

UNISON Scotland Classroom Assistant Conference September 29th 2007.

Jackie Gilchrist spoke on behalf of UNISON Scotland Education Issues Group

My name is Jackie Gilchrist and I am a classroom assistant. I work in a provision attached to a mainstream primary school in Midlothian. The provision I work in is specifically for children with autism.



We are a staged provision where children are given the chance to access their mainstream peers and the 5 – 14 curriculum. I work with children who are at very different areas on the spectrum. This means some children thrive in the environment and others do not.

I work with a principal teacher, 2 nursery nurses on job share and 12 other part time classroom assistants from 8.30 am till 3.30. We all carry out the same tasks and duties and there is no difference in our jobs. If you were to walk into the classroom you would not be able to pick out who has what title. I am the person most consistently in the class and I am the lowest paid.

I work from a generic job description which states “any other relevant task”. It is very difficult to know which tasks are not relevant so my job role has stretched and stretched even to the point that I para-teach. Most of us will be in the position of dealing with children who present the most challenging and violent behaviour especially when they are removed from class.

My job is by no means typical but then every one of our jobs, as every head teacher will use classrooms assistants differently. This again leads to complex

and varied roles. I could list all the tasks undertaken by classroom assistants in all settings but that would take pages and pages of A4 paper double sided.

I questioned how I could try and make a change, where I could be heard. I obviously matter at school level especially with my class team but not at local authority level. I felt I had too small a voice and did not want to be labelled a ‘stirrer’ in such a close working environment. I looked at the protection and influence the EIS offered to teachers and believed the next step I needed was to become involved and vocal at union level.

Becoming a shop steward led me to the EOC Valuable Assets investigation.

Through my branch I responded to an invitation to put my experience and sent off 6 A4 pages entitled “a day in the life of”. This was a typical day from start to finish with every task I perform. I was contacted by the EOC who were astounded by the workload and skills my job required. I am sure each one of you would be able to produce the same kind of response.

The Valuable Assets report has been launched and gives credence to what we all feel. We have to carry out our roles with a high level of skill, professionalism

and dedication. The report has stated that we are undermined. This is exactly how I and all of you here feel. UNISON has responded to the report by setting up an Education Issues Working Group that have looked at the recommendations the EOC have made and decided to ask us what we think the priorities are and outcomes we want to see. We now have the opportunity to be heard individually and as a group.

Throughout this experience I have surprisingly become aware of the message we are sending to our young people. We must address the issue of low paid women in soft skilled jobs. If we do not, our children will deem our valuable input as worthless, cheap and demeaning especially when some young people in part time jobs can earn more or the same as we do.

Please use today to talk to each other choose your issues and concerns. Prioritise what you want to achieve and influence the work of the union in Scotland.



Classroom Assistants from all over Scotland say: Its time for Equal Pay!



Other Speakers

The speakers were **Laura Hutchison from the Equality and Human Rights Commission (ex EOC)** reflecting the impact of the recent research on the undervaluing of classroom assistants and outlining the follow on steps that have been pursued. Laura reassured UNISON members that the report recommendations do not end here. Further action has now been targeted at local authorities who continue to undervalue the job of classroom assistants and fail to represent the diversity of roles undertaken by producing only one generic job description.

Peter Hunter UNISON Scotland's Legal Officer spoke about UNISON's work in lodging equal pay cases on behalf of members all over Scotland and encouraged branches and members to continue to work with classroom assistants building the numbers of equal pay cases and in doing so highlighting the cause of fair and equal pay.

Christina McAnea UNISON Head of Education brought support from UNISON at UK level. Christina shared the experience of England and Wales in

the schools remodelling process and outlined the UK strategy to highlight UNISON's role as the education union. "UNISON is the largest union for school staff with over 200,000 members," she said. "They do a range of jobs including teaching assistants, nursery staff, janitors, administrative and clerical, technicians and bursars".

Jennifer McCarey, Branch Development Officer with UNISON Scotland's Pay Equality Group outlined the organising strategy that UNISON Scotland has developed in partnership with members, branches and staff. Central to that is encouraging branches to hold local meetings with classroom assistants and using these meetings to recruit members and stewards. She said: "At least 55% of all Scottish classroom assistants are UNISON members and that figure is growing. The challenge is not just to recruit members but to recruit and train representatives, ensuring classroom assistants have a real voice and are represented around the negotiating table in local authorities.

Thank you for coming forward as delegates, UNISON is a better union with your involvement; we are closer to and more representative of our membership."

Job Evaluation Workshop

The workshop was well attended and held twice during the conference. Reports were given from branches throughout Scotland who are at various stages in the job evaluation process. Local branches reported the repeated underscoring of classroom assistants throughout Scotland and pay and grading proposals for some which would result in a reduction in wages. Real concerns were raised about the accuracy of the job evaluation of classroom assistants. Delegates were keen to share information on classroom assistants' outcomes and wish to continue this to help arguments for re evaluation and appeals.

The recommendations are

1. Be familiar with the work of the EOC on classroom assistants at <http://83.137.212.42/sitearchive/eoc/Default9be2.html?page=18802>
2. Obtain copies of all single status material including job evaluation scores, rank order of jobs and revised pay and grading proposals.
3. Gather information on how the proposals affect classroom assistants
4. Speak to classroom assistants about the job descriptions, benchmarking and matching processes used.
5. Prepare to litigate for classroom assistants

Organising and Recruitment Workshop

The workshop had around 15 participants and a good geographical spread. After a full discussion delegates concluded that the following methods work when organising and recruiting with classroom assistants and should be adopted as a strategy throughout Scotland. These recommendations were then reported back to the main conference.

Local

1. Members meetings should be held on this issue to encourage wider participation and recruitment
2. Invite the EOC to link members issues to the research undertaken and equal pay
3. Invite other classroom assistants who have successfully organised around this issue to share experiences.

Branch

1. Pathways courses can be used to mentor new contacts and stewards. Participants can be recruited through members meetings.
2. Building a profile in branches - schools networks – involving all education UNISON stewards - help to build a profile and involve stewards / workplace contacts from across the schools workforce.
3. Encourage conference delegates and others to ensure branches are attending the Education Issues Group. If there is a vacancy why not volunteer to be the delegate? Check with Ken Matthews UNISON Regional Officer.

UNISON Scotland

1. A classroom assistant network should be established to keep the issue live
2. Start sharing information across branches like job evaluation scores, Pay and grading proposals
3. Expand the education website as an information point for members and stewards

National Framework of Job Roles and Qualifications, Continuing Professional Development and Career Progression Workshop

This workshop was very well attended and held twice to allow all delegates who wished, to attend. Further consultation required with members on these issues

National Framework –

1. How many levels ?
2. Should there be protection of existing levels?
3. Should Partial levels be introduced?

Roles

1. Where you work and what you do. i.e. Working in mainstream establishments, additional support needs, primary / secondary,
2. Your role in the class. Are you left alone in the classroom, working one to one, or with groups of children and / or children with behavioural issues?

Qualifications & continuing professional development.

1. There is a large range of qualifications undertaken by classroom assistants, some of which receive support from the employer either financial and / or in terms of time off work, however some branches report that employers did not offer support.
2. Concerns were raised over the lack of training opportunities for many classroom assistants
3. Lack of specialist training and professional development .
4. Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework – Where would qualification fit?





View From the Floor How did delegates evaluate the conference?

Excellent support ! A real feel good factor

“I thought the course highly relevant to all classroom assistants and more of this training can bring classroom assistants to the fore”
Jim from Argyll and Bute

“Keep it up! This will encourage more participation”

Anne from Renfrewshire

“It is interesting to hear what is happening in other areas and to be able to compare jobs”

“Very worthwhile thanks to all”
Audrey, East Dumbarton

“Again please!”
Ellen from Edinburgh

- Over 50 delegates participated in the conference from as far away as Lerwick and Dumfries.
- Most of the delegates thought the venue, date and location were very good,
- Most branches had sent members who were classroom assistants as part of their delegation.
- Some of our delegates told us the workshops rooms were too cold.
- The 95 % of conference delegates told us that the seminar topics were very relevant.
- Lots of delegates told us they wanted more events like this to attend

THE NEXT STEPS

UNISON’s Education Issues Group has established a Classroom Assistants Working Group.

The first actions from the conference have been identified.

1. Collate evidence that demonstrates the undervaluing of classroom assistants work over a broad section of Scottish local authorities
2. Establish evidence of job evaluation outcomes from all Scottish local authorities
3. Develop a network of UNISON Classroom Assistant Workplace Contacts through email and the UNISON website.
4. Publish a report of UNISON Scotland’s Classroom Assistants Conference and send to all delegates.

Do you want to be part of an email mailing list for Classroom Assistants? Please compete and return or email j.graham@unison.co.uk

Name

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