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**The actual and potential participation of primary school pupils at parents’ evenings: A challenge to the established order**

**Abstract**

As curricular development in Scotland espoused the importance of pupil participation, the extent to which this has been embedded across teachers’ pedagogy into assessment and reporting practices warranted investigation. This paper reports a mixed-methods study with parents, pupils and teachers from three Scottish primary schools that examined pupils’ participation in parents’ evenings. Findings revealed that pupils did not attend meetings but were relied upon as a source of preparation by attending parents. Adults rationalised excluding pupils from the perspective of protecting children or indicated a perceived tension between parental and pupil participation. While teachers and parents proposed passive pupil attendance based upon age and meeting content, many pupils were positively disposed towards potential attendance and envisioned more participatory roles during the meetings. I will conclude by suggesting that parents’ evenings practice merits careful revision to reflect current educational discourse.

**Key words**

children’s voice, consultation, parent-teacher conferences

**Introduction**

Curricular development in Scotland reflects a shift towards conceptualising pupils as co-constructors of their education and partners in the assessment and reporting of their progress. Pupil participation in matters directly concerning them has been previously rationalised from a range of perspectives including children’s rights, citizenship and stakeholder principles (Czerniawski, 2012). The rights argument mainly focused upon Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) where it states that children, where they are able to form an opinion, should be consulted on relevant matters. The discourse on citizenship has argued for pupil participation to prepare children for enacting democracy. This focus on educating children for future responsibilities has not been without criticism (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000); instead, children have expressed interest in enacting participation to change structures that currently place them in marginal roles (Rudduck & Flutter, 1998). In the primary school, pupils have welcomed consultation where it is done properly; Devine’s (2010:316) findings suggested that ‘children’s capacities as active agents are underutilized’.

Research into secondary schools has highlighted barriers to effective pupil participation including lack of time and over-bureaucratic systems of consultation; in addition, it stressed the importance of teacher dispositions towards pupil suggestions (Morgan, 2011). There are broader reservations to consider where participation may be adopted as a more acceptable form of pupil control rather than genuine engagement with children’s perspectives (Denscombe, 1985; Thornberg, 2010).

Arguments have developed for pupil participation in education that focus upon related improvements in teaching, curriculum and teacher – pupil relationships (Fielding, 2001; Covell & Howe, 2009). One way this has been realised is where pupils act as ‘expert witnesses’ in the school improvement process (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000; 2004). Elsewhere, Doddington, Flutter and Rudduck (2000) describe schools that developed a culture that valued learning using strategies including (i) involving pupils in assessing and evaluating their own work and (ii) encouraging dialogue around learning between pupils, teachers and pupils, parents and pupils, and teachers and parents. Research supports the efficacy of pupil participation in dialogue about their learning (Morgan,2011; Lodge, 2005) , including the value of parent-child conversations about learning in contributing towards pupil achievement (Desforges & Abouchar, 2003). Hampshire’s Rights, Respect and Responsibility initiative reported that their approach , not only contributed to gains in pupil attainment, but its findings suggested further related benefits including an increase in self-regulation and the demonstration of continuing resilience as pupils moved from primary into secondary education. Its success lay in its integration ‘at the core of the school culture providing an overarching framework into which all school functioning, teaching practices, and other related school programs and policies fit’ (Covell & Howe, 2011: 3).

 A useful model of types of participation with pupils was developed by Lodge (2005) to analyse projects in schools. She identified passive participation where pupils are consulted for functional purposes of *quality control* (e.g. during school inspections) and as *sources of information* towards school improvement. This contrasted with active roles that could be for c*ompliance and control* (i.e. tokenism) or open up a genuine conversation around learning through *dialogue*. This is about ‘shared narrative’ where engaging with others ‘through talk to arrive at a point one would not get to alone’ (Lodge, 2005: 134). She proposes the impact of dialogue lies in that it ‘prompts reflection, critical investigation, analysis, interpretation and reorganisation of knowledge.’ (Lodge, 2005: 135). Initially, pupils will need help in discussing their learning with teachers and others but Rudduck and Flutter (2000) also advocate the potential gains including increasing pupils’ commitment to their learning.

In Scotland, the UNCRC impacted on educational law including Children (Scotland) Act (1995) and Standard in Scotland’s Schools, etc Act (2000); consistent with the wider UK setting, this had been equated with the mechanism of Pupil Councils (Deuchar, 2003) but research has suggested that these involve a narrow representation of pupils (Czerniawski, 2012), have limited scope in their focus (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000) and show instances of pupil dissatisfaction with staff responses to their views (Children in Scotland & University of Edinburgh, 2010). A rights-based approach has had more significant impact where schools have embraced it as a ‘way of being’ (Sebba & Robinson, 2010: 2). More recent Scottish education policy has now aligned participation with benefits to pupils’ learning (Hulme. McKinney, Hall & Cross ,2011).

The impact of pupils’ individual preferences and aptitudes was embedded in Scotland’s A Curriculum for Excellence (2004) in the design principles of *personalisation* and *choice* where pupils from 3 to 18 years have ‘increased opportunities for exercising responsible personal choice as they move through their school career’*;* a perspective akin to Roche (1999) who confers greater participation responsibility with age. Scotland’s earlier work on Education for Citizenship (Learning and Teaching, Scotland, 2001) now forms part of Global Citizenship within A Curriculum for Excellence; this is viewed as a cross-curricular theme rather than a distinct curricular area, thus, extending the scope of teacher responsibility. Education for Citizenship bases its approach on the belief that, ‘Young people are citizens of today, not citizens in waiting’ and sees ‘learner voice’ as ‘a crucial element of education for citizenship’. However, a recent study indicates that the perspective of pupils as ‘citizens in waiting’ is still prevalent in Scottish education (Hulme, McKinney, Hall and Cross, 2011: 139).

 In 2002, Scotland established Assessment is for Learning with similar developments across the UK; it extended assessment approaches to create greater pupil self-reliance through self and peer assessment strategies. Teachers were encouraged to provide clarity about assessment and to engage in conversations *with* learners. Building the Curriculum 5 (2010: 10) provides *a framework for assessment* for the new curriculum. This model was consistent with prior assessment developments although progress was evident in reporting assessment. The previous curriculum provided guidance in Reporting 5-14 (1992) aimed at improving teacher-parent dialogue; Assessment is for Learning incorporated work with parents but teachers undertook separate dialogue with pupils and parents; Building the Curriculum 5 indicates the start of connections between the key stakeholders of the pupil, the parents and the teacher:

Learners themselves should be in a good position to contribute to discussions about written reports and about their progress in learning at consultation meetings with parents. (Scottish Government, 2010:43)

 The practice of parents’ evenings as a means of reporting pupil progress to parents is long-established in the UK. Elsewhere, these are known as conferences (Swap, 1993; Simpson, 1996). Research on these meetings has been drawn chiefly from the secondary school sector and indicates a picture of parental dissatisfaction over lack of privacy, long queues and pressures of time ( Reid, 1984: Walker, 1998); parents were critical of meetings that did little more than reiterate pupils’ written reports and avoided dialogue (Clark & Power, 1988). The perspective of teachers was not positive as they complained that they do not see the parents they want to see (Bastiani, 1986). Overall, there was an uneasy relationship between teachers and parents where ‘a veneer of consensus’ (Walker, 1998:172) was maintained in the interests of the child. Inglis’ (2012) study in Scottish primary schools suggests a more positive experience for teachers and parents where ratings of satisfaction were high with a key factor being the interpersonal qualities of the primary teacher. Our knowledge of pupil participation from UK secondary school studies shows examples of pupils avoiding potential attendance to evade stressful situations or feeling that their presence was not encouraged (Walker, 1996; Maclure & Walker, 1999). Walker (1996) found that teachers felt the presence of pupils was ‘inhibiting’ and she surmises that parent –teacher- pupil meetings would be more complex. Studies from the US indicate a practice of conferences where pupils not only attend but may lead the meeting: Tuinstra and Hiatt-Michael (2004) found that teachers felt less stressed; parental participation increased; school administrators saw conferences as a contributory factor to improved attainment and behaviour; and pupils reported behaviours that indicated a greater focus on their learning.

This study draws on findings from a study in primary schools that examined teacher, parent and pupil perceptions of the relevance and effectiveness of parents’ evenings during a period of curricular transition in Scotland when Assessment is for Learning had been introduced. I present and discuss findings in relation to current participation by pupils before, during and after parents’ evenings in three primary schools in Scotland and explore participants’ views about extending the role of pupils in the process.

In what follows, I provide an overview of the study, present findings from the research, discuss the incongruities between current educational policy and parents’ evening practice and make recommendations for the future development of these meetings.

**The study**

The study took place in three primary schools within one education authority in central Scotland. Gateway and Hill primaries (pseudonyms) were located in areas described in their Constituency Health and Well-being Profiles as below the national levels of average household income; while Burgh was placed above this level.

The study took place in two phases. In Phase 1, data were collected during the summer term parents’ evenings. Three teachers volunteered to participate at each school; followed by a random sample of two parents drawn from each of their classes. Nine teachers and 15 parents completed the Phase 1 process (three parents did not complete the process at Burgh).These participants completed a semi-structured diary to record their preparation beforehand, their actions during the meeting and actions taken after the parents’ evening; they were asked about how they involved the child before and after the event and to rate their satisfaction level with the meeting. A follow-up, semi-structured interview was used to explore the diary entries; it also investigated extending pupils’ involvement around these meetings. Parents and teachers were given a copy of their diary as a prompt during the interview to reduce the potential accusation of ‘anecdotalism’ with a short time lapse between the event and the interview (Silverman, 2000: 11). In addition, I carried-out a general observation of parents’ evenings at each school to inform the interview stage. All research tools were piloted before final data collection and I obtained the relevant ethical consents.

Group interviews were conducted with a total of 18 pupils. At each school, a quota sample of six was drawn to include two randomly selected pupils from the stages of Infants, Juniors, and Seniors.(At the time of interviewing, P.1 had little experience of parents’ evenings). The sample was not designed to directly relate to the parent and teacher group although there was some overlap. These interviews explored the pupils’ involvement before, during and after the parents’ evening. It examined extending their participation at the meetings.

The findings from Phase 1 were analysed and used to create a Phase 2 questionnaire to gain the perspective of a more representational parental sample at each site (92 returns out of 180 issued). The questionnaire was issued in the following spring term and returns from each site were relatively even: Burgh-32; Gateway-33; Hill-27. Phase 1 data were used to create multiple option items and statements for attitudinal scales; there were 21 items in total. To ensure parents were not limited by the Phase 1 data, open questions were provided to add to these items. A specific question was provided on potential pupil participation that asked parents to select one statement that reflected their view from full agreement to pupil attendance, agreement to attendance with conditions ( either age, partial attendance or issues dependent), undecided or disagreement with attendance. (Parents were asked to add comment if they disagreed).. Clearly, while the method adopted gleaned depth in its perspective, there is potential to make this study more representational by drawing from a wider, national sample of primary schools.

24 individual and three group interviews were transcribed in full and content analysis was carried-out to identify emergent themes; this was informed by a grounded theory approach developed by Strauss and Corbin (1998) acknowledging that, while the literature may have raised sensitivity to potential themes, the lack of research specifically in the context of primary education and on potential of pupil participation, required an exploratory approach. Findings were organised under the themes of purposes, roles, organisation, preparation, content, satisfaction and pupil participation. The questionnaire responses were analysed using SPSS to provide descriptive statistics and some data were cross-tabulated and subjected to non-parametric testing to establish significance around factors such as research site. This article will explore the findings in relation to pupil preparation, participation and feedback received currently and the potential to extend their participation further.

**Findings**

*The pupil’s role before the parents’ evening*

None of the participants described structured and consistent pupil involvement in preparation for the meeting. Teachers listed methods they used to feel prepared that often involved the collation or creation of paperwork on the pupils’ progress. The process established in Reporting 5-14 (1992) of meetings following a written report home had changed in some schools and parents evolved other preparation strategies including observing the child in the home context, using informal feedback from the school during the year and looking through school work where it was made available at the meeting. No pupils perceived that they had the opportunity to discuss the meeting beforehand. Two teachers said they had spoken to pupils earlier (although later interview data contradicted the statement of one teacher) and 11 parents across all the sites logged that they had spoken to their children. The talk focussed on: (i) asking the child to predict the content of the meeting; (ii) informing the child that the parent would be attending the meeting; and (iii) asking the child if there were points that should be raised at the meeting.

Although there was not a consistent relationship between all the Phase 1 pupils and adults interviewed in this study, it is worth noting that there was a mismatch between the answers of the participant groups both within and between sites; revealing differing perceptions on pupil preparation. Parents’ responses indicated that their interaction with the children, at this point, was primarily to prepare the parent rather than the pupil. In the Phase 2 68 of the 92 parents described methods to prepare for the meetings: 25 parents cited the most frequent strategy of talking to their child.

*Pupil participation at the meeting*

Pupils were often in or around the school building waiting for parents but they did not attend the meeting. Some schools accommodated the children’s presence: Burgh provided an area supervised by older pupils and Hill had toys available in the school hall which also served as a waiting area for parents. Hill pupils were critical of meetings that ran late as they had to wait for their parents. The pupils had vague expectations of what would happen at these meetings. They had narrow perceptions of the range of roles that the adults may undertake with 17 out of 18 pupils casting teachers in expertise roles only as information-givers while they had a general idea that parents ‘discuss’ them with the class teacher. Only one pupil at Gateway suggested that parents take a more proactive stance in asking the teachers questions. Similarly, pupils had limited ideas about the content of meetings.

While the organisation of parents’ evenings was not included in the pupil interview schedule, their discussions provided some related insight. The older Burgh pupils were aware of the limits of the meeting setting for all classes in the school hall rather than individual classrooms; while the parents linked their dissatisfaction with confidentiality, the pupils suggested that the parents needed access to the classrooms to allow them to view their work. Across the sites, pupils raised the importance of parents having access to school work and suggested they take a more active role in sharing this with their parents. Other aspects of meeting organisation indicated that some teachers and parents applied a deficit model to the process. In spite of school guidelines on meeting length, teachers retained discretion, in practice, over the actual allocation of time. This was exemplified when a Burgh teacher discussed whether parents should come after a positive school report:

 They’re getting the report and really a lot of them come because they feel they have to come, there’s really no reason for them to come. I mean *(names both her research participant parents)* they were in a different position this year because there were concerns for both of them and there were bits there they could enjoy but there were also concerns. But some of them, like *(names two other sets of parents)*, I mean, they just sat and smiled at me. I mean, their weans are brill. They really didn’t need to come. They could just’ve sat on the report.

(‘weans’ is a Scottish dialect term for children)

It appeared that parents colluded with this as they felt longer sessions signalled problematic meetings. The deficit model suggested that meetings between teachers and parents lacked purpose where pupil progress was not viewed as ‘problematic’.

*Pupil involvement after the meeting*

The Phase 1 adult participants were asked to record any action taken after the meeting including the involvement of the child and the pupil interviewees were asked about their participation at this stage. Five teachers, 23 parents and 17 pupils recorded child involvement at this stage. Teachers said the discussion related to pupil behaviour, pupil readiness for National testing, relating that the parent was pleased and reminding a child to bring items to school. The parents reported praising the child, discussing ways in which they could improve on the child’s work or behaviour, relating the content of the meeting and using punishment. None of the pupils recalled a class teacher discussing the meeting with them; the teacher input may have been specific to individual pupils rather than a common model of practice. Most of the children recollected a parent discussing the meeting with them with the exception of one Burgh pupil. Similarly to parents, they described discussions about rewards, action needed to improve work or behaviour, information provided by the teacher and punishment.

In phase 2, 47 parents selected that they took action after the meeting. The most frequently indicated form of action was for the parent to support the child’s learning as a result of the content of the meeting (28 responses), followed by talking to the child about progress at school (19 responses), offering praise (5 responses), talking with the other parents (1response) and other (3 responses). As this was an open question, there is potential overlap between parents who described supporting the child, talking about progress and offering praise. Therefore, about half of the children were receiving feedback from a meeting that was about them. Regardless of concerns of some pupils in Phase 1, none of the Phase 2 parents recorded punishing the child. While this may be accurate, the respondents may be avoiding social judgement about punishing a child where the questionnaire could not clarify the nature of the punishment. There is also the possibility that, what parents perceive as support; the child may feel is punishment. At Hill where there was greater pupil anxiety about punishment, based on prior parental responses, this pupil was cautious about potential pupil participation:

I wouldn’t like to be in the classroom at the same time in case my mum… the teacher showed my mum my work and, if I had messy writing, then my mum would keep me instead of getting outside and playing and she’ll shout at me and tell me to write sentences over and over again, neater.

Although few parents identified praising the child, one cannot assume that the parents were not positive when they talked to the child about progress at school.

*Potential pupil participation*

In Phase 1, 12 of the 18 pupils stated that they would like to attend their parents’ meetings but 11 adults were not in favour; the pupils tended to have clearly polarised views whereas six adults were undecided but they could identify variables that might allow the child to attend. Within the pupils ( a group of six at each site), the pattern varied over the sites with all the Burgh pupils and a majority of four of the Gateway pupils in support of the idea compared to a minority of two pupils at Hill. (The willingness to attend had been higher in a pilot study carried-out at that school). Pupil willingness to participate in the meetings appeared to increase with the age of the child. Parents cited as a factor in pupil participation that the child should be older, with the exception of one parent who felt that taking part at a younger age would demystify the process. Teachers also discussed pupil participation being more suitable as the child matured. It appears that pupil willingness to participate and parental opinion that they could meaningfully participate agree that this is related to the age of the child. 69 of the 85 Phase 2 parents who responded to this question could anticipate pupil attendance in some form (five were undecided; 11 gave a negative response). This nominal data were tested using chi-squared and there was a statistical significance between sites with no Burgh parents willing to select a positive response without setting conditions for attendance (χ2 (2) = 5.91, p = 0.05).

Participants described reasons for their views on pupil participation that either focussed on the welfare of the child or upon the interests of the adult. Adults felt they could mediate the information from the meeting to the child as hearing the contents of the meeting would impact on the child’s self-esteem, create anxiety or the child may not understand the contents of the meeting. This mediation was often perceived as a protective role towards children with adults selecting balanced information and communicating it in a supportive way. Pupils most frequently referred to mediation: they demonstrated awareness that the content of the meeting was edited and they wanted full disclosure instead.

Four pupils felt that their participation would make them anxious; these were the Hill pupils that indicated that they would not like to attend. This perception may be linked to pupil responses on after-meeting behaviour in current meetings as they were more likely to discuss punishment than pupils at other sites. A senior pupil at Hill was adamant that he would not like to attend:

I wouldn’t like to be there because, if I got a bad report, I’d probably get shouted at inside the school or something.

Similarly, a Hill infant was anxious that her presence would result in immediate punishment:

I don’t want to go into the class and be part of it in case my work is messy and my mum keeps me in or something.

Discussion with pupils often revealed that they did not have work or behaviour difficulties. However, their reluctance stemmed from perceived immediacy of punishment if they were present at the meeting. Also, it indicates that these children fear that the meeting will actually be a reprimand from the adults.

Four adults queried whether the children would understand the meeting; one parent expressed this as not wanting pupils present to listen to “an adult conversation”. However, some adult participants suggested that pupil participation would necessitate a new model of practice to allow pupils to understand and participate meaningfully in the meetings.

The adults also displayed self-interest in disagreeing with pupil participation. The majority of responding adults approved of mediating information to the child but they, particularly parents, were uncomfortable with the prospect of having information mediated to them due to pupil presence. Some parents added comments to their concerns about pupil participation in the questionnaires; most of these (five comments) related to parents receiving less information. Adult reasoning was often founded on a conservative view of parents’ meetings based on their current models; some participants suggested that a step towards pupil inclusion would necessitate thinking creatively in the future. Phase 2 confirmed the most common conditions that adults placed on the meetings were (i)the age of the child (11 respondents); (ii) the issues being discussed (34 respondents); and (iii) aspects of the organisation (15 respondents). Participation was appropriate for older pupils as they would understand the content and be able to make a meaningful contribution. Teachers were more concerned with the issues being discussed in front of the child, that they should not be confidential or likely to upset the child. Other aspects related to changing the organisation so that children attended for part of the meeting to allow privacy for the adults to discuss more confidential topics, clearly relating to adult concerns about mediating information. Organisational changes that were suggested also included the confidentiality of the setting to protect the child from embarrassment and having additional evenings where pupil participation was viewed as an addition to the current model rather than a central change.

Where interviewees gave an affirmative response to participation, they were asked to describe pupils’ roles. Most commonly, the adults said that children would express their views, hear the views of the teacher and parents or identify areas of school work in need of support. The pupils expanded this to include showing the parent their work, viewing their own work and questioning the class teacher; showing their work and expressing their views were the most frequently cited roles by the pupils. Across the sites, the Hill pupils suggested a more limited range of roles although this may be related to their general reluctance to participate in meetings. Pupils from all class levels contributed towards the discussion but the middle and upper stages tended to identify new roles. It was interesting to examine the roles that pupils did *not* identify for themselves; these were hearing the views of teachers and parents or attending in a non-participatory role. Clearly, the pupils did not see their potential role as passive but as an active, participatory one.

**Discussion**

The findings of the study indicate that discourses on children’s’ rights, citizenship and participation have not influenced the practice of parents’ evenings in these primary schools as pupils did not attend nor did they contribute towards the conversation in a structured way. Therefore, it would appear that the discourses in current Scottish educational policy on curriculum and assessment have not fully impacted upon this assessment practice. Hulme, McKinney, Hall and Cross’ Scottish study (2011) similarly concluded that participation was not embedded at the core of teachers’ work in the classroom and they suggest that some teachers may find this involvement threatening.

These findings indicate that parents also perceived a threat from pupil participation in that information would be edited at the meeting. This suggests two related areas of tension over power. Discourses around professional accountability and parental consumerism or participation indicate gains in influence for some parents (Crozier, 2000: Reay, 2005). The wider study showed that, while the model of teacher as ‘expert’ (Hornby, 2000) prevails, through their actions and expectations, parents had developed more participatory roles (Inglis, 2012). Some parents viewed the presence of the pupil as a potential loss to their information gains. Secondly, this finding suggests that parents can see their rights as at odds to children’s rights. This appears to be part of a wider pattern of tension that Prout (2000) identified in industrialised countries; a tension that is often resolved by granting parents the opportunity to enact rights for children.

Where the exclusion of pupils was rationalised in a child-focussed manner, adults described avoiding anxiety and stress for the child; some doubted the ability of children to understand the meeting content. Underpinning the argument was a protectionist perspective on childhood, that is, it is the role of the adults to shield the child from harm. Here, harm was viewed as the content of the meeting and the manner in which it was communicated. An irony becomes evident in the findings: parents felt that pupils had the capacity to identify potential issues and to assess the progress that would be reported to enable the adults to prepare for the meetings; however, adults felt that pupils were sufficiently ignorant of their educational progress that exposure to this information without adult mediation would cause anxiety. Some parents felt that they had a better manner to convey this information but pupils sometimes perceived instances of parental feedback as reprimands. Clearly, adults would need to consider how they involved pupils in this dialogue but, the difficulty of this alone does not present a valid argument for pupil omission.

Crucial to overcoming this omission appeared to be the age of the pupil with participation perceived as increasingly possible as the pupil became older. This outcome sits comfortably with Roche (1999) and A Curriculum for Excellence. On the other hand, Alderson (2008: 87)argues for judging children’s evolving capacities to enact rights as based upon ‘their experiences, cultural and family life’ rather than fixed by age, that is, we should avoid notions of children’s capacity based on static ideas of child development. Elsewhere, there have been successful examples in Scotland of consulting young children (Learning and Teaching Scotland & Save the Children, 2007; Stirling Council, 2000). As with other examples of enacting Article 12, the crucial aspect is designing a process that fits the stage and development of the child. The RRR initiative found it was possible to bring an understanding of rights to their youngest participants but that appreciation differed in scope compared to the older primary pupils (Covell & Howe, 2011). The findings in this article show that pupils were able to articulate greater reasoning around their involvement and to envisage active roles as they matured; but there is a fine balance between waiting for pupils to be mature enough to participate fully and omitting them in a manner that inducts them into expecting traditional forms of meetings around their learning.

During the consultation over potential pupil participation, many answers equated to ‘how can we fit this into our existing meetings?’ The way ahead may lie out with the current organisation. Some participants demonstrated an awareness of needing a new format with a ‘clear agenda’. The deficit model indicated by the findings points to a practice without purpose for pupils who were not encountering problems in their learning. Parents appreciated opportunities to view children’s work but the lay-out at schools and limited time could make this difficult. Pupils wanted to be able to share their work with their parents and to ask their teachers questions about their progress. More broadly in the Scottish sector, parents can have few opportunities to view their children’s work until the end of the academic year as schools retain this as evidence for accountability mechanisms such as HMIe. As teachers concern themselves with gaining parental interest, Russell and Granville’s Scottish study on parental involvement (2005) suggests that this can be achieved by engaging pupils to engage their parents.

**Recommendations**

While the educational policy landscape in Scotland has shifted towards increasing pupil participation, practices such as reporting progress through parents’ evenings have been slow to follow: it is time to review this practice to make them meaningful for *all* pupils.

This author proposes that new forms should not compel pupils into models that extend pupil control so that parents’ evenings in the primary school replicate the ‘show trials’ (Maclure & Walker, 1999: 54) described in secondary school research. In engaging with the discourse on children’s rights to participation, we should not compel pupils into situations that may create distress.

 As suggested by participants in this study, new models will require support for pupils and a clear structure with a shared purpose communicated to all participants. The focus upon children’s age need not absent primary schools, in particular its younger pupils; rather, it suggests that approaches may have to vary across the school to best support the pupils. Most importantly, to engage participants, they need to have real roles that focus on purposeful dialogue on children’s learning. Assessment is for Learning and A Curriculum for Excellence have already embedded practices of self and peer assessment; meetings to discuss educational progress should be seen as an extension to these approaches but not as an addition to existing parents’ meeting structures. This suggests that there needs to be a significant shift in how adults view the capacity of children to engage knowledgeably in joint discussions about their education.

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