

National Parent Forum of Scotland

Focus Group "Assessment: Curriculum for Excellence in Primary Schools"

St Teresa's Primary School, Dumfries

Thursday 27 February 2014

Introduction

The focus of the workshop was to explore with parents their views on the assessment of pupils during Primary Education.

The focus group looked at the following questions:

- What are parents' experiences of assessment?
- How is progress communicated with parents?
- What do parents want assessment to be like?

Please note that because all the parents who participated had children at schools in Dumfries and Galloway they talked about practices which not all schools in Scotland use or draw upon (eg the use of INCA and Performance Indicators in Primary Schools).

What are parents' experiences of assessment?

Parents were nervous about the lack of formal comparative assessment, for example where their child might be given an A-C rating. They contrasted their feeling of insecurity under CfE assessments to the previous system where *"you knew where you were"*.

Several of the parents were unhappy with the *"vague, fluffy and non-specific"* information they received from schools about the assessment of their child. One parent went further to argue that while CfE is intended to make teaching more personalised the *"[Curriculum Level] bands are so wide that assessment has become less individualised"*.

In particular, parents felt that the Curriculum Levels were *"big fat levels"* making it *"hard to benchmark"* children against their peers, which they felt to be of particular importance if the child was falling behind:

"You are not finding out if there is an issue until two years down the line."

"It feels like if a child is falling behind - or leaping ahead - it is less likely to be spotted and there is a risk that nothing will be done about it."

Some schools are still running formal comparative testing. All parents' schools were using INCA and/or Performance Indicators in Primary Schools (all these schools were in Dumfries and Galloway and this practice is not necessarily followed in other Local Authorities). All the parents were aware of these tests and interested in the results – several had been shown the results by teachers or head teachers. Some parents accepted that these tests were not ideal as assessment measures for their child but they wanted to *"hang their hat on something"* as there was *"a void"* in benchmarking their child. As a consequence of this void parents were considering these test results to be important and useful measures of their child even where schools had been reluctant to share information about these tests. There was a clearly identified risk around this in terms of *"performance on the day"* and the need for tests to be part of a rounded approach.

Parents wanted to know in advance when these tests were happening, what they involved, what their child's results were and in which percentile they were placed.

Overall, parents felt that they needed information from the school that told them *"your child should be 'here' and they are above/below that this year"* – they wanted these comparisons to be relative to their child's potential and their peers (in school and nationally). The only parents who did not express this view were two parents who already felt that they had excellent communication with their school (possibly including some comparative assessment information) and where the parents had confidence in the individual teacher making effective assessments and acting upon this.

There were striking disparities between the experiences of parents, which varied between schools – and even between teachers within the same school. There was a strong impression of each teacher and each school taking forward a different approach – and a lot of re-inventing the wheel going on in terms of the development of guidance for parents and for teachers.

However, it was also clear that nothing was preventing the development of outstanding practice that completely satisfied parental requirements – this seems to relate to the quality of school leadership and the energy and commitment of individual teachers.

How is progress communicated with parents?

Most of the parents were unhappy with the communication about assessment they were receiving. Information was written in “*teacher speak not parent speak*” and could be “*vague*” (“*arty-farty*”). Terminology such as “consolidating” and “securing” is not clear to parents in the way that a grade or a score would be. As important, parents felt that the information was not easily understandable by their children who were also keen to appreciate how well they were doing.

Parents reported that they were receiving information about what was being taught to their child, what they were successfully learning and in some cases what the parents could do to help (one parent had received some guidance in the new way of learning maths).

But parents reported that they were more interested in issues and comparative progress and there was a danger that the information they were given about learning and achievements was “*over-positive*”.

“Stop being scared to tell us how our child is doing”.

Parents made a number of specific comments about the report cards they received about their child. It was widely agreed that the most useful and important part was the general comment made by the teacher. Some felt that, in contrast to the rest of the report, this comment was accurate, useful and insightful as it stepped back from the detail and was personalised to their child and pinpointed the main current issue or issues.

“General comment is by far the most important”.

“I get a lot of words on the report”.

“Report has a lot of information on it [but only] about ‘what’ they are learning”.

“I have twins who are very different but I couldn’t tell them apart from their report card”.

Reports are not the only medium through which assessment and progress can or should be communicated to parents.

Homework diaries were identified as an adequate but imperfect way of communicating. These were described as sometimes being more useful with younger children than in secondary school as at that stage it was more likely to be a direct communication between parent and teacher (rather than relying on the child).

There was some excellent practice described by one parent about a school which had a journey book which was regularly added to and parents and children could clearly see their progress. This was combined with regular face to face feedback sessions.

Parent evenings are seen as very important for communicating children's progress. Parents are currently using parent evenings as an opportunity to see results of comparative testing and assessment to feel reassured about their child's progress. One parent felt that parent evening and other parent-teacher contact can be useful but in her experience tends to be *"more often about behaviour than performance"* which leaves a gap in her knowledge of her child's progress.

What do parents want assessment to be like?

Parents wanted to understand how their child was progressing *"in the round"*. One parent suggested that the terminology used in the Four Capacities provided an obvious way of doing this – but this was not used in communications from the school and they would like to see their child's progress reported more explicitly in respect of the capacities.

The parents felt it would be important to improve reports they received:

- Short and straightforward
 - *"Around two sentences [per topic]"*
 - *"Simple not lengthy" and "not wordy"*
- *"Communicate concerns and [only] highlights"*
- *"More regular [than annual]"*
- Clearly written and easily understood by both parents and children as *"kids want to read report"*
- Avoiding jargon and technical terms. *"Every time I get a report card I have to refer back to the meaning of the words – it is very difficult to interpret."*
- It should not be *"cut and paste"* as some parents described the reports they currently receive

There was appreciation of those schools which had introduced an early 'benchmarking' session between teachers and parents in week 4 -6 of first term – which allowed a reflection on appropriate achievements for the year ahead which could be revisited with teachers towards the end of the third term.

Parents want quite hard information about progress which they find hard to assess from reports. The focus has shifted to the teacher and it depends a lot on the quality of the teacher. So there were stories of children slipping behind without parents realising and without teachers responding.

A number of parents advocated increasing the number of parent evenings to two per year such that there was one in autumn for setting progress targets, one in spring to check progress against targets and then the report in the summer. Currently they get one per year so targets set with one teacher may not be followed up in the discussion with a new teacher in the new school year.

Some parents clearly welcomed other forms of communication which were working for them or had worked for them in the past. One parent described their Personal Learning Plan as providing a useful reference point. Other parents agreed that a PLP would be useful, although where children self-assess their progress on PLPs it may be of lesser value in the parents' eyes. Another parent reported receiving "*massive term plans every term*" which they found useful to help them support their child.

In summary, parents wanted:

- Progress of a child in the light of their potential – with some comparison with national norms
- Early benchmarking and identification of aspirations for the year in the first term with this forming the basis of assessments in terms 2 and 3.
- An assessment of the development of their child in the round – using the 4 capacities to describe this
- The clear identification of issues – where are they struggling/excelling?
- **Agreed responses** to any assessment issues
- Openness and honesty throughout
- A particular assessment focus on the basics – ie 3 Rs.

Recommendations

In the light of these comments NPFS may want to consider recommending the following action:

- A complementary focus group on the transition S1 to S3 group as the issues are likely to be different and distinctive
- Working with teachers (perhaps as part of CPD programme) to communicate these concerns and reflect on ways in which good practice can be more widely adopted and more parents can receive assessments that meet their needs
- Gathering case studies of assessment good practice and disseminating these
- Drawing on this good practice to create more coherent approaches between different schools and teachers.
- Exploring the scope to simplify Report Card language and terminology.

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