

National Parent Forum of Scotland- Focus Group

Attainment and the Attainment Gap

What is attainment and the attainment gap?

There was a great appetite among parents for understanding the data on attainment and working with Head Teachers to ensure that there is an honest understanding of strengths and weaknesses.

The Insights data can provide the hard evidence to underpin parental impressions and perceptions and help Head Teachers to act. The data can also lead to frank conversations about attainment which was not previously possible.

"Attainment is the elephant in the room".

"As a parent it is very important that you know the head teacher really knows their school and where it is [in terms of performance]."

"We've had these discussions with Head Teachers for years – Insight has now given us evidence that can drive practical responses."

There was a particular focus on how the data reveals performance in different SIMD¹ areas, e.g. whether it is the case that children in the "top 20%" SIMD areas or "bottom 20%" SIMD areas are underperforming in the school. While this was generally seen positively as a way of supporting the effort to really understand school performance, some issues were raised about stigmatising groups in this way. Other concerns were raised around the possibility that setting different target performance levels for different groups might serve to reinforce the attainment gap between those groups.

The data can also show how schools are really performing, in a way not possible with standard league tables. This was viewed positively by parents.

"We have a problem with pupils sending their children to private schools after primary. This could give reassurance that "your local state school is doing very well, thank you", which is great for first time parents."

"Because we have a very mixed catchment area, league tables are a disaster for us – [they show] a low % of people achieving at S6, but [there is only a] 50% maximum score as half the pupils leave the school in S4!"

¹ Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation

"We have an opportunity to show that [the wide catchment area] of the school is not a negative"

Any group of young people may under-perform – and schools can fail the more academically able young people as much as the less academically able.

Significant variations between schools in terms of how (and how much) data is presented. Some support for guidance on a common form of presentation for the most important data.

"At our Parents' Council meeting we didn't see the data – we wanted to see it."

Parents want to understand what the issues are and what is being done about them – and providing constructive challenge in following implementation through.

What should 'attainment' include?

There was a strong sense that attainment approaches should ensure a 'whole child' approach: that is, they need to recognise the strengths and aptitudes and interests of each child in the round and provide experiences that help them identify opportunities to take these forward (eg FE/HE, work experience, outdoor experiences). These experiences help to provide context for school – 'Why are we learning?'

So...there was general agreement that attainment should include wider achievements – but there are obvious issues both about measuring some of these in a meaningful and comparable way, and about how making some of them measurable may destroy their value to young people.

*"If they introduced an SQA in skateboarding...
that'd put my son right off!"*

There were mixed views on the terminology of wider achievement and personal achievement, with "wider achievement" having negative connotations for some based on experiences of excessive promotion of schemes like the Duke of Edinburgh Award when it may not be appropriate for the child.

Another interchange that highlighted the issues around wider achievements and the need to be focused on what is right for the child is set out below:

*"The Duke of Edinburgh [Award] grates on me. What we get is
'If you don't do it then the University won't like it'."*

*"I disagree; my youngest one is doing Duke of Edinburgh
and volunteering – I think it's important to recognise this."*

"I don't disagree – if it's the right child then that's great".

Another parent highlighted a further issue with inflexibility around "wider achievement" in that, at one school, Duke of Edinburgh Award is not available to higher academic achievers.

"It's about seeing what is right for every child."

There were some particularly good examples of school initiatives that do focus on what is right for each child:

"If there is a kid [in senior years of high school] who is great at football he can get a free period to train the first years, and he can then put this on his CV."

The Insight tariffs are gradually being applied to a wider range of achievements (eg an increasing range of vocational qualifications) and this range is likely to become wider over time. This will allow schools better to assess the difference they are making in the round to each child.

The positive outcomes achieved by each child (and recorded in SLDR) can be a proxy for the achievement of a school – though it does not necessarily reflect the extent to which the young person is achieving personal fulfilment.

What can parents and parent councils do to tackle the attainment gap?

There was a clear focus on ways of supporting more widespread parental engagement and involvement.

One parent gave an example of how the use of Insight data had led to positive outcomes by the school acting together with parents:

"Our school saw a cohort that was underperforming, then put in intensive support – they could show us that had a positive effect. This year, they've started the intensive support earlier because parents said it needed to start earlier in the year."

Many of the parents of children achieving lower attainment may have parents for whom school was a bad experience and they will wish to avoid engagement – and many of the messages they get back from any engagement can be negative, which reinforces this.

Some schools seek to maximise positive messages (eg by text) when a pupil has done something well or noticeably improved.

There are some 'high risk' areas in terms of when parental engagement may be lost. The main one is the primary to secondary transition – when parents may get strong messages that everything is different and they need to back off – when the opposite may be the truth.

"We need to get silent parents involved – primary schools will give messages that parents won't hear from secondary schools."

We heard a story of how one school (in London) dealt with this 'transition risk': every parent was visited at home by a teacher during P7 to help them understand the transition, what issues it may raise for their child and how they could provide appropriate support.

This 'transition risk' may be compounded by some parents lacking the confidence to support their child in high school subjects, or a natural disinclination to engage with high school based on parents' own negative experiences.

"At the transition from primary school to secondary school parental involvement drops off – perhaps [due to] lack of confidence. "I can't do calculus, or history". We need to tell [these parents] it's not about that."

But we also heard stories of schools not informing parents of some important signals of things not going well (eg a parent hearing at the end of term that their child had failed 5 maths tests in a row)...

...and limited feedback. *"I get more feedback from my garage after an MOT than I do from my school about my child"*

Parents also recognised that, while they may be strong advocates for their child, other children may lack effective parental advocacy – and asked how the parental body can become advocates for all children needing this.

However, an example was also given of where a parent felt that the school needs to be able to act as a role model, in a way not possible for parents:

"Been recognised as being able to do something makes a huge difference to my child's attitude – he needs the school to do this, to be the role model – I can't tell him this."

Other approaches to supporting parental engagement and involvement included personal invitations (from school/parent council) to targeted events, for example thematic group events focused on sports, business and enterprise, job fairs. One parent said that this would work because *"people need a role to play"*.

The increasing development of tutor time (ie a teacher fulfilling a role more akin to a mentor) was seen as really important – providing a chance to explore with a child their development and progress in the round. Having someone who knows all about how a child is doing at school was also seen as more valuable for parents, who could discuss their child's school life with this tutor in detail instead of gaining only a very limited understanding through multiple teachers at parents evenings.

"Tutor time has helped massively – you have someone who stays with [your child] all the way through school. They know their ups and their downs."

Richard Scothorne and David Toner, Rocket Science, February 2014