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GfK. Growth from Knowledge



Research among parents: a qualitative study

A research report
for the General
Teaching Council for
England



Provided by: GfK NOP Social Research

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Table of Contents

1	Executive Summary	3
2	Introduction.....	5
	2.1 Background and Research Objectives	5
	2.2 Research Method.....	5
	2.3 The sample	6
	2.4 Recruitment	7
3	Main findings	9
	3.1 Awareness of the GTC.....	9
	3.2 Information provided by schools	10
	3.3 Suggestions for information development	26



1 Executive Summary

Research objectives

Following consultation with parents and parent governor groups, the GTC wished to explore the following topics:

- Parents' awareness and understanding of the current role of the GTC with regard to its policy function, by way of context
- The kinds of information currently provided by schools about individual pupil progress and performance, and aspects of that information most valuable to parents
- The ways in which parents think their children's school should be accountable to them about its performance and its plans for improvement, taking due note of current legal requirements.
- Parents' views on the specific contribution of performance tables in making schools accountable (building on a previous MORI survey)

Sample and methodology

- 4 group discussions and 2 paired depth interviews (non-English speaking parents) were conducted in London and Manchester
- The sample included parents of primary and secondary school pupils with varying degrees of involvement in their child's education. Parents of pupils attending schools facing challenging circumstances were also included in the sample.

Key findings

- Across all the interviews, there was a limited knowledge of the role of the GTC
- These parents expressed an overall preference for verbal information on pupil progress and performance as it was considered more tailored to the individual pupil and offered the opportunity for discussion with teachers
- Newsletters were thought to be the most useful source of information on schools' plans for improvement and to some extent schools' performance
- Ofsted reports were considered to be the most comprehensive information on schools' performance but would be perceived as more reliable if inspections were unwarned to gather a "truer" picture of the school
- Performance tables in isolation were not thought to provide valuable information on schools. Parents raised questions over the tables' validity, particularly as they did not take into account the broader context of schools, such as the demographic profile of the pupils. Therefore, parents felt schools were not compared on a meaningful basis.



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- Overall performance tables were not the significant factor in these parents' choice of school or their subsequent evaluation of the school
- Parents saw effective accountability on an individual school basis rather than on a regional or national level
- Parents desired more tailored and descriptive information, focussed on both the academic and personal development of child.



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2 Introduction

2.1 Background and Research Objectives

The GTC wished to commission qualitative research amongst parents prior to a education policy seminar on public information and accountability which took place in early October 2005.

Following consultation with parents and parent governor groups, the GTC wished to explore the following topics:

- Parents' awareness and understanding of the current role of the GTC with regard to its policy function, by way of context
- The kinds of information currently provided by schools about individual pupil progress and performance, and aspects of that information most valuable to parents
- The ways in which parents think their children's school should be accountable to them about its performance and its plans for improvement, taking due note of current legal requirements.
- Parents' views on the specific contribution of performance tables in making schools accountable (building on a previous MORI survey)

2.2 Research Method

Four group discussions were undertaken, with two taking place in London and the remaining groups in Manchester. Each discussion lasted for 1½ hours and was attended by 7 to 8 respondents. All group discussions were held at a centrally located hotel venue.

Additionally, 2 paired-depth interviews (4 respondents, 2 at each interview) were conducted with parents who did not speak English at home. All respondents were from the Bangladeshi community in East London and an independent language interpreter facilitated the interviews. Each paired-depth interview lasted 1½ hours. Paired depth interviews were held at a local community centre known and trusted by respondents, and which facilitated recruitment for these interviews.

All interviews were conducted in September 2005.



2.3 The sample

Group discussions

Group 1 – London	Group 2 – London
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Parents of secondary school pupils (Years 7 –13) ▪ Respondents with high and middle involvement in children’s schooling ▪ School in challenging areas/facing difficulty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Parents of primary school pupils ▪ At least 3 respondents to be parents of Key Stage 1 pupils (Years 1 and 2) ▪ At least 3 respondents to be parents of Key Stage 2 pupils (Years 3-6) ▪ Respondents with middle and low involvement in children’s schooling
Group 3 – Manchester	Group 4 – Manchester
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Parents of secondary school pupils (Years 7 – 13) ▪ Respondents with middle and low involvement in children’s schooling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Parents of primary school pupils ▪ At least 3 respondents to be parents of Key Stage 1 pupils (Years 1 and 2) ▪ At least 3 respondents to be parents of Key Stage 2 pupils (Years 3-6) ▪ Respondents with high and middle involvement in children’s schooling ▪ School in challenging area/facing difficulty

Parents with varying levels of involvement in their child’s schooling were represented in this research. Definitions of levels of involvement were as follows:

- High involvement: Parents working in the schools as voluntary classroom assistants, ‘dinner ladies’, hearing readers, and voluntary supervisors of school excursions
- Middle involvement: Participation in ‘routine’ school activities eg: attendance at parents’ evenings.
- Low involvement: Limited/no participation in ‘routine’ school activities. This level of involvement was desirable for the research but it was recognised from the outset as difficult to recruit. However, representation from parents with low involvement was achieved. These respondents tended to be partners of parents with middle involvement who therefore had very limited involvement in their child’s education.



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In consultation with the GTC, it was agreed that parents with high and low involvement would not feature in the same group discussion as it could have inhibited responses, particularly from those with low involvement. However, the sample was designed to include a range of levels of parental involvement within each discussion group in order to explore and debate attitudinal and behavioural differences. Therefore, each group was given an emphasis in terms of representation of higher or lower involvement.

Paired depth interviews

Four respondents were interviewed for the paired-depths among parents who did not speak English at home. Each respondent was the parent of a different child (ie: no two parents of same child/ren were interviewed). All respondents had middle involvement in their children's education.

These respondents are referred to as non-English speaking parents throughout the report.

2.3.1 Parents' profile

In total 35 parents were interviewed for this research study.

- 9 male, 26 female
- Sample included representation of B, C1, C2 and D social grades
- 20 schools were represented (11 primary, 9 secondary)
- 13 parents had high involvement, 17 parents had middle involvement, and 5 parents had low involvement in their child/ren's schooling.

2.4 Recruitment

The group discussion and paired-depth interview participants were recruited by GfK NOP's preferred supplier of recruitment services, with a proven track record of good quality recruitment for previous similar work on behalf of GfK NOP. A recruitment screener was developed in consultation with the GTC to ensure that the individuals invited to each of the sessions matched the agreed sample structure, and that 'professional respondents' who had recent or regular experience of participation in market research interviews were excluded from the research. The screener was given to the GTC for final approval before recruitment began to ensure that they were satisfied with the recruitment approach.



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Group discussions

GfK NOP adopted a primarily 'free-find' recruitment approach. This involved our professional recruiters approaching parents at the school gates, explaining the research study to them and administering the recruitment screener. This approach was most successful in recruiting parents of children at primary school who were more likely to take and collect their children from school. For secondary school parents, this approach had some success, but was supplemented by utilising existing contacts within the education field to source respondents, for example headmasters and teachers leading to access to parents. Head teachers in the designated London area were also sent letters by GfK NOP and bearing the GTC logo, alerting them to the research and asking for their assistance in accessing parents, particularly those with high involvement such as members of the school's PTA.

Paired-depths

For the paired depth interviews, recruiters liaised with an established community centre in the East London area to source Bangladeshi parents who did not speak English at home. The interviews took place at the community centre, with a language interpreter present. As these respondents were more difficult to recruit, 'friendship pairs' were recruited. Respondents were asked if they knew someone else who may fit the criteria, and who may be willing to participate. The recruiter then contacted the recommended respondent and the screener was administered to verify their eligibility.

Cash incentives were paid to all respondents. This is standard qualitative research practice, offered as a gift and need not be declared to the Inland Revenue. It is intended to cover respondents' expenses and to encourage participation in the research.



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3 Main findings

3.1 Awareness of the GTC

Across all the research interviews, awareness of the General Teaching Council was low.

A small number of parents who were highly involved in their children's education were familiar with the work of the GTC, and other parents recognised the name of the Council but were unable to describe its role. After being given a brief description of the Council's role, an appreciation was expressed for the presence of a high profile, non-statutory organisation that represented the needs of parents as well as teachers.

"I've heard of it, yes, but I don't know anything about it."

(Primary facing challenging circumstances, high involvement, Manchester)

"I've seen things that they've [GTC] written in the library but I assumed they were for teachers rather than anyone else."

(Secondary facing challenging circumstances, high involvement, London)



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3.2 Information provided by schools

This section looks at the types and usefulness of information provided by the school. Information received by parents about their child's progress, schools' plans for improvement and its performance are addressed. Parents' views on performance tables and its impact on choice of school are also discussed. The section then considers the issue of accountability of both schools and the wider education system.

3.2.1 Pupil progress and performance

Written information

Parents described a range of information provided by the school. The level of detail and format of the information varied widely across schools in the same area and there were also differences between secondary school and primary school information, where the latter tended to be more descriptive and less comparative.

The most useful and detailed provision was the **pupil report** that was sent to parents either once, or in a smaller number of cases twice, a year. For parents receiving an annual pupil report this tended to be at the end of the school year, which some parents felt was too late either to take immediate action on any issues raised, or discuss these in more detail with teachers as it was the summer break. For parents who received reports twice yearly, this was generally part way through the academic year (at the end of the winter term or during the February half-term) and again at the end of the year.

Within these reports, parents of both primary and secondary school pupils were given grades on current and predicted performance, based on exam results such as SATs and GCSEs. Secondary school parents felt this was particularly useful in tracking their child's progress over time but they expressed a need for this information to be accompanied by descriptive commentary, which was not always provided.

"When we were small, my parents didn't really know how I was doing. But having grades you know what's happening."

(Primary, lower involvement, London)

Grades were often presented against comparisons contextualising pupil performance within their class or year group. Some parents also received local authority and nationwide comparisons of their child's performance in the school report. There were mixed attitudes towards comparative information, and this appeared to depend on whether the child was in primary or secondary school education. Overall, this information was regarded as useful in gauging how "typical" their child's performance was of their immediate peers. However, many



parents of primary school pupils felt that any academic comparisons, including those that were class-based, were not significant at the earlier stages of education and greater focus should be placed on behavioural issues such as social skills. However, at the secondary school level, class-based comparisons were more a valued information provision.

"I'm so much more concerned that he is happy and has a good circle of friends than if he is at the top of the class."

(Primary facing challenging circumstances, high involvement, Manchester)

"As long as I can see my daughter is improving, it doesn't matter if she's improving at the same rate as someone else in the class."

(Primary, lower involvement, London)

"If it's the same class, then they've all got the same teacher, the same books, whatever. So then it's good to know if they're average or doing well because they're all being judged on the same things..."

(Secondary facing challenging circumstances, high involvement, London)

Interestingly, among all parents there was a widespread view that broader comparisons on a local or national level were largely *"irrelevant"*. At the secondary school stage of education, it was felt that a child's performance needed to be assessed in the context of their learning environment, and that comparisons across schools would not consider this factor. It was also perceived that the broader the comparison, the less tailored the information was to the individual pupil, thus less valuable to the parent.

"You're making all the kids the same and every child is unique. They say the average grade for an 11 year old is this. Well, why should it be? Your child is an individual not a national average."

(Secondary facing challenging circumstances, high involvement, London)

The amount of descriptive information within pupil reports appeared to vary significantly between primary and secondary level education and also between schools in the same area. Parents of primary school pupils were highly satisfied with the detail provided in the pupil report, and many felt that the commentary was more valuable to them than the grades presented alongside this. Conversely, many secondary school parents felt that where provided, descriptive commentary was either sparse or too general and not sufficiently pupil-specific. While exam and test results were considered important, emphasis on general behaviour, for example interaction with staff and other pupils was also considered valuable and desired information in the school report.



Another useful source of written information to parents of both primary and secondary school pupils was a **'journal' or 'contact book'**, which was completed by both parents and teachers and was described as a continuing dialogue between teacher and parent related to the pupil's learning activity. For example, for primary school pupils the teacher may make a suggestion in the journal that the pupil should read aloud every evening, and the parent would note in the journal if this task was completed, what new vocabulary had been learned and how comfortable the pupil was in undertaking the activity. For secondary school pupils, parents described having to sign the contact book on a weekly basis to confirm their child had completed their homework, any difficulties they had encountered and any concerns they as parents had about their child's learning. This would prompt a response from the teachers and could result in a telephone conversation or meeting if issues were particularly problematic.

Secondary school parents also mentioned receiving **individual pupil profiles**, which featured academic performance targets tailored to each pupil. This provided parents with indicators of ability and achievement by age. It also featured "scores" on effort and achievement, and statistics related to attendance. Parents received this halfway through the academic year and separately from the school report. They felt this was valuable as it provided tailored action points for the pupil to fulfil for the remainder of the academic year, and this would be evaluated within the end of year school report.

Other ad-hoc information from both secondary and primary schools included **letters of congratulation or certificates** from the school when students had performed well. This could be a reward for a particular piece of work, good attendance or an improvement in a subject over a period of time. While this was generally received very positively, the form of reward was considered by some secondary pupil parents to be "over the top". One parent told of her son being invited to Manchester City football ground for a ceremony to reward his good attendance at school.

"I got a postcard addressed to me. It was telling me that my eldest got an A star. It wasn't a proper exam, just a test. It's nice he got the recognition but I thought it was a bit odd."

(Secondary, lower involvement, Manchester)

When communicating less positive information, parents received letters to alert them to concerns regarding academic performance or attendance, and this was often supplemented by telephone conversations. Some parents had been invited to meet with teachers or the head teacher. Parents were generally satisfied with initially being informed of problematic issues in writing but felt this was most useful when followed up by verbal discussion. Parents did not feel correspondence on its own was an appropriate channel to address issues of concern.



There appeared to be a heavy reliance on pupils to translate written information for parents who did not speak English at home. While this reliance on their children was not considered to be ideal, parents acknowledged that it encouraged a greater level of discussion about school related matters between parents and their children. Parents also sought objective translation from either English-speaking friends or community support workers, particularly for pupil reports, to ensure they received a comprehensive understanding of this information.

Verbal information

Across the group discussions and paired depth interviews there was a strong preference for face-to-face communication with teachers via **parents' evenings** when receiving information on pupil progress. This was seen as a good opportunity to gain a greater insight into both academic performance and behavioural issues, such as socialising with other pupils. It was considered to be the most tailored and detailed source of information on pupil progress.

"You get the body language, you get the chance to ask questions. It's not just words on a page"

(Secondary facing challenging circumstances, high involvement, London)

"It's better to meet as you can ask questions. But with reading a report you may have questions and you can't ask the teachers"

(Non English-speaking parents, middle involvement, London)

At the secondary school level, parents described being accompanied by their children to parents' evenings. Although pupil attendance was optional, parents felt it important for them together with teachers and pupils to have a forum in which to discuss pupil performance and development.

"Because it's face to face, your child is sat with you so there's no evading the issue."

(Secondary, lower involvement, Manchester)

Generally, little resistance was faced from the pupils to accompany parents to the evening, and reported that it was commonplace in many schools. At a primary school level, some parents described taking their children to parents' evening but many did not. Reasons for being accompanied by children tended to be practical rather than developmental, such as absence of childcare, as pupils at this stage were considered too young to be able contribute in this forum.



However, many respondents noted that time spent in discussion with each teacher could be limited and did not allow for in-depth discussion.

"You're so aware of the other thirty parents behind you, all wanting to get a look in. I'm the same. So I never go over my time and it really annoys me when you get parents who sit there for half an hour..."

(Secondary, lower involvement, Manchester)

"It's a bit of a conveyer belt. You've rushed out from work, the teacher's knackered. You only get a couple of minutes. What do you get out of it?"

(Secondary, lower involvement, Manchester)

Interestingly, parents who did not speak English also favoured face-to-face interaction with teaching staff for similar reasons. In some cases, parents described interpreters being available at parents' evenings to facilitate communication with the teachers. Others were accompanied by their children who provided translation of the teacher's feedback. However, one parent described how language interpreters were not available at events such as parents' evenings and felt the language barrier prevented her from attending other school-related meetings.

An additional form of verbal communication was the **Academic Review Day**, which took place once or twice a year at secondary schools in London. This was an opportunity for parents and pupils to discuss progress at greater length with the form tutor. Parents were very positive about this review as it allowed between fifteen and twenty minutes with the form tutor who presented an overview of feedback from all subject teachers. However, some felt that this was adequate as a complement to and not a replacement for parents' evenings where the opportunity to gather information first hand from each teacher was widely seen as more valuable.

Secondary school parents in Manchester described pupils attending a **Pupil Review Day** which was designed as a formal forum for teachers and pupils to meet on a one-to-one basis during an allocated school day each term. At these meetings which would last approximately twenty minutes, pupils and teachers would review performance and targets. Parents were particularly positive about the pupil review days as pupils had a significant input in setting new targets with the teacher and were given one-to-one attention to discuss any performance related issues, including personal situations.

At the primary school level, parents were invited to attend **school assemblies**, which involved recognition of achievement in the form of prize-giving or topic-led presentations by the pupils. Parents who were highly involved also described attending classes on how to support their child's development for example, suggestions on helping to improve their child's handwriting.



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In terms of more informal, ad hoc verbal information this was largely accessed when specific issues of concern arose. It was widely agreed that teachers were very accessible should the need for discussion arise. Among the highly involved parents interviewed, many worked in the school premises and had greater access to approach teaching staff. Some parents had made appointments outside of school hours but lower involved parents saw this as inconvenient if they were working. A more effective means of communication among these parents was by telephone, particularly if they wished to speak to the head teacher.

"I wanted to speak to the headmaster but we just couldn't set up a time. So I remember he called me at home at 10 in the evening as he didn't want it to drag into another day. I thought that was really good."

(Secondary, lower involvement, Manchester)

Teaching assistants were also perceived as an alternative source of informal feedback, particularly by highly involved primary school parents and those who did not speak English. Interestingly, in one school many teaching assistants were from the Bangladeshi community, and non-English speaking parents had approached them on a more informal basis to discuss their child's progress. In these cases, there was a high level of satisfaction with face-to-face communication with the school.



3.2.2 Information on schools' plans for improvement

Many parents identified school newsletters as a key source of information on schools' plans for improvement. It was regarded as a useful overview of the school's activities covering issues such as the development of new buildings, changes to the teaching staff, fundraising events, annual general meetings and other parent-teacher events as well as addressing wider school issues such as bullying and smoking.

"It keeps you in touch with what's happening really. You can't rely on your kids to tell you everything, and they aren't always interested unless it's something in their class or affecting them directly. So you hear about teachers leaving. At my daughter's school they're building a new gymnasium so we hear about how that's coming along. Just general information really."

(Secondary facing challenging circumstances, high involvement, London)

While parents recognised the importance of receiving information on any issues that would impact on teaching provision, many felt strongly that detailed updates on staffing was vital as it was seen to have an important impact on their child's performance. A few parents complained that their child's school did not keep parents or pupils informed of changes to the teaching staff and argued that this should be presented to them in a letter from the head teacher, rather than as part of a generic information provision such as the newsletter.

"If you get a change of headmaster or teacher it makes a complete difference to the school and that changes the results. So the kids might not achieve a high scores as if they had the same teacher."

(Secondary, lower involvement, Manchester)

Non-English speaking parents were again heavily dependent on their children to translate newsletters to them, and felt it would be useful if this information could be provided in other languages in schools where a high proportion of pupils are from non-English speaking backgrounds.

There was an overall awareness of meetings such as "AGMs" where head teachers, governors and parents would discuss the school's development, and some highly involved parents had attended. These parents felt that the content of the meetings were highly significant particularly where the introduction of new initiatives were explained, such as "drugs awareness education". However, parents who regularly attended these meetings felt that points of discussion were not effectively disseminated more widely to parents who did not attend. It was suggested that a follow-up letter or minutes of the meeting should be made available to all parents. Non-English speaking respondents who did not attend these meetings due to language issues expressed a keen interest in receiving feedback.



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"Most parents don't go to things but I think they'd still have an interest in what was said. And if they aren't interested they won't read it will they? But for those who don't go, they shouldn't miss out because it might be useful to them."

(Secondary facing challenging circumstances, high involvement, London)

Many lower involved parents felt AGMs and similar meetings were not useful to them, as the information was not related directly to their child. Those who had never attended expected such meetings would be *"boring"*, *"take too long"* and dominated by *"over keen"* parents wishing to discuss their child rather than the plans of the school.

"AGM to a lot of people is an instant turn off."

(Primary facing challenging circumstances, high involvement, Manchester)

Across all interviews, parents appeared to be heavily reliant on word-of-mouth information either from their own children or other parents, particularly regarding staffing issues or changes to the delivery of teaching provision. Some learned of school plans from notices displayed at the school premises or letters sent to them by the school, for example alerting them to fundraising needs or events.



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3.2.3 Information on schools' performance

Parents received a range of information on school performance from both their child's school and external sources. In terms of their child's school, many parents described how Open Days available to both parents and prospective pupils in advance of attendance were an extremely valuable source of information. It was seen as a good opportunity to meet the teaching staff and view the facilities.

"I just went up to the open day and I really liked it. I liked the feel of the place."

(Secondary, lower involvement, Manchester)

During their child's attendance at the school, parents with a higher involvement described receiving copies of the school's Annual Report and attending AGMs, which outlined both academic and financial performance. A few parents had also viewed the school website and had accessed Ofsted reports both in full and in summary.

External sources of information on school performance included local press, which featured articles on achievement or decline, as well as performance tables following the release of exam results.

"This year, the school got double the number of A to C passes than last year and it made the front page of the local paper."

(Secondary facing challenging circumstances, high involvement, London)

Parents with higher involvement had consulted Ofsted reports to gather a greater level of detailed knowledge on their child's school. Ofsted reports were particularly valued for providing an independent and comprehensive evaluation for parents to access. However, some parents with high involvement who worked in schools described how staff were thoroughly "briefed" prior to the inspection to present the school in the best, and some felt unrepresentative, light. Therefore, the reliability of the Ofsted data was questioned.

"They know when the [Ofsted] inspectors are coming so they make the school look wonderful. It's like the Queen's coming..."

(Primary facing challenging circumstances, high involvement, Manchester)

3.2.4 Awareness of performance tables

Performance tables, or "league tables" as they were more commonly referred to, were widely mentioned across all the interviews. A few parents with low involvement had not seen performance tables but had a general awareness of the information it provided. As previously discussed, parents had seen these published in local newspapers, displayed at the school or



an edited version was included in the school newsletter showing the school's performance results over a period of time (between 2 to 5 years) and in some cases in comparison with other local schools. Parents stated that they had "*come across*" the performance tables on the school website and had not purposively sought this information from the school or any other website, including government sites.

Spontaneous recall of performance tables led to many parents describing them as a ranking of local schools by academic performance. Only parents of children with special educational needs identified this aspect of the tables. Some parents discussed the 8-level scale featuring in the tables but there seemed to be an overall lack of understanding of the scale. In the group discussions, parents were presented with examples of performance tables in various formats including those from the DfES, BBC and Good Schools websites and were also given a copy of an Ofsted report. Of these, parents found the DfES tables to be least user-friendly both in layout and content. The 'Average point score' was identified as the most relevant information, and some parents did not appear to understand subject-specific statistics. A few parents who had children with special needs expressed interest in the SEN statistics but wider awareness of SEN was limited. Generally, parents felt the information was unnecessary in its detail, and difficult to interpret to in order to elicit useful information.

"It's quite baffling because you've got SEN with statements, without statements. Loads of percentages. The average parent wouldn't want all this..."

(Secondary, lower involvement, Manchester)

In contrast, many praised the Ofsted report for providing the descriptive information sought by parents but felt the density of information was "*a bit overwhelming*" and difficult to follow.

"It's very detailed and it tells you a lot about the pupils, ethnicity, special needs... but I think it's just too much information for an average parent."

(Primary, high involvement, Manchester)

3.2.5 Views on performance tables

Across all the group discussions, parents expressed a high degree of scepticism over the value of performance tables. While some parents could see some benefit to the publication of such tables, this view was largely overridden by more negative perceptions. Those with high involvement in their child's education held the strongest views against performance tables but this could be explained to some extent by their child attending schools facing challenging circumstances. Across the interviews, many asserted the "*irrelevance*" of performance tables



both in the decision making process when choosing which school their child will attend, and in their subsequent evaluation of the school during their child's attendance.

While a few parents argued for the abolishment of performance tables, this was qualified to some degree by the acknowledgement that the tables satisfied a general interest about their child's school. This seemed to be underpinned by a widely held belief that a school's academic record was highly significant, but that it should be considered in the context of several other factors. For parents who had been given performance table results of their child's school over a period of time they appreciated the ability to be able to track the school's progress or decline via statistical evidence of academic performance. A few parents also appreciated that performance tables were a more objective indicator of school performance than alternative sources that tended to be supplied by the school itself. Non-English speaking parents felt the tables were an accessible source of information, but also argued that it remained an inadequate resource that did not address many other issues of interest.

"It gives you an idea of how good the school is so it is helpful. But you need more information about the school, what it is like to go there every day."

(Non-English speaking parent, middle involvement, London)

However, there was strongly held belief across the interviews that the statistics were unreliable and unrepresentative. Many parents argued that high achieving students were "cherry-picked" to sit tests while others were excluded to ensure optimum results would feature in the performance tables. This view was supported by personal experience where some parents of primary school pupils reported their children being excluded from sitting the tests on which performance table statistics are based because they would not attain high enough grades.

"I don't agree with all this anyway. Some of these kids' scores aren't submitted if they don't get the grades the school requires. So to me, it's all rubbish anyway..."

(Primary, lower involvement, London)

The sole focus on academic results coupled with the absence of descriptive information in performance tables resulted in a widely held perception of performance tables as an inadequate representation of schools, lacking detail on significant issues such as the facilities available at the school, quality of teaching and teaching styles. Parents with children at schools facing challenging circumstances felt that the reputation of their schools had been adversely affected by its ranking in published tables which did not represent the reality of attending the school, the quality of teaching and the positive learning experience of their children. For this reason, parents had preferred to rely on word of mouth, open days and their child's own preference when deciding school selection.



"The school is right at the bottom [of the league tables] and is hammered by the local press and by the local parents because apparently it's a failing school. I was advised not to send her there. Yet she's come out this year with several GCSE passes and none of them lower than a B."

(Secondary facing challenging circumstances, high involvement, London)

Some parents objected to comparisons of results on a regional or national basis, mirroring attitudes conveyed with regard to information on pupil progress. This was largely explained by the perception that comparisons between schools were not valid as they did not take into account differences in the number of pupils attending the school, the proportion of children with English as a second language and those with special needs.

"You're not really bothered about anybody else's school, just your school. Not, this school's doing that and that one is doing this.."

(Primary facing challenging circumstances, high involvement, Manchester)

"All I'm interested is in my son's performance. I'm not interested in any kinds of tables."

(Secondary facing challenging circumstances, high involvement, London)

"All these tests they have to do for statistics for the school are the problem really. At the end of the day, as long as your child has come out having done the best that they can, that's all you want. But it's all now about results and what position they are in the league tables or compared to the rest of the country. Who cares?"

(Primary facing challenging circumstances, high involvement, Manchester)

Parents also felt that that performance tables did not demonstrate the degree of pupil progress within the school. Many parents raised the issue of schools that select pupils according to ability consistently featuring at the top of performance tables as evidence of how the tables *"stated the obvious"* and masked the improvement of schools with weaker academic results.

"You can send your child to a school that's at the top of these tables but if they don't want to learn it doesn't make a blind bit of difference where the school is on the league table."

(Secondary, lower involvement, Manchester)



"I don't agree with them because I think the school might have an 80% failure rate but your child might be in the 20%..."

(Secondary, lower involvement, Manchester)

3.2.6 Use of performance tables

It is difficult to construe precisely how parents understood the 'use' of performance tables. However, some parents considered consulting tables to inform their choice of school, particularly when choosing secondary school where academic success was widely perceived to be more significant.

Most parents were aware of the position of their children's school via information provided by the school. Across the interviews parents articulated a strong belief in allowing their children to attend a school that *"suits"* their individual development. For those with children at lower performing schools, the ranking did not affect their view of the school if they were confident that their child was in a learning environment to which they were responding well. Parents said they would not move their child to a higher achieving school as this transition could adversely affect their educational development. However, there was no indication if parents would change their view of the school if there were a decline in performance table results.

"If a child wants to learn, he'll learn. It won't matter whether the school is at the bottom of these tables, he will motivate himself and achieve..."

(Non-English speaking parent, middle involvement, London)

"You hear of people who actually move to get to schools that league tables show is doing well. I think that's crazy."

(Primary facing challenging circumstances, high involvement, Manchester)

3.2.7 Impact of performance tables on choice of school

In terms of choosing which school their children should attend, many parents claimed not to have purposely consulted performance tables to inform this decision. Parents with a child already attending school were generally already aware of local schools' ranking in the tables from information they had received from the school. In these cases performance tables appeared to feed into the decision-making process for their younger children. However, other factors such as their elder child's experience at the school and word of mouth about other schools were more significant factors affecting choice of school for their younger children.



Across all interviews, many parents described school Open Days as the most influential information resource when choosing their child's school. The opportunity to meet teachers and evaluate the school alongside their child was essential.

"A lot of the schools that are high up on the league tables don't have a good vibe when you go and see them. The teachers don't know how to talk to you, they just tell you how great the grades are."

(Secondary facing challenging circumstances, high involvement, London)

Many parents relied on word of mouth from other parents, as the reputation of the school was considered important. When probed further this tended to be based less on academic performance than the behavioural activity of the school's pupils with parents suggesting that pupils displaying anti-social behaviour in public places such as shops and public transport heavily influenced their perception of the school. However, among the few parents who were new to the local area and could not rely on informal information networks there appeared to be a heavier reliance on performance tables and Ofsted inspection reports.

"I didn't even know my neighbours at that point so I did look at Ofsted. At the end of the day, people want the best for their children. You wouldn't put them in a school that you know wasn't performing especially if you didn't have other information available to you."

(Secondary, lower involvement, Manchester)

A small number of parents had sent their children to schools that they themselves had attended and therefore had a personal knowledge of the head teacher or teaching staff who were still at the school. Some parents were also led by their child's own preference of school, which tended to be based on where their friends were attending.

"I let my son choose where he wanted to go because I wanted him to be comfortable and happy whether the school was failing or not."

(Secondary facing challenging circumstances, high involvement, London)

Location was also a significant factor in choosing schools. Parents believed that living in close proximity to the school would lessen practical considerations such as commuting and also enhance the social lives of their children who would be living in the same area as other pupils attending the school.

"Our school had a really bad reputation but we sent him there because it was the closest."

(Primary facing challenging circumstances, high involvement, Manchester)



3.2.8 Accountability and performance tables

The concept of accountability was difficult to explore with parents who immediately associated the term in relation to their child's school rather than at a broader level.

Parents identified AGMs, school newsletters and local press coverage of the school's academic performance displayed in schools as ways in which schools were accountable to them. In terms of accountability of the education system, local and national media coverage of GCSE and A level results were mentioned widely, as were performance tables and Ofsted reports.

While there was a broad recognition that schools needed to be accountable to parents, this was considered most effective on a school-by-school basis rather than as part of a regional or national comparison.

"As long as the child is happy and they are learning in that school, I don't think parents are interested in the education system being accountable and being fed hundreds of statistics."

(Primary, lower involvement, London)

While parents recognised the need for making information such as performance tables publicly available to offer objective and accessible information to parents, these alone were not considered to be adequate in providing accountability.

Many parents felt that performance tables provided only a "snapshot" picture of a school that lacked detail on pupil and school progress over time. Widespread scepticism around the manipulation of statistics, the selection of students to undertake tests included in performance table results and sole emphasis on academic results contributed to this view. Parents also felt that performance tables were a crude portrait of school performance that did not consider or present the profile of the parents and pupils, such as social grade, special needs and non-English speaking households. These views were compounded by a general lack of value placed on broadly comparative information and dissatisfaction with the format of the tables as inaccessible.

"At the end of the day, no one really wants to know. I'm not interested in some school that's got 80% A to C's and we only got 40%. As long as my child comes out doing the best that they can and the school is doing the best it can that's all that matters."

(Secondary facing challenging circumstances, high involvement, London)



3.3 Suggestions for information development

This section outlines suggestions for development by parents on:

- how information could be more valuable and relevant to them;
- how existing gaps in current information provision can be addressed;
- how to make performance tables more useful and increase accountability..

3.3.1 Pupil progress

Across all interviews, there was a strong desire for more descriptive written information to complement the academic results received. Among parents with children attending secondary school, a more even balance between academic and non-academic achievement was requested to gain a comprehensive view of pupil development. For parents with children attending primary school, some favoured less emphasis on the academic development of their child and greater focus on other areas of development such as social skills and general behaviour. In terms of academic development, parents with a lower involvement in their child's education were expectant that their children should gain basic numeracy and literacy skills by the end of their primary school education but that more advanced academic performance should be extended at secondary school.

"As long as your kids can read and write by the time they leave primary school and as long as their happy, that's what's important. Not test results..."

(Primary, lower involvement, London)

Parents of both primary and secondary school pupils also expressed the need for personalised targets in place of or alongside broader targets based on the school year, the local authority or national performance to ensure information remained tailored to the individual pupil. Parents also suggested that targets be accompanied by constructive descriptive commentary including indicators on how parents can facilitate their child's learning to address any areas for development.

"It gives you an idea of how they're doing and how you can push them in the right direction."

(Secondary, lower involvement, Manchester)

Non-English speaking parents requested that written reports on pupil progress be available in other languages to facilitate access and comprehension. It was also suggested that reports be provided to each parent in families where parents are living separately to encourage participation from both parents.



In terms of verbal information provision, parents desired more frequent formal forums to discuss pupil progress with teaching staff. It was suggested that Parents' Evenings should take place more than once a year, with secondary school parents stating that they should occur in October, February and June to coincide with key points in the academic year. Non-English speaking parents requested that interpreters be provided for formal parent-teacher meetings, particularly where a high proportion of parents in the school were from non-English speaking backgrounds.

A small number of parents also felt that teachers were reliant on test or exam results to indicate problematic issues. It was argued that staff could be more proactive in alerting parents to learning or behavioural issues at the earliest stages. A few parents with children at secondary school described how poor performance in GCSE mock exams prompted teachers to report disruptive behaviour using the results as evidence of this.

3.3.2 Schools' plans and performance

There was a high level of satisfaction in terms of current information on schools' plans for development but there remained a few key areas about which parents desired further information. Among primary school parents, notification of changes in policy and its impact on teaching provision was raised. Some parents had complained that they were not given adequate warning or information on changes to non-contact time and the merging of school years for some teaching provision. Also, many parents were unclear as to the role of Teaching Assistants and the level of responsibility they had for delivery of classes and wanted this to be clarified.

Parents with children at secondary school wanted greater financial transparency from the school to explain the frequency of fundraising events and other requests for financial donations. Specific requests were information on government support and how funds collected via fundraising efforts were spent. Parents also felt that information on staffing issues should be provided directly from the school to parents by letter. Staff retention and changes to teaching staff was also perceived to have a significant impact on pupil progress. Therefore, where some parents had learned of teachers leaving or joining via their children, this was a source of dissatisfaction. Parents also suggested that information provided at meetings such as AGMs should be routinely disseminated to all parents via the school newsletter.

In terms of schools' performance and accountability, parents felt the all children attending the schools should be included in tests that contribute to performance table results to present a more truthful picture of performance. In addition to this, parents also suggested that information on provision for high achieving pupils and those with special needs should be provided to parents via school prospectuses and Open Days. Some parents also requested



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information on staff retention and teachers qualifications as this was seen as an indicator of the learning environment of the school, where high staff turnover would be a negative indicator.

Addressing accountability of the education system, it was argued that performance tables would be more relevant and useful if they included statistics on levels of attendance, incidence of bullying, suspensions and expulsions, as well as academic performance. Parents also felt strongly that schools should be compared with others of a similar profile in terms of the number of pupils and the demographic background of parents and pupils to make results more meaningful. It was also suggested that performance tables should be presented with results of recent years so that parents can more easily track improvement or decline.

Some parents felt Ofsted reports provided greater accountability as it was an independent and more comprehensive representation of the school. However, some parents felt greater accountability would be achieved if Ofsted inspections were undertaken without prior warning to the school in order to capture a *"truer"* account of its performance.

Parents also suggested increasing access to key information such as attendance, changes to staffing and policy changes by utilising text and email communication. It was widely considered that parents would be more likely to read information via these channels than by sending letters by post or via pupils.