behaved badly they would put me in 'isolation' for the rest of the day – where you sat in a room by yourself".* We also heard that, ultimately, exclusion is not helpful for young people: *"suspending me doesn't solve anything."* / *"suspending me makes me want to go to school even less."*

Another young person stressed the importance of having a good pastoral care teacher who was able to understand their needs and negotiate on their behalf: *"I wasn't allowed outside to go for lunch or to go to the toilet as they thought I was smoking or drinking. It was my pastoral care teacher that got this lifted."* This once more highlights the importance of positive relationships – just one significant adult can make all the difference.[17] Indeed, a means by which schools, learning establishments, and education authorities can seek to reduce exclusion is by establishing a whole school ethos of prevention, early intervention and support against a background which promotes positive relationships, learning and behaviour.[18]

Challenges faced by children and young people who have been excluded are not new to includem – last year, young people we supported were featured in EachOther's national documentary on school exclusions, 'Excluded'.[19][20] One young person who had experienced significant childhood trauma felt that teachers did not understand them or get to know them prior to their exclusion. *"People have, like, stuff going in our lives. And then teachers don't really take that into consideration."*

Another young person involved in the project outlined their 'alternative to exclusion' process, rooted in understanding and restoration: *"Excluding them would be the last thing I would do, I would find out the whole story. I would have them in their classroom, take them away that period, let them calm down, let them do the work in the school and after they have settled down and the problem resolved, then send them back to class."*

This echoes what children and young people said during focus groups: they feel that they are not always heard, and that the challenges they face – challenges often experienced outwith the school gates – are not adequately considered in responses to their behaviour. They feel that they are not given an opportunity to share their perspectives and enable teachers to understand the full picture. Building positive relationships and using a restorative approach is a key solution to these issues.
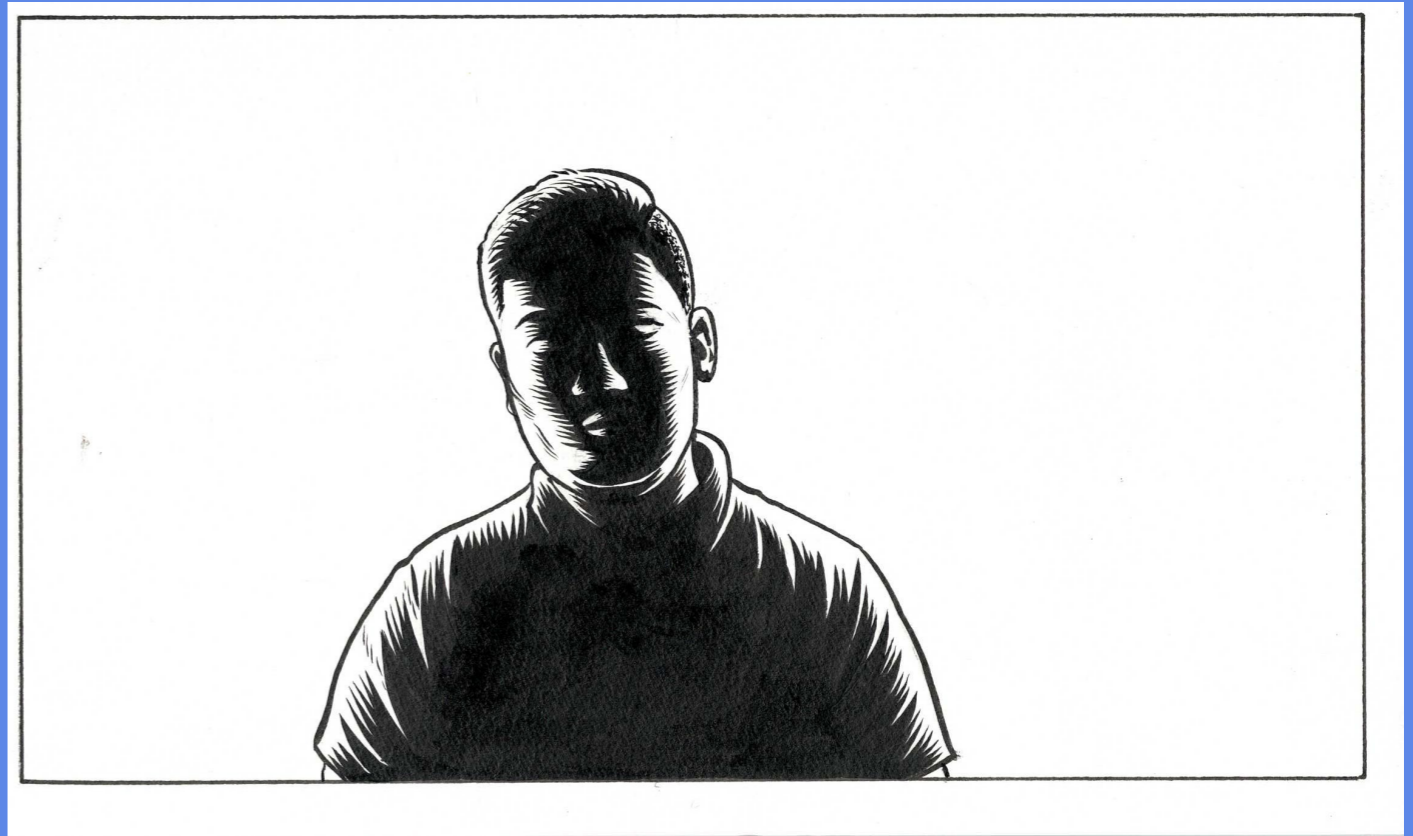
17 http://www.cycj.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/ILC-Common-Factors-paper-2020.pdf

18 https://www.gov.scot/publications/included-engaged-involved-part-2-positive-approach-preventing-managing-school/_
19 https://eachother.org.uk/excluded-film/
20 For further information on young people's participation in 'Excluded' please see: https://eachother.org.uk/excluded-we-felt-heard-the-young-scots-who-shaped-our-school-exclusions-film/

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A culture where children and young people feel included, respected, safe, and secure – and where their achievements and contributions are valued and celebrated – is essential to the development of good relationships. In order to create such an environment for effective learning and teaching, there should be a shared understanding of wellbeing underpinned by Children's Rights and a focus on positive relationships across the whole school community, as detailed in the Scottish Government's 'Included, engaged, involved' part 1 guidance.[21]

A common factor that can contribute to improved life chances for children and young people involved in or at risk of involvement in offending behaviour is recognising that strong, secure, consistent, and trusting relationships, even just with one adult, is critical to achieving sustainable, improved outcomes, and that such relationships take time, patience, persistence, and perseverance to build and sustain.[22] This need is not exclusive to young people in conflict with the law but can be applied to all young people who have experienced trauma and adverse childhood experiences and is known to build resilience in children.

One young person told us about the significant impact of having a positive relationship with their teacher:

> "I've got a really good relationship with a teacher, the things that made us click was that she was a lot like my nana. She always listened to me. I could just walk into the support base and she'd ask if I was okay and sit me down and listen to me. And that's just what I needed. Someone to sit and listen. At the start she didn't know me, she just sat me down and listened."

In the example above, the teacher with which the student had a strong positive relationship was not their pastoral care teacher. They told us that: *"my guidance teacher for S1 was great but I preferred to go to [teacher discussed previously]."* They went on to explain that they had a new guidance teacher in S2 who actively discouraged them from seeing the teacher with whom they had built a strong relationship. The young person did not want to engage with their new guidance teacher yet felt cut off from the person they wanted support from.

Another participant, who had been out of school for a year-and-a-half, noted that their pastoral care teacher established a strong relationship with them early in their re-introduction to school – helping them to get settled by providing a tour of the school before starting.

21 https://www.gov.scot/publications/included-engaged-involved-part-1-positive-approach-promotion-management-attendance-scottish-schools/
22 http://www.cycj.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/ILC-Common-Factors-paper-2020.pdf

However, some children and young people told us they had difficult relationships with their teachers, feeling like their aspirations had been set and limited - particularly for those who had either been in conflict with the law or were deemed to be on the periphery of offending: *"Teachers were being nasty and saying they didn't want me in their school. Told me I was the worst student that had ever been in the school." / "I got blamed for something I didn't do and teacher told me they didn't like me." / "One time in Primary, the teachers told me I was going to jail when I was older – teacher said that in front of the whole class." / "[A teacher told me] "you've got no future" / "your mother must be sad about how you've turned out."*

Dr Claire Lightowler's seminal work, titled 'Right's Respecting? Scotland's approach to children in conflict with the law' concludes that:

'There is no justice in taking traumatised children; holding them solely responsible for their actions; blaming and stigmatising them whilst failing to give them what they need; putting barriers in the way of loving and caring relationships; and taking existing supports and opportunities away from them'. The report ultimately calls for *'a shift from focusing on children as troubled, challenged, vulnerable and challenging, which while often well-meaning and containing partial truth, can encourage negative unintended consequences which disproportionately affect and stigmatise the most disadvantaged children.'*

Includem's work is fundamentally rooted in hope – supporting children, young people, and their families to build better lives, including through engaging with their education and diverting from negative behaviours. Young people interviewed for a recent report on the use of restorative practices reflected on includem's non-judgemental approach to building strong relationships, and in turn, helping to raise aspirations:[23]

"[Includem] listened to what I had to say, whereas at that point, I thought that the world was against me. So they were just there, a listening ear. They helped realise the underlying problem [of my behaviour], and they make me realise that I did not do that because I was a bad person but because there was an [underlying problem]."

"You look at my paperwork, you will think this is a bad [person]…until you sit and talk to me and go and realise 'Nahhh it is not a bad [person]'. That was a lot of people. I did get a lot of stereotype but includem did not stereotype me, includem did not look at me and go 'that's a bad [person]'. Includem gave me a chance, a better chance, and you got to know them and you get to being friends with them, so you'll know them and they will know you."

By taking a youth work approach and focussing on the strengths of the child, young person, family, and community, we can work with schools to ensure the messages young people receive are consistent in raising their confidence and aspirations. In turn, this will support school staff to understand the challenges children and young

23 https://includem.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/I-am-a-good-person.-I-like-to-be-good.-The-benefits-of-the-restorative-approach-in-the-charitable-sector.-The-cases-of-Includem.-Report..docx

people face beyond the school gates to in order to respond empathetically.

'Bridging the gap' between home and school can build empathy by helping teachers to understand why a child is behaving a certain way. Ultimately, all behaviour is communication, and whole family support is crucial in understanding what is being communicated.

"[Includem has] grasped the fact that the most important thing to do is build that relationship, that trust, and that if they have to pass information on it's not about undermining the trust it's about making sure the right people know the right information to support, and I think they've managed to get that over to the young people and to their families, and I think that's why it's worked so well."

Through building these positive, trusting relationships with children and young people we are able to work with them, and their schools, to negotiate learning arrangements that work best for them – this may include moving classes, or flexible and/or reduced timetables. Based on what they have told us through the survey and focus groups, we know that a priority moving forward should be ensuring that children and young people can build positive relationships with school staff so that they can be supported, understood, and listened to at all stages of their education.
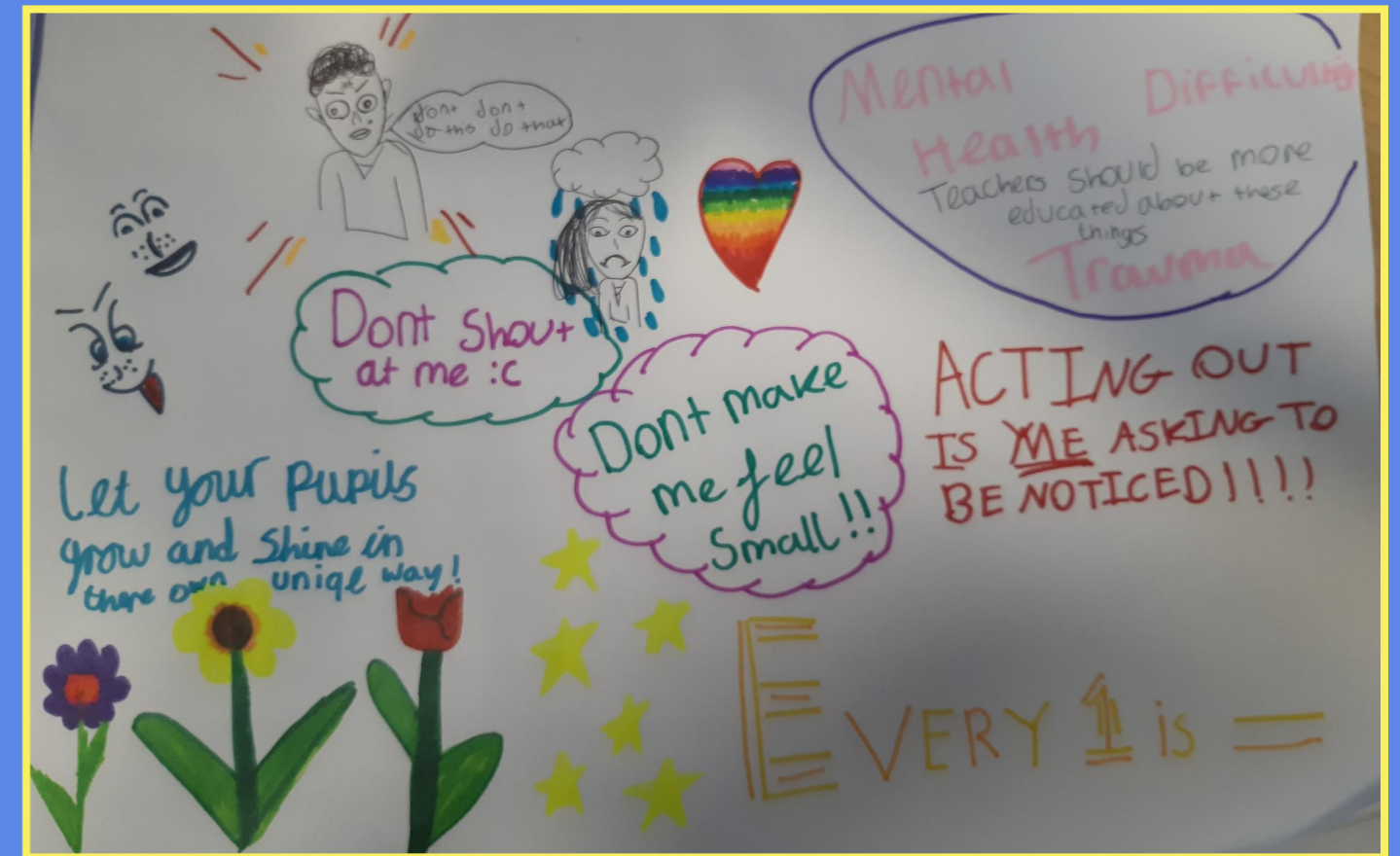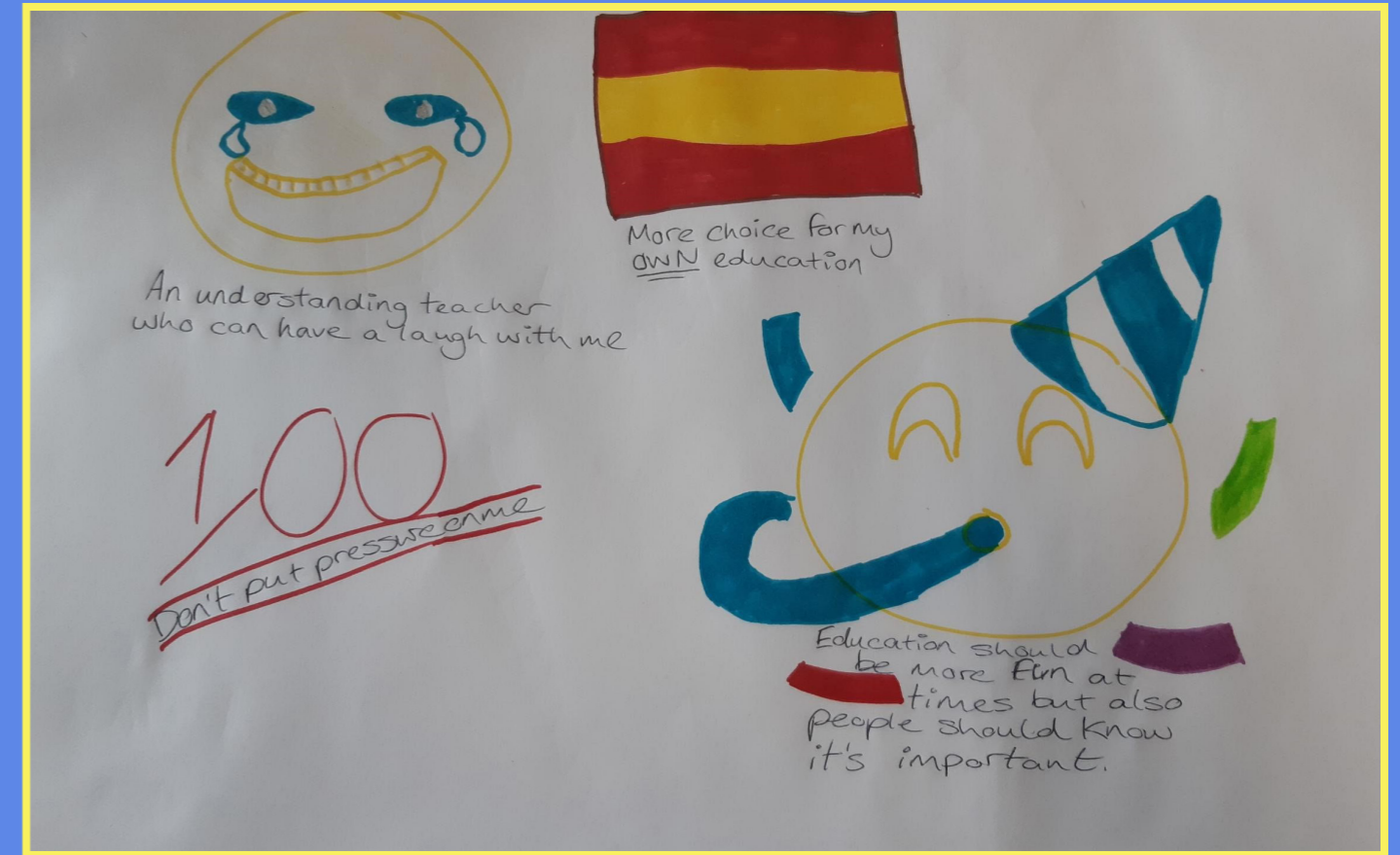
These two pieces of artwork reflect on what the young people said they should have had in school.

Part Three

Recommendations

1 Schools should be underpinned by a children's rights perspective:
Those we support emphasised having their voices heard and being included in decisions which affect them as priorities – a rights-based approach will ensure they are included, involved, and engaged in their learning.

2 Expand the use of restorative practices:
Restorative conversations not just between peers, but between pupils and staff could build stronger relationships and help young people feel that they can put mistakes behind them.

3 Identify the 'one significant adult' within the school:
Just one significant adult can make the necessary positive difference for a child or young person in school. While some young people we spoke to cited positive relationships with pastoral care teachers, this significant adult could be any staff member within the school – the structures must be in place for this to happen.

4 Increased provision of whole family support:
For children and young people at risk of exclusion and/or on the fringes of offending behaviour in particular, a whole family support approach is needed. If the challenges experienced in school are caused by issues within the community or family, then they will not be overcome with solely school-based solutions.

5 An ambition to end exclusion for all children and young people:
Young people who participated in focus groups told us exclusion was not helpful for them, and research shows that exclusion can have significantly negative impacts on future outcomes and wellbeing. The Promise's Plan 21-24 outlines an end to the exclusion of all care experienced students by March 2024 – we believe this could act as a vital stepping stone towards a longer term ambition to end exclusion for all.

6 Teachers should be supported to understand children and young people's emotions and behaviours:
Training should be made available to teachers to understand why children and young people are behaving the way they are, in order to develop healthy relationships and forge meaningful connections. Young people we spoke to wanted schools to adopt hopeful and strengths-based approaches to build on their capacities and work together towards a better future. Ultimately, teachers need the time, space, and resources to deliver the support children and young people tell us they need.

We would like to thank all the children and young people who participated in this research from across Scotland.

You can also read our previous policy reports:

- Staying Connected
- Poverty & The Impact of COVID-19 on Young People & families

at

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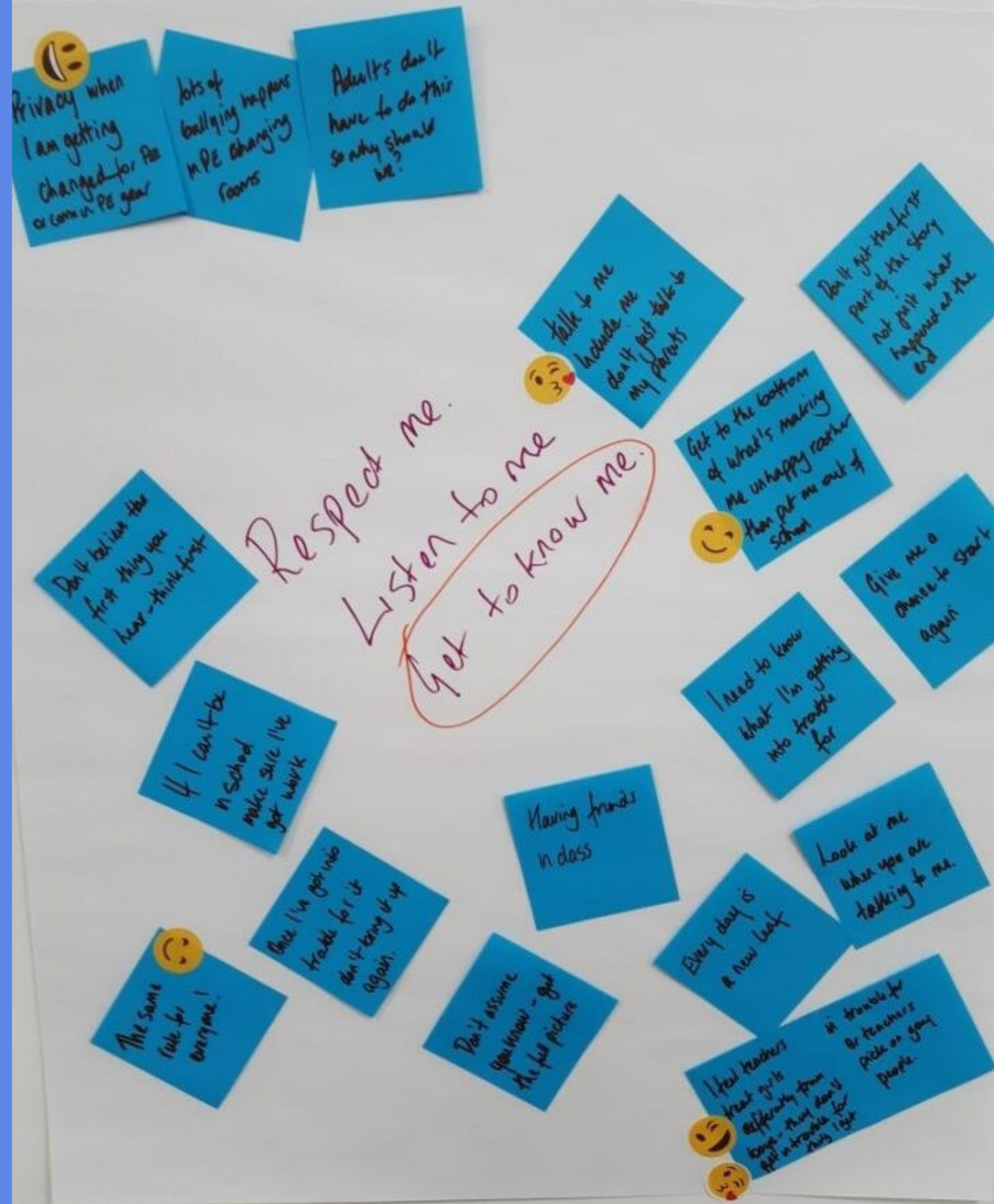
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