



the National Parent Forum of Scotland

*Evidence to the Education and Culture Committee
Educational attainment gap – Involvement of parents
March 2015*

Introduction

1.1 The National Parent Forum of Scotland (NPFS) welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence for the Committee's inquiry into the educational attainment gap and the involvement of parents. This evidence is based on the views of parents who participated in a focus group on attainment, held in Edinburgh on 12th March, and of NPFS' representatives. It also reflects the views of parents gathered at other focus groups, local events, quarterly forum meetings, and at our annual conference.

NPFS' role in parental involvement

2.1 NPFS was established in 2009 following the introduction of Parent Councils by the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) 2006 Act. The Forum aims to support parental involvement in education and provides a parental perspective at the national level. The Forum is parent-led and is comprised of volunteer parent representatives from each of the local authority areas, who communicate with Parent Councils and support parent involvement at the local level. Our representatives work with Parental Involvement Officers in local authorities to share information with parents. In many areas, there are local authority-level parent forums, usually attended by Chairs of Parent Councils, where local issues can be shared and concerns raised.

2.2 NPFS delivers a range of resources, events and other opportunities to help parents understand what their children are learning and to enable them to participate in their child's school. For example, we produce 'in a Nutshell' leaflets clearly summarising Nationals 1-5 and new Highers in a range of subjects to help parents understand the new qualifications and support their child in making decisions about which subjects to choose. We also produce leaflets that provide an overview of assessment, skills, learner pathways and many other aspects of Curriculum for Excellence.

2.3 We also help schools understand how to engage with parents. For instance, we presented at the primary and secondary Curriculum for Excellence leadership events for head-teachers, held in 2014 and 2015. Our representatives have also presented on parental engagement at the Scottish Learning Festival 'extra' learning events held throughout Scotland, which are aimed at teachers.

The attainment gap and parental involvement

3.1 There is a need to examine what is meant by attainment and the attainment gap. Audit Scotland's report on *School Education* found that there is a lack of information about pupil performance at both the local and the national level. The measures that are currently used focus on the exam results of pupils in S4-S6. Audit Scotland found that there is little information available on wider achievement or the performance of pupils in P1-S3 available at either the local or the national level. Vocational courses have not been captured in the existing attainment measures. However, it is hoped that the Insight benchmarking tool will start to capture information about vocational courses and wider achievement as the tariffs are currently being applied to a broader range of achievements, and this will continue to increase over time.

3.2 Although there is evidence to suggest that pupil attainment has been rising over the past decade by around four percent for S4 and around five to ten percent for S5-S6¹, we do not currently have the evidence to comment on whether this is directly related to parental involvement through Parent Councils as created by the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) 2006 Act.

3.3 The evidence does tell us that there is an achievement gap between pupils from higher and lower-income households, and this gap is persistent². The OECD review in 2007 found that in Scotland a pupil's social background mattered more in terms of attainment than in other countries: 'Who you are in Scotland is far more important than what school you attend, so far as achievement differences on international tests are concerned.'³ Research based on the 2009 PISA study found that, in relation to boys' reading skills, Scotland's attainment gap was the highest in the developed world, and was comparatively worse than in emerging economies such as Chile, Turkey and Mexico⁴.

3.4 NPFS welcomes the Scottish Government's recent announcement regarding the Scottish Attainment Challenge, which will provide £100m funding in addition to the existing Raising Attainment for All programme. The first tranche of funding will focus on the areas that have the highest concentration of primary school age children from households in deprived areas. However, targeting using the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) means that pupils who are living in poverty, but not in the areas classified as the most disadvantaged, will miss out. NPFS is gathering evidence on the indicators used in the SIMD as we believe these may need updating in light of some anomalies – for instance, inner city areas in which a

¹ Audit Scotland *School Education* (2014) p. 18

² Joseph Rowntree Foundation, *Closing the attainment gap in Scottish education* (2014) p.8

³ OECD 2007 p.15

⁴ Jerrim, J. (2013) 'The reading gap: the socio-economic gap in children's reading skills: a cross-national comparison using PISA 2009', www.suttontrust.com/public/documents/readinggap.pdf

significant proportion of residents are in privately rented accommodation. NPFS is currently in discussion with Ministers regarding this issue.

3.5 Parents have told us that they believe that there needs to be a broader and more inclusive interpretation of what 'attainment' means⁵. It should encompass wider and personal achievements as well as qualifications. For example, it should encompass youth work activities such as the Duke of Edinburgh awards, which are recognised and valued by young people, parents and employers. These help young people develop the 'soft skills' that employers value and are particularly successful at reaching young people who are otherwise at risk of becoming disengaged from formal education. However, it important to take a 'whole child' approach, in keeping with the aims of GIRFEC and Curriculum for Excellence, and to recognise the strengths, aptitudes and interests of each child in the round⁶.

3.6 However, even taking this broader definition into account, we still need to address the inequality in the education system, as it is unacceptable that there is such a persistent gap between the numeracy and literacy skills of pupils from higher and lower income households.

Improving parental involvement

4.1 NPFS agrees with Audit Scotland's view that spending should be targeted on the parents, pupils and schools that need it the most. The focus should not be on raising attainment for all, as this will continue to raise the bar while not addressing the equity gap, but on supporting pupils from lower income households to achieve (which should be defined as including exam attainment, vocational courses and wider achievements) and on supporting parents from lower income households to engage and support their children's learning.

4.2 There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that parental involvement plays a key role in closing the attainment gap. For instance, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's report found that parental involvement programmes that focus on helping parents to support their children's learning at home have a positive impact on reducing the attainment gap.⁷ The Audit Scotland report identified parental involvement as being one of the key factors in improving pupil performance.⁸ Some studies have gone so far as to state that parental involvement is the only factor that makes a significant contribution to closing the attainment gap.⁹

⁵ Evidence from NPFS focus group with parents on attainment, 12 March 2015. Full report available on request from NPFS.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Joseph Rowntree Foundation, *Closing the attainment gap in Scottish education*, 2014 p.23

⁸ Audit Scotland *School Education* (2014) p.31

⁹ Joseph Rowntree Foundation. *The impact of attitudes and aspirations on educational attainment and participation* (2012).

4.3 However, there are a number of barriers to parental involvement. Parents may not be able to support their child's learning in the home due to issues such as a lack of time, or not having enough information about their child's learning stage. Some parents may be reluctant to engage in parent councils due to a lack of confidence in public speaking, or they may be put off by a formal approach to parental involvement. Schools can also create barriers, for instance if their communication with parents is not effective, or by not providing enough opportunities for parents to participate. Schools may also have a lack of knowledge about parents' skills and expertise and how these could potentially support their children's learning.

4.4 Children who have lower levels of attainment may have parents who had a negative experience of school. For this reason, they may be reluctant to engage with the school, a problem which can be reinforced if they get negative messages about their child's performance back from the school.¹⁰

4.5 Communication from schools varies greatly, with some schools providing very good feedback and others providing very limited information. Parents have provided us with examples of where communications can go wrong - for instance, some schools not informing parents about important indications that something is not going well, e.g. a parent only being told at the end of term that their child had failed five maths tests in a row. Parents would prefer to know sooner rather than later if there is an issue that they need to be aware of, so that they can try and support their child. One parent attending our focus group commented that 'I get more feedback from my garage after an MOT than I do from the school about my child.'¹¹ More positively, parents told us about approaches that some schools have adopted to try and combat the problem of negative feedback, for instance by letting parents know (e.g. by text message) when a pupil has noticeably improved or has done something particularly well.

4.6 Parents also disengage at transition points, particularly primary to secondary. The risk of disengagement at this point can be compounded by some parents lacking the confidence to engage with secondary school subjects with which they are unfamiliar. They may also feel that their child's homework is beyond their level of understanding. There is a need to consider how to build on the momentum in the early years, when parents are often very closely engaged and are speaking to staff on a daily basis and support this into the primary and secondary stages.

4.7 While some parents are heavily involved in their child's education and are strong advocates for their child, it should be recognised that not all parents can or are able to have this level of involvement. A great deal is expected of parents in terms of supporting their child's learning – e.g. encouraging them to practice their reading and writing, supporting them to do homework, helping

¹⁰ Evidence from NPFS focus group with parents on attainment, 12 March 2015. Full report available on request from NPFS.

¹¹ Evidence from NPFS focus group with parents on attainment, 12 March 2015. Full report available on request from NPFS.

them undertake projects, making financial contributions to the school. In reality, many parents are unable to provide this level of support for reasons including poverty, mental or physical ill health, and a lack of confidence and low self-esteem. They may have literacy and numeracy issues themselves, and many have had a negative experience of formal education overall. Children from less advantaged households are less likely to experience a wide range of 'home learning' activities than children from higher-income households as it is more difficult for parents living in poverty to provide opportunities such as educational trips and books¹².

4.8 In order to redress the balance for children who do not have this level of support, we need to consider different approaches. For example, by providing short, simple, clear advice for parents, with practical examples of what they can do to support their child's learning (e.g. reading together for ten minutes a day¹³) along with a flexible, open approach to communicating with and involving parents in the school, recognising that not all parents have the time or capacity to participate in parent council meetings, and that this approach may be off-putting for some parents.

4.9 There are currently a range of different projects and initiatives addressing attainment and parental engagement taking place throughout Scotland. We believe that, rather than a piecemeal approach to addressing the attainment gap with small-scale projects being done in different ways in different local authorities, a national approach to engaging with parents at the grassroots level is needed. There is a need for parent-led approaches based on identification of communities' needs, building on existing strengths and identifying areas for development with a view to boosting skills, self-esteem and encouraging active participation so that parents feel they are equipped to participate in parent councils as well having the knowledge and confidence to support their child's learning more generally.

4.10 Local authorities and Education Scotland can also do more to support parental involvement. For example, there are currently plans for HM Inspectors to evaluate parental involvement and family learning as part of the school and learning community inspection process. Local authority education departments support parental involvement through the work of Parental Involvement Officers (PIOs), but many councils do not currently have PIOs and where they are in place, around half of them spend less than 40% of their time on parental engagement work¹⁴.

Other factors impacting on attainment

¹² Growing Up in Scotland: Early Experiences of Primary School – the transition to school (2012)

¹³ Lewis, M and Samuels, SJ (2005) *Read More, Read Better? A meta-analysis of the literature on the relationship between being exposure to reading and reading achievement* <http://www.tc.umn.edu/~samue001/final%20version.pdf>

¹⁴ Audit Scotland *School Education* (2014) p.40

5.1 Closing the attainment gap is increasingly challenging given the cuts to school budgets being made by local authorities. For example, at the time of writing Edinburgh City Council is looking to cut 1,200 non-teaching posts. As we reported in our evidence on school budgets, English as an Additional Language support is being cut in many authorities, yet there is a growing need for this in communities throughout Scotland.¹⁵ NPFS' view is that it is difficult for measures aimed at improving attainment to succeed when the support children need is being reduced.

5.2 NPFS has particular concerns in relation to additional support for learning (ASL) and are writing to the Children and Young People's Commissioner with regards to this. Although the majority of teachers are dedicated and committed to the principles of ASL, and many schools lead the way in good practice, there are a number of recurring and significant issues that have the potential to impact negatively on the educational outcomes and well-being children with additional support needs (ASN). Our concerns about provision for ASL are supported by research evidence such as the report undertaken by Prof. Kirsten Stalker for the Commissioner for Children and Young People in 2013¹⁶, anecdotal evidence we have received from parents, and from the results of a survey for parents of children with ASN which was undertaken by NPFS in February-March 2015. Around 400 parents have responded to our survey. The findings tell us that:

42% of respondents feel that the ASL resources and support available in school do not meet their child's needs. 30% said that their child's support had decreased; and in terms of what specifically has been affected, 91% said that support staff/auxiliaries have reduced in number. Of those who said that support had been cut, nearly half said that they had not been involved in any discussions about the decisions that had been taken. And of those who did take part in a discussion about changes to their child's support, 37% said they had found this discussion to be unhelpful, or only slightly helpful.

5.3 However, evidence tells us that it is not just parents who are key to improving attainment; Audit Scotland identified improving teacher quality and leadership as other significant factors. Across Scotland local authorities are finding it increasingly difficult to recruit and retain high quality teachers, with consequent impact on children and young peoples' education. In one local authority area, for example, class sizes in P2 and P3 have been increased as a measure for tackling a shortage of teachers at some schools.¹⁷ There have been reports in the national press about potential school closures in some areas of Moray and Highland due to a lack of teachers.

5.4 There would appear to be a national problem in relation to supply teachers, with particular difficulties in rural and remote areas. All of this has a

¹⁵Count Us In, Education Scotland 2009

http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/cuimnnus_tcm4-618947.pdf

¹⁶ <http://www.sccyp.org.uk/ufiles/It-always-comes-down-to-money.pdf>

¹⁷ We have anonymised these examples but can provide further details on request.

negative impact on children's learning experiences and outcomes. NPFS representatives told us:

'My daughter's school is short of teachers and we've been told that they can't get supply teachers. I have checked with several other parents (from other local schools) as well as some teachers, and they have confirmed that supply teachers are unavailable.'

'Parents play a vital role in supporting their child's learning but they can only do so much, and their role should be supported by an adequately funded education system staffed by quality, motivated teachers. A good energised motivated teacher in every classroom is a fundamental part of the education process. It is key to attainment, achievement, confidence, and self-belief - the works! CfE philosophy documents explicitly state it too.'

'The Government's focus on closing the attainment gap is welcome, but we do have concerns that trying to do this at the same time as implementing a new curriculum, a new qualifications system and setting up Glow+ etc. is challenging. There is a need to ensure that the basic building blocks of the educational system – teachers – are in place.'

What the Scottish Government can do to close the attainment gap and support parental involvement

6.1 The forthcoming Education Bill (Scotland) 2015 contains provisions on closing the attainment gap. We believe that the Bill and the accompanying statutory guidance should address how to target pupils, parents and schools who need the most support. Otherwise, there is a risk that the provisions will not affect pupils who are living in poverty, but who are not resident in areas of multiple deprivation as defined by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation. The provisions should also include a duty to support and engage with parents in order to increase their involvement both at home and in the school.

6.2 It is also important to protect pupils from the negative impact of education budget cuts. Attempts to save costs by reducing services and staff will have a negative impact on all pupils, but will have the biggest impact on those who are already struggling. As Audit Scotland stated: 'councils also need to understand the longer term effect that budget reductions could have on efforts to raise attainment among pupils.' Cutting the number of learning assistants, ASL provision and other cost-saving measures will not help address the attainment gap, but could, in fact, worsen it. As one measure, NPFS has suggested that the Bill should include provisions on protecting the school week, in order to stop cuts to the school week being proposed by local authorities each year.

6.3 As we have argued in previous evidence to the Committee, NPFS believes there are other ways for local authorities to save money which have less of an impact on children's learning. For instance, Councils could share services much more than is currently the case. For instance, one means of

cost saving could be for teacher payrolls to be either delivered at the national level, or shared between several authorities.

Conclusion

7.1 Parents have told us that there needs to be a broader definition of what we mean by attainment, and that this should include wider achievements, personal achievements and vocational courses. The Insight tool is making some progress towards this, but this is still on going. Parents have also reported that it is good communication with schools that makes a considerable difference to their understanding and engagement.

7.2 Research evidence suggests that in order to close the attainment gap, the Scottish Government should concentrate funding on the parents and pupils who need the most support. However it will be difficult if not impossible to raise attainment at the same time as cuts to school budgets, which have a disproportionate effect on the pupils who are most in need, are being pushed through. The forthcoming Education (Scotland) Bill 2015 presents an opportunity to protect one area which is subject to cuts, i.e. the school week.

7.3 Although they play a vital role, parents are not the only factor in closing the attainment gap, and it is important that there are is an adequate number of high quality teachers, including supply teachers, available in all schools.

7.4 Parents are however expected to play a considerable role in their children's school and in their child's education generally. Unfortunately, not all children receive this level of support and involvement. In order to address this inequality, there is a need to support the involvement of parents from lower income households so they have the skills and confidence to participate in schools and support their children's learning at home.

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