

# GATHERED TOGETHER

Cruinn Còmhla



## INVOLVING ALL PARENTS

Good Practice Guide  
for Schools





**Gathered Together** would like to thank all the participants who came along to the training sessions and shared their thoughts, ideas and experiences. We would also like to thank the teachers and schools that welcomed us and shared their good practice and the wonderful work they are doing to get parents involved.

We would also like to thank all our colleagues at SPTC for their hard work in developing and delivering the sessions and bringing their years of knowledge and experience working with Parent Councils.

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*Glasgow Chinese School*

## INTRODUCTION

Gathered Together is a pilot project between BEMIS (umbrella body for ethnic minority groups in Scotland) and the Scottish Parent Teacher Council. It was created following a survey conducted by BEMIS and SPTC of Parent Councils in Scotland addressing representation of Ethnic Minorities on Parent Councils. The survey found that 77% of the parent councils in the survey had no ethnic minority members<sup>1</sup>.

There was concern that this meant that the views and experiences of ethnic minority parents were not being represented within schools and also that this lack of involvement in the school could impact negatively on EM children. There are clear links between parental involvement and children's academic success<sup>2</sup> and positive outcomes in later life. Berla and Henderson found that

*The most accurate predictor of a student's achievement in school is not income or social status but the extent to which that student's family is able to . . . become involved in their children's education at school and in the community<sup>3</sup>*

Gathered Together has been working to promote greater parental involvement by ethnic minority parents in their school communities- working directly with schools, Parent Councils and ethnic minority parents. Part of our work has been engaging with ethnic minority parents to learn about their experiences of contact with school and identify barriers that they faced in greater engagement. We have been able to use this information in our work with schools, Parents Councils and at a council and national level to raise awareness of the issues that ethnic minority parents face, share good practice and highlight gaps in policy and practice.

This report summarises the findings from our work with ethnic minority parents and identifies good practice to engage with parents and help overcome the barriers they face.

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<sup>1</sup> Ethnic Minority Parental Involvement within Parent Groups (2012)  
<http://bemis.org.uk/documents/Outline%20Report%20-%20BEMIS%20SPTC.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> The Role of aspirations, attitudes and behaviour in closing the educational attainment gap, Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2012) <http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/education-achievement-poverty-summary.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> A new generation of evidence: The family is critical to student achievement Henderson & Berla (1994).. Columbia, MD: National Committee for Citizens in Education

**Gathered Together have delivered 35 workshops for 332 ethnic minority parents, exploring their experience of contact with school and barriers to engagement that they have faced. For the full report read “Experiences of Parents from Ethnic Minorities of parental involvement”**

## **KEY FINDINGS**

- Parents’ main contact with school is through attending parents’ evenings and in dropping off and picking up their children.
  - In primary school parents had diverse opportunities for coming into school including attending fairs, assemblies, concerts.
  - In secondary school parents had very limited contact with school and their main contact is through parents’ evenings.
- Parents place a great deal of importance on homework, however many parents expressed concern that they were not able to support their children with homework- often due to lower levels of English or understanding of the way their children are being taught
- Language is a significant barrier for many parents and also impacts on their ability to communicate with school, speak to teachers about issues with their children and on their confidence to go into school
- Differences in education systems and culture were also frequently mentioned by parents as a barrier- parents were not aware how the Scottish education system worked, including who to approach, their right to have their voice heard within the school
  - Parents of secondary school children expressed concerns about the new exam system and were unsure about the best way to support their children and options for their future. They often felt there was a lack of information or that the information was not easily accessible
- In common with all parents time, child care and work were barriers to becoming more involved- this was particularly a barrier for parents who did not have close family and friends to help with childcare and were not able to access nursery
- Where parents were involved in the school to celebrate their culture- including bilingual story-telling, being invited to speak about their religion or share their food, parents were very positive and felt respected and this helped to create a sense that they and their family were a part of the school community

The following ideas and good practice are designed to give inspiration to schools wanting to engage more with their parents, particularly parents from Ethnic Minorities. It is not exhaustive and we recommend picking and choosing ideas that are best suited to the individual needs and resources of your school.

## COMMUNICATION WITH PARENTS

Poor communication with school was often raised at our sessions with ethnic minority parents. They expressed concern that they did not know what was happening in school and struggled to cope with letters home- due the amount of information that was covered. Several EM parents spoke about missing “come as you please” days because they had not been able to read the letter from school.

- **Podcasts:** It is cheap and easy to make podcasts of school newsletters which can be uploaded to the school website. Podcasts are more accessible to parents with lower levels of literacy- you could also get pupils to read items to raise the profile among parents. In St Albert’s primary (Glasgow) they have a high number of families from Pakistan and now have podcasts of the school newsletter in Urdu and Arabic <http://tiny.cc/qd9xtx>.
- **Community Assemblies:** Holding regular assemblies to share information with parents about activities in the school, give the children the opportunity to show their parents what they are doing in class and publicly recognise children who have worked hard. For Oakgrove primary (Glasgow) this has helped to replace newsletters and parents with limited English are encouraged to bring friends or family who can help them with interpreting. To hear the head teacher and parents talking about the impact of community assemblies at Oakgrove go to <http://tiny.cc/6q9xtx>.



*Oakgrove Primary Community Assembly*

- **Parent’s questionnaires:** to find out about the opinions of parents (their views on homework, the school etc.) as well as the skills and experience that they could bring to the school send questionnaires for parents. Some schools have offered a chance to win a family trip to the cinema or vouchers for completed questionnaires. In one primary school the children were supported to create their own questionnaires for their parents which they did with their parents as homework- leading to almost 100% completion.

- **Texting:** Texting is much more accessible for parents with limited English than long letters from school and does not depend on children remembering to give parents the letter. Parents have also raised that they find phoning the school stressful, particularly when they are not confident in their English- it would be good practice to have other options of contacting the school to inform that children are unwell etc. For example email or a mobile number they could text.
- **Direct communication** speaking to parents in the playground is always the most effective way of engaging with them— this helps show parents that you are friendly and approachable and they can speak to you directly. To hear Denny head teacher Don McPherson talking about his experience of working with EM parents and the importance of getting out and speaking to them face to face go to <http://tiny.cc/h6bytx>.

## UNDERSTANDING THE CURRICULUM

Parents coming from other culture can find the Scottish curriculum confusing and are unsure how best to support their children with their learning. Many of the parents we met said that in their home country there had been a much greater value placed on tests and homework and expressed concern that their children were not getting “enough work”.

- **Learning together clubs** these clubs are targeted for EAL families (in Glasgow they are run by the EAL teacher) and help parents understand how to help their children with their learning. The focus of these clubs is working in partnership and parents are given the opportunity to read stories and play games with their children to support their education. These clubs also provide the opportunity for EM parents to come together and share their experiences, it also gets parents into the school and helps them understand what and how their children are being taught <http://tiny.cc/cncytx>.
- **Homework workshops** the school can run regular workshop showing parents how they can support their children with homework. These can also cover how their child is being taught maths, the language that teachers are using in class (like “learn its” and “rainbow writing”). Approaching parents directly to attend these events is generally more productive than sending out mass information and can ensure that parents of children who may be struggling are more likely to attend
- **Information evenings** holding events for specific groups e.g. parents of children making subject choices in S3 to explain what is happening in the curriculum. For these sessions we suggest that the school and Parent Council work together to ensure that the language used is “parent friendly” and avoids using too much technical language.

- **Open days** having regular open days to allow parents to come into their children's classroom, to see the work their children are doing, demonstrate how their children are learning and give them a chance to speak to the teacher in a more informal setting
- **Pre-school meeting** in Falkirk the EAL service is able to meet with new families before the child starts school- this gives them the opportunity to gauge the child's level of English as well as explain to the family how the education system works, how they can become involved or ask questions etc. It also enables the school to be better prepared for the new student- to hear Kayee and Marion from Falkirk council talking about this go to <http://tiny.cc/cf8hux>.

## LANGUAGE BARRIER

In every session with Ethnic Minority parents language was raised as an issue, many parents are self-conscious about their English and find going into school very stressful and do not have the confidence to ask questions.

- **Parent helpers** asking parents to help with simple tasks which do not require English ability, for example a big garden tidy up. These enable the parents to get involved with the school in a practical manner and does not ask them to make a big commitment. It can help parents feel more relaxed around the school and a part of the community.
- **Interpreters** for key meetings with schools parents who speak English as an additional language should be informed that they have the right to request an interpreter.
- **Multi-lingual signs** with the increasing diversity of languages spoken in schools it is good practice to have signs in all the languages spoken- for example "welcome" in every language used. This shows that the school recognises and values the different cultures within the school.
- **Celebrating language diversity** directly approach parents with EAL and ask if they would volunteer in the class- for example teach the class to count to ten in their native language or read a story in their native language (with their child acting as translator) as part of international story telling day. This can also be part of the third language from "1+2" language learning policy.
- **Bilingual story-telling** taking this a step further St Albert's primary school in Glasgow has trained several parents to come in once a week to do bilingual storytelling to small groups of younger children. These parents are able to take small groups themselves but this requires greater support and training (and PVG checks). It shows that the school recognises and values the child's mother tongue. To hear about the personal experiences of the parents involved in the group go to <http://tiny.cc/audytx>.



- **ESOL classes** if there is a spare room within the school you can hold ESOL classes (in conjunction with a local college or the council adult learning team). As well as helping parents learn English at a time when their children are in school this gets parents through the door of the school and can provide an informal setting to meet with teachers. The ESOL teacher can also work with the school to build on vocabulary relevant to their children's education.





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