



The National Parent Forum of Scotland

Curriculum for Excellence: Achieving its Ambitions?

Summary of parent focus group, Mearns Castle High School, 29th April 2015

The group contained parents from a number of Local Authority areas.

Most noticeable impacts

The workshop began with parents discussing in small groups what they felt were the most noticeable differences that CfE had made to their children's experience at school.

Several parents commented that the focus on life skills, independent learning and presentation skills had made their child **more confident**. Improvements in confidence are attributed to both a focus on presenting and on children taking ownership of their own learning from a young age.

"[CfE is] giving children more confidence from a young age."

"I felt my children had learnt a lot more life skills- researching things themselves, having the confidence to stand up and present- they do more of that at school without help from their parents."

"The children are definitely a lot more confident - they know that their voice is going to be heard."

Some parents have noticed a marked increase in **parental involvement** because of CfE, more of which is informal – although some of this may be due to the increasing pressure on young people, and parental concern about the job market facing their children.

Several parents commented that it was **hard to identify** any changes due specifically to CfE itself, because their children's experience is so dependent on individual teachers, differences between schools, and the child's own learning style.

One parent noted that the increased parental involvement makes it difficult to attribute progress to other aspects of CfE:

"Children were confident before, you just didn't know as much about what they were learning at school."

Several parents reflected that CfE had more impact at primary level than **secondary**, and that secondary schools are slower to react to CfE:

“It’s taking the secondaries a bit longer to get the children involved and taking more responsibility in their own learning. Primaries are more advanced. When my children were still in primary, I could see that more clearly - it’s now emerging in secondary as well.”

There was a concern that assessment processes in secondary schools is driving out some of the flexibility, personalisation and linkages offered by CfE:

“At primary, they are getting that, but once they get to third year of secondary, it goes back to the way it has always been, with the pressure of exams”

Flexibility

Some parents felt that CfE’s focus on flexibility had led to more creative teaching practices; however the general feeling was that creativity in teaching was down to individual teachers rather than to CfE.

“Some teachers are very creative; some- no matter what they do - won’t engage the kids. They’re individuals, they’ve got personalities.”

“I have a friend who’s a maths teacher who celebrated Pi day by building a tower in the gym- he didn’t do that to tick a box for CfE, he did it because he’s a really good maths teacher.”

“Good teachers have always been good teachers – if you’ve got enough children, you know someone’s going to get a duff one.”

Parents agreed that the demands of flexible learning are contributing to mounting pressure on teachers, which is likely to be counterproductive for pupils’ experience.

“They seem to be in a state of perpetual stress- it’s much harder for them to focus on the individual child. It doesn’t seem to calm down.”

“How can you be flexible in a curriculum that is timetabled to within an inch of its life?”

Some parents described a tension between flexibility and measures of quality or progress – with flexibility being driven out in secondary school by the focus on exams and attainment.

“Where you have flexibility you have to have some kind of moderation.”

“I honestly don’t believe that parents really truly know how their children are getting on in school- because of the flexibility.”

“You can have flexibility and there are no measures of quality- it could all end in disarray. In large schools, this is a bit of a pipe dream.”

Parents acknowledged that truly flexible learning is resource intensive, and that stretched resources present a challenge.

“Resources mean there is very little flexibility in practice.”

“As soon as you have a teacher who’s ill, the whole thing falls apart.”

Personalisation

Personalisation appears to be a mixed blessing for young people; some parents reported that personalised learning has helped their child to have more confidence and take more ownership of their own education. Others felt that attempting to provide a personalised experience for every child while resources are limited means that some young people will fall between cracks.

Parents agreed that personalisation appears to work better in Primary than in Secondary schools, in part because of the lower assessment pressure:

“It’s probably easier to implement it all in primary”

There is a limit to how much can be personalised with the available resources. One parent reported that in their school, *“...the head teacher doesn’t have the resources and has said that they don’t plan to [prioritise personalisation].”*

Some parents, although not all, were cynical about personalisation, feeling that children’s interests are secondary to targets:

“...once they’ve passed the target for however many children can write their own name, then they’re forgotten about.”

“...is it personalisation for the school or personalisation for the child?”

“I think it’s physically impossible to personalise every lesson for every child, I defy anyone to logically say it is possible.”

“...it’s putting the onus back on the child to get the depth of knowledge themselves.”

Personalisation in terms of the free choice of subjects at the secondary level presents clear challenges for schools in terms of timetabling and resourcing, and parents reported instances of young people not being able to study their first choice of subjects or being “shunted” into other subjects. There was some reflection on the need for exchange arrangements between schools / colleges to be coordinated at the Local Authority level, allowing young people to study subjects not offered at their own school. On the other hand, as one parent noted, *“kids don’t like going somewhere else”* - suggesting that exchange arrangements are not necessarily best for everyone.

One parent noted that personalisation at the level of subject choice is not being applied in the same way across the school district, and that this too should be coordinated at a council level.

“Every school’s doing their own thing. I’ve challenged why we’re still picking subjects at the end of S1, when it should be broad education as late as possible; whereas other schools are doing it later. Surely this should be a benchmark that’s led from the top down?”

Progression at their own speed

One of CfE’s aims for personalisation is for young people to be allowed to make progress at their own speed. Some parents felt that this was not happening, with more able children being left to idle, repeating exams until other children had caught up. Parents felt that while resources are limited, supporting children to progress at their own speed means focusing resources on those at the bottom [and in some cases those at the top] at the cost of those in the middle.

“Kids who are doing exceptionally well who are just doing exams over and over again.”

“If my son was allowed to progress at his own speed he’d never get anywhere... but then other people are talking about progressing faster and being left in the corner with a book.”

“Very few children will come home and say ‘I’m not getting pushed enough at school’- you’re reliant on the school to tell you.”

Linkages across all aspects of their learning

One parent expressed some scepticism about the extent of linkage in the curriculum diluting progress in some areas:

“Should we really expect the physics teacher to teach literacy skills? Literacy work is needed- but at the end of day I want my children to do well in physics, I don’t want the physics teacher to be focusing on literacy.”

Some parents were concerned that as a result of linking across learning areas and the focus on life skills, CfE had “*thrown out the basics*” of literacy and numeracy which are still important in the world of work.

“[in school, the attitude seems to be] ‘six times eight is whatever you want it to mean’- but in the workplace, your employer minds whether it’s there, their or they’re.”

Raising expectations

Expectations of attainment are high and rising, contributing to high stress levels among young people. Parents were concerned about the impact of ever increasing expectations on their children, and tended to indicate that ambitions to increase attainment, both nationally and at a school level, was not in their children's best interests. Some felt that schools were contributing to the stress caused by this "*attainment arms race*" by focusing on school performance, rather than on responding to the needs of each pupil.

"That aspiration has been loaded on her shoulders by the school."

Parents also reported that increasing attainment expectations can be counter-productive for their children in terms of employability, with schools putting children under pressure to do more Highers than they need to.

"I've got a child who's on track for 5 Highers - I don't want her to go back in sixth year to do more Highers, I want her to be looking at what else is out there to be more attractive to an employer, or to universities- piling up the Highers is not necessarily it."

Qualifications with an emphasis on skills, knowledge and understanding

Many parents described the intense pressure on young people in secondary school due to constant, rolling assessments, with pressure being passed on from teachers who are under stress themselves. The pressure of rolling assessments means that the personalisation promised by CfE is in effect "*out of the window*" by the third year of secondary school. As one parent noted, "*...for the teachers it becomes more about coaching than teaching- coaching to pass exams*".

"[Teachers] communicate pressure to the kids too because they're under pressure- it's like someone needs to take the lid off to let some pressure out."

"The apparent attainment levels are much higher [than when I was at school] - meanwhile you go to things after school and you see teachers who are there 3, 4, or 5 times a week- it's unbelievable the amount of pressure the teachers are under- it's like they're in some kind of arms race."

Several parents recognised the impact of the timing of assessments on young people's stress, and in particular the impact of constant rolling assessments:

"When we were at school you had the exam at the end of the year, and you could relax in the middle."

Some parents were cynical about the changes to qualifications, expressing concern that employers don't understand what the different / new qualifications mean anyway, and that little has changed except for the names.

"My impression is we've just come full circle. The qualifications are almost the same as when I was at school - they've just been called a lot of different names. It's just taking up teachers' time."

Increasing pressure on schools to reach ever higher levels of attainment in order to compete is forcing a narrow focus on measured forms of attainment- through traditional qualifications. Parents in this focus group agreed with the need for qualifications to reward schools for giving young people life skills and understanding.

“The big push just now from government is for attainment. I ask people what attainment is, and everyone has a different definition. We need to start recognising the other things you want your child to do in S6. If you don’t tariff it properly, you’re looking at the number game again. It’s all down to how schools get it recognised.”

“The currency at the moment is Highers and National 5s, so that’s what the schools prioritise. They don’t have a way of matching equivalency. Even if they did, the job market struggles to understand what these things are. Alternative qualifications are going to take a long time [to develop value]. Maybe it needs some quality assurance?”

Many parents recognised that the focus on academic attainment was not helpful for young people’s employability, and wanted to see more of a focus on preparing for the world of work.

“It’s not all about going to Uni - some kids just won’t, they can’t all go. Having to stand up and have your voice heard at school is massively important because if they don’t go to Uni they’ll still have to get a job, and we still have to equip them with the skills for life.”

“I don’t think the purpose of school is to prepare kids for Uni- the majority won’t even sniff Uni.”

“What are the communications with business, with skills shortages? I don’t see the correlation between what’s out there and what they’re getting shoehorned into doing.”

One parent also expressed a concern that different councils’ approaches to prioritising academic vs vocational qualifications was creating inequality of access to qualifications:

“If you go to more deprived areas, the kids are walking out with a raft of qualifications that are more relevant to the world of work.”

As another parent noted, young people’s perceptions of which skills and subjects will be important for them in the world of work are largely informed by the structure of school rather than work itself:

“Kids still mostly have a very traditional view of what the main subjects are - not enough are being exposed to the reality of the Scottish jobs market.”

Parental involvement

Parental involvement is strong at primary level, and not as strong at secondary level. Parents recognised that this is mostly due to adolescence rather than the schools themselves. It was noted that the parents engaging with this focus group are likely to be on the more engaged end of the spectrum, and may not therefore have a typical experience of engaging with their children's schools and education. One parent noted that parental engagement at their school was limited from the parents' side.

"It's not the school's availability, it's the parents - in a school of a thousand pupils, only a handful engages."

Parents with older children noted that parental involvement in secondary education has increased, and that the type of involvement is increasingly informal. One parent noted:

"With my older child we didn't get in except for the carol concert and parents evenings - regimented events. Now [with my younger child] we're never out of the school."

Another parent noted that the Parent Council had become stuck in practical details and no longer engaged in education itself:

"Way back, we used to talk more about education- that seems to be lost at the Parent Council level- instead we're talking about the toilets..."

Some parents described frustration at the lack of information and resources available to help them be involved with their children's home learning. In particular there seemed to be a lack of information that helped parents understand where their child was now, what they had already done to reach this point, and what came next in the curriculum; parents are dependent on their child for this information. As one parent said *"It's always a bit difficult to pry out what is actually expected of them"*. However this seems to vary between schools; another parent said that their school provided parents with a timeline for each subject so they could see exactly where their child was at any time.

As one parent noted, parental involvement in home learning puts considerable responsibility and onus on parents themselves, and this may in itself create inequality.

"I'm not a teacher- I can't teach her how to do division. As a parent you want to help with all of the fun things that make them nice boys and girls and nice adults, not just reading and writing."

Summary

The main points made by parents were:

- The focus of CfE on life skills, independent learning and presentation skills had made their child *more confident*.
- Some parents felt that *CfE's focus on flexibility* had led to more creative teaching practices; however the general feeling was that creativity in teaching was more down to individual teachers rather than to CfE.
- Similarly, several parents commented that it was *hard to identify* any changes due specifically to CfE itself, because their children's experience is so dependent on individual teachers, differences between schools, and the child's own learning style.
- Several parents reflected that CfE had *more impact at primary level than secondary*, and that secondary schools are slower to react to CfE.
- Parents agreed that the demands of flexible learning are contributing to *mounting pressure on teachers*, which is likely to be counterproductive for pupils' experience.
- Some parents described a *tension between flexibility and measures of quality* or progress – with flexibility being driven out in secondary school by the focus on exams and attainment.
- There was a concern that *assessment processes in secondary schools is driving out* some of the flexibility, personalisation and linkages offered by CfE.
- On the whole, parents felt that the *scope of personalisation was limited by resources*, and some felt that children's interests were secondary to the achievement of targets. There appeared to be a specific issue about the scope of subject choice. The pressure of rolling assessments means that the personalisation promised by CfE is in effect “*out of the window*” by the third year of secondary school.
- The aspiration to have children make *progress at their own speed* also appeared to be challenging, with more able children being left to idle, repeating exams until other children had caught up. Others talked of the focus being on those at the top and bottom of the class, with the middle not getting the attention they needed.
- *Expectations of attainment are high and rising*, contributing to high stress levels among young people. Some parents felt that schools were contributing to the stress caused by this “*attainment arms race*” by focusing on school performance, rather than on responding to the needs of each pupil.
- Some parents were cynical about the *changes to qualifications*, expressing concern that employers don't understand what the different / new qualifications mean. Many parents recognised that the focus on academic attainment was not helpful for young people's employability, and wanted to see more of a focus on preparing for the world of work.
- Some parents have noticed a marked *increase in parental involvement* because of CfE, more of which is informal. Some of this may be due to the increasing pressure on young people, and parental concern about the job market facing their children.

- However, some parents described their frustration at the *lack of information and resources available to help them be involved with their children's home learning*. However, again the story was mixed with one school providing parents with a timeline for each subject so they could see exactly where their child was at any time.
- As one parent noted, parental involvement in home learning puts considerable responsibility and onus on parents themselves, and this may in itself create inequality.

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