EVIDENCE FOR THE EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE INQUIRY ON THE EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT GAP

Consultation 3: How parents (including guardians) and schools can work best together to raise all pupils' attainment, particularly those whose attainment is lowest.

Introduction

Established in 2011, CELCIS is the Centre for excellence for looked after children in Scotland. Our remit is to work with service providers (such as schools and colleges) to improve the experiences and outcomes of children and young people who are (or have been) 'looked after' by local authorities. For this reason our responses to the questions posed by the Committee are framed in consideration of the particular circumstances of looked after young people and care leavers.

Question 1: Do schools always explain clearly to parents how children learn throughout their school years? How can parents help their children's development (e.g. with reading and wider literacy approaches)?

Scottish schools use a wide range of approaches to inform parents about 'what' children learn, including school handbooks and websites, meetings on aspects of the curriculum, and inviting parents to be classroom helpers. These approaches are complimented by the online resources provided by Education Scotland; in particular the recently updated *Parentzone Scotland* website.[1] A number of these approaches and resources also provide an opportunity for schools to explain the 'how' children learn, and the role parents and carers have in supporting them.

However, while schools and their partners (especially third sector organisations) are increasingly aware of the need to support the home to understand children's learning stages and styles,[2] we believe that schools (and managing local education authorities) could do more to enable parents and carers to help with children's development. Increased support in understanding (and adapting to) 'how' children learn would be of particular benefit to parents and carers from more disadvantaged backgrounds, who may not appreciate how important the 'home'

---

[1] http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/parentzone/
[2] For example, please see the 'Learning at Home' section of the Parentzone website, or the Scottish Book Trust resources.

environment is to a child's school success. In a seminal review of the impact of parental involvement on children's education, Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) concluded that:

> *"Parental involvement in the form of 'at-home good parenting' has a significant positive effect on children's achievement and adjustment even after all other factors shaping attainment have been taken out of the equation. In the primary age range the impact caused by different levels of parental involvement is much bigger than differences associated with variations in the quality of schools. The scale of the impact is evident across all social classes and all ethnic groups."[3]*

This strong link between the 'voluntary expression of parental involvement' and school outcomes has been found in other, subsequent meta-analyses of the research, and it is now widely accepted by educationalists.[4] But more recent research has also highlighted the need for, and positive effects of, 'school and community led parental involvement' approaches.[5] An example would be teachers training parents how to teach their children to read.[6] In a study carried out by the University of Strathclyde for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF), the authors found that parents with low incomes or who live in poverty mostly have high aspirations for their children, but that they need support in specific ways of supporting their children in learning.[7]

The JRF research suggests that many of the traditional methods of engaging with parents (e.g. parents' meetings in school) have little impact on supporting parents (and therefore pupils) from more disadvantaged backgrounds. The degree to which parents are able (or the degree to which they *feel* able) to provide active support to their child's literacy or numeracy development varies significantly, and families are not always aware of the literacy practices and skills valued by schools. Close (2001) is among many authors to stress the critical importance of raising the self-confidence of parents and carers in relation to their role in supporting children's development.[8]

A number of effective approaches (to supporting parents and carers) have been identified in a systematic review carried out for UK Department for Education

---

[3] Desforges, C & Abouchaar, A (2003) *The Impact of Parental Involvement, Parental Support and Family Education on Pupil Achievement and Adjustment: A literature Review*, Department for Education and Skills (UK), p.4
[4] http://www.uk.sagepub.com/oleary2e/study/Journal%20Articles/Article%209%20-%20Jeynes.pdf
[5] Jeynes, W (2012) A meta-analysis of different types of parental involvement programs for urban students, Urban Education 47(4), pp. 706 - 742
[6] Goodall, J & Vorhaus, J (2011) Review of best practice in parental engagement, Department of Education Research Report
[7] Sosu, E & Ellis, S (2014) Closing the Attainment Gap in Scottish Education, Joseph Rowntree Foundation
[8] http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/assets/0000/0423/Parental_involvement_2001.pdf

(DfE).[9] These include helping carers of young children to use developmental activities (e.g. reading, games) and supporting parents of older children to participate and engage with children's learning at home. In relation to looked after children specifically, organisations such as The Fostering Network have developed programmes such as 'Fostering Achievement' (currently in operation in Northern Ireland and London), where teachers and schools work to promote the role of foster carers as 'first educators'.[10] However, it should be noted that the DfE report was unequivocal in its conclusion that good, effective practice was not tied to a specific programme or approach, but rather with:

> *"[…] schools which were proactive, had listened to parents, and refined their strategy to take account of their suggestions and built on activities it considered successful. Where there is effective parental involvement the single most important factor was found to be the enthusiasm of the head-teacher."[11]*

The authors go on to highlight the need for school approaches to 'parental engagement' to be integrated into the core of its approach to teaching (not a 'bolt on' to mainstream activities), and for programmes to have a clear focus on raising children's achievement. (Many schools, they found, prioritised their relationship with parents over promoting pupil achievement.)[12] The report's authors also suggest that "interventions are more likely to be effective when they are informed by the views of parents identified by means of thorough needs assessment".[13] This applied in particular to marginalised groups, which in the Scottish context would include kinship carers and the parents of children 'looked after at home'.

In the current context of 'Children's Services Planning' and mandatory consultation in respect to 'early learning and childcare' provision (Parts 3 and 6, respectively, of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014), Scottish local authorities have an unparalleled opportunity to carry out just this kind of 'thorough needs assessment' described in the DfE report. We strongly urge the Scottish Government to emphasise (through statutory guidance and secondary legislation) the need for every Community Planning Partnership to carry out such assessments. Potential models for the process (and how to carry out the necessary analysis of the data) already exist in Scotland, in the form of the *Improving Children's Outcomes*[14] programme operated by Perth & Kinross and Dundee, the *Realigning Children's Services* programme recently commissioned by the Scottish Government, and the *Glasgow Indicators Project*[15].

---

[9] Goodall, J & Vorhaus, J (2011) Review of best practice in parental engagement, Department of Education Research Report
[10] Fostering Achievement (Northern Ireland) Fostering Achievement (London)
[11] Ibid, p.24
[12] Ibid, p.25
[13] Goodall, J & Vorhaus, J (2011) Review of best practice in parental engagement, Department of Education Research Report, p.26
[14] Dartington Social Research Unit, Improving Children's Outcomes programme
[15] Understanding Glasgow: The Glasgow Indicators Project

To improve the level and quality of parental / carer engagement in children's education we believe it is critically important that schools and local authorities are motivated and equipped to support parents. Approaches should be localised, and sensitive to individual and community needs. Introducing such approaches on a significant scale is likely to require additional resources (or redeployment of existing resources) and skilled professionals trained to work with parents in the home and other community settings. In the interests of raising the attainment of looked after children, and closing the attainment gap more generally, supporting parents and carers to understand 'how' children learn (and how they can support children's development) should be a priority area for the resources soon to be made available to Scottish schools through the *Attainment Scotland Fund*.[16]

Question 2: Are schools always flexible enough to allow parents to be involved in their children's education (given parents' work commitments, for example)?

Through our engagement with carers, teachers and other educational practitioners we have encountered a wide variety of practice, with some schools flexible and accommodating of parent / carer needs, others much less so. What we have observed, in line with the conclusions of the DfE Evidence Review, is that the leadership of the head teacher is central to the priority given to involving parents and carers. The head teacher has a key role in prescribing the parameters of engagement and, critically, its tone; teacher attitudes towards parents are an important barrier to effective and inclusive practice.[17]

An example from a recent focus group with kinship carers illustrates this point. A kinship carer had an arrangement with the head teacher of her grandson's primary school whereby she was on-call to visit the school at short notice if the boy's behaviour became difficult for the class teacher to manage. This approach was usually successful in calming and re-engaging the child, and both carer and teacher felt supported through the process. Unfortunately, however, a new head teacher disapproved of the arrangement, and brought it an end. The child's behaviour subsequently led to several exclusions. Although this story reflects the experiences of only one carer (and presents just one side of the story) it is consistent with other reports, and the academic literature. At the same focus group, a representative of a third sector agency told us:

> *"We often hear from young people that the only communication between their parents and their school is when something negative has taken place; this must be a barrier to parent engagement as well as heightening the young person's resentment. Many of the parents we work with already feel*

---

[16] SG website news story (09/02/2015) Smart money on attainment [website accessed on 20/03/2015]

[17] Goodall, J & Vorhaus, J (2011) Review of best practice in parental engagement, Department of Education Research Report, p.48

that they have failed as parents and have this re-enforced by reports of negative behaviour from school. Parents need positive re-enforcement of their skills and hearing regular positive feedback about their kids, however small, can help achieve this.[18]

Some parents and carers (including foster carers) of looked after children will have had a negative experience of school themselves, and may, as a result, not prioritise the children's education, or be anxious about engaging with the school. Some will have literacy and numeracy issues, leading to embarrassment and fears of stigma. These factors act as barriers to successful engagement between school and carer, and serve to reinforce the practical challenges faced by many, such as work commitments, access to transport, child and other caring responsibilities.

To meaningfully engage with all parents and carers (not just those willing and able) schools need to develop approaches which are flexible, sensitive and responsive to need. This requires school staff to have had appropriate training and coaching, particularly when working with parents / carers whose backgrounds are very different to their own. 'Parental engagement' should therefore be a core element of initial teacher training, and continuing professional development.[19] Suitably trained staff (including head teachers) should understand that effective 'parental engagement' will look different to different people, according to the skills and values of parents and carers. Schools strategies must be flexible enough to respond to the variety of parenting styles, and not impose a one-size-fits-all approach. This again highlights the need for proper assessments of pupil and family need, and for schools to have systems in place with which they can measure the efficacy of their interventions.

In an unpublished thesis Rhona McKinnon suggests that schools must also have clarity of purpose regarding their activities to involve parents.[20] For example, an 'open-door' approach to engagement, without clear parameters on what can be discussed, carries the risk that the engagement quickly becomes about 'student progress', reflecting the school's priorities, not the parents. This limits the potential of the engagement to break down barriers between home and school, and to provide a richer picture of the child and their social environment. In one school included in McKinnon's research, issues about children's academic progress were excluded from the drop-in surgery available to parents.

Finally, we would recommend that greater emphasis is placed on outreach work, facilitating parental engagement within the home or community spaces, rather than within the school itself. The DfE Evidence Review finds that children's centres

---

[18] CELCIS and Pupil Inclusion Network (2014) focus group for kinship carers, exploring issues of exclusion

[19] Goodall, J & Vorhaus, J (2011) [Review of best practice in parental engagement](#), Department of Education Research Report

[20] MacKinnon, R. (2013) *Practising Power: Parent-Teacher Consultations in Early Years Settings*. Unpublished Ed D thesis, University of Stirling.

can be particularly effective in involving parents and families.[21] In interviews parents reported that these centres helped them to become more confident in speaking to teachers, and in developing an understanding of how children learn. Moreover, parental support programmes which focused on both academic outcomes and training in parenting skills was found to be more effective than interventions that do not include such 'parent' training.[22]

For looked after children there are additional reasons for taking an outreach approach, including potential breaches of children's confidentiality if work is carried out in groups, and the distance carers can live from schools children attended. In the development of the Parental Engagement Act 2006, focus groups indicated that home-link workers had a positive impact for children looked after at home, helping to build and maintain relationships between their family and the school. From our experience, home-link workers also allow the school to better understand what parents and carers already do with their children, and how they (parents / carers) are most likely to respond positively to attempts to engage them in their children's learning. An example of an initiative developed in response to parent / carer feedback is the use of text and social media to report regular (weekly) good news stories about children's progress to parents or carers. Elsewhere, we are aware of a Scottish head teacher who arranged for parent-teacher meetings to take place in a pub situated near the homes of parents who had previously struggled to attend. Without systematic evaluation we cannot confirm whether such initiatives have directly improved parental engagement, but at a minimum they reflect a willingness to be flexible in approach, and responsive to need. The research would suggest that success in engaging disengaged or disadvantaged parents and carers is contingent on these qualities being at the core of a school's approach.

Question 3: To what extent do schools offer particular support to the parents of pupils from the most disadvantaged communities, in order to improve the attainment of those pupils?

Our experience of school approaches to engaging and supporting parents / carers of looked after children is mixed. A recent action research project, undertaken by CELCIS in the City of Edinburgh, involved schools redesigning the way they communicated with parents of children looked after at home. From a periodic, problem-orientated model (where parents were informed of bad behaviour), the new system was built on regular, positive communication (the content focused on aspects of the child's week which were promising). As a result, improvements in the parent's relationships with the school were reported, and the process was also found to help teachers to focus on children's strengths and abilities. Children were

---

[21] Goodall, J & Vorhaus, J (2011) Review of best practice in parental engagement, Department of Education Research Report, p. 77
[22] Ibid, p.7

seen to be more engaged in education, which should, if maintained in the long term, have implications for their attainment.[23]

Such approaches are not uncommon in Scotland, but nor are they sufficiently widespread. Too often we encounter statements along the lines of 'they [the parents] are too difficult to engage with' or 'they don't want to be involved'. In a research piece for Enquire, Pilkington (2010) suggests that parents of children who are looked after away from home are often excluded from the school process entirely, because of a prevailing view that they are too 'complex and difficult'. This results 'in [parents] being overlooked as potentially significant contributors' to the child's education[24]. Which is a serious concern when it is considered that many accommodated looked after children return to live with their parents and families before school leaving age. MacKinnon suggests that if schools and teachers could acknowledge the richness of pupils and parents backgrounds, an important 'fund of knowledge' would be made available to them, helping them to better engage the child in learning. [25]

In line with the conclusions of the DfE Evidence Review, we find schools offering particular support to disadvantaged parents and pupils are nearly always led by a head teacher who is personally committed to helping vulnerable learners, and who is determined for the school to be 'owned' by all parts of the community it serves. These head teachers, often supported by depute heads with responsibility for pastoral support, make partnership and multi-agency arrangements an essential component of their strategy for parental engagement.[26] The *Getting it Right* approach is evident, with information shared between partners, and external expertise (such as educational psychologists) utilised strategically.

While the extent of tailored support for disadvantaged parents (or the carers of disadvantaged pupils) is probably insufficient across Scotland as a whole, we are currently involved with a number of local authorities who are actively considering how to improve their provision for this group. Moreover, rather than simply mandating an increase in the amount of support available, these authorities are giving careful attention to the quality and form of support they provide. Investment by local authorities will be needed if they are to understand the needs of disadvantaged communities, followed up by a critical appraisal of what works to help parents and carers help children. As noted by the DfE's review, effective parental engagement with disadvantaged communities depends on 'strong

---

[23] Hennessy, A & Connelly, G (2014) *Improving Educational Outcomes for Children Looked After at Home: Use of Improvement Methodology*, CELCIS Research Briefing

[24] Pilkington, K. (2010) *Parental and Carer Involvement for Looked After Children: Messages from Research.* Paper presented at: Enquire annual conference 'Families as Learning Partners' March 9, 2010. Workshop 'Parental and Carer Involvement for Looked After Children'.

[25] MacKinnon, R. (2013) *Practising Power: Parent-Teacher Consultations in Early Years Settings.* Unpublished Ed D thesis, University of Stirling p. 35/36.

[26] Goodall, J & Vorhaus, J (2011) Review of best practice in parental engagement, Department of Education Research Report

leadership, clear strategic direction, collecting, monitoring and sharing data, and pro-actively engaging with and reaching out to parents and families'.[27]

Question 4: Is there evidence to demonstrate which approaches used by schools have been most successful and are these being used, as appropriate, throughout Scotland?

A review from 1997 indicated that even the most well-planned and well-intentioned school programmes for parental engagement fail if they do not address issues of 'parental role' construction and parental efficacy (in relation to helping children succeed in school).[28] In informing our work with schools we therefore make reference to programmes and approaches which have shown (either in a UK or other English speaking context) significant outcomes in respect to parent / carer skills and knowledge. Examples include school based counselling services which work with child and parent / carer, paired reading schemes underpinned by a 'parent' tutoring element (to raise skills and confidence), and regular, positive updates from teachers on children's progress (as used in our Edinburgh project).[29] Research from the US also indicates that special 'home work' clubs, where teachers and parents are both engaged in supporting the child with a specific task, not only improves the child's academic performance, but also school-parent relations and the skills of the parent.[30]

On the basis of the available literature these combined approaches to intervention, which focus on supporting both children and carers, appear to be particularly effective in improving outcomes for disadvantaged pupils (when based on planning for individual needs and an understanding social and environmental context). We are currently testing their efficacy in the Scottish context through our 'test-of-change' projects with schools, as part of wider Scottish Government efforts to improve the involvement of parents, currently being led by the Raising Attainment for All (RAFA) team. This should provide further evidence about the success of certain approaches. But while there are gaps in the evidence base, there is now a sufficient body of information on which schools can develop their own interventions, and a number of well-evaluated 'off-the-shelf' approaches (particularly in relation to building home-school links).[31] The reasons why these approaches are not more widely used in Scotland (or existing approaches evaluated) is probably linked to insufficient resources (perceived and actual), a

---

[27] Ibid, p.64
[28] http://vanderbilt.edu/peabody/family-school/papers/1997.pdf
[29] Liabo, K et al (2013) A systematic review of interventions to suppot looked after children in school, Child and Family Social Work, 18, pp. 341 - 353
[30] Jeynes, W (2012) A meta-analysis of different types of parental involvement programs for urban students, Urban Education 47(4), pp. 706 - 742
[31] Please see Goodall, J & Vorhaus, J (2011) Review of best practice in parental engagement, Department of Education Research Report

lack of leadership at school and local authority levels, and attitudes of school staff.

In relation to staff attitudes, it is important to acknowledge that engaging with families from disadvantaged communities can be challenging, requiring skills and competencies not necessarily associated with class room teaching. School teachers should not simply be required to 'do things differently' without appropriate development opportunities, and support from other professionals (such as community and adult teachers, family-link works and social workers).

Furthermore, while schools have a critical role to play in improving outcomes, for the attainment gap to be closed educational inequality must be assiduously tackled at the pre-school stage. High-quality pre-school provision is consistently shown to positively influence children's intellectual and social behavioural development, and for this reason we welcome the additional 'early learning and childcare' support which should now be available to every 'looked after' two year old under Part 6 of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014. We urge the Scottish Government to monitor implementation of this legislation closely, to ensure that local authorities and their partners tailor their provision so that it meets the specific educational and care needs of looked after children, and their parents and carers.

Question 5: Has greater parental involvement in school education through the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006 led to an improvement in pupil attainment?

In 2009 Consumer Focus Scotland carried out research into the impact of the *Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006*.[32] This provided some evidence that a wider group of parents were becoming engaged with schools, due to the introduction of parent councils. However, there was no relationship identified with improved pupil attainment, and in a review of the relevant academic databases we found no other research related to this specific legislation. Our expectation is that the 2006 Act has had little direct impact on student attainment, as the wider literature from parent engagement suggests that resources deployed in this form of school-parent interaction have little to no impact in terms of enhancing children's learning; particularly for children from the most disadvantaged families.

---

[32] Consumer Focus Scotland (2009) *Making the Difference? The impact of the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006*. Consumer Focus Scotland.

Question 6: Are there any new measures that could be realistically taken (for example, by the Scottish Government, local authorities, parents' forums, the voluntary sector etc.) to help parents raise their child's attainment?

The conclusions of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report identifies a number of ways in which schools and local authorities can better help parents and carers of children who are disadvantaged by poverty, or by being looked after.[33] Mediating these through our experience working across Scottish local authorities, we believe the necessary measures should be:

a) Focused on developing meaningful, two-way relationships between schools and carers. Research from the US, such as the Harvard Family Research Project, have found that a positive home–school relationship can help to buffer against the negative effects of poverty, in terms of its impact on children's language, social, motor, adaptive and basic school skills. In this model schools listen to and learn from parents / carers, and vice versa. [34]

b) Helping to build capacity at home, through practical support for parents / carers in reading and maths. Sénéchal has found that training parents to teach their children to read is more than twice as effective as programs which encourage parents to listen to their children to read, and six times more effective than those which encourage parents to read to their children.[35]

c) Facilitating educationally rich relationships between carer and child (through the completion of shared activities, for instance).[36] An example of one such activity, which has shown promising results with looked after children, is 'paired reading'. This involves a structured approach to helping carers to read with their children. A study by Osborne et al. (2010) found that the use of paired reading methods with foster carers and primary schools improved the reading age of children (on average each child in the study made one year's progress in just over four months). [37]

Outside of these, the University of Strathclyde's School of Education has been engaged in a 'literacy clinic' with undergraduate education students, supporting

---

[33] Sosu, E & Ellis, S (2014) Closing the Attainment Gap in Scottish Education, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

[34] http://www.google.ie/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&frm=1&source=web&cd=2&ved=0CCsQFjAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.hfrp.org%2Fcontent%2Fdownload%2F1182%2F48686%2Ffile%2Felementary.pdf&ei=MYX4VL-cEemu7AaXooDwCA&usg=AFQjCNEjP6Hp0DqKCmJSRwRtWoBAGTYQWg&bvm=bv.87519884,d.ZGU

[35] Sénéchal, M. and L. Young (2008). "The Effect of Family Literacy Interventions on Children's Acquisition of Reading from Kindergarten to Grade 3: A Meta-Analytic Review." Review of Educational Research 78(4): 880.

[36] http://www.effectiveservices.org/images/uploads/file/publications/Childrens%20Learning%20Report%20final%20feb%202013.pdf

[37] Osborne, C., Alfano, A. & Winn, T. (2010). *Adoption & Fostering, 34* (4), 17-26.

children in a Glasgow primary school who have experienced reading difficulties[38]. If evaluations support the approach, it would indicate the valuable contribution that undergraduate teacher education students could make to closing the attainment gap in Scotland, while also gaining professional experience and course credit.

Finally, as has been mentioned above, it is important that schools and local authorities plan and develop their parental engagement strategies on the basis of systematic assessments of parent and child need. This requires an investment of time and money, but the benefit is the selection of approaches which are meaningful to the communities they are targeted towards. Moreover, in view of the statutory requirements on Community Planning Partnerships (to develop Children's Services Plans) these assessments would appear to be both essential and unavoidable. The Scottish Government has a key role in supporting local areas to prioritise and implement such activities, particularly through the statutory guidance currently being developed for Children's Services Planning and the Child's Plan. Education Scotland has a valuable contribution to make too, supporting schools to identify (and evaluate) successful approaches to parental engagement, providing practical guidance on how to develop strategies, and enabling schools across the country to learn from each other.

Thank you for this opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry. We would welcome any further discussions with Committee.

CELCIS Contact:
Dr Graham Connelly
Lead for Improving Educational Outcomes
g.connelly@strath.ac.uk
0141 444 8500

---

[38] http://www.strath.ac.uk/humanities/schoolofeducation/education_projects/literacy_clinic/