

## PARENTS AS PARTNERS IN ASSURING THE QUALITY OF SCHOOLS

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### SYNOPSIS

The need to improve the relationship between schools and parents has been an increasing focus of public policy since the 1970s with a raft of legislation both in Scotland and in England and Wales designed to encourage parental rights and responsibilities. One development has been the involvement of parents as part of the inspection process of schools. This paper looks at the pioneering work on the Quality Assurance Unit of the Education Department of Strathclyde Regional Council before its demise in April 1996 through an analysis of parental questionnaires. The data gives a unique insight into how parents judge their children's schools at the time of inspection and underlines the value of their contribution as quality assurers. The authors interpret the analysis in terms of a development model of parental involvement in schools resulting in an interactive partnership between parents and their children's schools and recommend ways forward for the new education authorities.

### INTRODUCTION

There is growing understanding that involving parents in the life of the school is the key to improving the motivation and achievement of pupils. Parents play an indispensable role as complementary educators (for example, in home-school reading schemes) and, if there is to be a shared understanding of the purpose and organisation of the curriculum, then parents, as school inspectors have acknowledged, need to know what is intended, and how it is to be pursued and achieved. Some schools have tried to go beyond 'effective communication' to use the skills and experience of parents to enrich the learning experience and to involve them in assessing and evaluating the quality of achievement. Indeed, it is increasingly argued that a conception of parents as partners who have a shared sense of purpose with teachers provides the foundation for schools to improve learning quality (Macbeth, 1995; Tomlinson, 1991; Wolfendale, 1993; Bastiani and Doyle, 1994).

The need to improve the relationship between schools and parents has been an increasing focus of public policy since the 1970s. The rights and responsibilities of parents in the educational process are emphasised in recent legislative developments. Parents have a right to information about schools (e.g. Parents' Charter in Scotland 1995), typically so that they can make informed choices for their children (1981 Education (Scotland) Act, in operation since 1982). Parents have become elected members of School Boards and take part in ballots (if there are any) for Self-Governing schools (The Self-Governing Schools etc. (Scotland) Act 1989). The 1989 and 1993 Education Acts strengthening parental rights in relation to complaints they may have or appeals in relation to 'statements' ('records of need', in Scotland) for children with special educational needs followed legislation in Scotland at a much earlier date (Education (Scotland) Act 1981). The partnership between teachers and parents as complementary educators in the learning process continues to be emphasised in public documents including 'A Manifesto for Partnership' from the Educational Institute of Scotland as well as the recent Parents' Charter in Scotland. In England and Wales parents are invited to take part in an annual meeting to discuss an annual report from the governing body (Education Act 1986). Since 1992 (1990 Education Act) parents have been invited to take part in meetings as part of the inspection process by Ofsted.

This paper looks at this latter aspect of parental involvement in their child's education. It builds upon an analysis of data collated from parental questionnaires administered as part of the inspection process of schools throughout Strathclyde Regional Council and draws upon a model of development proposed in the final report of the research team to the Regional Council who sponsored the work.

#### *Strathclyde's Policy Development*

In the area of parental involvement in schools Strathclyde Regional Council provided a model for policy development. The largest education authority in Scotland until it was dissolved in 1996, it comprised six divisions covering the Glasgow conurbation and surrounding rural districts. In 1993, as part of Strathclyde's Social Strategy for the Nineties, the Regional Council committed itself 'to foster genuine partnership in education'. Proposals for action included:

In the context of decentralisation, further consideration will be given to means of empowering the users of the education service. The form in which this empowerment process will be developed is still the subject of a debate which is centred around the relative importance of consultative mechanisms, whether community based or in the form of school boards on the one hand and the facilitation of choice on the other. Within this steps will be taken to further develop partnerships between schools and parents, building on the experience of partnerships already developed in some schools.

Subsequent policy development regarding parents genuinely attempted to reflect this and a number of initiatives were taken in recent years to develop partnership both at the level of school and within the Regional Council. The role of the Regional Council was to inform and consult with parents on matters of policy and practice and also to enable closer liaison between schools and parents around teaching and learning. The basis of this partnership was information for parents and the facilitation of their involvement in the curriculum.

New initiatives included the establishment of a liaison officer for parents in 1991 – believed to be the first full-time officer appointed in the United Kingdom and, in 1995, new posts of liaison officers for parents in all six divisions of the region. A good deal of work was done to encourage closer liaison between schools and parents on homework and in October 1993 the Educational Development Service issued guidance for staff and parents on the management of pupils' homework. A Parents' Consultative Group on the Curriculum was also set up by the Director of Education in 1993 to foster dialogue and debate in an open forum through which two-way communication between the Council and parents could be established.

Subsequent developments of this process included a surgery system for parents to meet with school inspectors and, in 1994, local groups of the Consultative Group in all regional divisions. The commitment to customer satisfaction continued in the Region with the publication of *Strathclyde Charter of Parental Expectations* in 1994 which outlined the level of service parents could expect from schools in the region.

A vigorous commitment to home-school projects was established as part of the Region's urban programme with delegated funding from that budget for the Home-School Employment Partnership in a number of schools. As part of this partnership twelve project workers were recruited based in three local secondary schools and a comprehensive programme developed, from pre-5 to post-16, to facilitate continuing consultation with young people and their parents. This project included a project advisory group and a parents' representative group which met bi-monthly.

Strathclyde Education Quality Assurance Unit was instrumental in developing models for parental involvement and consultation alongside education department earmarked funding to support schools in working with parents. The involvement of

parents was encouraged in establishing school development priorities and in January 1995 it was estimated that around 50% of schools consulted or informed parents about development priorities often through the involvement of the school board.

As a result of these several developments in fostering a partnership between parents and schools, Strathclyde Region's Education Department became the leading local authority in the United Kingdom in this field. Its innovations continually broke new ground and had an impact on schools. One such innovation was the establishment of parental questionnaires as part of the inspection process within the Quality Assurance Programme. This was an initiative that arguably influenced developments in the Inspection process in England and Wales by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) which routinely incorporates in the process a meeting for parents, a parental questionnaire and the requirement to distribute a summary of the inspection report to all parents.

#### *Parental Questionnaires as part of the Inspection Process*

In 1990 the Education Department created a Quality Assurance Unit to monitor and evaluate the quality of education provided in schools. Inspections were a central part of this process of quality assurance. Since 1990 the QA Unit carried out 207 establishment inspections. The value of involving parents in this inspection process was recognised from the outset. Listening to the views of parents would, it was argued, be of considerable benefit not only for schools but also for the education authority itself. A questionnaire instrument was chosen as the means for gathering the opinions of parents. The questionnaires — designed with moderate variations for nursery, primary, secondary and special schools — invited parents to answer fixed category questions, but also to comment about the quality of the service provided by the schools which their children attend.

The questionnaires sought parental reactions on the quality of:

- Accommodation
- Information on educational provision
- Homework
- School responses to parents
- Information on pupil progress
- Parental contacts with the school

Parents were invited to provide open-ended comments about what they liked best about the school and what suggestions they would make to improve the school.

The views of over 30,000 parents of pupils in Strathclyde schools and nurseries were gathered by questionnaire by the Quality Assurance Unit. The data set for the analysis referred to in this paper is drawn from schools which had been inspected following a revision of the format of the parental questionnaire as outlined above. The total number of establishments included in the analysis is therefore less than the 207 inspected overall, amounting to 158 schools and 34,030 parental responses.

Two discrete data sets have been drawn upon for the following analysis. The first data set is drawn from a report entitled *Analysis of Parental Questionnaires* produced by the Quality Assurance Unit in June 1995. This report presented quantitative data on parent responses to questionnaires by sector and division. Our analysis of this data is given in Section II as 'Parent Opinions on Relations between Home and School.' For the purposes of analysis these data will be grouped under the following headings in order to clarify the purposes and functions of home-school liaison:

*Communication:*

- (a) Satisfaction with information on education provision
- (b) Satisfaction with information on pupil progress

*Interaction:*

- (a) Satisfaction with the responsiveness of the school
- (b) Extent of parental contact

*Participation:*

- (a) Extent of involvement at transition stage e.g. secondary transfer
- (b) Extent of shared understanding of homework

The second data set draws upon qualitative data which the Authority received from open comments to their questionnaire. This data has been analysed from a summary presented by the Quality Assurance Unit in the Inspection Report for each individual school and is presented in Section III. Section IV offers a concluding analysis and recommendations.

PARENTS' OPINIONS ON RELATIONS BETWEEN HOME AND SCHOOL

The relationship between home and school will involve different tasks and will be informed by different purposes. The questionnaire invited parents to express their views about activities which imply different kinds and stages of relationship between home and school. We discuss the questions asked in relation to the purposes of: communication, interaction and participation. These are discussed in turn.

*Communication*

If the relations between home and school are to flourish and parents are to fulfil their contribution to the education of their child they need to be provided with relevant information. The questionnaire invited parents to comment on the quality of information provided about two important areas of school activity: firstly, about *information on the nature and variety of educational provision*. Parents were asked to agree or disagree with the following statements:

Full information is provided about the school on:

- subjects taught
- activities within the school
- the way your child is taught
- social events
- discipline
- absence and punctuality
- homework

*Information on Educational Provision*

The data in Table 1, as with many of the tables, suggests considerable support from parents for what schools were doing. Nevertheless there were differences of response which it is important to analyse. This table is arranged in a rank order so that what parents believed to be the fullest information provided by the school is placed at the top of the table and the least adequate information is at the bottom. This suggests

that while schools were better at providing information about ‘social events’ and ‘activities within the school’, they were less diligent in providing information about the core educational processes of teaching and learning, the curriculum offered, homework strategies, and the approach used by the school to maintain discipline. The least effective provision of information was believed to be around absence and punctuality which could be a serious concern for parents.

*Table 1: Information on Educational Provision*

Full information is provided about the school on:	Pre-Five	Primary	Secondary	Special	ALL
	Yes %	Yes %	Yes %	Yes %	Yes %
Social events	86	89	77	88	84
School activities	91	84	4	88	80
Subjects taught	-	76	82	88	78
Homework	-	76	74	66	75
The way your child is taught	83	74	70	91	73
Discipline	74	68	77	81	72
Absence and punctuality	-	63	76	60	68

Total responses = 34,030

There were variations between phases of education in the quality of information provided. Nurseries, primary and special schools, more than secondary schools, were perceived by parents to be better at providing information on social events, teaching strategies, and activities within school. Secondary schools, however, were believed to be more effective at communicating information about the curriculum, matters of discipline and information on absence and punctuality. This may reflect the priorities of different school sectors as much as their relative expertise. Special schools were perceived to be the least effective at providing full information on absence and punctuality but may again reflect the particular environment of the special school.

#### *Information on Pupil Progress*

Perhaps the most important information parents wanted to receive was that which described and developed understanding of the progress children were making in their learning at school. The second area of questioning focused upon *information provided about pupil progress*. Parents were asked to agree or disagree with the following statements:

- The school keep you well informed about your child’s progress
- Invitations, by appointment, to discuss progress keep you well informed
- Formal written reports keep you well informed
- Parents’ evenings keep you will informed

Table 2 presents the data in a rank order.

Table 2: Information on Pupil Progress

	Pre-Five	Primary	Secondary	Special	ALL
	Yes %	Yes %	Yes %	Yes %	Yes%
Parents' evenings keep you well informed.	56	88	81	82	84
The school keeps you well informed about your child's progress.	79	77	73	88	75
Invitations, by appointment, to discuss progress keep you well informed.	65	80	71	84	75
Formal written reports keep you well informed.	-	73	76	83	74

Parents were typically satisfied with the information they received about their child's progress at parents' evenings. However, they were rather less satisfied that schools should keep them 'well informed' about their child's progress, nor were they uniformly content that the written reports provided by the school kept them well informed. Not all parents, furthermore, were happy with the information they received when they visited the school by appointment to discuss their child's progress.

Parents of different phases and types of school perceived the quality of the information provided with varying levels of satisfaction. Special schools, followed by primary schools, were judged to keep their parents better informed than other types of school, though secondary schools were believed to prepare more informative formal school reports than primary schools. Primary schools were perceived to mount the best parents' evenings. The data, however, contained some areas of concern. 27 percent of parents in secondary schools were clear that their schools did *not* keep them well informed about their child's progress in learning. Systems of informing parents by invited appointment were least satisfactory in Pre-Five establishments and in secondary schools, while 44 percent of parents with children at nurseries were uncertain whether parents' evenings were satisfactory. (Were they uncertain whether there were such meetings? Do many nurseries not hold such meetings?).

The consistently high scores parents gave to special schools is interesting. Excellent information on learning progress is of course vital for the parents of children with special educational needs. Clearly many special schools in the Region were responding effectively to parents' high expectations for good quality information on their children's progress. Although the smaller size of special schools is an important factor which can influence the quality of interaction, the research literature also emphasises how special schools are consistently concerned with the involvement of parents in the learning process. However it begs the question that if some institutions and their professionals can establish a tradition of 'public service orientation' why others in the same education service cannot: especially given the Authority's policy of 'all children are special'.

#### *Interaction*

Parents need to get in touch with schools for many reasons. They may need to enquire about the curriculum or activities in school, or arrange to meet a teacher to discuss progress in learning, or gain permission for withdrawing their child because of some occasion in the family, or for medical reasons, and so on. Schools which

believe in a partnership with parents will wish to encourage them to get in touch with the school whenever they feel the need to do so: to phone, or visit the school and in particular to attend parents' evenings when they are held. The parent oriented school will wish to respond promptly to parents enquiries and in so doing to satisfy the reasons or concerns which prompted the enquiry. The extent of parental contact with schools is considered first and then parents' perceptions of the responsiveness of schools in dealing with their enquiries.

*Parental Contact with Schools*

Parents were asked about their contacts with the school in response to the following questions.

- Have you made an enquiry to the school?
- Have you visited the school for any reason?
- Have you attended any parents evenings?

This data is presented in rank order in Table 3 with the most frequent contact at the top of the list.

Table 3 shows that most parents made contact with their child's school, either through a visit or by making an enquiry, or attending a parents' meeting. Yet there were important variations: in secondary schools, 38 percent of parents never made an enquiry and 17 percent never visited the school; in primary schools, 31 percent of parents never made an enquiry at the school; and in special schools, 34 percent of parents never attended a parents' evening. (This could, of course, be accounted for by the greater interaction in nurseries between parents and teachers each day which can make the mounting of parents evenings, as well as attending them, perhaps appear less necessary).

*Table 3: Parents Contact with the School*

	<b>Pre-Five</b>	<b>Primary</b>	<b>Secondary</b>	<b>Special</b>	<b>ALL</b>
	Yes %	Yes %	Yes %	Yes %	Yes%
Have you visited the school for any reasons?	67	90	83	91	87
Have you attended any parents' evenings?	44	91	83	66	86
Have you made an enquiry to the school?	54	69	62	76	65

The extent of parental contact in Nurseries and other Pre-Five establishments ought to be highlighted. Over forty per cent of parents had not made any enquiry of the nursery, 56 percent had never attended any parents' meetings, and over 30 percent had never visited the nursery for any reason. These figures seem particularly high. This may be explained by the high level of informal contact parents had with nurseries which negates the need for more formal arrangements. Perhaps many nurseries do not hold parents' evenings — but if not should they? Perhaps the lack of contact suggests parental satisfaction — but why are the figures so different between Pre-Five and Primary schools? The figures suggest that parents who ostensibly 'do not bother' to get in touch with a nursery, do make the effort to make contact with the primary school. The trends which appear to be evident may more easily be explained

by the perceived level of dependence of the child on the parent — which are seen to necessitate more frequent contact. It may be that the perception of primary education as in some way more important than nursery education in the minds of the parent or may indicate a parental need to seek out information on curriculum issues which is not so acute in the nursery sector.

*Responsiveness to Parental Enquiries*

One of the most significant characteristics of what has come to be called the new management of public services is precisely its ‘public service orientation’. How committed are public services to listening to and responding to the needs and wishes of their publics? Parents were asked:

- Does the school deal with enquiries promptly?
- Does the school deal with enquiries satisfactorily?

This data is set out in Table 4.

*Table 4 : Responsiveness to parental enquiries*

	<b>Pre-Five</b>	<b>Primary</b>	<b>Secondary</b>	<b>Special</b>	<b>ALL</b>
	Yes %	Yes %	Yes %	Yes %	Yes%
Does the school deal with enquiries promptly?	85	81	73	93	78
Does the school deal with enquiries satisfactorily?	72	77	71	74	75

The levels of responsiveness which parents perceived in relation to their enquiries was quite high. Ninety-three percent of parents with children at special schools (85 percent in primary schools) believed the schools responded promptly to their enquiries. Secondary schools were perceived to be rather less prompt in dealing with parental enquiries and although 93 percent of special school parents were happy with the expeditiousness of their schools response, only 73 were satisfied with the response they received, implying they had not been given sufficient information or a satisfactory enough explanation of why the school took a particular action. The discrepancy was also high in nursery and Pre-Five establishments.

*Participation*

Our developmental framework for the school-parent relationship is based upon the assumption that the involvement of parents forms a very significant stage of development. The importance of participation, above communication or interaction, lies in the status which is accorded to parents in the education process. Intending to involve parents implies that a school is willing to regard them with a degree of equality which reflects their status as partners, seeking to draw upon their experience and knowledge as complementary educators.

We pick out two questions from the questionnaire instrument which allude to the importance of participation. These questions give us data which gives us some insight into the extent to which parents have been involved at transition stages and the extent of shared understanding.



### *Extent of Involvement*

The first question asks parents whether they are involved when their child first started or transferred to the school. These are important stages in a child's educational career when parental involvement is crucial in ensuring an easy transition into a new learning environment.

*Table 5: Involving parents when their children start school*

	<b>Pre-Five</b>	<b>Primary</b>	<b>Secondary</b>	<b>Special</b>	<b>ALL</b>
	Yes %	Yes %	Yes %	Yes %	Yes%
When your child starts / transfers to school parents are involved.	89	73	77	88	75

Table 5 suggests that the involvement of parents in the transition to a new school was supported rather better in nurseries and special schools but is quite high generally. The lowest score (73 percent), rather surprisingly, was in primary schools.

### *Extent of Shared Understanding*

Schools and parents can say they act as partners in the education of the children when they work together to establish shared understanding about the educational experience. The partners know how each needs to make a contribution which complements that of the other. The questionnaire asks one question in the section on homework, that reflects such an understanding of partnership, and requires parents to consider whether they know how they can help with homework. Parents are asked to respond to the statement:

- I know what help I am expected to give with homework.

This data is presented in Table 6:

*Table 6: Extent of Shared Understanding (Homework)*

	<b>Primary</b>	<b>Secondary</b>	<b>Special</b>	<b>ALL</b>
	Yes %	Yes %	Yes %	Yes %
I know what help I am expected to give with homework.	75	56	69	67

Table 6 indicates that between the sectors there was significant variation in parents' grasp of what was expected of them by schools in relation to homework. Parents with children at primary school felt most involved in developing shared understanding of homework, while secondary school parents perceived themselves the least knowledgeable about how they could help their children with learning at home.

Our data suggests that whilst schools across Strathclyde had taken steps to improve the quality of the home-school relationship, the extent of real partnership — reflecting mutual understanding and purpose — was possibly more limited. One item of school life, of course, is too fragile a basis for generalisation. The question

on homework is a very pertinent example, however, of how schools might consider the extent and quality of their ‘partnership’ with parents.

### III PARENTAL SATISFACTION

Although the questionnaire as a whole formed a survey of parents’ opinions and experience of schools, it also provided data which could be interpreted in terms of ‘customer’ satisfaction. The final section of the questionnaire, in particular, invited parents to express their own comments in response to:

1. What things do you like best about the school?
2. What things do you suggest to improve the school?

Each school’s Inspection Report included a summary of these open comments which we draw upon in this section.

#### *Parental Evaluations and Criteria of Judgement*

The discussion of the questionnaire data on parental satisfaction provides important and complementary evidence for our unfolding analysis. While the data, both quantitative and qualitative, provide substantive evidence on how the parents were actually *evaluating* Strathclyde’s schools, the open comments, we argue, also presented the *criteria* which they used to judge the quality of schools. Together they provided the most valuable insight into the orientation of parents and thus the conditions for partnership with schools.

While parents were satisfied with a number of aspects of school life, it is clear they were rather less content with significant aspects of the education of their children in schools, to an extent which questions the degree of partnership yet established in a number of Strathclyde’s schools.

Parents were happy with important aspects of schools: with the cleanliness, safety and (with greater anxiety about secondary schools) the accessibility of school buildings; they were happy with communication about parents’ evenings, about social events and activities in schools; parents, moreover, were satisfied with the promptness of schools’ response to their enquiries. Yet it seems clear that schools often remained much less effective in satisfying parents on those issues which concerned them most. Parents indicated concern that school buildings were unattractive and in a state of disrepair. They appeared to be dissatisfied with the quality of information they received about the core processes of teaching, learning and the curriculum. Schools appeared reluctant to communicate information in those areas which might be open to interpretation of failure on the part of the school — discipline, lateness and absence. Parents were not satisfied with the general orientation and commitment of schools to communicate information about pupil progress in learning, nor were they happy with the capacity of schools to develop shared understanding about something as important as how parents could help their children with homework. Finally, although parents were content with the promptness of replies they were often not satisfied that they provided the information or explanations they had been seeking. All this suggests that too many schools remained reluctant to share information about the most significant aspects of learning which parents clearly regarded as fundamental to their understanding and well-being.

The education of their children is of the greatest significance for parents and the repetitiveness of the issues and concerns, to which the evaluation reports routinely refer, suggests parents had a clear frame of criteria which they brought to judge the quality of schools. We summarise these as:

- A positive ethos which fosters good relations

- High standards of professionalism
- An ordered, safe, caring environment
- Strong leadership from the head and others who manage the school
- Parental involvement, communication, liaison
- Broad curriculum provision which develops the confidence and capacity of pupils
- Adequate resourcing to enable small classes and meet equipment needs
- Accommodation which is attractive and well maintained

Parents value an education which provides high professional standards of teaching in a caring atmosphere that focuses, as far as possible, upon the particular learning needs of individual children in an ordered, safe environment. The learning experience and teaching strategies of the school will strive to develop the capacities of young people enabling them to grow in self-confidence but also in sensitivity to others. The school will provide a broad curriculum and offer diverse opportunities for extra-curricular activities which encourage young people to develop understanding of their distinctive cultures and learn to express themselves, for example, through the arts as well as sport. The school will be well led and managed with priority given to positive relations, especially with parents who will be perceived as partners. The conditions for learning will be supported by satisfactory resourcing and attractive accommodation.

#### IV TOWARDS PARTNERSHIP: CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Strathclyde Regional Council was, we believe, the leading Authority in the country in promoting the involvement of parents. The Authority grasped early the significance of parental involvement for the quality of education. The Authority's idea of involving parents in school inspections to support the process of assuring the quality of schools was a leading innovation which has been influential nationally. In this concluding discussion we review the value of the Strathclyde initiative and introduce a developmental model of involvement before proceeding to analyse what can be learned substantively about the state of the partnership in practice.

##### *Strathclyde and The Value of Parents as Partners in Assuring the Quality of Education*

The typically high levels of parental response to the questionnaires demonstrates the striking success of involving parents in the Inspection process. It dramatically dissolves those traditional arguments that too many parents are not interested in education. Rather, when given a constructive opportunity to contribute their opinions parents have offered their reasoned experience in a form that can be of great value to educational policy makers as well as to the schools taking part.

We have argued that the responses of parents revealed valid criteria for a framework of evaluation. If parents do bring such a frame to bear upon their evaluations it suggests the most important understanding for an unfolding partnership between schools and the public. It implies that parents do not assess schools in a random manner but possess a clear and distinctive model of a 'good school'. It reinforces the assumption underlying policy developments in the Authority that parents must be involved as partners in delivering and assuring the quality of education in schools. The challenge for professional educators is to engage with parents to reach shared understanding about the most appropriate model of education in schools.

### *Improving Parental Partnership in Quality Assurance in Strathclyde*

The commitment of parents to take part in the inspection process, as reflected in the return rates of questionnaires, vindicated the Authority's decision to involve parents. Following our analysis we would make the following recommendations for the newly created education authorities following the dissolution of Strathclyde Regional Council.

1. That the new education authorities should be encouraged to continue and build upon the excellent practice of involving parents in the process of quality assurance for schools.
2. That the new authorities can learn from the Ofsted experience in England and Wales and invite parents to meet school inspectors at the beginning of the process.
3. Also following the experience in England and Wales a summary of the Inspection report should be distributed to parents and a further meeting convened so that the findings of the inspection can be shared and discussed.
4. If the new authorities and their schools are to continue to promote the value of a partnership with parents then they need to encourage their schools to involve parents routinely — over and above the formal school inspections. The natural focus for this is the school development plan. Parents can be involved at significant stages during each year to help formulate strategic priorities and to help evaluate the extent to which they have been realised.

### *Understanding Stages of Development*

Partnership with parents has been regarded as the key to improving pupil motivation and achievement, while service to and involvement of the public reflects the broader responsibility of school and college to promote education within the community. Characteristics of partnership for improving learning quality are perceived to include.

- (i) *Welcoming parents into the life of the school as partners:* establishing a new style in which schools will listen to and respond to parents.
- (ii) *Encouraging parents as complementary educators — in the home:* parental contribution to schemes of reading is encouraged because of its acknowledged influence upon motivation, confidence and attainment scores; and — *in school:* increasing recognition of the wide range of skills and experience amongst parents which can support the learning process.
- (iii) *Developing shared understanding of the curriculum:* establishing a closer match of understanding within the partnership and acknowledging that this takes time, given the differing perceptions of teachers, pupils and parents.
- (iv) *Enabling a dialogue in curriculum design:* listening to parents and members of the community about how the curriculum, enriched by local knowledge and experience can enhance a school's multi-cultural and anti-racist understanding.
- (v) *Facilitating partnership in the assessment of the learning progress:* establishing regular communication with parents about the progress their child is making; involving the parent in assessment and in agreeing a strategy about future development.
- (vi) *Enabling partnership in evaluation and accountability:* schools having the confidence to report to parents about performance, to listen to the 'accounts' of parents and to involve them in evaluating achievement.

While a number of studies have described different kinds of practice for involving parents (cf. Wolfendale, 1993; Bastiani, 1993; Macleod, 1989) an analysis created by Alastair Macbeth (1989) provides a useful model which proposes that the relationship between parents and schools passes through different stages of development. He proposes four stages of evolution. The first stage describes *the self-contained school*: here the emphasis is upon the enclosed school of professional expertise which holds parents at a distance. The self-contained school stage tends to be characterised by: emphasis upon teacher autonomy in decision-making; infrequent, formalised contacts with parents; staff development which neglects home-school liaison.

The second stage is one of *professional uncertainty*: with the spread of evidence about the value of participation teachers differ in their response, while parents often retain assumptions that the school should be self-contained. Characteristics of this stage include a growing recognition by teachers of the significance of home-school liaison for pupil performance; variation in teacher practice in regard to liaison; localised experiments in liaison techniques; and voluntary parent organisations more readily tolerated in schools.

As the practice of liaison develops so both parents and teachers discover that mutual confidence gradually replaces mutual caution. Features of this third stage of *growing confidence* may include:

- A style of school management which encourages the involvement of parents
- Parents entering schools and classrooms informally
- Voluntary parent organisations being accepted as part of the school community
- The appointment of home-school liaison teachers
- Two-way reports in which parents express views about the school

While stage three depends upon voluntary dedication which often results in uneven practice, stage four seeks to establish more formally the principles and practice of parental participation in the life of the school. The relationship between parents and the school is regarded as '*a concordat*' of *mutual commitment* whereby teachers work in partnership with parents and forums are established to encourage the views of parents on matters of policy. Some schools strive to reach beyond the family to involve members of the community in the life of the school. Learning does not begin and end at the school gate, and the effective school seeks actively to involve the community it serves.

#### *Towards a Model of Development*

While Macbeth's analysis emphasises how the professional world of schools and teachers need to change if relations between home and school are to improve, it nevertheless tends to neglect the parental point of view. Both perspectives need to be understood if the relationship is to develop over time. We believe it is helpful to suggest a developmental model which illustrates the positions of parent and professional, as well as the purposes and nature of the relationship at each stage. This model is shown in Figure 1.

1. *Dependence*: this stage describes the traditional relationship between home and school. Parents are passive and deferential in the face of teachers professional knowledge and training. The typical purpose for meeting parents is one of instruction, whether in the context of meeting particular parents to discuss learning or behavioural issues of a particular child, or in collective meetings, for example, to inform parents about changes in the curriculum. The underlying message of this stage suggests a model of the didactic learning relationship.

2. *Membership*: the value of parents contribution to learning, as co-educators, begins to be recognised and legitimates their role in the home-school relationship. Parents begin to be consulted about changes and their views are listened to. The model of the relationship at this stage is provided by home-school reading schemes which acknowledge the reciprocity of contributions to enhancing progress in learning. The role of the professional becomes that of facilitator supporting the contribution which parents have to make.
3. *Interaction*: this model forms a third stage of development. The school expects and encourages the active participation of parents in the life of the school: valuing them as 'complementary educators', recognising the contribution they can make to the learning process and the well-being of the school, willing to listen and to learn from them. The model is one of a learning workshop in which the participants are valued as equal partners in discussion and work together to develop a shared understanding of a particular policy or dimension of school practice.
4. *Partnership*: the fourth stage of partnership develops further the emphasis within the previous model of shared understanding and collaborative working. Here School Board members, parents and teachers enter into a public partnership which holds them jointly responsible for the governance and development of the school. Adversarial relationships are eschewed, but it is acknowledged that understanding needs to be reinforced by shared ownership and commitment. This requires a degree of formal organisation in which rights and responsibilities are defined, roles, procedures and joint accountabilities clarified and policies negotiated.

Fig. 1: Forms of Developing Partnership

	Purpose	Organisation	Parent role	Teacher role model	Pedagogic
<b>Dependence</b>	instruction	parents' evenings	passive, listening	the only expert	didactic
<b>Membership</b>	consultation	reading schemes	receiving, commenting	facilitator	listening
<b>Interaction</b>	dialogue	learning compact	active discussion influencing	engaging	inquiring learning
<b>Partnership</b>	joint responsibility	governance forums	parent body	professional mediation	negotiated curriculum

The key issue is the notion of equality. Partnership implies a relationship freely entered into. Thus partnership can only really work when all partners recognise the freedom of the other to enter into the relationship and respect the contribution which they bring. So it is with parents and teachers. Wolfendale's phrase 'equal shares' (1994) is helpful in solving the problem of equality by showing how different but equally important contributions are made by teachers and parents to the learning progress of young people. This ideal standard brings with it, moreover, an implied sense of shared responsibility.

This can remain problematic (see Tomlinson, 1991; Macbeth, 1989; Sallis, 1988). Lack of self-esteem on the part of some parents, often located in cultural factors, is very often perceived as apathy by schools who then blame parents for lack of

success. All the evidence points to parental interest in and desire to assist in their child's education (Martin *et al.*, 1995; Hughes *et al.* 1994). The problem is how to meet their needs in order that they may play a full and active part as partners.

If parents are to develop a constructive policy-making partnership with professionals in schools, then the onus may be on the professionals initially to create the appropriate climate of welcome. Many parent members of governing bodies or school boards have found their commitment and enthusiasm diminished by 'initial feelings of being out of their depth and blighted by jargon' (Golby and Brigley, 1989). Indeed Golby and Brigley's study highlights the difference in effectiveness between parents operating in an 'enabling environment' with enlightened professionals and those struggling with 'tokenist attitudes' which impose crucial limitations on the conception and practice of 'governorship'. (See also Deem, Brehony & Heath 1995.)

Parents themselves will also need to change how they perceive their role, if they are to play a greater part in formulating policy in schools. Parent groups in Britain appear to have failed to achieve the degree of influence on policy that some continental organisations have gained and remain, as Shipman (1984) describes, 'outsider groups'. Interestingly, recent research (Hughes *et al.*, 1990) suggests that such notions as 'consumerism' or 'parental choice' have only limited relevance, yet parents are intensely interested and concerned about their child's education. Parents will need to understand the need to become involved collectively at the level of policy formulation if they are to influence the quality of education as experienced by their individual children. The challenge for parents is to grasp the educational value for the learning process of working together with the school to manage change.

#### *The State of the Partnership*

Partnership has been defined by Pugh (1989) as 'a shared sense of purpose, mutual respect and the willingness to negotiate' and 'a sharing of information, responsibility, skills, decision-making and accountability'. The parental questionnaires reveal a distinctive substantive evaluation of the 'partnership' between schools and parents. The discussion of parental perceptions of the quality of the relationships between home and school suggests, however, that schools may tend to be located at earlier stages in a line of progression towards partnership. Parents typically perceive the quality of information they receive from schools about social events, for example, is much more satisfactory than the quality of shared understanding and expectation about how they are to help with their children's homework which we have picked out as a practice which illustrates partnership at work.

Referring to our typology of forms of partnership between parents and schools in Figure 1 the discussion here suggests that more schools are at earlier rather than later stages of partnership. The data does not allow us to quantify the number of schools at different stages, but we would hypothesise from the data presented that 'most' schools will have reached the stage of according parents *membership* (communicating information to them and consulting parents on changes), and many schools will have moved to a stage of *interaction* (of entering a dialogue with parents about how to improve the quality of learning and achievement in the school), only some schools will have progressed to a stage of *partnership* (which involves the parent body in reaching shared understanding about school policies and practice).

We conclude by recommending the new local authorities to continue to promote and develop Strathclyde Regional Council's excellent policy initiatives to involve parents in the life of the school. An initial step for the new authorities would be to consolidate good practice, in terms of our framework, at the stage of interaction. This stage expects and encourages the active participation of parents in the life of the school: valuing them as 'complementary educators', recognising the contribution

they can make to the learning process and the well-being of the school, willing to listen and to learn from them.

The model is one of a learning workshop in which the participants are valued as equal partners in discussion striving to develop a shared understanding of a particular policy or dimension of school practice.

The advantages of moving to this third stage of interaction ties the pedagogy of parental participation to the best practices of learning within a school: engaging rather than instructing, enabling rather than directing. More importantly it is a model which connects the needs of the institution and those of the pupil: the individual interest in the child requires a parent to develop understanding and agreement about the whole. The quality of the whole is understood as a condition for the development of each individual. Unless parents and teachers agree about homework, or uniform, or behaviour and language, or many key areas of the curriculum then the divergences in experience are likely to impede the learning of pupils severally. (Unless homework, for example, is an agreed practice, then the commitment of young people can slip easily through the crevices of adult disagreement or the inequity of 'rules' applied differently). Only a shared understanding between teachers, parents and governors as well as pupils can provide the necessary climate required for all to learn effectively.

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