

VIEWS OF SCOTTISH PARENTS ABOUT WHAT MATTERS IN LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT

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Introduction

As part of the Scottish *Assessment is for Learning (AifL)* programme, a series of ‘Open Space’ meetings was held for parents in four locations around Scotland (Appendix 1). The theme for the meetings was “How can parents and teachers work together to help children do their best?” Participants were encouraged to discuss and make recommendations on questions such as:

- How can parents best support their children’s learning?
- What help do parents need in order to do this?
- How can teachers and schools respond best to parents’ needs?
- How can we improve communication?

This report is based on the recorded outcomes of three Open Space events for parents, facilitated by Open Futures Ltd on behalf of the Scottish Executive Education Department (SEED). It analyses the ‘burning issues’ raised by parents, things of urgent significance to them concerning their child’s learning. It also reflects on the ‘actions’ they prioritised, through discussion and through a voting system on the day, that they felt would address these issues. Their main priorities are identified, indicating what delegates on these days agreed mattered most.

Five themes relating to what matters in assessment for parents are identified for further analysis. These themes are identified partly from the list of priorities but also from the recorded decisions of all groups, since this is a fuller and more accurate source of views and concerns for present purposes.

The Open Space Events

The purpose of SEED AifL Parents’ Open Space events was not focused on any particular aspect of the AifL Programme or on Scottish educational policy or practice. Once the main theme had been identified, the agenda was in the hands of participants, since the Open Space process encourages them to discuss:

- their burning issues
- what they feel appropriate actions might be in terms of these issues
- what the priorities are arising from the day, achieved by open voting across all the issues and actions

158 participants had children in nursery, primary, secondary and special education provision. They came on Saturdays from all parts of Scotland, including remote islands and inner city areas. Participants were not necessarily members of School Boards or PTAs. Local authority officers were asked specifically to ensure all parents were offered the opportunity to attend so that their voices would be heard.

Outcomes, actions and priorities

Three conferences were held across Scotland. Outcomes of the events are the key source of evidence for this report (see Appendix 2). The language used in the report of the original conferences, in accordance with the rules of Open Space conferencing, is that of participants. Participants also vote for their individual priorities arising from all the issues and actions groups debate. For each of the three conferences, the top priorities identified by those attending, expressed in delegates' own words, are attached as Appendix 3.

Summary of key points parents made

Looking across the events at all the responses, it is possible to identify the following 5 key themes:

1. The focus for parents was effective learning e.g. 'learning for life', 'skills to improve learning' and 'learning holistically'. The purpose of assessment was to facilitate this. Parents were interested in teachers (schools/the system) identifying their children's strengths and areas that needed developing in an ongoing way. They saw this as key to their children progressing and being successful learners.
2. Parents wished to know well in advance what their children were going to be learning in different aspects of the curriculum and the targets their own child would be working towards.
3. They wanted partnership – a real dialogue about what their child needed to do to improve and how they could help with this. They wanted their children fully involved in these conversations too.
4. Parents also wanted good and regular communication about their child's progress via a range of media – and they wanted it at points early enough in the session to allow them to work with schools to resolve any obstacles to learning their child was experiencing.
5. From the centre (Education Authorities/Scottish Executive) they wanted support for assessment for learning practices, not more tests.

The remainder of the analysis and report draws on these priorities but also includes evidence from all the issues discussed by groups and actions proposed at each event. Many of the other actions and issues are extensions or amplifications of the priorities above and confirm them, or comprise slight variations or elements within them. Others give interesting insights into the range of issues parents have with learning, schools and the education system.

Looking in more detail at each of the key themes

1. *The focus for parents was effective learning e.g. 'learning for life', 'skills to improve learning' and 'learning holistically'. The purpose of assessment was to facilitate this. Parents were interested in teachers (schools/the system) identifying their children's strengths and areas that needed developing in an ongoing way. They saw this as key to their children progressing and being successful learners.*

One group in Edinburgh spoke for almost all others about the purpose parents saw for assessment as 'Regular, current, realistic information about a child's progress and well being'. They went on to say that they wanted to know, in detail and early each session, 'information

about how the school deals with different kinds of difficulties children may meet' and ' how the system of qualifications works (5-14) and what's going to be in the curriculum'.

There were also groups of parents who explored how best assessment might assist in promoting lifelong and effective learning by recognising and developing pupils' learning styles. In Aberdeen the issue of parents & teachers encouraging pupils to become life-long learners was key for one group which expressed a desire for 'actions to remove the emphasis from results to process' (including more focus on 'core and skill strategies'), motivating pupils through 'acknowledging learning styles and giving pupils choices', and achieving all this through 'continuous dialogue with parents and teachers'. Another group picked up this same theme and wished assessment to include evaluating their children's 'learning style and advising parents and pupils about how to work at it and improve'.

- 2. Parents wished to know well in advance what their children were going to be learning in different aspects of the curriculum and the targets their own child would be working towards.*

Parents in Aberdeen identified that their issue was how to of seek information 'about what is to be learnt prior to learning taking place' and 'feedback during (school) session that includes actions proposed.' They wanted parents to get 'curriculum information - beginning of each session in P1, then at beginning of each planning block and advance information of next stage, working one stage ahead as parental information'.

The same group also wished this backed up by curriculum evenings and guidelines as to e.g. reading/phonics approach, maths decomposition, perhaps on paper, that would help parents understand and undertake their roles as partners successfully. Glasgow groups endorsed the value of workshops in the curriculum to built confidence and understanding for parents about the details of their child's learning.

In Glasgow another group suggested that schools set up a 'library' of the resources their children used to let parents see them, linked to 'anticipated outcomes' of learning. They thought a website would be an alternative location for this information.

- 3. Parents wanted partnership – a real dialogue about what their child needed to do to improve and how they could help with this. They wanted their children fully involved in these conversations too.*

Parents in Aberdeen supported the full involvement of parents in personal learning planning linked to learning in the curriculum. They wanted to know their 'child's potential and if performance matches their potential.' They saw the role of a 'learning diary' as helping them keep in touch with progress in an ongoing way. Edinburgh parents went further: they saw a role for an 'assessment diary' which identified where pupils were focusing work and where progress was checked in a systematic way via a 'comment from all staff, parent and pupil on the child's progress'.

In Glasgow a group looked at achieving and maintaining consistency across schools via sharing good practice. They suggested an issue about 'achieving standardisation' of parental input (into PLP) across schools because, in their experience, there was mixed experience when it involved assessment diaries.

Several groups reported that they saw the PLP as belonging to the child and ‘as important as knowledge’, so they advocated that ‘it stay with the child throughout school life’. In Aberdeen parents made suggestions for action under their issue that assessment needed to be ‘a holistic approach for the longer term’. In Edinburgh similar views were expressed, that ‘the child has the right to be involved in discussions about their learning both reporting and issues within the school’.

Also in Edinburgh, one group summed up what many expressed in different ways. It would help if schools/teachers would ‘outline expectations of parents’ responsibilities as co-educator’. They went on to comment about defining what they thought a co-educator might do. This included looking ‘beyond academic learning’ and including ‘personal, emotional and social development.’ and seeing a complementary role for parents and teachers.

In Glasgow the concern was to have early three-way meetings that ‘involved the child’ as well as teacher and parents, to establish a relationship, starting points and targets. There too concern was expressed for ‘honest reporting good/bad with enough time to do something about it.’

4. Parents wanted good and regular communication about their child’s progress in a range of media – and they wanted it at points in the session where they could work with schools to resolve any obstacles to learning.

In Aberdeen parents appreciated that schools faced practical difficulties in trying to keep parents in touch about their child’s progress and obstacles to learning, and advocated the use of telephone links, for example. This issues was also addressed in Edinburgh with suggestions that communication between school and parents about how pupils are progressing could best be achieved by using ‘all available channels to engage all parents’, for example via email, web, phone, letters, and using web sites as "forums," not just notice boards. This, the group felt, increased real dialogue and partnership.

Another issue was the way some teachers ‘conversed’ with parents and pupils. One group was critical of some schools’ written communication. Whereas the ‘language of spoken words’ seemed understandable, the ‘language of written words’ was less so. With ‘professional language seen as a barrier to communication’, there is clearly a challenge for some members of the teaching profession to address. Another group pointed out there should be ‘no jargon’ and less dependence on written reports, using instead tapes or e-mail, for example, especially considering the needs of ethnic groups to be fully involved. This was echoed in Glasgow with the comment ‘create information more appropriate to parents/children.’

The Edinburgh group, and many others, emphasised that nothing could replace discussion face to face with a teacher or, failing that, by telephone. They pleaded for resources to allow such sharing to take place.

5. From the centre (Education Authorities/Scottish Executive) parents wanted support for assessment for learning practices, not more tests.

Parents wished more training for teachers and/or themselves in what partnership responsibilities might mean. They wanted training for teachers in the techniques involved; resources/time for conversations about their children with their schools and teachers or

possibly a publicity campaign. In Glasgow a group proposed the benefits of ‘sharing of best practice nationally with other teachers and parents’.

A group in Edinburgh articulated the need to support parents to ‘know what questions to ask, therefore empowering parents to become involved’ and helping them to ‘support their child’s learning’. In Edinburgh, on a similar tack, another group suggested what support might look like: ‘informal workshops throughout year; forward planning: "back to school night," topics etc., subject matter, teaching & methods’.

There was also a concern, expressed in only one group in Edinburgh, but of interest to schools and authorities looking for areas to develop. It concerned the use of ongoing assessment information to group or set pupils as parents perceived it. ‘Parents’ perception is that on-going assessment does not take place - sets are fixed/ pupils stay at same level.’ The same group questioned ‘How can parents trust the teacher’s assessment/ know they’ve assessed accurately/ assessed at all? The assessment needs to be meaningful to everyone involved.’ The idea of teachers also having ‘targets’ to achieve was raised in Glasgow by a group, as a way of ‘ensuring standards are achieved’ and achieving accountability

In Glasgow there was a plea for a ‘simple system that flows from primary to secondary and beyond based on a Scottish Executive Policy’ and for ‘workshops’ to help parents understand and fulfil their role.

Reflection

Priorities are clear and generally shared across sectors and across Scotland. Though they extend beyond what parents want in terms of assessing achievement, progress and attainment, the messages in relation to assessment and learning are strong and consistent.

What is also interesting is what the events did not prioritise or include as issues. Given an open forum and invitation to address whatever was a ‘burning issue’, no group sought to increase external examinations or testing nor expressed concerns about standards. This may be seen as evidence of a long established trust in Scottish Education on the part of parents, who view assessing pupils’ progress and achievements as best done in an ongoing way, by the child’s teacher and school. This view is confirmed by many groups prioritising increased opportunities for establishing starting points and targets for learning then getting feedback about progress from teachers.

Addressing the issues

The messages communicated by parents from the Open Space meetings are not new in the Scottish context. In 2002, a National Debate on Education yielded similar messages. Key themes for assessment and reporting were to put the learner at the centre of the learning process; better partnership between teachers and parents; better feedback to pupils and their parents about progress; more celebration of success; and less emphasis on passing tests and exams (see Appendix 4). The *Assessment is for Learning (AifL)* programme started in 2002 with ten linked projects, all of which were planned to take account of parents needs and issues as part of the work. One of the projects explicitly addressed Partnership with Parents. All of the schools involved across Scotland undertook to explore assessment issues in their school communities and reported on the outcomes of their work in case studies. Examples of extracts from case studies referring to communication with parents are given in Appendix 5.

More recently, the AifL programme has developed the concept of an 'AifL school' (Appendix 6), setting out 10 key features of a school that is successfully delivering assessment as, of and for learning. Helping schools to achieve the 10 key features, including that of sharing information about their children's learning with parents, will be the main focus of the programme's work for the next two years. The issues addressed in the case studies show a clear consistency with the Open Space parents' views, and have provided the programme with a sound basis on which to build good practice into every school's communication and partnership with its parents and community. In the wider educational context, Learning and Teaching Scotland manage a web-site for parents, ParentZone, <http://www.parentzonescotland.gov.uk>, whose content will updated over the next 12 months to take full account of a recently published Circular on assessment and reporting, and in the slightly longer term, of the outcomes of the current review of the curriculum, *A Curriculum for Excellence*. <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/library5/education/cerv-00.asp>

APPENDIX 1: OPEN FUTURES From <http://www.openfutures.com/>

OPEN SPACE TECHNOLOGY

If the challenges facing your organisation involve:

- high levels of DIVERSITY
- high levels of COMPLEXITY
- high levels of potential or actual CONFLICT
- and the decision times are YESTERDAY

then Open Space could be the answer.

What is Open Space?

- A large group process involving 20-500+ people who come together for 1/2 to 3 days to tackle an important challenge.
 - It's a creative problem solving process where nobody knows the answer and all the participants are experts.
 - It's a safe space for people to contribute and co-create.
 - It's a bottom-up process with meaning, because people put their energy behind things that mean something to them in the organisation.
 - It's driven by individual passion and responsibility.
 - Participation leads to commitment and ownership — a virtuous circle.
 - It has been used by scores of organisations, including Dupont, Corning, Pepsico, ICI and the NHS in 48 countries.
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How does it work?

- The sponsor sets the theme, invites participants and sets diversity.
 - Participants create their own agenda, within the theme, of 1-2 hour workshop sessions dealing with burning issues they feel strongly and want to do something about.
 - Participants self-organise by signing up to those workshop sessions that are important to them.
 - Usually starts with issues/opportunities then actions and priorities.
 - Ensure follow-up actions through self-help groups and/or management response to convert energy into action and sustain momentum.
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What Are the Business Applications?

- Bottom-up input into strategic plan, future direction, vision and values, and urgent issues or opportunities.
 - Identify and respond to issues/opportunities followed by priorities and actions in the areas of Customer Satisfaction, Product/Service Quality, Innovation/New Products, Marketing/Selling.
 - Structural issues relating to cross function and cross cultural working, especially after mergers and acquisitions.
 - Anticipate change and flexible, rapid response to change.
 - Reposition, change culture, re-invent the organisation and gain competitive edge.
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What Are The Benefits?

- Involves the 'whole system' in dealing with complexity and conflict.
- Accesses the collective creativity and wisdom of all your people including vital interfaces with suppliers and customers if required.
- Co-create solutions owned by everyone without the drawbacks of top-down cascade.
- Open up new communication channels within the organisation and create networks leading to more innovation.
- Leadership harnesses the energy, creativity and motivation of everyone in the organisation, gaining the ultimate in competitive edges.
- Senior management refocuses on positive to develop futures.

Moves away from outmoded command and control structures to modern participation based on voluntary co-operation.

APPENDIX 2

SUMMARY OF KEY ISSUES AND PRIORITY ACTIONS PROPOSED BY 158 PARTICIPANTS (PARENTS & TEACHERS) AT OPEN SPACE EVENTS IN GLASGOW, ABERDEEN AND EDINBURGH ON 30 AUGUST, 6 & 13 SEPTEMBER 2003

Sponsored by Assessment is for Learning (AifL) programme, Scottish Executive Education Department (SEED), and facilitated and reported by Open Futures Ltd, Edinburgh.

1 INFORMATION TO PARENTS ON CHILD'S PROGRESS (21.2% OF TOTAL PRIORITY VOTES) WITH SPECIFIC ACTIONS AS FOLLOW (VOTES):

- Weekly assessment diary with comments from everyone (staff, parent, pupil) (40 votes)
- AifL programme information more appropriate to parents and children (33 votes)
- Regular, current, realistic information about child's progress and well being (32 votes)
- Honest reporting with enough time to do something and access to teachers (32 votes)

1.0 PARENT ACCESS TO TEACHERS (18.1% OF TOTAL) BY SPECIFIC ACTIONS AS FOLLOW (VOTES):

- Break down barriers between parents/teachers/schools by real opening of schools, seeking and valuing parents' opinion, open channel for positive comments and change perception of roles with children key (33 votes)
- Break down barriers between personal and professional by responding to parents' appropriately (27 votes)
- Phone slot, tape, email for communication with individual teachers (23 votes)
- Informal route for teachers to access parents (19 votes)
- Create phone-in slot for parents to access teachers (15 votes)

3 INFORMATION TO PARENTS ON CURRICULUM AND QUALIFICATIONS (15.5% OF TOTAL) WITH SPECIFIC ACTIONS AS FOLLOW (VOTES):

- What's to be covered at beginning of each term (29 votes)
- Information at start of term on qualifications system, curriculum and named contact (27 votes)
- Format best suiting parents - no jargon (23 votes)
- Curriculum evenings and guidelines (21 votes)

4 SMALLER CLASS SIZES (12.4% OF TOTAL) WITH SPECIFIC ACTIONS AS FOLLOW (VOTES):

- Help get around all pupils for self assessment (29 votes)
- More staff (teachers & assistants) to manage difficult pupils (28 votes)
- Managing difficult pupils (23 votes)

5 PARTNERSHIPS (10.7% OF TOTAL) WITH SPECIFIC ACTIONS AS FOLLOW (VOTES):

- Three-way partnership (pupil/parent/teacher) at parents' meeting with early meetings to set way forward (38 votes)
- Child has right to be involved in discussions about their learning (reporting & school issues) (31 votes)

6 SUPPORT FOR PARENTS (9.3% OF TOTAL) WITH SPECIFIC ACTIONS AS FOLLOW (VOTES):

- Structured approach to parent/teacher communication (34 votes)
- Support parents to know how to support child learning (26 votes)

7 TEACHING & LEARNING (8.1% OF TOTAL) WITH SPECIFIC ACTIONS AS FOLLOW (VOTES):

- Introduce team teaching and extra specialist staff to share work and play to strengths, using more Community expertise (28 votes)
- Encourage life long learning by emphasis on process, including core and skill strategies (24 votes)

8 RESOURCES (4.7% OF TOTAL) WITH SPECIFIC ACTION AS FOLLOWS (VOTES):

- Protect resources allocated , transparency and two way communication with SEED (30 votes)

APPENDIX 3

OPEN SPACE EVENTS IN GLASGOW, ABERDEEN AND EDINBURGH

In Aberdeen

- Teachers' meet differing parent/pupil needs regarding feedback: information to parents at beginning of each term - what's to be covered.
- Is the curriculum too wide? : introduce team teaching and extra specialist staff to share the work & allow people to play to their strengths. Make more use of expertise in the community.
- Parents & teachers encouraging pupils to become life-long learners: remove emphasis from results to process, including core and skill strategies.
- Information on what is to be learnt prior to learning and feedback during session: curriculum evenings and guidelines as to e.g. Reading/phonics approach, maths decomposition, perhaps on paper.
- Lack of feedback to parents during term time: create an informal route for teachers to be able to access parents.
- Lack of feedback to parents during term time: create a phone in slot for parents to access teachers.

In Edinburgh

- Smaller class: smaller class sizes to help get around all pupils for self-assessment and managing difficult pupils .
- More communication contact with teacher outwith "parents' evenings": weekly assessment diary. Comment from all staff, parent and pupil on child's progress .
- What information do parents want about their children? Regular, current, realistic information about a child's progress and well being.
- Involving the child in the review of learning and the time implications for teachers, parents and the child: the child has the right to be involved in discussions about their learning both reporting and issues within the school.
- Parents' perceptions of assessment: break down the barriers (personal, professional) by responding to parents appropriately (area, background, education, needs).
- What information do parents want about their children? Information at the start of the term/ year about how the system of qualifications works (5-14). What's going to be in the curriculum and a named contact person for questions.
- Involving the child in the review of learning and the time implications for teachers, parents and the child: supporting the parents to know how to support child learning. What do parents' want to know about child's learning? Informing parents to know what questions to ask, therefore parents empowered to become involved.
- Communications between parents/ schools/ teachers: have communication in format which best suits parents - no jargon. Tape, email, phone slot for individual teachers.

In Glasgow

- Teacher involvement in children's learning: 3-way partnership (pupil-parent-child), all present at parents' meeting, early meetings to set out way forward.
- How parents can help in their children's education: workshops for parents in order to agree a structured approach with regard to parent/teacher communication.
- What is "assessment for learning" create information more appropriate to parents/children.
- Breaking down barrier between parents & school/teachers: real opening up of school, make parents aware that opinion is sought & valued, channel between parents & teachers for positive comment, input can change!, changing perceptions of each others' roles (children are the key) and school, board & PTA.
- How to chart/measure/find out child's learning process: honest reporting good/bad with enough time to do something about it, access to teachers, schools with support from the department of education.
- Resources before assessment: independent/external moderation, absolute protection of resources allocated, transparency, communicate issues to Scottish Executive and prompt feedback.

APPENDIX 4

EDUCATING FOR EXCELLENCE: Choice and Opportunity The Executive's Response to the National Debate (2002) <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/library5/education/ndser-00.asp>

PUPILS, PARENTS AND THE COMMUNITY

WHAT PEOPLE SAID

- Many responses were about parents taking more interest in and supporting the school and that schools could value parents more.
- With changing working patterns, many parents are expecting schools to take on a different role.
- Most people support the idea of the New Community Schools.
- Young people want to be listened to more.

KEY COMMENTS MADE

- School facilities could be open for longer.
- Communication and partnership between schools and parents could be improved.
- Classes for parents and more support for parents in understanding school structures and processes.

OUR VISION FOR THE FUTURE

- Every school is a centre of excellence, bringing together different services to support pupils and their families.
- Every school adopting the New Community School approach.
- More involvement by local community and businesses in school life.
- Continued support and development of Gaelic.
- Support for learning other languages.
- Parents more involved in making decisions about their children's learning and local education.
- Discipline problems and bullying successfully tackled by pupils, teachers, parents and communities working together.
- Better out of school care within the school environment.

LEARNING AND TEACHING

WHAT PEOPLE SAID

- People support a broad but balanced curriculum until the age of 13 or 14.
- We should continue to encourage and develop a flexible curriculum.
- Some said that because there is too much assessment, pupils and teachers see education as only about passing exams and getting qualifications.
- Learning should be fun, exciting, challenging and relevant.

KEY COMMENTS MADE

- There should be more emphasis on life skills and learning by experience.
- Many pupils want to learn more about the world around them.
- We need to celebrate success and recognise the negative effect of league tables.
- Assessment should be about feedback to pupils to improve the quality of learning and teaching, not just about the passing of exams and tests.
- Pupils should have something to show for both formal and informal achievements.

OUR VISION FOR THE FUTURE

- Comprehensive education means meeting all pupils' learning needs, not putting all pupils through the same system, delivering according to local needs and priorities. Focus on closing the opportunity gap for young people, especially the most disadvantaged.
- A better standard of literacy and numeracy for pupils, as the basis for learning.
- Pupils have more opportunities for flexible learning patterns around a well-balanced core of knowledge and skills, with increased opportunities for out of school learning, including summer study, specialist teaching and on-line learning support. The importance of pupils' learning outside of schools and classrooms recognised.
- Focus on skills and attitudes as well as knowledge. Subject barriers broken down and links developed between different areas of learning. Use different methods to encourage creativity and active learning.
- Move away from assessment which simply grades pupils at each stage to assessment which helps pupils understand how they can improve and supports their learning.
- Closing the opportunity gap: better results for all pupils when leaving school but clear and specific action to improve results for those currently underperforming.
- Teachers spend time on teaching, not unnecessary bureaucracy.

APPENDIX 5: CASE STUDIES from <http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/assess/casestudies>

Partnership: Mid Yell Junior High School, Shetland

Development focus: Primary and secondary

Key issue: Supporting and working with parents and pupils as partners improves learning, assessment and reporting.

- The appropriateness of the venue for pupil–parent–teacher meetings should be considered, in order to ensure that all partners feel comfortable contributing to the discussion.

Description of development work

The school's aims were:

- To build on existing procedures for reporting to parents and other teachers.
- To develop a school policy on reporting to parents and other teachers.
- To enhance current procedures for communicating with parents.
- To investigate opportunities for sharing learning objectives with parents.
- To provide opportunities for the school to respond to parents' and pupils' views on the reporting process.

Case study extract

At the beginning of Mid Yell's involvement with the project on reporting to and working with parents, the school distributed a questionnaire to parents to elicit their views on the school's existing reporting and communication processes. The results raised some issues about certain aspects of parents' evenings.

In the primary department, appointments are made to fit parents' schedules, and waiting facilities are provided outside the classroom where the parent–teacher meetings will take place. This set-up gave rise to concerns about the matter of confidentiality, as parents waiting outside classrooms to see class teachers might be able to hear any conversation that is taking place inside. In response, it was suggested that the following adjustments could be made to the current arrangements:

- relocate the waiting areas
- provide background music outside the classrooms.

A second issue that came up was the lack of an area where staff and parents can meet at times other than during parents' evenings. The establishment of a parents' room has been suggested to resolve the issue, but due to restricted accommodation (a matter that is being addressed, with the indication that a new school may be provided in the near future), this is proving to be a difficulty. However, the point has been addressed, and it will be dealt with positively, we hope, in the future.

Evaluation of the secondary department parents' evening

Parents' evenings are a vital part of the reporting process, giving both parents and staff the opportunity to share information on the attainment of the child. It is, therefore, very important that the format of a parents' evening is thoroughly investigated in order for both staff and parents to have a positive experience.

After receiving responses to the parent questionnaire, it was apparent that, due to the nature of the venue for the secondary parents' evening and the way in which the tables were set up in the assembly hall, it was proving difficult to discuss confidential matters.

We thought about what could be done, and began by videoing the S2 parents' evening – the first parents' evening to take place since the start of our involvement in this project. The video helped us to see that:

- desks were too close to each other
- parents had to queue to meet teachers
- there was no adequate seating area for parents to use while they were waiting to see staff
- there was no coursework on display for parents to look at
- there was a lack of privacy, which meant that confidentiality could not always be preserved.

In order to improve the process of giving quality information to parents at parents' evenings, without having to limit communication because of a lack of privacy, the following alterations were made for the S4 parents' evening, which followed a few weeks after the S2 evening:

- the desks used by the teaching staff were spaced out in order to aid confidentiality
- a seating area with refreshments was made available for parents and children to use while they were waiting to see staff
- soft music was playing in the background at the seating area, in order to provide more privacy for staff and parents discussing confidential issues
- pupils' work was put on display for parents to observe
- parents were given the opportunity to complete an evaluation form and give their impressions on the new format
- policy documents, educational literature and information about the project on working with parents were displayed, and many parents took the opportunity to look at these while waiting to see a member of the teaching staff.

The responses from parents indicated that they welcomed the changes, and the ambience of the evening was more conducive to discussion between teaching staff, parents and pupils.

Gathering Evidence: Lochgelly West Primary School, Fife

Development focus: Cross-curricular - Nursery and Primary

Key issue: Teachers, pupils and parents need to consider a range of evidence of learning when they are talking about progress.

Description of development work

The school intended to develop a personal learning plan (PLP) that focused on and addressed additional support needs, with a particular focus on pupils from Traveller families. The school tried to address the issue of a possible lack of parental literacy skills by supplementing the written PLP with a video PLP.

Case study extract

Even in the limited timeframe that we allocated for the video PLP project, the films clearly identify the pupils' current levels of achievement in particular subjects. It is envisaged that, over a whole term or session, clear progression would be seen in all areas of the curriculum.

The next step for development is to share the completed videos with families. One Traveller family has left, but the mother has indicated that she intends to return to collect the film. Another pupil's video has been used at an educational review in support of the pupil's transfer to high school. This was a multi-agency meeting which included the parents, and the video was well received as a useful tool for assessment.

'I like to see him achieving things. He gets excited when he does something good. It is a good idea filming them. It will make me feel good to see what R is learning.'

(A parent's comments)

Partnership: Kelloholm Primary School, Dumfries and Galloway

Development focus: Cross-curricular, Pre-school and Primary

Key issue: Supporting and working with parents and pupils as partners improves learning, assessment and reporting

- The personal learning plan may also contribute effectively to the reporting process.
- It is important that there is interaction between teacher, pupil and parent in specifying learning aims and ensuring the quality of next steps.
- The personal learning plan must be flexible enough to encourage teachers, parents and pupils to include achievement in the widest possible sense.

Description of development work

Kelloholm PS is part of a school cluster in Dumfries and Galloway, working in association with Sanquhar PS and Sanquhar Academy. The school, having recently attained new community school status, became involved in the development of personal learning plans (PLPs) in August 2002 as part of the AifL programme. The school had no prior experience of personal learning plans, but it was able to draw upon development work that had already taken place within the local authority.

As part of the school's trial of PLPs, the school selected groups of six pupils from each stage, including six pre-school children, for the purpose of trying out personal learning plans in lieu of summative reports. The small numbers of children involved allowed the staff to explore the various issues without the danger of immediate overload.

Parents of selected pupils were invited to a parents' information evening in September of that year, which set out the aims and intention of the project. The parents of the pupils concerned would be offered appointments that involved discussing with the child and teacher the progress to date and planned learning. Other pupils would continue with the normal arrangements for reporting and for parents' evenings.

This extract from the case study focuses on the PLP format for the pre-school children involved. Key workers maintained an observational checklist and a transition document based on learning outcomes derived from the 3–5 curriculum. The bi-annual report (issued in November and May) was replaced by a PLP that indicated planned learning outcomes for the forthcoming block of time. At the parent–teacher–child appointments, parents discussed the achievements of their child outwith school, and these were recorded. The teacher discussed progress to date, planned next steps, and 'handy hints' – strategies that parents could carry out to assist with planned learning at home. Some preparation took place during the school day, involving talking to the children, in order to prepare them for their meetings with the parents and teacher.

This personal learning plan therefore focuses strongly on the notion of partnership between child, parent and teacher/key worker.

Case study extract

The nursery teacher, in common with all other teachers, was provided with cover for a whole day in October 2002 in order to hold 30-minute meetings. Four parents were able to attend at the suggested time, but one other parent managed to come at another arranged time on a different day, after school hours. The teacher met with the child alone in cases where the parent was unable or unwilling to attend. The figure for the whole school was 86 per cent attendance.

The meetings were held in a small room adjacent to the nursery, and both teacher and parents saw this as a drawback. There was no opportunity to look around the nursery and look at wall displays. Since many of the children are brought to the nursery by minibus rather than by their parents, not all parents are familiar with the layout of the nursery. The different surroundings were strange for the children, and this may have inhibited their participation.

Some parents seemed surprised to find that small achievements at home were of interest to the school. The teacher elaborated on the chosen curricular targets and offered suggestions as to how help could be given at home. Suggestions also came from parents.

The meetings lasted the full half hour and could have gone on longer. The children, being so young, became bored and restless fairly quickly, and so the meetings were really with the parents; the children resorted to playing.

Before the second meeting, class teachers talked to individual pupils about how they felt they had coped with the initial learning outcomes. They also used class time to discuss with the group of children what the next steps might be and how they might achieve them. Teachers felt that this was time well spent and that it enabled the meetings with parents to be completed within the half hour allotted.

Future Plans

The nursery teacher felt that the theory behind PLPs was sound but that there were difficulties to be overcome.

Positive aspects of the PLP include:

- The language used is parent-friendly.
- Parents are informed about childrens' learning before the event.
- Parents, children and teachers are involved.
- Handy hints are a good way of sharing information with parents.
- There is identification of special achievements.

Changes required:

- The PLP needs to include all curricular areas.
- Parent comments areas could be lessened.
- Will paperwork be the responsibility of teachers? If so, when will they do it? If not, who will do it?
- Time for discussing some matters is not included in the PLP – parents should be better informed about all of their children's achievements.
- Meetings should take place in non-contact time.
- Children would be more relaxed in familiar surroundings, and parents could see displays in the nursery.
- Meetings need to be more frequent.
- An electronic version of the PLP is needed.

Comments from P1–7 teachers were very similar. The level of involvement of the children tended to increase with age, and in some cases, with the older children, the parents seemed happy to listen to their child and the teacher discussing progress and next steps.

Partnership: St John's Primary School, East Ayrshire

Development focus: P6

Key issue: Supporting and working with parents and pupils as partners improves learning, assessment and reporting.

- Pupil involvement in the reporting process increases partnership and contributes to the motivation to learn.
- Effective practice in formative assessment can support self-evaluation and enhance pupils' contribution to the reporting process.
- Jargon-free information for parents about learning and learning intentions can give them the opportunity to support their child's learning at home.

Description of development work

After consultation, the school recognised a need to explore how it might increase the involvement of pupils and parents in the reporting process.

Case study extract

It was recognised from an audit we had carried out that alternative ways to those we were already using of involving pupils in the reporting process should be considered.

It was decided that, initially, the target group would be pupils from Primary 6. The pupils would be involved in the trial of new reporting methods during session 2002–3, and this would carry forward into the following session. It would then be expanded to include the next Primary 6 class.

In May 2003 the headteacher held a workshop with the Primary 6 pupils and, through presentation and discussion, outlined to them the process of reporting.

Pupils were given the opportunity to read and discuss their school reports before they were issued to parents. A simple initial evaluation was carried out, and all pupils responded positively and valued the opportunity to discuss their reports before taking them home.

To increase parents' involvement in their children's learning, it was agreed that curricular information would be distributed to parents at the beginning of each session. Staff would prepare a leaflet advising parents of work to be undertaken throughout the session. This would allow parents to support their children's learning by assisting with research at home.

'Reporting to parents' sessions are busy, and sometimes information is shared which may, at a later date, prove to be significant for the education and welfare of a child. A pro-forma was devised so that staff could record additional relevant information given to them by parents during the reporting session. Parents would then sign the form, allowing this information to be passed to the headteacher and relevant staff, where appropriate.

What is an AifL School?



A Place Where Everyone is Learning Together

Our pupils and staff help to set their own learning goals

Our pupils and staff identify and reflect on their own evidence of learning

Our pupils and staff practise self- and peer-assessment

ASSESSMENT AS LEARNING

Curriculum

Learning and Teaching

Staff use a range of evidence from day-to-day activities to check on pupils' progress



ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING

Using evidence as feedback to inform improvement

ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING

Our pupils, staff and parents are clear about what is to be learned and what success would be like

Staff talk and work together to share standards in and across schools



Our pupils and staff are given timely feedback about the quality of their work and how to make it better

Staff use assessment information to monitor their establishment's provision and progress, and to plan for improvement



Our pupils and staff are fully involved in deciding next steps in their learning and identifying who can help

Assessment



Our classroom assessment involves high quality interactions, based on thoughtful questions, careful listening and reflective responses