

Walking together, hand in hand.

Examining the experiences, barriers and motivators around parental engagement in a CLN setting.

“The children, the parents, the school, they walk together, hand in hand”

“Gideon”, parent interview, 2017.

Parental engagement is a National Priority in Scotland, with almost universal acceptance that it leads to improved outcomes for learners. Like many Scottish schools, we wanted to improve both the quality and uptake of our interactions with parents and families. But how? In our small secondary school for pupils with Complex Learning Needs (CLN), what did parental involvement look like? Should it be the same as in mainstream settings? Were the experiences, barriers and motivators for parents and schools the same? Why were some events and initiatives hugely successful, while others passed by unnoticed? When it comes to policy, does one size truly fit all?

Legislation, national and local policy make parental involvement a priority for all schools, and for good reason. Current legislation (Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006) while non-prescriptive in many areas, specifies what parent councils can expect from schools, and highlights their rights to involvement in specific aspects of school life. Government policy reflects the predominant view in research that parental engagement is, broadly, desirable for all stakeholders. Despite affirming a commitment to inclusion, the Act largely treats parents as a homogenous group, by supposing (again, like much research) that the government’s goals of greater academic achievement, closing that attainment gap and ensuring positive destinations for learners are equally relevant to all learners. Legislation also fails to consider the additional needs of some parents in supporting their child’s learning (The National Parent Forum of Scotland, 2017). Although the Plan identifies strategies supporting parental involvement from the very earliest days by addressing inequities in social and cultural capital (Scottish Government, 2016, p.15), there is no obvious reference to supporting the engagement of families who speak English as an additional language, for example, or parents who have a learning difficulty or other additional support need.

Current legislation and policies are predicated on the belief that “when parents, carers and other family members are effectively involved in their children’s education, the outcome for their children is better.” (Ministerial Foreword to the Act, 2006, p.i), making parental engagement the goal and duty of all education authorities and school communities (Executive, S., 2006, pp 10 -11). The school self-evaluation document How Good is Our School 4 identifies “Family Learning and Partnerships”, including school-parent partnerships, as a fundamental theme in a school’s improvement process (Education Scotland, 2015).

Building the Curriculum 5 states that parents must be “actively involved” in the planning of support and

targets for their children (Scottish Government. 2010, p.55). The Scottish National Improvement Framework Plan refers to the benefits of parental engagement and promotes monitoring it as a strategy for closing the attainment gap (Scottish Government, 2016, p.9). Legislation, policy and expectations of practice are permeated by this perspective of cooperative and collaborative home-school relationships, beneficial to all parties.

But what does this look like in a specialist setting? Without a shared understanding of what activities and experiences are included and valued, and of their goals and functions, it becomes impossible to measure success, to identify barriers, or to plan improvement. Current policy and legislation in Scotland regarding parental involvement is universal – it relates to all pupils, in all education establishments and to their parents. This can sometimes lead to a “one-size-fits-all” approach, with assumptions that the needs of mainstream school communities are universal. This lack of attention is significant: it has led to schools from all sectors being required to measure and evaluate their approaches to parental involvement in the same way (Education Scotland, 2015), creating the potential for families and staff to expend precious energy, time and resources on initiatives which are of minimal, if any benefit to them or their learners. Parents of children with significant learning needs are already subject to substantial physical and emotional demands; we must be sure that parents responding to any further demands placed upon them see a net gain.

In fact, research suggests different outcomes for parental involvement in Special Educational settings. The most dramatic impact is real improvements in quality of life for the whole family, with a focus on wellbeing (Fishman and Nickerson, 2015, Thompson-Janes et al., 2016; Carpenter, 2000). However, where Scottish policy refers to supporting parents, it tends to be in the context of supporting them in their involvement with the school and with the child’s learning, rather than in their quality of life or wellbeing (for example, National Parent Forum of Scotland, 2017; Education Scotland, 2015).

I sought to explore how all of this applied to our practice by conducting informal interviews with parents and staff. At the time of the research, the population of our school was 36, with pupils ranging from first to sixth year. All families and staff were invited to participate by letter; seven families and seven members of staff participated, including parents, grandparents, class teachers, members of the leadership team, the school nurse, and a member of administrative staff. Participants were self-selecting and were aware of their rights and that participation was voluntary. Interviews took place in school, at a time suitable to participants, and in a comfortable and informal setting.

When using semi-structured interviews as a research tool, it is common for participants to be asked to read over the transcripts of their interview, or to give feedback on the main points identified by the researcher.

However, the parent participants in this case are particularly vulnerable – many spoke of the difficulties they face simply getting through each day. Over the course of the research, I became aware that some had travelled for over an hour to attend the interview. Others had clearly found the process emotionally draining. I was not willing to ask any more of these participants than they had already freely given. Nor was I willing to place an additional burden on my frazzled colleagues at the end of a particularly stressful year. Instead, where possible I sought to clarify the thoughts and key themes raised in the interviews as they emerged and offered a copy of the transcript to all participants. I was also aware of the implications of my dual role as interviewer and staff member: I am not a disinterested observer, and cannot, with the best of intentions, claim total objectivity. Similarly, all participants had an existing relationship with me, which had an inevitable impact on interview dynamics. I addressed this by reassuring participants of their anonymity, allowing plenty of time at interviews for them to explore and express their thoughts and by clarifying and recapping major points during interviews whilst maintaining an awareness of my own assumptions and preconceptions.

To protect anonymity, parents and staff names have been changed (pseudonyms given below), and staff roles have not been identified.

Parents: Aadi, Bisma, Caroline, David, Elizabeth, Farah, Gideon, Hannah, Sara.

Staff: Jill, Laurence, Mariam, Nicola, Olive, Patricia, Rachael.

What became immediately apparent was that all interviewees value parents' roles in their child's education. All family members regarded their input as being at least as valuable as that of teachers: "the role of the parents is always, always, always, always more important than the role of the teacher." ("Gideon"); "I feel that we really are as much an important role as you are" ("Caroline"). Staff were entirely in agreement: "The parent's role really is central" ("Patricia"); "It makes all the difference in the world" ("Laurence").

There was also strong awareness of the challenges faced by families in the school. Parents spoke of the demands of having a child with CLN ("We've given up our life, basically", "Hannah"), something which was universally recognised by staff. Compassion for parents and families and understanding of the difficulties faced by them was implicit and explicit in all staff interviews; however, it was not clear that parents were aware of this.

When asked to unpick what parental involvement meant for them, parents shared several experiences and priorities. Advocacy for their child was key: "basically, we are his voice really, you know. He can't do it himself, so we do it and I'm like warrior mother!" (Caroline). They described experiences in school and elsewhere, fighting for access to services on behalf of their child. This was closely related to parents'

awareness of the vulnerability of their children, and of their responsibility in ensuring the child's safety and happiness first and foremost, a point also emphasised by staff.

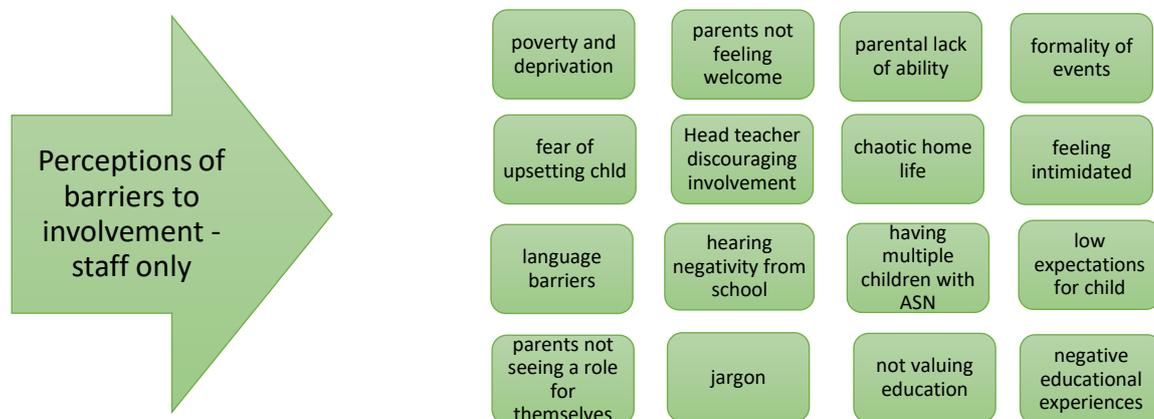
Communication was seen as crucial, with telephone calls being the most common type of contact described. Several parents spoke of regularly phoning the school or using the home-school diary. This process was described by Gideon as "a relay game"; he saw it as the joint responsibility of parents and school, a view echoed by staff. An interest in learning about their child's life and work in school was seen by staff as a crucial part of a parent's role; feedback from parents was described as a valuable part of this relationship.

Parents universally described attending formal meetings and events as very important, as did staff, although some expressed concerns about how much meaning these meetings held for parents. This focus on communication fed into the concept of a partnership between school and parents, and the importance of building this relationship: "the children, the parents, the school, they walk together, walk hand in hand" (Gideon).

Barriers to Parental Engagement

Both parents and staff perceived greater barriers to parental engagement in a CLN setting than in mainstream schools.

Staff identified significantly more potential and existing barriers than parents did, which can be explained by the fact that parents will be drawing on their own experiences and those of friends and acquaintances, whereas staff have, in some cases, the experiences of decades of relationships with parents to draw on (see Figure 1).



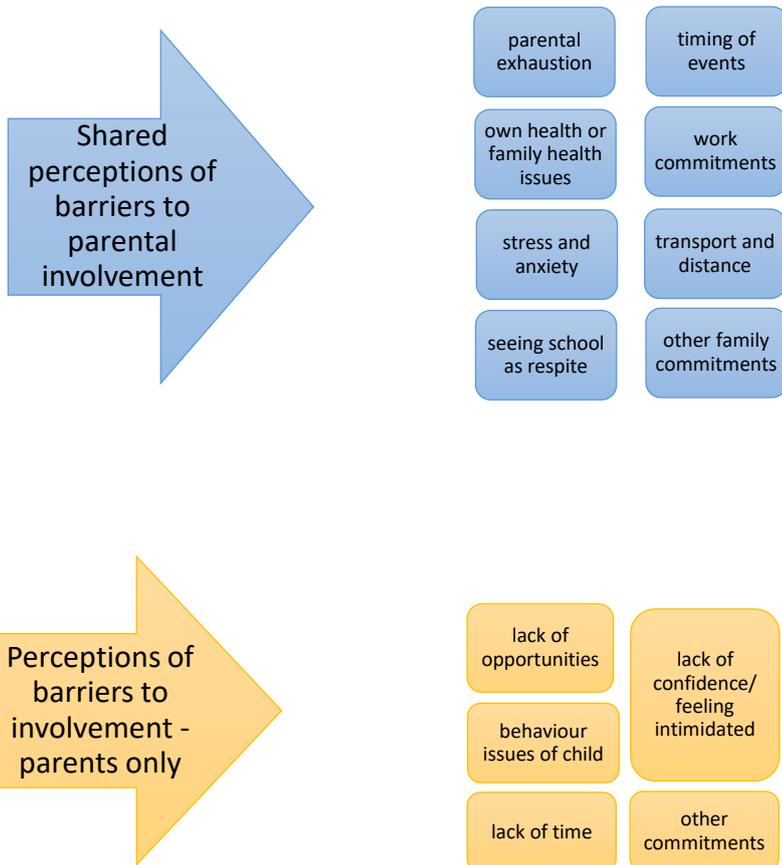


Figure 1: Perceptions of barriers to parental involvement

Suggestions to improve Parental Engagement

Many participants saw supporting parents and families as a priority for schools, and as a main function of parental involvement. This was often seen as quite separate from the goals of supporting the formal education of the child. Staff and families agreed that anything which improved family life ultimately supported the child’s wellbeing. By supporting and enabling families in terms of understanding and coping with their child’s needs, or in accessing services, the school would also be supporting the child. This idea dominated interviews with both staff and parents; when asked for suggestions on how schools could better support families, nobody mentioned curriculum-based initiatives. (See Figure 2). When asked how the school could encourage more parental involvement, only two participants (one from each group) suggested more curricular information; most suggestions centred around what are traditionally seen as the “softer” aspects of parental involvement (school shows, coffee mornings, trips) and initiatives to support families (see Figure 3).



Figure 2: Opportunities for the school to better support parents, as suggested by parents and staff.

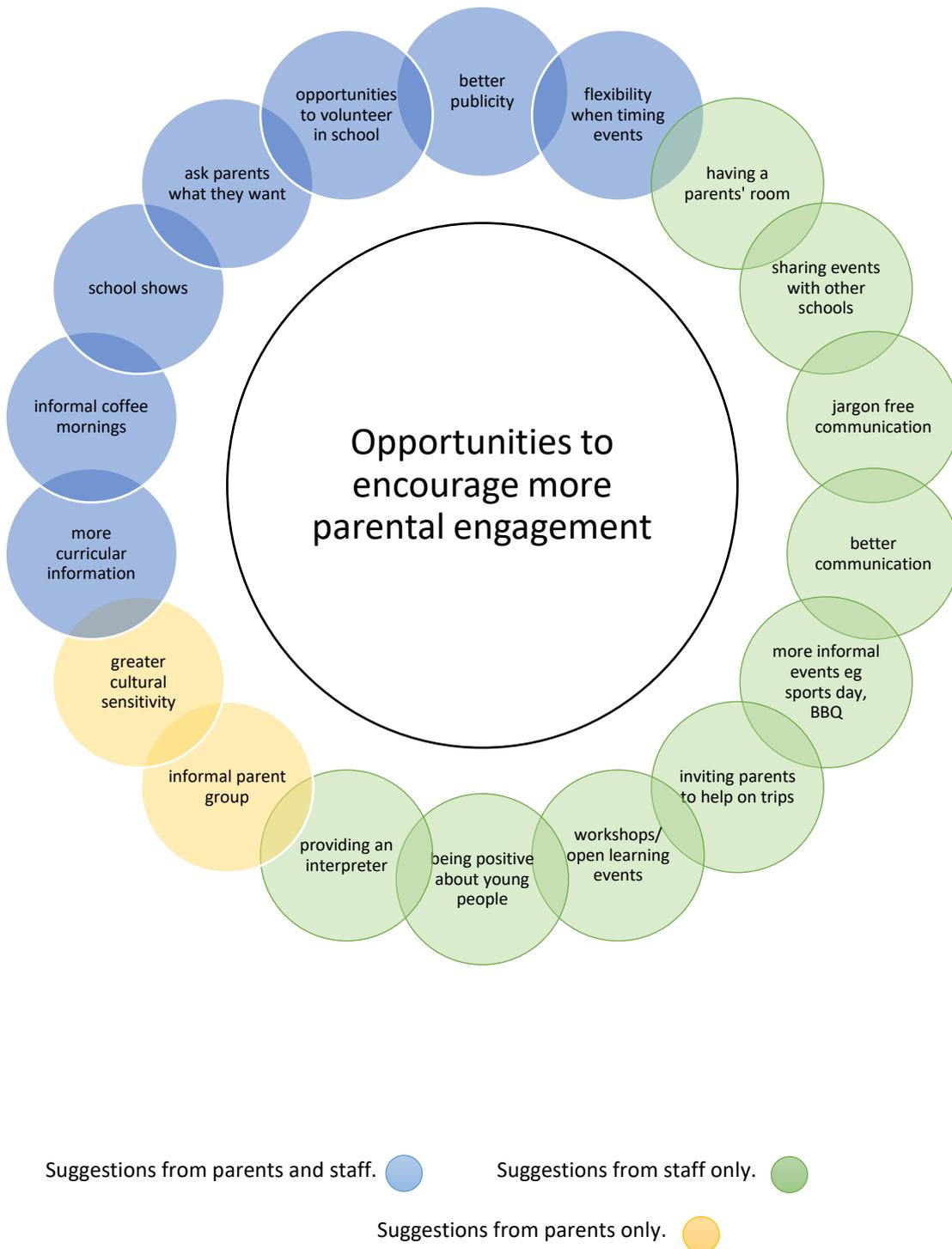


Figure 3: Opportunities for the school to encourage more parental engagement, as suggested by parents and staff.

These opportunities were seen as desirable by parents and staff, enabling parents to visit, watch, listen, discuss, learn, even lend a hand or share skills and expertise and enabling schools to offer meaningful support to vulnerable and often exhausted parents:

“It means that you can start to engage with a parent by meeting the needs that they have and then you can sort of try to lead that out into other areas about supporting their young people and working with them from there” (“Patricia”).

It empowers parents by giving them access to information both about their child's education, and about choices and rights for the future. Where it works well, it creates an environment in which other relationships, between families and across the community, can flourish: "...you can feel like you're on your own and we always bump into people at like the coffee mornings and things which it's great because you get to see these people that you don't normally see" (Caroline). Social events, opportunities to enjoy their child, their accomplishments and friendships – sometimes very rare for this cohort of parents – are of massive importance. Engaged parents, who telephone, or fill out forms, or read (even if they don't write in) the home school diary, or who come to assemblies or coffee mornings, are less isolated, less vulnerable - "I'm happy to do this, because I feel it keeps me involved with what's going on and you know, I don't want to feel distant from the school" (Elizabeth). They know the faces and voices of the school staff, they can visualise where their children are during the day, and they know who to call for help or advice if they have a concern. These parents, by and large, want more of this; by and large, staff want to give it to them. Staff also value these interactions, speaking with clear pleasure and satisfaction of being able to support a struggling parent, or of an intervention that had a positive impact on a child's home life. Even the frustration expressed at the underfunding of social services was underpinned by a sort of pride in the school's role in "plugging the gaps" and supporting and protecting these families.

Involvement or Engagement?

Scottish policy and legislation differentiate between parental involvement and engagement. Parental involvement describes families' relationships with schools. Engagement describes their relationship with their child, and with their child's learning. The intention is that by encouraging parental involvement in school life, we will nurture their engagement with their child's education, at school and at home. This model is subverted in Special Education. Parents are already engaged in home learning, often working on basic life, social and communication skills well into secondary school. And they are exhausted. If we want them to become more involved in school life, they need to know why. And we need to make it worth their while.

Educational policy values, welcomes and encourages parental engagement, but does it actually encourage involvement? Buried under the genuine desire to help, to support and to educate, is a touch of paternalism. National and local policies run the risk of telling families what they should value. This perception that professionals are "the experts" was observable in parents also. Elizabeth spoke of wanting to support her child's learning but was very clear that she shouldn't be too involved: "You don't want to feel that you are interfering". It is possible that this is learned behaviour on both sides. Attempts to

involve parents in curricular events have largely been met with disinterest: Patricia and “Rachael” both spoke of poor attendance at a recent meeting about the school homework policy. Some staff felt that parents don’t really see what the school provides as education. This is based on parental uptake of curriculum events, and how staff experience parental participation at review meetings: “they’re more concerned about how they behave” (Rachael). Although parents identified their child’s learning and progress as important, when asked to describe parental involvement they suggested a rather passive role for themselves, largely as consumers of support rather than as having an impact on the life of the school.

Another hidden barrier is staff fatigue. Staff appeared to be exhausted by the very physical and emotional demands of working in this sector, and to be disillusioned by repeated failures to engage parents, or by the inadequacies of the system: “You know, we’ve put on events here, laid on transport, and the parents still don’t come” (Patricia). Like many in the sector, this is a small school, and so the organisation of new initiatives and events will fall to the same staff over and over again. Staff can be worn down by perceived failures. One parent, Elizabeth, spoke of her embarrassment at being the only person attending an event. Staff expressed frustration at being stuck with traditional models of parental involvement used in mainstream settings, despite them not necessarily having relevance to the CLN sector. The Homework Policy event was a case in point – two parents attended, in contrast to the Leavers’ Assembly, attended by twenty-five. It seems that parents will attend events which they see as relevant to them and will simply ignore those which are not.

What was very clear during interviews was that, while more formal events were deemed necessary and important, it was opportunities for engagement which families welcomed – in both theory and practice. Greatest enthusiasm was shown for events where families were, on the face of it, more passive consumers of hospitality, information or support, than when discussing opportunities to contribute to or support the work of the school. Parental engagement was valued and desired significantly more than parental involvement.

Jargon, language and education difficulties were acknowledged by several members of staff as significant barriers, an issue which is not restricted to this school. Many government documents are lengthy and acronym-heavy (for example, Guidance on The Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006 is 86 pages long), and websites such as <https://education.gov.scot/> can be wordy and difficult to navigate. Even having the language and literacy skills to access information and resources is not always defence against what can be perceived to be paternalistic and patronising attitudes from professionals, as described by “David”: “And it’s trying to get this through to his adult worker as well. Cos, he was kind of like, ‘You just need to forget it.’ And we were like, ‘No.’”

Similarly, the “gathered community” of a specialist CLN provision creates many artificial barriers. The practice of bussing these children from across one side of a city into a single school creates a distance not only between the school and parents, but also between families. The lack of that “school gate” experience, where parents can meet, form friendships and offer each other support and advice can lead to loneliness and isolation, as acknowledged by Patricia, “Jill” and Nicola. The very organisation of special education is a barrier to involvement. Locally and nationally, we identify these barriers, and yet the barriers remain – failure to act on them, failure to change is, in itself, a decision to maintain the status quo.

Conclusions

Parents and staff participants value opportunities for parental engagement very highly. Parents particularly enjoy the more social opportunities, and historically, informal social events have been better attended. Even parents who described themselves as happy with the opportunities to be involved in school life spoke of a lack of communication, and a desire to “see behind the curtain” of school life. Staff members suggested that parents are put off attending formal occasions because they are intimidated, because of negative experiences in the past, or because of fears of being exposed or made to feel inadequate. Some staff questioned the value of the more formal meetings: “I do try to include the parents, but do we really, at a meeting of professionals?” (Rachael). When speaking of positive experiences of parental involvement, staff cited times they were able to support families and children, building relationships and improving outcomes. None spoke of the more formal events.

Measurement of parental engagement or involvement in special schools is problematic; improved attendance at curriculum events, or at parent council meetings is simpler to quantify than supporting a family in crisis, arranging a new bus route, or facilitating a family’s access to health or social services. It can seem, in the current political climate, that that which cannot be measured and evidenced is not valued as much as that which can.

However, if parents want social and relaxed engagement with the school, rather than more formal involvement, who has the right to tell them what is of the most value to them? Parents were very clear about what they want from the school. Universally, they became most animated when asked how the school could best support them; in the context of their daily lives, and the challenges they and their young people face, it seems unrealistic to ask them to support the school. Asking parents to come in to discuss a communication policy, for example, when they haven’t had a full night’s sleep in fifteen years could appear inconsiderate, if not crass. However, many parents expressed an interest in less formal curricular involvement – open mornings, assemblies, class visits, fairs – these are all opportunities for parents to engage with the curriculum, see what their children are learning, and how, and allow the school to nurture relationships in which families’ suggestions, queries and contributions are made and received with ease.

As long as we restrict involvement to a formal context, we will fail to attract those parents for whom it feels like detention, or just has no obvious meaning. The encounters and events which are difficult to measure, as a result, risk being less valued by schools and professionals, but these are the very contacts which were most valued by parents: phone calls, coffee mornings and assemblies are the opportunities which hold real meaning for them, and which meet their needs. These events transcend some of the barriers families face – they will not be overwhelmed by jargon, intimidated by a sea of professionals, or grilled on their parenting skills at a Christmas Fayre, and they will have the opportunity to get past their own negative experiences of school, to see “behind the curtain”, to reassure themselves of the wellbeing of their child and to build positive relationships with other families and with staff.

This tension between what schools and parents are told to value, and what they actually find useful or meaningful, also exists in the research, much of which explores the impact parental involvement has on traditional measures of curricular attainment and focuses on how parental involvement can support educators in what Gideon called “the business of the school”. There is a limited amount of research on parental involvement in schools for pupils with ASN, even less relating to schools for pupils with complex and significant learning difficulties. What does exist deals less with the traditional measures of success for schools seen in policy and legislation, and more with building supportive relationships and meeting the needs of parents.

This approach resonates with current national policy, although not specifically relating to parental involvement: the indicators on the Wellbeing Wheel in *Getting It Right for Every Child* (Scottish Government, 2012) are fundamental to the ethos of Scottish education, and inform best practice around children and young people, placing the child and their needs firmly at the centre of planning. It does not take much of a stretch to apply this ethos to strategies around parental involvement. Participants were clear that parents can get involved with schools where they can feel safe, where their health needs are acknowledged and supported, where they know that their involvement has purpose, their contribution is valued and respected, where there is genuine partnership, and where they feel included. They were also clear that this is less likely to happen at formal meetings geared towards the needs of professionals than it is in more relaxed and social settings.

Contrary to the assumptions made in the Scottish Executive’s *Guidance on the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act* (2006), parents in this school are already engaged in their children’s learning - what they need is greater empowerment and more opportunities for meaningful involvement. This is most likely to happen in a context in which their needs and preoccupations are understood and acknowledged, and in which all forms of involvement are recognised (Smith, 2006).

So how are we moving forward? Instead of telling our families what they need, we asked them – and we are listening to their responses. As a school, we are re-imagining the purpose of parental involvement with the parents' as well as the pupils' wellbeing at heart. Our new Twitter account, created to draw back the curtain on school life, has become a well-used resource for parents, also sharing information about accessing supports, services and opportunities beyond the school gates. A parent questionnaire on opportunities for involvement continues to inform events and planning. Requested information events have been well attended, and open mornings and training opportunities are in the pipeline. By listening to and trusting our families, we are supporting and empowering each other in working towards our shared goals: enhancing the wellbeing, education and life experiences of our young learners.

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