COULD DO BETTER

SCHOOL REPORTS AND PARENTS' EVENINGS

A STUDY OF SECONDARY SCHOOL PRACTICE

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Acknowledgements

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Summary of Main Findings

This report looks at the range of home-school reporting practices in English state-maintained secondary schools and examines parents' perceptions of their usefulness. The data are derived from a questionnaire survey and more detailed research within four case study schools involving interviews with senior staff and parents.

Reporting practices

- There was a wide variation in the frequency and number of written reports parents receive about their child's progress during their secondary school career. However, the majority of schools reported to parents more frequently than legally required.

- Some types of schools appeared to report more frequently than others. The grammar schools reported more frequently than comprehensive and secondary modern schools; schools in inner-city locations reported less frequently than those in rural and suburban locations.

- There has been a rapid growth in the use of computerised reporting systems. Over one third of schools used computer statement banks to construct some or all of their reports.

- There seems to be a move towards making reports more interactive. A relatively new feature of school reports is the concentration on target-setting. In addition, the incorporation of some form of pupil self-evaluation was the norm rather than the exception. Three quarters of schools also said that all or some of their reports contained space for parents to add written comments. However, the nature and quality of pupil and parent involvement in reports appeared to be quite limited.

- Only a small minority of schools offered special provisions to help parents with little or no English. As one might expect, nearly all of these schools had inner city catchment areas, but there were a number of schools in inner city areas with a significant population of students from backgrounds whose first language is not English where no such provision was available.

- Few schools appeared to have systems to monitor attendance at parent-teacher consultations.

- Estimated levels of attendance at parent-teacher consultations showed wide variations. Attendance declined as students progressed through the school. There were marked differences in the scale of the drop in attendance according to school type. Attendance at secondary modern schools was lower than at grammar schools and lower in inner-city schools than in others. The parents of children with behavioural problems were identified as the most under-represented group by the majority of schools.

- The large majority of schools reported difficulties in managing home-school reporting. Issues relating to administration and time were raised more frequently than anything else. Schools mentioned the difficulties of getting in contact with parents in general, and some groups of parents in particular.

Parents' experiences

- Parents wanted written feedback on children's progress as often as possible. Those who received reports three times a year found this useful. Annual reporting appeared to be particularly unhelpful for children who struggle with their schoolwork.

- Different forms of reporting created particular problems. Parents were ambivalent about the use of computer statement banks. They appreciated the frequency, detail and legibility but often found them impersonal. There was a widely expressed fear that the technology rather than the teacher controlled the content. Hand-written and unstructured reports gave the impression of being individualised but were often seen to be bland and over-generalised. They also presented problems of legibility. Highly standardised reports using tickboxes, often provided as interim feedback, caused confusion if the grading systems were not clearly explained.

- There was some confusion about National Curriculum levels and Key Stage assessments. But most parents wanted more comparative information on how their children were performing relative to other pupils, irrespective of their level of ability or whether they had special educational needs.

- The relationship between effort, behaviour and attainment grades often seemed particularly opaque. In particular, parents were confused by apparent discrepancies between actual grades and teacher evaluations of effort and relative progress.

- There was concern that reports were too positive and failed to mention, or concealed, areas of weakness. Parents felt it was important that reports were explicit about difficulties and wanted to see clear and achievable targets that they could help their children reach.

- Parents with little or no English had limited understanding of the structure or content of school reports. Contrary to what one might expect, they had particular difficulties with highly standardised formats. None of those interviewed had received reports translated into their home language and tended to use family members and friends to help interpret.

- Parents valued parent-teacher consultations but were almost universally critical about their organisation. None of the various formats used by the case study schools appeared to be successful. Parents felt there was insufficient time or privacy to get to grips with important issues, especially when a child had difficulties at school.

- Parent-teacher consultations presented particular problems for parents with little or no English. The practice of handing out reports at these events created difficulties as they need time to prepare and formulate questions.

- Although schools offered parents opportunities to make alternative arrangements to see teachers, for many parents, particularly working class and ethnic minority parents, the idea of availing themselves of these was daunting.

1: Parents and School Reports

Establishing rights of access to information has been a central feature of recent education policies designed to make schools more accountable to parents. Within *The Parent's Charter* (DfE 1994), for instance, the 'right to know' was placed at the forefront of parental entitlements. Successive legislation has been passed that requires schools to provide school-level data on test results, examination performance and attendance. There have also been new statutory requirements and government circulars, concerning the reporting of information about individual children's progress to parents.

At the time of writing, schools are obliged to provide parents with at least one written report each school year[1] covering brief particulars of pupil progress in all subjects and activities, general progress, attendance and arrangements for parents to discuss the report with staff. At the end of Key Stage 3, schools are also required to provide information on National Curriculum (NC) assessment levels in all core and most non-core subjects, including test results where applicable (QCA/DfEE 1997). These must be accompanied be a brief commentary and statistical information on school and national level attainments. At the end of Key Stage 4, secondary schools are required to report to parents by the end of the summer term, or, where public examination results are awaited, by 30th September (DfEE 1997a).

The importance placed on parental access to information looks set to continue with the new Labour government. *Excellence in Schools* (DfEE 1997b), one of its first White Papers on education, signalled the requirement that schools develop home-school contracts, one element of which will stipulate the information schools and parents can expect of each other.

It has been argued that these entitlements are particularly important for parents with children at secondary school - not just because of the role which parents can play in supporting their child through public examinations, but also because it is at this stage that relationships between parents and secondary schools traditionally become more distant. The informal contact between the parent and the primary school disappears and only the more formal encounters remain (Walker 1996). This compounds the sense of isolation from school that parents feel when confronted with the more complex secondary school syllabus and greater number of teachers (Beresford and Hardie 1996).

Information entitlements may also potentially provide a more effective mechanism for parental enfranchisement than the other accountability mechanisms that have been put in place. There is now a significant body of evidence to show that, especially at secondary school level, encouraging parental choice between schools tends to advantage the already advantaged schools and the already advantaged parents (see Whitty et al 1998). The negative consequences of these policies would therefore suggest that enabling parents to have a greater leverage *within* schools might be a more effective means of improving provision across the board than enabling parents to have greater choice *between* schools. School-reporting procedures may potentially provide one route for any such leverage.

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1   For children with statements of special educational needs, the annual review can serve as the annual report.

Research background

Over thirty years ago, Green (1968) argued that changing the purpose and format of school reports could enhance parental involvement in schools. At that time, the report was generally little more than a list of test scores and class positions (Rowe 1964). On the basis of trialling a new mode of reporting in a London secondary school, Green claimed that more personalised reports and requests for feedback from parents led to dramatic changes in parental attitudes towards school. The number of 'indifferent or hostile' responses was halved, while the number of 'very co-operative' responses quadrupled.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s the mode of reporting did shift from being less concerned with test scores and class positions and gave more emphasis to individual development. Goacher and Reid (1983) who conducted a detailed and extensive survey in this area found that the less structured 'slip' report was used more frequently than the single sheet report - especially for older pupils. However, they also found that parental participation as measured through report reply slips was 'disappointingly low'. Moreover, attendance at parents' evenings was variable and decreased as students progressed through the five years of compulsory school attendance. The lack of parental involvement in the reporting system led Reid (1984:82) to argue that: 'If the parent and pupil are viewed as the major consumers, it seems that schools have a long way to go before any degree of consumer choice is realised'.

There is relatively little research on the extent to which the new entitlements have changed this situation. The conclusions from the most recent evaluation of home-school reporting, undertaken by Ofsted (1995), are ambivalent. Ofsted commented on the bewildering array of information which parents needed to sift through. Reports on National Curriculum assessments and comparative data were found to be particularly confusing, to the extent that Ofsted doubted '... that NC level data alone will provide refined reporting, or serve other purposes ... such as motivating pupils by illustrating progress' (1995: 8).

While the Ofsted study provides a useful overview, its inadequate survey methods and lack of information about sample size and characteristics leave many issues unaddressed and unresolved. One such issue concerns the level of parent satisfaction with school reports. Ofsted claim that 80 per cent of parents were 'entirely positive' about their school reports. However, this surprisingly high figure needs to be treated with caution. We are not told how many schools and parents it includes nor what proportion of the parent body they represent. In addition, the claim is derived from answers to a single question within a survey which parents had to sign before returning to school. The Ofsted finding certainly does not tally with other research (eg Ouston & Klenowski 1995) which indicates that parents are far from happy with school reporting procedures.

Perhaps one of the reasons that Ofsted found such high levels of satisfaction relates to the kind of parents involved in the survey. Parents are not a homogenous group, and their experiences are likely to vary according to attributes of socio-economic status, gender and ethnicity. Recent reforms may well seek to 'empower' parents, but unless they tackle the differences between parents they will not be effective at increasing parental participation across the board. Indeed, as some commentators have suggested, they may instead lead to a 'ratcheting of the spiral of cumulative advantage which passes from one generation to the next' (Jonathan 1993). In this research therefore we have sought to examine how reporting procedures are experienced by a broad spectrum of parents, including those who are sometimes silent when it comes to speaking out about their child's needs.

Objectives

The overall aim of the project was to research the usefulness of home-school reports for different communities of parents. More specifically, the research sought to:
a) survey the range and frequency of reporting practices in secondary schools
b) explore how reporting and feedback practices are differentially experienced by particular groups of parents in terms of their socio-economic status, ethnicity and perceived ability of their children
c) compare practices which particular groups of parents found most helpful with administrative issues raised by senior staff

Methods

The objectives were fulfilled through two connected stages of research, a national questionnaire survey followed up with interviews with senior staff and parents at four selected schools. The questionnaire was sent to 328 randomly selected state secondary schools in England - ten percent of the total number. A respectable response rate of 57% (183 schools) was obtained, containing a largely representative cross-section of secondary schools, with differing modes of governance, admissions policies, age ranges and geographic locations.

In the light of the survey findings, four schools were chosen as case studies to represent both a range of reporting practices and diverse groups of parents. *Newton Technology College*[2] has a geographically mixed catchment area on the edge of a major city with 642 pupils on roll (11-18 years). The school issues regular progress reports and uses computerised statement banks for all of its annual reports. *Greenwood School* is a mixed comprehensive in a rural area. The school has 1,258 pupils (11-18 years). It uses once-a-year unstructured, hand-written reports. *La Retraite* is a voluntary aided girls secondary school in an inner city area where 63 percent of the pupils are from ethnic minorities. There are currently 600 pupils on roll (11-16 years). The schools uses annual and interim reports. *Hyslop Place School* is a mixed inner city secondary school where 12 percent of the intake are refugees and 54 percent of the school population are from ethnic minorities. There are 1,480 pupils on roll (11-19 years). The school uses annual reports, with interim reports in some years.

The last two schools were selected in part because of the characteristics of their student population. Although we knew that interviewing the parents of these students would not be easy, we achieved even less success than we had anticipated. Problems were encountered contacting parents for whom English was an additional language (EAL), despite the translation of interview request letters into their home language and the availability of interpreters. Perhaps indicative of lack of school co-ordination in this area, there were several instances of senior staff mistakenly identifying the home language. As a result of the relatively poor response achieved through the school, community groups were approached. Establishing a link with private supplementary schools attended by ethnic minority pupils proved the most useful way to invite parents from La Retraite to take part.

Access to parents of children with special educational needs relied on the support of senior school staff to identify pupils and many of their parents were reluctant to be interviewed. Contact with the parents of pupils with behavioural problems was particularly difficult. Two such parents interviewed indicated the high level of emotions associated with home-school reporting procedures. The level of their anxiety about school was such that they were the only parents to request that the interview should not be taped.

In total, 68 parents were interviewed. Some of the socio-economic characteristics of these parents and their children are detailed in Table 1.

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2   Pseudonyms are used for all schools, students and parents throughout the report.

Table 1: Distribution of parents interviewed

	Middle class	Working class	EAL speakers	Eligible for free school meals	Children with SEN statements	Total number interviewed
Newton TC	17	3	0	0	0	20
Greenwood	11	11	1	1	3	22
La Retraite	2	14	11	13	0	16
Hyslop Place	4	6	2	2	5	10
Total	**34**	**34**	**14**	**16**	**8**	**68**

Once parents had been interviewed, anonymised reports on the main issues raised were sent to schools.

Structure of the report

The main findings of the national survey are discussed in Chapter 2. It was in the light of these findings, and particularly, the frequency and form of reporting procedures that the four case study schools were selected. These are described in Chapter 3, which draws on interviews with staff and provides the background information on the schools themselves, their policies on reporting and the kind of reports sent out. Chapters 4 and 5 look at parents' experiences of these procedures. Chapter 4 concentrates on parents' various responses to written reports and Chapter 5 focuses on the face-to-face interactions at parents' evenings. Chapter 6 attempts to draw together the contrasting needs of parents and schools while Chapter 7 outlines a number of recommendations that we believe will make school reports more useful to parents without creating unduly heavy demands on schools.

2: A National Survey of School Reporting Practices

This chapter looks at the range of school reporting practices, based on a questionnaire survey of English secondary schools. The schools were asked a series of questions about their current reporting procedures, including the frequency and timing of school reports, consultations with parents and their perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of these procedures. They were also invited to attach any copies of report forms that were available.

The questionnaire was sent to a random sample of 328 schools and obtained a response rate of 57% (183) of the sample. The respondents comprised a largely representative cross-section of the range of provision available, both in terms of admissions policies (Table 1) and modes of governance (Table 2), although grammar and secondary modern schools are somewhat over-represented.

Table 1: Admissions policies of responding schools

	Number	% of sample	% of all schools*
Comprehensive	157	86%	90%
Grammar	14	8%	5%
Secondary Modern	12	7%	3%
Total	183	100%	98%†

* *1997 DfEE statistics (excludes middle deemed secondary)*
† *Excludes 'other' designations*

Table 2: Modes of school governance

	Number	% of sample	% of all schools*
Grant Maintained	34	19%	18%
LEA maintained	125	68%	67%
VA/VC/SA†	23	13%	15%
City Technology College	1	1%	<1%
Total	183	100%	100%

* *1997 DfEE statistics (includes middle deemed secondary)*
† *Voluntary Aided, Voluntary Controlled or Special Agreement*

The largest proportion of schools (46%) catered for 11-18, 41% catered for 11-16 year olds and the remaining 13% covered a range of combinations. In terms of geographical location, 21% classified themselves as 'inner-city', 42% as 'suburban' and 21% as 'rural', with the remaining 16% describing themselves variously as 'mixed', 'town' etc.

School Reports

Frequency and cycle

The questionnaire responses revealed wide differences in the numbers of reports parents receive about their child's progress during their secondary school career. At one extreme, parents will receive only one report each year.[1] At the other extreme, parents might receive twenty-four reports during the five compulsory years of their child's secondary schooling.

Despite this wide variation, the majority of schools reported to parents more frequently than legally required. One fifth (21.5%) sent an annual report to parents, with nearly three quarters of the sample schools (74.5%) sending out on average more than one report each year, usually in the form of one full length report and a shorter, often more structured, interim report. These figures are somewhat higher than those found by Benn and Chitty (1996) in their 1994 survey of comprehensive schools. They report that 48% sent annual reports and 52% sent out reports more frequently. This might be taken to indicate that even in the short time between the two surveys, schools became more responsive to parents' need for feedback. However, such a shift would need to have been so rapid that it seems unlikely. Benn and Chitty's figures are similar to those found by Goacher and Reid's (1983) survey undertaken nearly 20 years ago when over half the schools provided two reports in the first four years of secondary schooling. It may be that our more focused questionnaire was more likely to attract responses from schools with strong reporting procedures. Our figures are certainly closer to those of Benn and Chitty once the grammar schools have been excluded from the sample.

It is also worth noting that nearly one third of our sample identified the frequency of reports, often including interim ones, as a main strength of their reporting system. However, this did not always appear to be closely connected to actual frequency - two schools which identified this as a strength only sent out one report each year. Moreover only two schools that sent out reports annually acknowledged 'infrequency' as a weakness (for fuller details of perceptions of strengths and weaknesses see Tables 9 and 10).

The cycle of reporting both from year to year (Table 3) and within school years also varied (Table 4). More reports were sent out in Year 7 than in the other years leading up to GCSE. However, proportionately more reports were sent out in Year 12 than any other year. Fewer reports were sent out in Years 11 and 13 when pupils would be most likely to be entered for public examinations.

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[1]   Several schools recorded that in some years no reports were issued. However, given the strong probability that a zero entry represents an omission on the part of the respondent, we are counting these instances as missing data in our analysis.

Table 3: Annual distribution of reports

	Number of schools sending reports	Number of reports sent	Average number of reports sent
Year 7	167	312	1.9
Year 8	175	292	1.7
Year 9	182	316	1.7
Year 10	182	317	1.7
Year 11	179	268	1.5
Year 12	104	204	2.0
Year 13	96	146	1.5

The end of the school year continues to be the most common time for sending reports home, with the exception of Years 11 and 13, when reports tend to be sent out in the spring term preceding GCSE and A level examinations. A majority of schools also sent reports home in the autumn term of Year 7, presumably to give parents an early indication of how their children were settling in.

Table 4: Annual cycle of reporting

	Autumn		Spring		Summer	
	early	*late*	*early*	*late*	*early*	*late*
Year 7	13%	43%	16%	25%	11%	79%
Year 8	2%	33%	21%	28%	23%	60%
Year 9	3%	27%	29%	34%	5%	76%
Year 10	5%	35%	17%	28%	25%	64%
Year 11	16%	21%	68%	17%	17%	11%
Year 12	12%	41%	25%	31%	7%	81%
Year 13	9%	35%	53%	35%	11%	7%

It is also notable that some types of schools report more frequently than others (Table 5). While the numbers involved are small, less than one quarter of grammar schools report to parents only once a year, whereas this is the case for nearly half the comprehensive schools and secondary modern schools. None of the secondary modern schools sends out more than two reports a year.

Table 5: Frequency of home-school reports by school type

	once a year	twice a year	termly
Comprehensive	45%	43%	12%
Grammar	23%	62%	15%
Secondary Modern	42%	58%	-

If this pattern does reflect the national situation, it must be considered cause for concern. For home-school reports to become an effective mechanism for raising school achievement, it would seem desirable for parents of students who are not deemed academically able to receive reports at least as often as their counterparts in selective schools.

It would also appear that schools in inner-city locations tend to report less frequently than those in rural and suburban locations (Table 6). Although, school location is an imprecise proxy for socio-economic status, these tend to be the schools with the highest concentrations of ethnic minority parents and lowest income profiles.

Table 6: Frequency of home-school reports by school location

	once a year	more than once a year
Inner-city	53%	47%
Mixed city	44%	56%
Rural	34%	66%
Mixed rural	38%	63%
Town	46%	54%
Suburban	41%	59%

Form of reporting

The variation in frequency is also matched by variation in form. Styles of reporting were grouped into three categories; structured sheets with little space for teacher narrative, unstructured sheets which were mostly blank for teacher narrative and semi-structured sheets which contained fill-in boxes for grading or exam/test marks with some space for teacher comments. The semi-structured report was the most popular style and was used exclusively by almost a third of schools (32.7%). Blank sheets collated together were used as the only style of report by less than a fifth of schools (14.7%). A very small minority of schools (2.7%) used only structured sheets with no space for teacher narrative. However, almost half of schools (49.9%) used a mixture of these styles, choosing different formats to suit the purpose of the report. Interim reports were frequently in the form of a standardised 'tick box' sheets, while fuller reports, summarising annual progress, were less structured. There did not appear to be any clear relationship between school type and reporting format.

With reference to standardised systems of reporting, one clear finding from the national survey is the growing use of computerised reporting systems, in particular the use of computer statement banks. These contain stocks of pre-prepared phrases, often modified and added to by teachers, that are then selected for each pupil as appropriate. The use of computer statement banks did not appear to be closely related to the type of school, although they were less commonly found in grammar schools and in rural schools. For the

sample as a whole, over one third (35%) used computer statement banks to construct some or all of their reports, and twelve schools (6.5%) used such banks for all reporting. This indicates a rapid increase over the last few years. In 1995, for instance, Ofsted (1995) reported such systems in only eight percent of schools. It will be interesting to monitor whether this trend continues. Certainly those schools that used these systems for all their reporting spoke highly of the benefits. These were seen to include good presentation, ease of operation leading to increased efficiency, greater frequency of reports and enhanced ability to compare pupil performance across subjects.

Other schools were less convinced. A few were emphatic about *not* using computer statement banks. Moreover, three schools reported having installed but subsequently withdrawn such systems due to: staff dislike; parental preference for '... a hand or word processed individual report'; and, 'having tried computer glossary reports they have been kicked out in favour of curricular achievement statements and specific target setting. Cutting out the verbiage!'. The extent to which these different formats facilitate or impede parent involvement will be explored in Chapter 5.

Content of school reports

Although much of the content of school reports is now determined by central government guidelines, we were interested in the extent to which schools provided parents with information about their child's position relative to other students, behaviour, targets set and whether they included pupil self-evaluation as part of the reporting process.

The large majority of schools (70%) provided parents with a summary of work covered in the curriculum, and nearly three-quarters (74%) gave predicted GCSE grades in examination years. A relatively new feature of school reports is the inclusion of targets, provided by 76% of schools in the sample. Although secondary schools are now obliged to provide information at the end of Key Stage 3 about individual performance in the context of school and national levels of attainment, relatively few schools (16%) reported on pupils' positions within groups. This is a far lower proportion than that reported 30 years ago by Rowe (1964) and Green (1968) when test results and class positions dominated reports. However, we may now be seeing a reverse trend, in that the proportion of our schools providing class positions was notably higher than the 5% of school reports that contained such information in Goacher and Reid's (1983) survey. The concentration on assessment levels and target setting had not precluded other concerns and 91% of schools claimed they covered information on behaviour beyond the stipulated figures on attendance.

Involvement of pupils in the reporting process has increased since Goacher and Reid's survey, probably as a result of the widespread take-up of the Records of Achievement scheme. In their survey only 11% of heads were favourably disposed to the idea of student input to the report and less than 0.5% of the reports they examined had any space for pupil comment. Although the nature of pupil involvement is unspecified in our data, the incorporation of some form of pupil self-evaluation was the norm rather than the exception. Self-evaluation was a feature of *all* reports for 39% of schools in the sample and of *some* reports of a further 38%. Only 22% claimed their reports contained no pupil self-evaluation. It should be noted however that the limited nature of pupil involvement was one of the most frequently mentioned weaknesses of the content of school reports (see Table 10). Certainly, it was an integral element in only very few of the reports we received from schools.

Three quarters (75%) of schools also said that all or some of their reports contained space for parents to add written comments, although again the nature of this involvement may be quite limited. Examination of reports returned with questionnaires suggest that it often comprises a slip to be returned as acknowledgement of receipt. Most schools had arrangements for parents to respond to reports either through arranging appointments (82%), by open invitation (66%) or by other means, eg: through form tutor meetings, home-school workers, monitoring cards or regular clinics.

Special provisions

Fourteen of the schools in the sample (8%) translated reports to parents. Languages identified were Urdu, Bengali, Punjabi, Chinese, Greek and Arabic. As one might expect, twelve of these schools had inner city catchment areas, but there was also a number of schools in inner city areas with a significant population

(sometimes 50%) of students from backgrounds whose first language is not English where no such provision was available. Reports were not translated into other languages by any of the grammar schools. One school commented 'we have a minuscule number of ethnic children' even though it had a wide catchment area including inner city areas. Only one school identified lack of translation facilities as a weakness in their current system.

The issue of reports for non-resident divorced parents was raised by only one school, which had put in place procedures for additional copies of reports to be sent to both parents if requested. This raises the important issue of the role of reporting in keeping separated or divorced parents in touch with their children's school progress. Although government guidelines do address this issue, it was perhaps surprising that it was raised by only one school. In view of the increasing number of 'non-traditional' households, this would appear to be an area which merits further attention from schools and educational researchers.

Parent consultations

One forum in which it is claimed that parents can enter into a more constructive dialogue with teachers is the formal consultation commonly referred to as 'parents' evenings'. High attendance at these events was identified as a key strength of individual practice by some schools and appears to be perceived as an important measure of parental involvement in the reporting process. Almost a third of schools (31.5%) indicated they held parents' evenings on an annual basis only. However, over half of the schools held parents' evenings twice a year in some year groups. This was particularly the case in the first year of entry to secondary school.

As the popular term implies, these consultations are traditionally held in the evening, and this remains the case for over half the schools in our sample. Ninety seven (54%) held these meetings between 6pm and 9pm or later. One school timetabled these meetings during school time only and a further thirty four schools (19%) held discussions between 4-6pm. The remaining forty eight schools (26.5%) provided a mixture of these alternatives. Offering a combination of times would seem to offer the widest range of opportunities for parents to attend. In particular, there must be some concern about the fact that one fifth held discussions during school time or, more commonly, shortly afterwards, when it might be difficult for many parents in paid employment to attend.

Schools were asked to estimate the level of attendance at parent consultations in three key year groups; Year 7, Year 9 and Year 11. One in eight schools stated that they were unsure of levels of attendance. Other schools in the sample offered figures but acknowledged that these were estimates. The average attendance across the sample is around 75% of parents, but this may be an over-optimistic figure given that few schools appear to have systems to monitor actual attendance. For instance, the school with the highest attendance claimed to see 100% of parents in all three year groups. The lowest estimated attendance across the year groups was 25% and the second lowest 33%. The lowest percentage for an individual year group was 20% of parents of pupils in Year 11. This is still, though, some way higher than the 2% attendance reported by Rani Puri (1997) in one inner city school.

While caution needs to be exercised about the accuracy of these estimates, they do indicate important variations relating to catchment area and age of pupil. In general, attendance at parents' evenings would seem to decline as students progress through the school. Average attendance at Year 7 was 79% compared with 75% at Year 9 and 70% at Year 11. There were marked differences in the scale of the drop in attendance according to school type. Grammar schools in the sample recorded a maximum drop of 15% in attendance between Year 7 (95%) and Year 11 (80%) attendance at parents' evenings. This figure widened to 30% in one participating secondary modern school where the most significant drop was from a Year 7 figure of 55% to a Year 11 figure of 25%. However, the most serious drop in parent attendance was over 50% recorded by an inner-city comprehensive school where numbers were estimated as falling from more than four fifths (85%) to less than a third (30%). The scale of the 'tail off' in parent attendance suggests a worrying level of detachment by parents as their children progress through school. There were exceptions to this rule, with some schools receiving a higher attendance for Year 9 meetings for example, presumably at the point where GCSE option choices become an immediate concern. As we see in Chapter 3, one of the case study schools applies quite aggressive strategies to ensure high and continuous levels of attendance.

In general, the catchment area of the schools also seems to be reflected in attendance at parents' evenings. Attendance in inner-city areas is at least ten percent lower for each year group than that of the sample as a whole, with average estimated attendance figures for Years 7, 9 and 11 of 69%, 62% and 58% respectively.

Schools also commented on variable attendance rates between different groups of parents. The parents of children with behavioural problems were identified as under-represented at parents' evenings by the majority (61%) of schools. Two thirds of comprehensive schools (66%) highlighted this group of parents as difficult to reach compared to one third of grammar schools and just under a half of secondary modern schools.

The second most significantly under-represented section of parents was seen to be those from lower socio-economic groups. Just over a third of schools (36%) identified this as a problem, the majority of which were comprehensive schools in a range of geographical areas. No grammar schools mentioned this category of parents as being under-represented, perhaps because there are likely to be fewer children from lower socio-economic backgrounds at these schools.

The parents of children with learning difficulties other than behavioural problems were only perceived as being poor attenders at parents' evenings by a small number of schools (13%). An even smaller percentage of schools identified ethnic minority families as under-represented (6%). These were all comprehensive schools, the majority of which were in inner city areas and comprise over one fifth of those schools (21%) in inner-city areas.

Other groups of parents identified by individual schools as being difficult to reach included 'low and late attenders' and 'underachievers'. Two schools referred to problems of communicating with families where both parents are working. One school mentioned single parents as being an under-represented group, and another highlighted the difficulty of contacting fathers in particular. Lack of transport was raised as an issue by two schools.

Policies on reporting to parents

The overwhelming majority (92%) of schools had guidelines for written or spoken reporting procedures (Table 7). However, these did not necessarily involve establishing common grading systems for either attainment or effort. While the majority did have such systems in place (65% and 61% respectively), a substantial minority (25% and 34%) had none at all or none that progressed from year to year.

Table 7: Existence of common grading systems

	All years	Lower years	Upper years	Each year	None
Attainment	65%	4%	5%	15%	10%
Effort	61%	2%	1%	20%	14%

On the one hand it might be argued that the introduction of government legislation and guidelines has obviated the need for local direction on school reporting procedures. On the other, such central government directives have created an array of demands that local education authorities (LEAs) may be able to help schools meet. While Bastiani (1996) comments on the important role played by LEAs in home-school liaison generally, our survey suggests that LEAs do not play a major role in reporting procedures in particular. Only one quarter (25%) of schools were aware of LEA guidelines in this area. Not surprisingly this was the case for fewer GM schools (6%). Among other maintained schools, however, there were conflicting responses about the existence of any such guidelines within a total of 18 LEAs. While lack of awareness does not necessarily indicate an absence of LEA policy and guidelines, it does indicate that neither party sees LEAs as having an important role to play in this area. Perhaps cross-school dialogue and coordination might help alleviate the many difficulties that schools experience in fulfilling their reporting obligations.

Schools' Perceptions of Reporting Procedures

Difficulties

All but 10 of the 183 schools in the sample identified difficulties in managing their written and spoken reporting procedures. Those aspects which were mentioned most frequently as being difficult to manage are shown in Table 8.

Table 8: Difficulties of home-school reporting

Difficulty	Number of mentions
Administration	64
Content	33
Parent contact	26
Parent consultations	14
Government and NC requirements	11
Effectiveness	5
Pupil involvement	5

Issues relating to administration were raised more frequently than anything else. In addition to references to administration in general, the problems of staff time and meeting deadlines were raised on 50 occasions. Managing the content also created difficulties. Government and National Curriculum requirements were named specifically 11 times, but schools also had problems achieving accuracy and consistency (19 mentions), balance (3) and clarity (2). The difficulties of managing pupil input on reports was mentioned, particularly in relation to how to ensure the quality of comments by pupils and the administrative problems of incorporating these comments into the complex organisational task of reporting. Schools also mentioned the difficulties of getting in contact with parents in general, and some parents in particular. Typical difficulties included: 'regular contact with the few who most need it', 'getting the parents of difficult/under-achieving pupils into school' and 'getting parents of children with problems to attend parents' evenings'. The logistics of these events was another issue cited relatively frequently.

However, schools were confident that they were getting some things right. When asked to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their own reporting systems, they put forward more than twice as many strengths as weaknesses.

Table 9: Schools' perceptions of the strengths of their reporting systems

Strengths	Number of mentions
Content	136
Frequency	57
Parent involvement	36
Pupil involvement	33
Administration	18
Parent consultations	16
Parent satisfaction	12
Staff commitment	12
Presentation	6
Effectiveness	4

Despite the difficulties cited earlier, schools seemed to feel especially confident about the content of their reports. The most frequently specified aspects of this were consistency (27 mentions), target-setting (18) and clarity (10 mentions). Many schools were happy about the frequency of reports sent home, although, as already mentioned, this was not always related to actual levels of frequency. Despite the difficulties with parent and pupil involvement cited earlier, some schools felt that they were succeeding in this area, and twelve singled out parent satisfaction as an indicator of this. Only one in ten mentioned administrative issues as strengths, in contrast to one third which identified these as weaknesses in their reporting procedures (Table 10).

Table 10: Schools' perceptions of the weaknesses of their reporting systems

Weaknesses	Number of mentions
Administration	59
Content	48
Parent contact	16
Pupil involvement	11
Effectiveness	6
Presentation	3

In connection with administration, the amount of time involved received the most mentions (40), which included the problem of getting staff to meet deadlines. Cost was mentioned four times. Issues relating to content covered concerns about accuracy, consistency and clarity, particularly communicating National Curriculum levels in a meaningful way. Parent involvement and contact was seen as a weakness, though blame tended to be attributed to the parents themselves rather than deficiencies in the system. As in schools' perceptions of the difficulties they experienced, problems with non-involvement were seen to be particularly acute with particular parents. As one school claimed: 'Difficult pupils generally have unsupportive parents'.

3: Reporting Practices in Four Schools

This chapter provides an outline of four case study schools. Each of the schools had been involved in a process of reviewing their reporting procedures and had developed different strategies for reconciling the various demands of government requirements, administrative feasibility and parental needs. In connection with the latter, all the staff with whom we spoke displayed an awareness of the importance of accountability and on several occasions referred to parents as 'consumers', 'clients' or 'partners'.

Newton Technology College

Newton Technology College (NTC) is a City Technology College designed to cater for 11-18 year olds that draws its 642 pupils (currently in Years 7 to 11) from a geographically mixed catchment area on the edge of a major city. It has relatively few minority ethnic students. Only five percent (31) of its student population are considered to have special educational needs, four of whom have formal statements. In common with other schools that select at least partially on the basis of aptitude, the pupils tend to come from relatively advantaged backgrounds and have parents who are educationally ambitious for their children. As the Principal puts it:

> We're all aware that we have recruited students from parents who are prepared to stand up and be counted and therefore are inclined to come and knock the door or lift the phone or ask a question. So we know that we have a vociferous parent body and we respond in anticipation of that.

Being newly established, the school was in the perhaps enviable position of being able to develop systems from scratch and on an incremental basis. As the Principal points out:

> We only had a one year group, Year 7. We only had a dozen staff, 150 children, so there were quite clear pressures about developing, co-ordinating, developing from scratch across the board ... reporting on children's progress, with a very tight number of professionals. We started off with a settling-in report for Year 7s. We'd no other year group to consider ...

The fact that they could build up the system from year to year meant that they were able to experiment more easily with different frequencies and formats. The school trialled a variety of systems and eventually set up a working committee to review the system:

> It reached a point really where feedback from parents from a number of parents' evenings started to indicate the need for ... a committee including parent governors and some representation across the board to look at the system, mostly because people said 'we don't want to turn up for a parents' evening once a year and be surprised and what we really need is a report every term'. Well, we went some way towards that and we ended up with a new system that would give them three punctuated quick snapshots progress reports which we call the continuous review sheet and they said 'OK what do you feel you can report on it?'. (Principal)

These interim reports have changed since their introduction however in response to both the conflicting demands of staff and teachers. Initially they contained more statistical information on students' relative attainment:

And so I suppose there was a bit of internal debate about wanting to put in a progress report individual sentences about individual people and not necessarily starting to do things like position in class, position in year group or raw score data but by the time we got to the exam at the end of the year we felt that was appropriate and so we agreed to also put a comment in that set the exam in context for the parents. (Academic Director)

As a result of these deliberations, parents received a column of data which showed lowest score, highest score, year average and year trial score. However, negative feedback from teachers caused these data to be dropped from the interim reports in favour of a simplified system, even though the parents wanted them retained. Parents get these revised review sheets (Fig 1) twice a year containing subject grades for effort, behaviour and homework completion rates.

Fig 1: Interim review sheet from Newton Technology College[1]

STUDENT'S CONTINUOUS REVIEW SHEET

Graham Jones
Tutor Group 9.3   Practical Group A

Date of Issue
Name of Tutor

Subjects	Effort Grades	Behaviour Grades	No of homeworks set	No of homeworks completed satisfactorily
English	[C]	[C]	[10]	[10]
Mathematics	[C]	[C]	[6]	[6]
Science	[C]	[D]	[8]	[8]
Technology	[C]	[C]	[6]	[5]
German	[C]	[C]	[2]	[2]
Spanish	[B]	[B]	[2]	[2]
Geography	[C]	[C]	[ ]	[ ]
History	[D]	[C]	[ ]	[ ]
Art and Design	[B]	[C]	[ ]	[ ]
Music	[C]	[C]	[ ]	[ ]
Drama	[C]	[B]	[ ]	[ ]
PE	[C]	[C]	[ ]	[ ]
Religious Studies	[D]	[D]	[ ]	[ ]

Total No of Total Homeworks Set	No of Homeworks Completed	Homework Completion Rate	Average for all Students
[34]	[33]	[97]%	[85]%

---

1   The reports illustrated in this chapter are reproduced from copies given to us by the schools. As a result, only some are completed, some are partially completed and others are blank.

Being at the 'cutting edge' of information technology, it is perhaps not surprising that this school uses this in its home school reporting procedures. The Academic Director, who has responsibility for reporting procedures, recalled how..

> … we looked at that as a possible vehicle for creating reports and lo and behold we came up with an awareness of pop-up menu statement banks and one or two other bits of information technology facilities that seemed to enable us to put together the first report. It looked very smart, we were pleased with that and we sent it home.

In addition to the interim reports, parents also receive an annual progress report (Fig 2) composed of statements selected from a computerised system.

Fig 2: Annual progress report from Newton Technology College

Newton Technology College

John Smith

TUTOR'S COMMENT
John generally has a positive report although there are some areas that need improvement. He is occasionally late for lessons and arrives unprepared. He needs more help to use the homework diary effectively in order to plan work loads. John seems to find it difficult to take PSE lessons seriously, he is generally tolerant of the views of others but finds it difficult to contribute to discussions. Some improvement in attitude is needed. John has become too lax of late and needs to improve his approach to lessons in certain subjects. He is capable of more, I feel.

ENGLISH
This term students have been studying for the S.A.T.s. Students have been studying some of the works of Shakespeare and developing an understanding of them. They have been reinforcing their skills in comprehension, grammar and punctuation. John makes constructive contributions to class discussions. He is a competent and expressive reader. He has produced imaginative written work. He is capable of producing work which is clearly set out at all times. John is making good general progress with English. Teacher: Mr A

LIBRARY SKILLS
In support of all areas of the curriculum and the S.A.T.s, the Library Skills course has concentrated on establishing sound research skills. John has worked well and is capable of using the Library effectively now and for future study. Ms B

MATHEMATICS
In Mathematics this year the students have covered topics including Probability, Algebraic Manipulation, Statistics, Angle and Circle Properties, Trigonometry and extending their skills in Using and Applying Mathematics. John appears to understand the importance of the work this year and has made good progress. In solving mathematical problems John has demonstrated a logical approach, but sometimes fails to show appropriate method and working out. It is important to come fully equipped to Mathematics lessons and John appears to appreciate this fact. John's presentation continues to be tidy and well organised but answers still need to be clearly shown. Average homework mark - 84%. Average assessment mark - 89%. John has a lot of natural ability in maths and grasps difficult concepts with ease. He has the potential to go a long way so long as he realises the importance of applying himself consistently to work. Teacher: Ms C

SCIENCE
John has studied modules on Radioactivity, Electricity and Magnetism and Inheritance in Science so far this year. He has always achieved an average standard in module tests and if a little more effort is made with producing notes, these could be used more effectively for revision prior to tests. John is able to carry out an effective investigation with guidance and is beginning to understand the concept of fair testing and factors, but finds it difficult to organise time and resources. Recent homeworks have not been completed to a satisfactory standard and are rarely handed in on time. John needs to develop a more responsible attitude in lessons and needs to develop a better standard of behaviour towards peers and staff. John has made satisfactory progress this year but needs to concentrate on some areas to make further progress. Teacher: Miss D

John Smith   9.3   Page 1   19/2/97   Personal Tutor: Mr E

Initial responses from parents brought about an increasing sophistication of the system:

> There was some feedback from parents who said these are just clinical, cold homogenised computer generated comments and we addressed that. We said you can't have a pop up menu with only two choices in it or with only four choices in it, you must have a range of statements. We've done some work advising staff about the way to make the pop up statements have some quality and have some focus on what they're delivering. We now send information home to parents to explain how to read the grades. (Academic Director)

As with many schools, the annual progress report is seen not just as a source of information for parents but also as a means of motivating students:

> The actual comment remains hopefully as a way of encouragement of positive phraseology, you know the days of the Record of Achievement statement and reports being phrased positively are still with us. We don't seek to be cold, harmful and damaging in our reports because we know the children read them and place great value on them. (Academic Director)

With the exception of Years 7 and 10, the school holds parents' evenings on an annual basis. These are staggered throughout the year to ease teacher workload and help parents make decisions at particular stages. For instance, in Year 9 the 'Options Parents' Evening' takes place in spring to help students select appropriate GCSE subjects for Years 10 and 11. As with written reports, the school has experimented and then sought feedback:

> Well we have done a survey, we did a particular survey of our Year 9 parents and after one of our parents' evenings. We tried a couple of different formats you know and we discovered that appointments were a useful way to manage the evening ... We asked parents do they like this system or would they prefer to have everybody in the main hall queuing and generally speaking the results of that survey ... [showed] that most of our parents agreed with the way the system went.

The current organisation consists of staff being located around the school with parents having prearranged appointments. Parents are limited to a maximum of six appointments of 5 minutes. In order to stop the meetings overrunning, a buzzer sounds after the allotted time to indicate the next parent's turn. This involved some staff development to ensure they stuck to the system:

> We've had to cajole and persuade staff to learn how to say 'no' at the end of those five minutes and not allow themselves to get carried over with one set of parents which leads to the domino effect.

The Principal acknowledged that this has meant that not all parents got to see the teachers they wanted so that follow-up appointments were made available:

> We've run into some difficulties with over-subscribed staff ... we have one parents' evening but the maths teacher has got four groups and all of our vociferous and keen parents want to see that maths teacher, we can't just say 'no' we have to make an alternative arrangement, we have a follow-up appointment slip.

The issue of making alternative arrangements is discussed in Chapter 5.

Greenwood Comprehensive

Greenwood (GW) Comprehensive is a co-educational LEA maintained comprehensive in a rural area. The school has 1,258 pupils (11-18 years). Its students come from a wide variety of backgrounds, but are predominantly white, with an overall socio-economic profile somewhat lower than that of Newton Technology College. Like Newton Technology College, Greenwood had been involved in radically rethinking its reporting procedures at the beginning of the 1990s. Evidence of a new 'consumer responsiveness' can be seen in the following comments of the Deputy Headteacher:

The next stage in that was that in the early 90's there was the shift over in school again by positive management decision that what we should do is move closer to our customers.

Home-school reporting procedures in particular were reviewed:

We had a whole training day on how to run report evenings. We invited parents to it, we showed a video, then in groups of tutors, plus year head, plus parents for the appropriate year group to say what's wrong with our reporting procedures and how would we like to improve them. We got out of that fairly simply that places were unpleasant, there needs to be customer service like coffee, tea and such like available, we must stick to time, we don't understand the language of the reports - that's from parents.

The school worked on both the report and the parent consultations. Although the school sends out only one report a year, they made efforts to ensure that it was sent out at the most appropriate time:
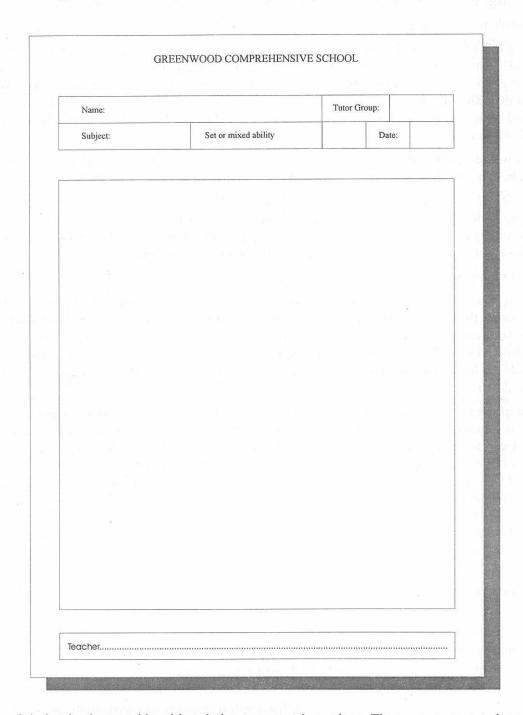
... it was a nonsense reporting [at the end of] Year 9 when the parents need to have information to help their children make the judgement about options. So Year 9 reporting self-evidently has to be in anticipation of the option process in order to plan the curriculum. The options process has to be in February - March and therefore the parents' evening has to be there.

Key Stage 3 reporting in particular was seen to be an interference in the cycle:

End of KS 3, oh it's a stupid time to report, ... a stupid time to do a test. The parents don't value it because they've gone past the options process and that's what the parents see as valuable in Year 9, so the tests for the governments statistics are not ... we do them, we report them, we get involved with the whole process, but the valuable exercise in Year 9 is a report that tells how my kids are doing and therefore it helps me to make a difference about which options my kids should be doing.

The format of the reports had been heavily influenced by the Records of Achievement scheme although the school has reluctantly accommodated the new regulations: 'we do the minimum of what the government require and we don't find any of them useful.' While the Deputy Head claims that details of National Curriculum attainments 'now dominate', the majority of school reports are much less structured and standardised than those of other schools, largely comprising hand-written loose-leaf A5 sheets that are collated into a booklet:

Fig 3: Annual report from Greenwood Comprehensive

GREENWOOD COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL

Name:		Tutor Group:	
Subject:	Set or mixed ability		Date:

Teacher..

The issue of timing is also considered in relation to parents' evenings. These were presented very much as part of a 'working partnership' model rather than a one-way conveying of information:

> The model is that if you are not concerned about all the prizes in the flower show what you actually want to do is discuss how to organise the fertiliser to make the flowers the best they can be in the flower show. There's no point in discussing it afterwards, it's an empty exercise. So we have parents' evenings related to trying to get in partnership with parents to help them to understand what we are about and therefore how to help their kid.

The school had radically restructured the format of parents' evenings. They had found the traditional pattern in which parents see as many teachers as they can unproductive because teachers were tired and the discussions were formulaic:

> Now I know that a teacher at 8.30 is speaking a ritual and not having a professional conversation because they've been doing it since 4 o'clock. Therefore parents' evenings in that other sense are a nonsense. You are spouting the same old sentences.

In order to overcome 'teacher fatigue', the school had introduced a format in which the parents had a ten minute meeting with the form tutor who acted as the intermediary of other subject teachers. This arrangement was to be further developed in the future:

> The school is moving towards the tutor as a middle manager, that means informed about their learning in all the subjects, therefore better informed at parents' evenings. They are collecting information ... having a personal development plan, they are collecting information in order to act upon the targets which are set.

La Retraite Roman Catholic School

La Retraite (LR) is a voluntary aided girls' secondary school with 600 pupils on roll (11-16 years). Located in an inner city area, 63% of the pupils are from ethnic minorities. In particular, the school serves local Greek, African and Afro-Caribbean communities. Again, there is evidence of an awareness of a need for the school to be more accountable to parents. As the Deputy Headteacher with responsibility for home-school communication comments:

> ... we try basically to use the contact with the school as if they're consumers ... I'm concerned ... to make sure that we put schools more on to a kind of a business footing in terms of using the parents as customers, the kids as clients. In terms of that basis, we've got to make sure, we've got to ensure that those customers are satisfied with what they're doing, what they're getting. That's why you're here.

As part of this process the report system had been changed. Like Greenwood it had been heavily influenced by Records of Achievement, but the school had moved away from that format which it considered unhelpful. In particular, La Retraite found the use of statement banks problematic:

> ... what tended to happen was it lost any sort of feel for the individual pupil. It lost out on the individuality of the pupil and if you read, as we do in senior management, a cross-section of profiles it became very apparent that you were reading a very bland statement about a particular child for a whole year and we thought that really wasn't what parents would require ... If we were giving parents a whole page of information about a particular subject on which an awful lot of it was narrative, an awful lot of it was in a language that they would not be used to themselves. It was very much in teacherspeak and I think there is still quite a lot of evidence of that in the profiling system, or in the system we now have.

In order to increase individualisation and comprehensibility, the school stopped depending entirely on computer statement banks and dropped common grading systems in favour of departmental flexibility:

> So we moved away from a computerised-based system onto this more hybrid system where we allow departments a lot more flexibility in the way they word their statements, where we allow departments a lot more flexibility in how they want to describe it, and then we gave departments an awful lot more free choice about how they actually put the statements together. We however insisted that they must be typed, they could not be hand-written, for ease of parent reading.

Amongst other things, La Retraite wanted to make the reports more effective through the use of targets which are now included in the annual report (Fig 4) along with a short description of the course and teacher assessments of progress.

Fig 4: Annual report from La Retraite R.C. School

LA RETRAITE RC SCHOOL

Name	Mary Brown	Subject	Mathematics
Form	9YZ	Teacher	
Date		Signature	

NINTH YEAR PROFILE

General aim
Pupils are taught in mixed ability classes and have an individual programme of study tailored to their own specific needs. The sources are used from SMILE with enrichment materials to encourage various forms of learning which promote achievement.

Content
The mathematics curriculum includes Using and Applying Mathematics, Number, Algebra, Shape and Space and Handling Data. All pupils use Information Technology as part of their maths.

ASSESSMENT OF THE STUDENT'S ACHIEVEMENT

Using and Applying Mathematics
Mary has a limited understanding of investigational work. She is sometimes able to extend her work when directed by the teacher. With guidance, she is able to produce tables and diagrams of her work.

Number
Mary has developed, with help, her number skills, including non-calculator methods of multiplication and division, estimation and inverse operations.

Algebra
Mary has developed with some teacher guidance, her algebraic skills such as recognising and describing patterns, expressing simple formulae in works and the use of co-ordinates are being developed with some teacher guidance.

Shape and Space
Mary is developing her skills in this area with guidance from the teacher. These skills include the naming and representation of shapes, angle measuring, symmetry, metric unit conversion and finding area of basic shapes.

Data Handling including IT Skills
Mary has developed some skills in the area which include using experimental and mathematical probability, graphs, diagrams and analysis of information collected.

Personal and Social
Mary can be a hardworking and conscientious student, but is easily distracted by others. She has made some progress this year, but with a little more effort and concentration could be making more advances. She needs to organise her work and complete all homework and classwork set.

Targets
*Continued effort in all areas of her Mathematics
*Complete all homework and classwork set
*Organise work and improve presentation to aid future revision
*Continued revision of difficult areas

La Retraite introduced interim reports as 'a whole year was not really sufficient for us to inform parents, we felt very much that we were not telling the parents at an early enough stage how their child was progressing'. These reports are highly standardised tick box profiles that cover progress, effort and homework so that parents could know whether their children were 'above average, average or below average'. It also enabled staff to monitor changes from year to year:

> ... we were able to build up a process or package, like this child in Year 7 got excellent throughout the whole thing, by Year 9 they're all kind of below average, now what has happened to the child

who has come in and produced really good stuff in Year 7 and has now become relatively disaffected by the time he comes to Year 9 ... On the other hand as well the kids that got the good reports, we were able to target those and say that's an excellent record we'd like to pass on our congratulations to them in what they have achieved. So it built up this dialogue as well between the parents and the school which I think is very, very important.

Fig 5: Interim report from La Retraite R.C. School

LA RETRAITE R.C. SCHOOL
YEAR 8 PROGRESS REPORT AUTUMN TERM

Name: Eva   Form: 8AB   Reading Age 13+
Key: 1. Very Good   2. Satisfactory   3. Unsatisfactory

Subject	Progress			Effort			Homework			Comment	Initial
	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	Comment will be made where needed	
English	✓			✓			✓			An excellent start	
Maths	✓			✓			✓			A star pupil who works so hard	
Science	✓			✓			✓				
RE	✓				✓		✓				
Technology	✓			✓			✓				
MFL	✓			✓			✓				
History		✓		✓				✓		Eva always works hard	
Geography		✓			✓			✓			
Drama		✓		✓				✓			
Music	✓			✓							
Art		✓			✓			✓			
PE		✓		✓							
PSE	✓			✓							

Total attendance for this term 118 out of 118 Excellent [✓] Good [ ] Poor   [ ]   .... Form Tutor

Number of lates for this term   0 out of 118 Excellent [✓] Good [ ] Poor [ ]   .... Head of Year

Uniform: Excellent [✓] Good [ ] Poor [ ]

FAX: Excellent [✓] Good [ ] Poor [ ]

La Retraite was also one of the very few schools in the survey that made special provisions for students from EAL backgrounds in that it translated some reports into Greek. The Deputy Headteacher acknowledged that this only covered a minority of parents' language needs and that wider availability of translated reports would create administrative difficulties for the school, particularly of time.

> The process and the cycle is such that it is very difficult to spend time to get a document translated because it is not an instantaneous thing. If I had a kid's profile today and I went down to [the LEA's] translation services or sent them a faxed copy, it could take them anything up to 21 days to return that in which time the parents' evening will have gone, you know.

The main effort of home-school reporting seemed to be directed at parents' evenings, however. The problems of written reporting, especially in a school where so many parents came from backgrounds where English was an additional language, were seen to make oral reporting even more important:

> It's all right us saying we will write profiles every single year about your child if the parent can't access that information: 1) because they can't speak English as a first language; 2) their own literacy level. You know, we're making them feel inadequate because they can't access that information. That's why I think along with normal profiles or school reports you do need this

contact, you need this parents' evening, you need to get the parents there. Because I think they give parents more information than they can glean from a page of A4 written thing.

The evening was organised along the traditional format of all the teachers sitting in waiting in the main hall while parents travelled round from one to the other. The school had Spanish speaking staff on-hand to help translate. But while the organisation had remained unchanged, the school had developed a number of strategies for encouraging high attendance. Throughout the school, reports were used as a 'carrot' to bring parents in:

> ... on the way in we usually get prefects or girls from our older year group with the profiles there, 'come in, good evening tick you off, there's your profile'. The teachers are sitting around the room and we monitor that at the end of the evening.

It is interesting to note that the discourse that applies to pupil attendance is now also used in connection with parents:

> We actually do include parents who've already sent their apologies because they cannot make it in terms of the day, who've at least had the courtesy to inform the school that we are not coming and I include those as people that we count as 'official absence', 'authorised'. We've authorised their absence, sounds quite awful that, but they're not there.

There is also a good deal of 'chasing' to ensure parents are brought in for consultation:

> ... then it's down to the sheer hard work of a lot of the Heads of Year, getting on the phone: 'Oh we see you're not coming to parents' evening. Why is that? You know it's very important?' And by doing that we actually do get a big change in parents' minds that they will actually make the effort to come. Obviously, things crop up from time to time as it does in every walk of life, like they can't attend. Then ... Heads of Year are back on the phone: 'You couldn't make it last night, can I offer you an appointment at ... ?' We had a 92% turn out in year 7.

For Year 11 parents, there was even stronger pressure to attend created through an insistence that they come to school to sign an 'exams contract':

> ... it was the year group that had seen the biggest drift - 'Why should we bother coming, we've only got another six months to go'. We've said 'well it's your GCSEs' and then we've come up with this idea, we'll get the parents to sign for their exams and they've got to turn up and that's basically what we did and it's now fed through the school at Year 11: 'You must come to the parents' evening. That is the only time that you will be able to sign these documents'. So the last two years we've got virtually 100% turn out at parents' evenings.

Hyslop Place School

Hyslop Place School (HP) is a large co-educational inner-city 11-18 school with 1,480 students on roll. It serves a very diverse population, including both affluent and low income families. One third (492) are deemed to have special educational needs, with 42 of these having formal statements of need. Just over half the students (54%) are from ethnic minority groups and one in eight (12%) is a refugee or political asylum seeker.

The school produces an annual profile for each student. In some years, there are also 'tick box' interim reports, but these are currently under review. The annual profile, again like those of La Retraite and Greenwood, is influenced strongly by Records of Achievement and designed to motivate as well as inform:

> Well a strength in the system at the moment is that it gives you a brief synopsis at the top of the course and it's based very much on the record of achievement model where you are aiming to talk positively about students and about their achievements and the way in which they are working towards things and yet it also gives you an opportunity to talk about areas of further development where you can focus on weakness.

Fig 6: Annual Report from Hyslop Place School

HYSLOP PLACE SCHOOL

COURSE:	Combined Humanities	DATE:
STUDENT'S NAME:		TUTOR SET:

COURSE DESCRIPTION
In Year 7, students follow a modular course which covers elements of the National Curriculum for Geography and History.
The History modules are The Roman Empire, Medieval Realms and Castles and Cathedrals.
The Geography modules studied include Local Studies, Weather and Water.
The skills developed include mapwork, collection of information in the local area, interpretation of different forms of evidence past and present such as written documents, photographs, artefacts, graphs, assessing the causes and consequences of change, and presentation of information.

ASSESSMENT

PERSONAL ORGANISATION

	Regularly	Needing Improvement	Causing Concern
Attends lessons	[✓]	[ ]	[ ]
Arrives on time to lessons	[✓]	[ ]	[ ]
Brings books and equipment	[✓]	[ ]	[ ]
Completes work set	[✓]	[ ]	[ ]
Hands work in on time	[ ]	[✓]	[ ]
Completes the required homework	[ ]	[✓]	[ ]

OVERVIEW
Attitude   [C]
              (A-E)

COMPLETED BY:

Apart from a few tick boxes to indicate aspects of personal organisation, the report is relatively unstructured in order to provide enough space for staff to say something individual and evaluative:

> … it just gives you a big enough gap, let's face it, on the piece of paper to say what you think. If you really want to be quite detailed about a student, you can do it. If you've got a tick box system, you are immediately constrained and what does good, bad or indifferent say about a kid.

Some departments, particularly those with IT literate staff, have developed the use of optical mark readers and statement banks, but these are generally considered to be less 'parent-friendly' than the more discursive elements. The issue had been the subject of some discussion at the school, with teachers who are also parents drawing on their own experience.

> … the debate raged among the staff you see. It's interesting that the optical mark reader, tick box system was raised by the person who doesn't have any children. As the Head of the English who has children, said 'well actually I prefer a debate and a much more evaluative remark'. It reflects one's experience. That's life isn't it?

The Deputy Head was aware that: 'We're not typical of the wide range of parents that we service and therefore who are we to say in fact what the typical parent, or a typical parent might want or not.' Nevertheless, the process of deciding the appropriate format would seem to endorse Beresford and Hardie's (1996: 143) claim that 'communications are aimed at one particular group served by the school - and this if often the one closest to the teachers' own experience'.

Like La Retraite, Hyslop Place uses school reports as a means of bolstering attendance at parents' evenings:

> We tend to work on our reports with the view that we will deliver them to parents at the parents' evening. That's a bit sneaky because we're giving them out at parents' evening in order to try to encourage parents to attend.

Again, the presence of staff who could translate for parents was seen to be an added bonus:

> It's an opportunity to have the Language Development Team on hand and to be able to go through the report and explain if it's not easily read by the recipient. So there's a method in our madness if you like. Yes it does help to bring in extra numbers but it also gives you an opportunity to struggle through. The parent's not reading it in isolation.

The school was able to provide translation in most European languages as well as Arabic, Bengali, Urdu and Hindi, but regretted the passing of the interborough translation service that had been able to co-ordinate more support.

Like La Retraite, Hyslop Park used the reports as a means of monitoring attendance. The format of the evening itself was similarly organised on the lines of gathering all staff into one place and letting parents circulate - although on a much larger scale:

> The parents arrive, are welcomed to the school in the foyer by students and staff, then come down into the main hall. It's a big enterprise in this school because the school is 1,400 students in total and 240 per year. Quite tightly organised. We sit with tables and a couple of chairs and subject areas mainly highlighted by our names obviously on the table. Parents are welcomed in at the door and given a report and we tick them off so we can keep a numerical record in terms of numbers and also in terms of who comes and track that.

With the exception of form tutors who operate an appointments system, parents get seen on a 'first come, first served' basis:

> An appointments system would be quite difficult to manage and you would get big queues if you run over … you get a view, you walk into the hall, we've got a hall where it's very large seating area with a well in the middle, and at each subject area desk you've got a large stick with a big sign on it that says English or Maths. So as you come into the hall above the heads of the parents it's actually quite easy to see where the subject areas are and the individual staff … you tend to get a general milling around of parents rather than them sitting in rows waiting.

4: Parents' Experiences of School Reports

The last chapters have outlined the range of reporting practices within our national sample of English secondary schools and the particular strategies adopted by our four case study schools. This chapter looks at the strength and weaknesses of some of these strategies through the eyes of a number of parents whose children attend the case study schools. We have attempted to cover the experiences of particular groups of parents; middle class; working class, those for whom English is an additional language and those whose children have special educational needs. However, both the numbers of schools and numbers of parents are relatively small and it cannot be presumed that their accounts are representative of even these groups let alone parents as a whole. Nevertheless, it is clear that there are a number of common issues and concerns relating to the importance, frequency, form, content, accessibility and usefulness of school reports, not just in connection with particular schools but across all four schools.

One clear and recurrent theme from our interviews with parents is the importance they place on the formal communication between school and home that the school report provides. Many stressed how this was particularly crucial at the secondary phase as their children approached public examinations. Virtually all parents commented on how much they missed the more informal and frequent contact they had experienced with their primary school teachers. Some also commented that this lack of contact was exacerbated by the increasing disinclination of their children to tell them about what happened at school as they grew older. For the majority of parents, the school reports and the organised parents' evenings (discussed in the next chapter), provided the *only* channel of communication between home and school.

Frequency

As the formal school report was often the only source of information about pupil progress, parents raised concerns about frequency. The three-times a year feedback (2 interim and 1 annual reports) from Newton Technology College was clearly appreciated, eg:

> We keep everything and look back through it from one time to another, and the up-to-date comments, you seem to be more in touch here because they are at a funny age aren't they when they are at senior school, they don't communicate particularly well with what they are doing and to get these quite often is a big help. (Mrs Chandler, NTC)

A few parents mentioned that they would like reports even more often. But few expressed the sense of frustration and dissatisfaction of the parents from Greenwood Comprehensive who received only the legal minimum of one report a year. These parents felt that an annual report was not enough, especially if problems emerged.

> If it's particularly bad I would like to know beforehand, not just wait until you get an annual report and you think 'gosh, this has been going wrong for a year'. (Mrs Chesham, GW)

> Obviously from year to year I don't think it's enough information we get from the school ... if Grace is starting to go downhill now just after the report I wouldn't know anything about it until next year or how she is doing really. (Mrs Lotki, GW)

The once yearly report would therefore appear to be particularly unhelpful for children who struggle with their schoolwork. Ms Salter, whose older daughter had had problems with both schoolwork and bullying, complained that:

> It's fine if the child is doing well but if the child isn't then it can be a problem … They were too late basically and by the time we saw the report the damage had been done … I felt that the reporting system let us down very badly. You weren't aware of that until a week or so before parents' evening, by then it's too late, you can't do anything about it, it's a sort of crisis management towards the end, so not very impressed really. (Ms Salter, GW).

Her comments reveal the related issue of the timing of reports. Annual reports sent out at the end of year may provide a useful summary of the year's progress, but provide little leverage for parents to work with their children throughout the year. The problems with the end-of-year report were raised by parents at Hyslop Place School.

> … it's too late after they've done it. You want that beforehand so then you can actually see whether they appear to be on the right bit of work at the right time of year. (Mrs Jarvis, HP)

> I certainly would like to have more of a more running commentary on her progress. It doesn't have to be in depth but if it was more consistent, it was a running commentary … I do think once a year is not enough if there's a problem in the year. (Mrs Walters, HP)

Although Hyslop Place had sent out interim reports in some years, a significant number of our parents claimed not to have received them. The school relied on 'pupil post' for these reports - a channel that could be less than reliable: 'Pupil post is notorious. Letters sent home are not delivered. From Year 9 upwards children don't want letters to arrive. With Year 7 and Year 8 it is less of a problem and 75% arrive' (Mrs White, HP). Even where reports are not deliberately withheld, pupils can simply forget to pass them on: 'an awful lot of kids just bin them - genuinely forget about it and then next week find it at the bottom of their bag and they bin it and you're none the wiser' (Mrs Jarvis, HP).

Form of reporting

There is inevitably a connection between the frequency of the report, the amount of detail it can cover and the extent to which it is either standardised and individualised. Greenwood's once-a-year report was the most individualised of all those from our case study schools comprising a hand-written sheet for each subject. There were some criticisms about the legibility of these reports, eg: 'The handwriting is absolutely disgusting … it took me, my husband and Grace to try to decipher what was actually written.' (Ms Lotki, GW); '… the one problem I have found is actually reading some of the teachers' writing … if they can't write properly I find it difficult to see how they can actually report on your children if you can't understand what they are writing' (Ms Salter, GW.) There were also concerns that even though they were individually hand-written the comments were too generalised. A minority of parents felt that the reports conveyed an individual knowledge of their children, but in the main, parents found them vague and formulaic, eg:

> Basically they all seem to write the same thing, I think they must look at each other's reports, I suppose it's very hard to write anyway, about 100 - 200 of them (Mrs Graham, GW)

> I've got a couple of close friends where you read each others' reports and some of them are just word for word the same as other children's. (Mrs Upton, GW)

One even felt that the teacher had the 'wrong' child, eg: '… they said that Malcolm wasn't very sporty, and Malcolm was sporty. They'd obviously got the wrong child' (Mrs Upton, GW). These comments suggest that 'individualised' formats did not necessarily mean that the reports were 'individual' in a meaningful way.

Hyslop Place and La Retraite used standardised interim reports to provide 'snapshots' and less structured reports for the annual report. In general parents appreciated the detail of the annual report. La Retraite's reports in particular received praise from English speaking parents, eg:

... as all reports are now broken down clearly into different topics, subject areas, as a parent it makes it much easier to recognise a child's strengths and weaknesses and identify any areas for development.' (Mrs Corsham, LR)

Several mentioned that the grading system was more precise than previously and left less room for ambiguity. But others felt that it was still too generalised and didn't say what they really wanted to know:

It's a little bit difficult ... say at the very beginning like the general language and comments ... and you think 'I've not really learnt anything'. (Mr Berrill, LR)

You've got the whole thing in front of you. It doesn't mean anything. I looked at some of them and thought 'well great, but I don't know what it means'. (Mrs Price, LR)

However, parents had problems with the very standardised interim reports that amounted to little more than a list of ticks in boxes. Making sense of these depended on an understanding of grading systems that were not always clearly explained:

It didn't really tell me anything ... it was more for a teacher than a parent ... There wasn't much effort gone into a lot of them ... there wasn't a lot of depth to it. (Mrs Price, LR)

... it doesn't give too much information, cause if she is lacking in something she gets a 3 or whatever, B, but it don't say what the problem is. (Mr Berrill, LR)

Contrary to what might have been anticipated, these reports proved even harder for EAL parents to make sense of than the more descriptive versions. The grading system was not particularly transparent and subject abbreviations such as 'MFL' are not likely be to instantly recognisable even for English speaking parents.

Newton Technology College had tried to reconcile the problems of standardisation, individualisation and a high frequency of reporting through the use of information technology. In addition to enabling the school to produce reports more frequently, this made it easier to give parents detailed information relating to the syllabus, areas covered and created none of the problems of illegibility mentioned earlier, eg: 'I think they are fine, they are easy to read. Easy to follow' (Mrs. Chandler, NTC); '... they're timely, they're tidy' (Mrs Rideout, NTC).

However, the use of computerised statement banks created other problems. One appears to be that parents simply don't like the *idea* of computer-generated reports. In particular, many complained that they lacked that 'personal touch':

... they're neat, they're compact and they're very easy to read and understand but I have very slight worries about using the information technology as opposed to the old fashioned hand-written thing because I think perhaps it lacks just that little personal touch, you know when you're having to sit down and write about Johnny Smith you really do have to think about him, don't you? ... As you write I think perhaps your personal feelings and things come into the report but when you're using those information technology packages and you just select your sentences, hopefully appropriate to the child you're talking about, I think that lacks just that little bit of sensitivity. (Mrs Brent, NTC)

... it's quite constrained and formal and you feel that it's formulaic, you know what is produced is probably more paragraphs than you would get from a normal system but the amount of information that relates to your child and is to an extent individual seems to be fairly minimal. (Mrs Rideout, NTC)

One mother found the idea of using computer banks so distasteful that she did not even read them:

I don't like that at all. The first time we had one we thought 'Oh this is brilliant' ... and then you read the thing that whoever it was explained it, 'we do use computer generated sentences' ... but I tell you, if it's a son of yours and you read that ... I don't even bother to read it all ... I really positively dislike it. It's so impersonal ... I've tried thinking now have they really said that or is it just that they've selected that piece on the computer. (Ms Stirling, NTC)

There was a widely expressed fear that the technology, rather than the teacher, controlled the content:

> I don't like these flagged up phrases, I don't like that system at all, I think it's a bit impersonal … I think they look at the phrase first and then the child second rather than the child first and the phrase second. The priority is misplaced. If the child doesn't really fall into one category or another it's difficult to describe them within the format of the report. (Mr Mace, NTC)

There was also a general lack of confidence in its accuracy:

> [There's] always a sneaky feeling that maybe they have cut and pasted the wrong bit. Could be terribly easy to do and very difficult to spot. (Mrs Rideout, NTC)

> The one thing I do find a little bit disconcerting about the computerised system is that the comment and text doesn't always 100% match up with what you might think from the scores that are there … it appears to be a pick and mix type - well these are the possible responses you might give about a child like we'll have 1, 3, 7 and 9 and it then copies in the sort of text … You get stock phrases but they seem to be a little bit odd sometimes with the scores. (Mr Storey, NTC)

> I think sometimes the problem is with computers, it's as if they've got these set things set up and I'll just press button A and that sentence will suit and there are times when it doesn't quite correspond with homework. (Mrs Ricketts, NTC)

Confidence once lost seems hard to recover. This was particularly so in the occasional case when there were clear errors of mistaken identity. Related to this lack of trust was a concern that errors stayed in the system. One family spoke of how they had battled to have an incorrect assessment removed and been told that that was not possible. However, it is possible that some of these issues are 'teething problems'. Several parents felt that the system had become more sensitive since it started, eg:

> I spoke to a friend of mine, after we had his very first report some of the phrases were very much the same on both children's reports but I suppose that's to be expected anyway, but I just feel as though as he's been there longer it's got more personal for him as they've got to know him perhaps more. (Mrs Chandler, NTC)

> I think they have improved in the last three years, I have noticed a difference. (Mrs Ricketts, NTC)

One parent commented that the issue of standardisation was not related entirely to information technology, and that it was merely a question of getting used to it:

> Well I suppose to begin with when we first had it it was computerised and you felt, you know, everyone was getting the same sort of thing and then when you thought about it most teachers will write very similar things that personalise it. I mean they're writing it in whatever school and in fact it's very thorough and they tend to put a lot more in so we've got used to it. (Mrs Winters, NTC)

Some of these concerns about computer comment banks may be overcome by small gestures. For instance, the 'personal touch' could be reinstated through little things - such as signing the report: 'if just somebody could sign it somewhere you know … but there's nothing' (Ms Stirling, NTC). In addition, as mentioned earlier, it should be noted that even the personalised hand-written reports from Greenwood were not exempt from criticisms that they did not really convey the impression that teachers 'knew' about whom they were writing. The issue may be one of mass production rather than the means of production.

Content, Accessibility and Usefulness

National Curriculum requirements

As mentioned in Chapter 1, there were fears that National Curriculum requirements would overload reports with detail and technical language rather than substance that would lead to confusion rather than clarification. Research conducted by Hughes (1993) reveals that at primary school, 26 percent of parents did not understand assessment systems, especially the National Curriculum levels, and we found similar levels of confusion amongst our parents. This is perhaps not surprising - as the principal of Newton

Technology College claimed: 'sometimes even the staff don't know what they mean let alone the parents'. Although not all had received reports on Key Stage 3 assessments, several of those that had were clearly unsure about what the various levels of assessment indication, eg:

> They go along the sort of lines at whatever the Key Stages they are going through, which is information, is OK, you apparently need to know. But … we are not really able to absorb that so to report along those lines specifically it is quite difficult to understand whether your daughter or son is doing well or not doing well. (Ms Salter, GW)

Some parents were unsure about what the appropriate levels should be and felt they weren't sufficiently precise:

> I wasn't very happy about the level she got and Lucy went and told the teacher what I said and the teacher sent the message home and said 'no, I wasn't to take that attitude because she was 4 plus and it was hard to do it between the 4 and 5' … so it wasn't as bad as what I took it to be. (Mrs Knight, LR)

One parent at La Retraite described her confusion between NC levels and the grades 1-3 used on internal reports:

> … the first time I sort of thought well does that mean the same as A, B or C, or is that the level they're at in the class, you know level one or are they level two, or are they, that's what I wasn't sure of at first … I'm just trying to understand those levels and then I looked … Well it's like in Maths, Tina's saying I'm on Level 4 now so if I'd got this and there's no '4', I'm thinking well I thought you were at Level 4. (Mrs Tsanavari, LR)

Many parents appear to be overwhelmed by the amount of information with which they were provided, eg: 'That is a little bit confused really. It's too much, I mean.' (Mrs Pagoni, LR). One parent felt that the requirements had altered teachers' attitudes to reporting and that this came through in their comments: 'it seems to me not for the wrong reasons, but the reports these days seem to be a bit of a chore that the teachers don't really like any more.' (Mr Armstrong, GW). Although parents at Newton Technology College seemed to be better informed about the National Curriculum, perhaps both as a result of the more detailed reports, explanatory notes and their generally higher socio-economic status, the computer-generated reports of this school in particular seemed to create an 'information overload':

> They say a lot about the content of what she has been doing, not a huge amount about the quality of it … It's wordy but it doesn't necessarily describe the things that I actually want to know about. (Mrs Rideout, NTC)

> They seem to have 5 or 6 lines about what has been taught and then 1½ lines on progress - that's what I'm interested in. I don't read the rest. (Mrs Danson, NTC)

Consistency and clarity of grading systems

Grading systems demand clear explanation and it was clear that despite schools' attempts to explain these, there was still much confusion over grades particularly when they varied between departments or from year to year.

> Sometimes the marks really aren't very clear and then each teacher has an individual way of doing their mark because we've picked up on one last term, I think it was English and there was a fraction we were given to work it out, it seems a bit silly. (Mr Armstrong, GW)

An example of the confusion caused by a change in grading criteria emerged at Newton Technology College. Several parents had been upset by their children receiving 'C' grades for effort and achievement as this grade had previously indicated 'poor' but was now used to indicate 'satisfactory'. There was also confusion over the figures on homework completion:

> They would see, say, 80% completion of homework, some parents thought they were getting a mark of 80% for that year's homework and we had to explain in more detail what that actually

meant, the number they had completed out of the possible number. So there was a little bit of communication there required. (Principal, NTC)

And even for attendance:

> ... when they attend in the school I didn't understand. I went to the meeting. One of the parent governors explained to me. I said I don't know why is it zero, my son never been out of school, always he attends. Oh no, zero means he is all right. (Mrs Greene, HP)

Parents at all of the schools commented on apparent mismatches between teachers' comments and grades. The relationship between effort, behaviour and attainment grades often seemed particularly opaque, eg.

> ... the grade system seems to work on behaviour so you can read what the teacher has put and then see at the bottom an A grade and the two don't always tally. Because the teacher can be telling you that your child appears to be struggling and is missing a lot of school for instance, and then you get an A and it seems to be for the way they behave in class the grade comes, and I don't know whether that's necessarily clear. (Mrs Jarvis, HP)

> He's said before that 'I have really tried hard', so whether it's been misunderstood that you know he's achieved higher than they think his effort's been, which can be the case, and he says he's really trying, so we've had this before and he says 'but I really am doing my best', but of course school might think he can do better. (Mrs Winters, NTC)

Professional discourse

On the whole the most frequently expressed complaint relating to content across all the case study schools was not the technical nature of the report but to its generality. Parents often felt that the comments were bland and gave them no direction. Many interpreted this vagueness as teachers wanting to offer positive reinforcement or indicative of a 'culture of non-competitiveness'. While parents appreciated that children needed to be encouraged, they felt it was unhelpful to them if this was at the expense of honesty:

> They're good with the praise, they're praising all the time there, when praise isn't necessarily due ... They should criticise just a little bit more and that's to the benefit of the child but I understand they do that to encourage the pupils rather than be negative all the time. (Mr Harris, NTC)

> Because you're into this ethos of Thou shalt not criticise or be negative or whatever, sometimes you lose the real meaning of what they're trying to say. (Mr Storey, NTC)

> Of course, better to be honest and cruel ... They're not emphasising problems ... they're very typical bits of paper, tend to be polite all the time. (Mrs Bonal, LR)

> Sometimes they say to you yes it's very good, really the opposite ... it's better to tell me the truth. (Mrs Vasilopoulou, LR)

The frustration that parents feel about being overprotected is just as acute for children with special educational needs, eg:

> ... we know obviously with Claire being statemented, we know she'll never have major academic aspirations but again from our point of view we want to know that she is holding her own with some other children ... we don't want a completely derogatory report ... but it would be still nice to see where she stands. (Mr Hector, GW)

Being upfront about students' attainments is important for all parents, but perhaps especially so for children who have learning difficulties. If positive reports leave parents unaware of the actual level of their children's attainments relative to others, they will be unprepared for the comparative assessment data that arrive at the end of Key Stage 3 or poor examination results at GCSE. It is also crucial for ethnic minority parents, as research by Rani Puri (1997) and Kahin (1998) shows. Crooks' (1997: 61) research in particular endorses our finding that parents had much closer relationships with private supplementary schools because they could communicate 'openly and honestly about children's academic achievement'.

In our case study schools, it was often felt that any negative feedback was hidden, or indicated by omission. Lack of comment didn't necessarily mean that everything was fine:

> Well, you need to read between the lines … You make a mental note, 'Right, if nothing comes to the surface, we ought to talk to them next time round'. It's probably on this basis rather than strictly on what you see on the report. (Mr Strong, NTC)

In a similar fashion to interpreting job references, it would appear that parents need to look out for subtle indicators, for what isn't mentioned as much as what is, and how the less favourable comments are concealed amongst more favourable ones, eg:

> If there is anything negative to say they'll do it in like a sandwich form, especially with these reports. They'll say something positive - it's a trendy thing at the moment - they'll say something positive then negative and then they'll finish up with something positive. I mean all business works that way these days. (Mr Harris, NTC)

Parents need to be able to 'decode' reports for the crucial pieces of information - a process which would appear to be easier for professional middle class parents than for working class and ethnic minority parents. These problems are compounded for parents with little or no English.

Language issues

Initially, our EAL parents appeared to be generally satisfied with the school reports. However, it often transpired that this satisfaction hid an underlying confusion. In many instances, a significant part of our interviews was spent explaining, with the help of the translator, what the report actually indicated. One issue that arose in the course of these interviews was the lack of systems to deal with pupils who joined schools after Year 7. This is likely to cause difficulties for those families who tend to be more transient, such as refugees, asylum seekers and those in temporary accommodation (Power et al 1998). Having missed out on the earlier induction procedures, these parents were in danger of slipping through the net entirely. One mother whose daughter had been attending La Retraite for ten months had not received a report or notice of a parents' evening even though other pupils in the same year had been issued an interim report and a full report and a parents' evening had been held during this period. Perhaps not surprisingly, she claimed 'I feel I don't get all the information. I feel badly informed.' (Mrs Vanella, LR)

But even those respondents who did receive the reports did not often feel better informed. Despite La Retraite's claim that translation into Greek was offered, not one of our eight Greek-speaking respondents from this school had received such special provision. Several relied on siblings to translate: 'I didn't understand actually but I ask my boy, he's 15, or my girl, and she's explain to me, you know, what she say'. (Mrs Pagoni, LR). But this could create difficulties, eg:

> You can't always guarantee that whoever's translating to you will get it right anyway, especially if it's younger children … I'm fortunate in that I've got a daughter who has lived in Greece for sometime so she can translate, an older daughter … but some of the detail gets lost. (Mrs Gravani, LR)

> Well of course it would be better if it was translated because I could understand it first hand rather than depending on another person's interpretation. (Mrs Ekoutsidou, LR)

So that while most had developed strategies for translating the content, the success of these was variable and depended on the availability and expertise of other family members.

Teacher expectations

Much of the confusion in the reports seems to arise from the way in which teachers reported actual performance in terms of expected performance. For instance, at Newton Technology College, the Academic Director gave the following example of how he might present students' achievements:

> The sort of wording was very brief and the column of data which showed lowest score, highest score, year average and year trial score and then the comment we put was something like 'For

John, a score of 36% is what we would have expected of him at this stage'... A bright one might get 85% and that's up at the top end and we would have said 'Well Jane could have done better although it's a good mark, we do expect to get more from her' ... just a brief comment to give some flavour to our interpretation of that mark.

One student has scored more than twice as highly as another, yet is exhorted to do better, while the lower scoring student is deemed to have 'satisfactory progress'. Clearly, parents want teachers' evaluations of their students, but they also want to be able to make their own interpretations of what they feel would count as satisfactory progress:

I am concerned obviously when they say things like 'She could do better', that sort of thing. I mean this sort of thing 'Kathryn's worked quite well in her work presented over the year, she's making satisfactory progress'. I mean, I know a lot of people would be happy with that but satisfactory progress is a very broad term, isn't it? ... I think sometimes the terms can be quite ambiguous, can't they? They can mean an awful lot of things to an awful lot of people. (Mrs Brent, NTC)

While teacher assessments may 'contextualise' performance, their interpretations reveal limited expectations of potential that can be both misleading and/or frustrating for parents who wish to challenge their judgements. They valued professional assessments, but wanted to make their own judgements: 'We think it's too much a teacher's opinion, although that's important, it's too generalised' (Mr Armstrong, GW).

It is also the case, as much research has shown, that teacher expectations are not always sound. Their various interpretations of what counted as 'satisfactory progress' created problems for parents of children of all levels of academic ability. For those who were doing well, there seemed to be little attention to specific weaknesses, eg:

And also I think that the teachers' expectations and standards are maybe functioning at a different level from what I would expect. I think perhaps she probably is a model student. She's keen, she's enthusiastic, she's bright and she's comparatively articulate, so I think it's very easy for them to like her and respond well to her, so you know if there is any area in which she is under performing it probably isn't being picked up. (Mrs Rideout, NTC)

Parents also felt that the needs of the 'middle of the road' students were not identified eg:

If you've got a child who's excelling or a child who's doing particularly badly, they're both ends of the figure of ability and performance and it's easy to reflect those within that report but it's the middle ground which I would find difficult I think. (Mr Mace, NTC)

While, as already mentioned, those whose children had special needs often felt that they were being overprotected. A common feeling was that problems were just glossed over giving the impression of complacency. As one Greek mother complained: 'In this country they say just carry on, doesn't matter if they fail or not, just carry on'. (Mrs Bonal, LR).

Comparative data

These are some of the reasons why nearly all the parents we spoke wanted clearer and more precise comparative information about attainment than that provided at the end of Key Stage 3. This was particularly strongly felt by parents from Greenwood where they got the least standardised reports:

If you know that he's got an A, B or C, that's easier than knowing whether he has got or whether the individual pupils got say a 49% or something because you don't know how that compares to the rest of the class anyway. So it seems a bit irrelevant. (Mr Armstrong, GW)

... at least you'd have some idea of where they are in the school, whereas ... you don't know whether they're top of the class, bottom ... where they need extra areas of help is where I look at it. (Mrs Egerton, GW)

I like to see how she has done ... to know how she is within the group. Not just, obviously, how she has done, what level she is within the class. (Mrs Lotki, GW)

Targets

Connected with obtaining a clearer picture of their children's attainments relative to others, all of the parents we spoke with were keen that schools set out targets that they could help their children achieve. Schools provided targets in different ways. La Retraite was the only one to include them in their reports, and parents appreciated this. They were often rather vague - as is evident from those given in the sample report in Chapter 3. In Greenwood, targets were entered in a 'journal', but this seemed to have little relation with the report, and again, the targets were often imprecise: 'In general it's not individual ... it's always the same - I could work harder' (Mr Hector, GW). As one parent said, outlining clear and achievable targets will require teachers to be far more open and candid with parents, eg:

I find teachers a bit possessive ... about their role and I feel quite strongly that, with a job, particularly with special needs then its appropriate support, that's all. I don't want to be working against them or confusing Rachel ... just anything that they might feel could benefit her that I could do, what we can do, Rachel and I can do, because what that would indicate to me was that they cared in a way. (Mrs Walters, HP)

Hyslop Place parents in particular felt that including targets in the reports would give them some sense of direction:

It would give us a way of saying as a parent what we would like him to do. (Mrs Brady, HP).

The report could have pointed out what could be done next. Only one of her subjects said how she needs to progress. Targets would be good to focus on. They would back up our own views of what she needs to do. (Mrs White, HP)

I want to know the areas she needs to improve, her achievements and does she work hard? (Mr Collins, HP)

In addition, if target-setting and monitoring are to be effective tools for involving parents and raising achievement, schools will have to consider moving away from the dominant model of providing the main report, especially if it is the only report, at the end of the school year.

Omissions

There was also some evidence that reporting on the National Curriculum had squeezed out other issues. Parents, particularly of children with special educational needs, wanted more coverage on social and personal aspects, eg:

I'm looking for the complete picture. I'm looking for the emotional and academic stability of the child. (Mrs Walters, HP)

I think you want to sort of find out exactly how they are doing and don't know, I suppose how they sort of fit in with the school because that's important, sort of social, social sort of thing. (Mrs Chesham, GW)

Several parents reported that incidents had occurred of which they were uninformed:

Grace being a young girl there was problems with friends to start with and that wasn't mentioned in the reports, which really should have been. It's only obviously with Grace coming home upset or other friends have had problems ... it doesn't really show behaviour, it's only work. (Mrs Lotki, GW)

Although school reports cannot identify other students, a few parents felt that information on crises within classes would provide useful background information to help them understand what was going on at school and what had been upsetting their children, eg:

> Basically we knew that, say, there were some elements in the class which were not helpful but we never knew it was reaching the crisis it reached, there was no communication at all to us. (Mrs Hector, GW)

For some parents, these issues can be the most important. Parents of children with special educational needs often make decisions about where they are best placed on social grounds and need feedback on these issues as much as academic ones. In addition, for parents recently arrived in Britain, their main concerns are about how their children are settling in and whether they are experiencing racism and bullying. These anxieties can continue within second and third generations of migrant communities. As an interpreter who liaised between the Moroccan community and Hyslop Place School commented, 'for many parents, they just want to know their child is not being beaten up every day'.

5: Parents and Parents' Evenings

At secondary school, parents' evenings frequently provide the only formal opportunity for parents to come and talk with their children's teachers. They were therefore seen as crucial encounters. Parents felt they were important on a number of fronts. One of these simply related to being able to put a face to a name. Without these occasions 'you wouldn't know them if you passed them in the street. You wouldn't know what they looked like' (Mrs Armstrong, GW). Another was to underscore the child's presence: ' to introduce her to them by me being there, saying I'm her mother, I want you to know who Rachel is' (Mrs Walters, HP). Or to observe relationships: 'you can watch the interaction between your child and the teacher' (Mrs Henshaw, HP). A few parents commented on the social aspects of these occasions: 'It's a family affair. It's great fun. I like to meet friends who I was at school with' (Mrs Brady, HP).

Only three of our sample of parents had not attended recent parents' evenings, in one instance because they had not been informed of it. However, despite their importance, parents were almost universally critical about these occasions as a means of finding out what they needed to know, let alone acting as a forum for working together to improve their children's educational progress.

Frequency

As we saw in Chapter 3, each of our case study schools held parents' evenings on an annual basis for most years and the overall opinion was that this was insufficient, even where schools sent out frequent written reports. Especially when parents' evenings were held at the end of the year, parents felt that it was too little, too late, eg:

> It would be helpful to see the teachers earlier in the year, as they start back in September, about the Christmas time, rather than waiting right through to the next June because if you've got any queries about that school year the year's finished then and you know they're going into some holiday and then a new year and it's a bit irrelevant to have that meeting that late in the year. (Mrs Meaker, NTC)

> Two weeks before the end of the summer term, its pathetic! She's had that teacher and it's finished. Parents' evening is about building a relationship with a teacher which is going to continue. I'm interested in meeting next year's teachers ... If you can establish a little personal relationship then it is more of a partnership. (Mrs White, HP)

Form

While timing and frequency are important, the main issues arose from the structure of the events. It is hard to think of an ideal way in which several hundred parents can meet and discuss progress with all their children's teachers over a few hours, and each of our schools had experimented with a number of different formats. As we saw in Chapter 3, Hyslop Park and La Retraite conducted the traditional 'free for all' parents' evenings where parents try and see as many teachers as they can. Newton Technology College had limited the number of teachers parents could speak with to six. Greenwood had gone even further and used the form tutor as the sole contact between parents and their children's teachers. None of these formats appeared to be particularly successful.

The traditional 'free for all' format was seen to be unsatisfactory. One parent described it as an 'horrendous experience' (Mrs White, HP). Another commented on how parents spent most of the evening waiting and jostling to see teachers:

> I find it a bit chaotic actually. It's too much, everybody's pushing to get to be the next one to sit down and the teachers … It's not on a personal basis, more like being pushed into a room, shoved into a room and next one, next one, next one kind of thing you know … like a conveyor belt … because people are pushing to get in, there's no order on who you see, just going around and you're sort of waiting on the edge of your chair to get there before the other one gets in. It's like a rugby match. (Mrs O'Brien, LR)

> I've found that I was agitated because I felt I was going to be late for the next teacher, so you're not totally listening and then you forget to ask questions. (Mrs Priest, HP).

Although one might anticipate that the more structured approach of Newton Technology College would do away with the scramble to see teachers, parents found that the restriction on the number of teachers they could see was unsatisfactory - particularly when, as in Year 9, decisions had to be made about GCSE options:

> I mean they limit the subjects as it is to either 5 or 6, so you can't see everybody and sometimes it's difficult to choose out of all the subjects … because you just don't know which ones to pick … he was so mind boggled by it, that was really difficult and we could have done then with more time to have spoken to different people about the different subjects and what it involved. (Mrs Chandler, NTC)

The buzzer system that Newton Technology College had devised to make the evening run more smoothly was not seen to be particularly helpful, eg:

> … well you don't just stop if you're in the middle and they never ever run to time and I think it's worse in a way because you hear the buzzer twice sometimes. If you're waiting outside and somebody's in there and the buzzers gone twice you think oh gosh and my appointment with the next one's … because you're worried that you're missing an appointment with someone else so you don't say what you should be saying to the teacher in front of you because you're looking at your sheet and thinking well I should be with the English teacher now. (Mrs Winter, NTC)

> Oh yes, it's horrendous and the teachers don't stick to it, and how can they, you know it would be just so conflictual, I mean, they've now got the system of sounding the buzzer but everyone ignores it … Fairly irritating and you tend to blame the teachers for not actually controlling it but why should they they've probably done enough control that day. (Mrs Rideout, NTC)

While Greenwood's system of seeing only the tutor might alleviate some of these difficulties, parents felt very unhappy about not being able to see the range of their children's subject teachers:

> They are a bit formal I think, you just go along and meet the tutor and I think now I would like to go along and meet the subject teachers, rather than just the tutor, because you don't get any … comments back from the other teachers unless there's a problem really I think. (Mrs George, GW)

> But this is the first opportunity we have had to speak to one of his teachers, you don't see the teachers unless the tutor is one of their teachers, so therefore you don't get to meet them … Invariably there's not time to go through most things and invariably the form teacher is not up on everything to know … you should be able to go in and sit with every member of staff. (Mr Armstrong, GW)

When specific subject-related difficulties arose, parents did not feel they were going to be able to sort anything out, eg:

> Malcolm has got into a bit of difficulty with spelling and it would be nice if you could … have a word with the teacher … But you don't feel you can say it. Always, every time we've been, she's

said 'We're behind time. I've got all these parents to see' and you feel you'd better not. (Mrs Upton, GW)

And even these restrictions didn't get over the problem of having to queue and curtail discussions because the next person was waiting:

I think we were behind somebody who was taking longer than they should and there was the deputy headmaster stood behind the couple like this to the teacher as if to say 'you've had your ten minutes, get out'. (Mrs Lotki, GW)

Despite these attempts to improve the situation, little seemed to have changed the experience of parents' evenings described over 15 years ago by (Nias 1981:92) as being 'a cross between a social security office, a doctor's surgery and King's Cross station':

… you've got into the dark car park, you've found your way through a strange school, you've got into a library perching on the end of the seat and there's always the odd teacher around you see and if you take any gathering of people … I mean you can't expect 150-200 parents to go through a small library in an evening without stepping on each other's toes and by that time you see any thinking person would think oh you know come on let's get on with it. Wrong frame of mind or whatever to sit in front of a teacher and to talk about important things … You see firstly you get this doctor's waiting room syndrome whereby you are sat there and they are very uncomfortable all sat there looking at their toes, it's an uncomfortable place. You have to remember that some of them went to that school and it was like it when they went there, it's like torture having to go back. And in doctors' waiting rooms how many conversations do you hear, not many. You get the one loud person, you'll get that in any group of people and they could be quite embarrassing at times. Nobody's listening but they all are. (Mr Armstrong, GW)

Content, Accessibility and Usefulness

Clearly the organisation of parents' evenings provides restrictions on the depth of discussions that can be held, but there are also issues about the purpose of these events. Rather than being a forum for dialogue, the majority of parents felt that it was more of a one way dissemination of knowledge, much of which confirmed or clarified what had been said in the school reports.

Absolutely appalling, stunningly badly organised. The worst one I went to I was moved to comment afterwards that I couldn't actually see the point of it at all because if it was to gain new information then it was entirely the wrong forum and if it was old information I mean why bother. (Mrs Rideout, NTC)

The first one I went to it seemed that in a very short space of time I spent with each teacher it seemed that all they did was totally to reiterate what was in the report. (Mrs Williams, NTC)

If these reports were largely along the lines of 'progress satisfactory', parents felt that there was little point in being there:

You turn up, sit down and get told 'well, there's nothing to talk about - no problems' (Mr Parker, NTC)

They're a bit of a waste of time. I go on every opportunity and they say 'yes, she's fine, she's fine, she's fine'. We queued up for that, three quarters of an hour - to see her head of year and he said 'Yes, she's fine. Cheerio.' (Mrs Price, LR)

And if there were real issues, then parents often felt that the discussions were not translated into meaningful strategies:

I feel when you come into the school here, you talk, talk, talk about this and that when you want to but you don't always, they listen, but you don't see the changes. It's like you're talking, but are they going to do anything to improve. (Mrs O'Brien, LR)

This feeling of 'not being listened to' was particularly pronounced among those parents who had little English:

> I get very frustrated. I can't, I may have a question to ask, I will ask my daughter and then the answer I'll get back, 'yeah she's doing fine' which isn't really what I want to know. So it is frustrating. (Mrs Gravani, LR)

As we saw in Chapter 3, La Retraite and Hyslop Place distribute the annual reports at parents' evenings. This gave parents little time to digest the information, and also meant that they were unprepared for discussions:

> I look for grades then sit down with a teacher and ask 'what does this mean?' (Mrs Brady, HP)

> It's not really a good venue for meeting people because people are sometimes hearing devastating things about their children and you see the whole gamut of human emotion from the kids that have got brilliant reports and their proud parents to the poor kid who's may be got no parents there at all and who's wandering around pretty aimlessly because they're not allowed to see the reports unless the parent has picked it up. (Mrs Jarvis, HP)

For EAL parents, handing out reports on parents' evenings would seem to be particularly unhelpful.

> So we don't get a chance to actually read it and then if we have any comments to make about it at the time we're there, which then again you have to go back if you don't agree with anything or if you're not sure or something you don't understand, because you can't always sit there all night when you've got like 15 teachers to see and spend each individual subject with them and say well what does that mean, what does that mean. (Mrs Tsanavari, LR)

> Last year, we didn't have enough time to read everything … Before I read anything, we went to the teachers, we couldn't sit and discuss about the problem. (Mrs Greene, HP)

That parents such as these need adequate time to prepare themselves for meetings with teachers is underscored by Kahin's (1998) research into the education of Somali children in Britain. It should also be noted that his research showed that these parents were far more likely to attend parents' evenings if the invitation was written in their home language.

As noted in Chapter 3, the schools argued that the availability of translators provided a useful resource for such parents enabling them to translate the reports when they received them. However, few of these parents used this facility anyway, preferring to bring with them friends or other family members, eg:

> I take someone with me who does interpret for me, my fourth daughter. Yes she goes every time … I prefer to take her with me because she can also pick up on what the teachers may say. Obviously it might be somewhat restricting on the teachers. (Mrs Gravani, LR)

Even when parents had received the report in advance, there were often unpleasant surprises:

> I thought they were quite good but then when I went to some of the parents' evenings and other people started discussing them it seemed that you had to read in-between the lines what they were actually saying. I think they were frightened to, not criticise the child, obviously they want to give them encouragement, but some parents felt that they weren't given the full facts really. (Mrs Storey, NTC)

> … if you looked at her results you'd think there wasn't a problem, you'd think oh this is lovely. Then when I actually went to see the teacher expecting them to be glowing about everything she was doing he said 'well she's all right but she's this and she's that, she's very disruptive and she is very opinionated' … all these things came out which weren't at all reflected in the report … I was so amazed as I came out. (Ms Parker, NTC)

The unexpected nature of these revelations may result from parents failing to 'read between the lines' of the school reports. The potential for contradictory messages is exacerbated in the case of children with statements of special educational needs where written and spoken procedures are set alongside the

procedures for the Annual Review. This duplicate line of communication can undermine the possibility of a coherent message to parents, In one instance, a meeting that had been pleasantly anticipated became something of an ordeal, eg:

> I felt almost beaten up … We were hit by all these negatives. (Mr Fisher, GW)

In cases where there are difficulties to be tackled, there is often a lack of privacy. This concern was shared by parents of children with or without special educational needs:

> So if something's being said then anyone actually could be listening, another child. (Mrs Walters, HP)

> It's not very confidential. It's in the library … You've got all these little sections so that whilst you're waiting to see the teacher you can listen to everybody' (Mrs Upton, GW)

> You are aware that other people are sat round waiting and may overhear what you've got to say. (Ms Charles, GW).

Parents of under-achieving and disruptive children can feel particularly disempowered in these encounters as confirmed by Parsons (1994) and Cohen & Hughes (1994). As we saw in Chapter 2, the parents of those with behaviour problems were the group most frequently identified by schools as being absent from parents' evenings. We also noted in Chapter 1, these parents were among the most reluctant to be interviewed and the two who we did eventually interview were the only respondents who did not want the conversation recorded. Another respondent whose son was deemed to be disruptive at school did come to parents' evening but avoided seeing her son's form tutor:

> I'm the first one to admit he's no angel … he can be difficult and I accepted her criticisms, but for years all she does is criticise him all the time. Doesn't give him any initiative to do anything because he knows he's just going to get criticised or get kicked out, so this was the first year I didn't want to go and see her … I get fed up with hearing from her all the time how bad he is. (Mrs Bartlett, HP)

Beresford and Hardie (1996) argue that one assumption that prevails among teachers is that it is parents who are to blame for students' problems - particularly when they are of a behavioural nature. If parents sense this, they are unlikely to feel welcome in school.

Another reason why the parent quoted above felt particularly strongly about not seeing her son's form tutor was because she always took her son with her and didn't want him to hear the teacher's negative attitude. The issue of whether children should accompany parents was one that was raised many times, and about which opinion was evenly divided. For all those who argued that these conversations would be more open without the children present, there were as many who claimed that their presence brought a range of benefits including being able to observe the teacher and child together, impressing on the teacher the identity of the child and providing a forum in which pupils could be involved in their own learning targets.

Despite the professional discourse of seeing parents as 'customers', 'clients' and 'partners', most of the parents did not feel they were taken seriously, or even welcomed, on these few occasions when they came to school to meet their children's teachers. Parents acknowledged that staff were under pressure, but still left feeling unsatisfied:

> I felt there was no eye contact and she had her spiel to say and she was going to say it and she wasn't really interested in what we had to say. Whether it was because she was aware that we were late on that one but we had gone up to her before and she was busy, whether she wanted to go but it seems that I had things that I wanted to say but she didn't seem to be terribly interested and didn't want to take it in. (Mr Storey, NTC)

To some extent this lack of reciprocity may reflect different perceptions of what parents' evenings are for. Bastiani (1989: 70-71) uses extracts from conversations held at parents' evenings to show how teachers appear to use the occasion to give a verbal report which makes parental inputs feel like interruptions.

Several parents felt the general level of organisation and attitude of the staff indicated how unimportant they were:

It was very badly organised and there was no apology made, and then it was 'well you lot can go now and I'll ring a bell in half an hour and you lot can come back'. That's just not good enough because as far as I can see we're their parents, I wouldn't call my customer 'you lot', I wouldn't expect the school to call me that ... It's only little things but if you put them all together, you come out of the school a little bit nonplussed ... It's like a cattle market really, it's a dreadful system. I don't know whether that's generally throughout schools but certainly Greenwood, it's probably always been that way, I think you become more and more offended by it the more you go. (Mr Armstrong, GW)

It's like a roundabout, like animals, everyone all pushed in and being pushed. I can't stand all that. (Mr Berrill, LR)

A cynical interpretation might suggest that parents' evenings are little more than exercises in impression management on the part of both school and parents. Schools present themselves as 'open' institutions and parents present themselves as the 'right' kind of parents:

The thing that we hate is for teachers to think ... that we don't really care. Trouble is you just don't get a chance at these parents' evenings to get our message over. Luckily you can get to know the form tutor, just to shake hands and I think the barrier is down virtually in a minute or two because you only get 5 minutes at the most. (Mrs Armstrong, GW)

And also I think it's good for the teachers to meet the parents and to try and find out what sort of family Kathryn comes from, the fact that we are concerned and supportive ... if you're lucky enough to make an impression on them of how you feel as a family, I think that can also reflect on how they handle different situations when they arise in the school. (Mrs Brent, NTC)

Beresford and Hardie (1996: 140) point out that teachers assume that parental interest can be measured by their physical presence in school: 'whether a parent attends a parents' evening is a definitive indication of general interest in their child's education'. Certainly, the parents we spoke with were aware that not attending would create the 'wrong' impression, even if they admitted that they got nothing out of the parents' evenings, eg:

You can't not do it because they think you're not interested. (Mrs Price, LR)

It seemed that if your child is behaving and doing reasonably well there was nothing much to be said and it was such a paraphernalia waiting in queues and just having a snatched few moments that I must admit I didn't go this time because of that ... I mean I am quite ashamed of myself actually having not gone afterwards, it made me feel more inclined to go next time. (Mrs Williams, NTC)

Making alternative arrangements

All our case study schools did offer the possibility of setting up alternative meetings for parents to see teachers if they were unable to attend or wanted to talk at greater length. However, for many parents, particularly those who felt less confident about coming to school, the idea of making 'special' arrangements was daunting:

I suppose having a parents' evening gives you an opportunity to go along without making any special effort really. I'm sure even without parents' evenings the teachers could still make themselves available for particular sessions but you might be less inclined to set something up, I would think ... I think for a lot of parents there would be, I mean I am sure there are some dedicated parents that are always going to make it fit to do what's right, whereas other people are less inclined to go out of their way. Like me who are concerned but not proactive. (Mrs Williams, NTC)

Parents, especially working class parents, were often unsure as to whether they could make separate arrangements, eg:

I don't know how I would stand there, I really don't. We have queried a subject on the parents' evening and we haven't heard anything back yet … I am not sure how we stand about asking to go in, it's not something I've done, I don't really know how to do it. (Mrs Graham, GW)

They have always said well we are an open school, do approach us. I haven't … if I felt I needed to I would. I haven't before so I don't know how they would take it or how they would deal with me, I don't know. (Mrs Lotki, GW)

The class-based dimension of parental interactions with schools is further demonstrated by Crozier's (1997) research in which she argues that working class parents rarely intervened and tended to do so only in non-academic spheres. In general, she claims, they were reactive rather than proactive in their relationship with their children's school.

It was particularly difficult for parents with little or no English to make special arrangements as they could not use the phone or write a letter without help:

This is a problem with language, we're not able to phone the teachers. No point getting a third party to phone because you can't … for non-English-speaking parents it's far more difficult. (Mrs Gravani, LR)

Even when parents know how to go about arranging an appointment, they expressed reluctance for fear of making a 'nuisance' of themselves, eg:

You don't want to feel you're intruding on their time at school because it's got to be after school and I know they've got families as well, they have to go to their families too and you don't want to make it feel as if you're pestering them. (Mrs Hector, GW)

I don't feel that - I'm not saying the college is a place that's unapproachable and I'm sure if you rang up and made an appointment and if I did it perhaps just the once, I would be, all my anxieties would be relieved, but I feel that making an appointment to talk about something in particular is a bit like making a fuss, do you know what I mean? Making a mountain out of a molehill … I don't feel very inclined to make special appointments to go and talk to people and bother them. (Mrs Brent, NTC)

The children themselves were often particularly reluctant for their parents to make special arrangements:

I said to her I'm going to have to go up and talk to somebody about this because I'm really concerned and she was frantic you see because going up and making a special appointment is making a fuss. (Mrs Brent, NTC)

Some parents also felt that there was resistance from the school to make additional appointments:

We've always been told that [we can make further appointments] but if you try and ring up to get hold of someone, that secretary is worse than a doctor's secretary. It's very difficult. (Mr Armstrong, GW)

Just how difficult it can be is illustrated by the following account from one parent who tried to query a grade with which she was unhappy:

I tried really hard. I try really hard get in touch with his teacher and see what's the problem, why he's got four, four, four because everybody else gave him a good mark for his behaviour, good mark for his work, good mark for his being very, got always his pen … I phoned and phoned and phoned and … I really lost my temper on the phone. I said this is disgusting to the secretaries, 'I'm very sorry, it's not your fault but I'm getting fed up with this', it's three weeks. I don't know how many times I phoned to get in touch. I want to get in touch with a teacher easily. And OK, I can't write English very well, I have to find my husband, 'can you come and please write for me and all that or find somebody'. I can speak English, I can read, my writing's not very good so the easy way for me, phone and make arrangement or appointment and lunch time you can't get in touch with them they are in lunch … I said 'please it's not a complaint about them' … still I'm sitting here. I don't understand why they don't get in touch with me. (Mrs Green, HP)

In discussing the problems of contact with schools, it is interesting to note the contrasting experience of those ethnic minority parents who sent their children to supplementary schools in the evening and at weekends. As mentioned in Chapter 4, they saw their relationship with these as being much more productive, despite the lack of formal regulations covering home-school reporting and parent consultations. In part, this relates to language:

> I go in every Saturday you know when I'm going with kids down there and because it's my language, I talk to them all the time and they tell me what is going on here. (Mrs Pagoni, LR)

But the schools also had a more 'open' atmosphere reminiscent of primary schools that meant that parents felt free to talk to teachers without feeling they were making a nuisance of themselves:

> We can chat to them any day, any time. (Mrs Agorogianni, LR)

> I no wait for the teachers to ask me to go there, I'm going to them. So I don't like to wait and see the end of the year what's happening because they need the help, if they need extra help, how am I going to know if I don't ask? (Mrs Giaka, LR)

That the difference is not entirely related to language is illustrated by the following English-speaking parent who uses a supplementary school:

> I communicate better with the Greek school in Greek than I do in the English ... I suppose we think alike on the discipline of our children ... We get personal ... we go individually into the classrooms. We have a parents' day and they let you know what's going on ... Any time you want to see a teacher, you can go any time, even in the break. And the thing is you can express your feelings without upsetting a teacher ... You start speaking your mind here [at La Retraite] and you're a trouble maker. (Mrs O'Brien, LR)

6: Bridging the Gap between Parents and Teachers ?

This report has provided two broad perspectives on home-school reporting procedures that give contrasting pictures of the difficulties confronting effective communication about pupil progress. The survey revealed that many schools are doing more than is legally required of them. The majority send out more than one report a year and include more information than is formally necessary. The survey also revealed the difficulties schools face in their reporting procedures from both 'above' and 'below' as they are progressively squeezed between the demands of central government agencies and the new entitlements of parents. In relation to the latter, many report that the problem is not so much over-involvement as lack of contact, particularly from those groups of parents that are perhaps most in need of a close working relationship. The accounts of the four case study schools show some of the strategies that schools are putting in place to cope with these various needs. All of the staff with whom we spoke were aware of the need for involving parents as 'partners' and often referred positively to the new discourse of 'client' and 'consumer' responsiveness. Each of the schools had also undertaken some form of review and reform of their reporting procedures in order to facilitate better communication between home and school.

Subsequent chapters presented parents' experiences of these procedures. Their accounts paint a very different picture from that presented by the schools. Although many acknowledged the efforts made by schools, there were widespread concerns about both written and oral reporting. In relation to school reports, parents often found them confusing or over-generalised. Even when information was understood, few felt that they provided sufficiently detailed guidelines to enable them to act as partners in the education of their children. In relation to parents' evenings, parents found these particularly unsatisfactory, reflecting little of the client and consumer responsiveness to which the schools referred. Despite the new legislation and the efforts of the case study schools, the overall situation seems to be little different from that outlined by Goacher and Reid (1983) fifteen years ago.

In trying to explain this apparent lack of progress, there is a danger in taking sides and seeing one party as the victim of the other. On the one hand, schools can be seen as the victims of central government imperatives and the indifference of parents. On the other hand, parents can be seen as the marginalised victims of professional high-handedness and organisational incompetence. However, such a polarisation of positions is not only empirically suspect and analytically unsound, it also creates added difficulties when trying to bridge the gap between teachers and parents.

The difficulties each faces in trying to establish useful and meaningful dialogue are real. Schools *are* confronted by a wide array of multiple demands in a context of stretched resources. Dealing with parents' individual concerns adds yet another burden. Parents are *not* always forthcoming, and reaching some can be extremely difficult. Establishing contact and consent with those parents who had little English or whose children had special educational needs presented us with considerable difficulties in the course of this research. And it is most probable that those who are absent partners in home-school relationships are also largely absent in this study.

Similarly, the problems that parents experience are not imaginary. Their expectations of what they hope to gain from school reports appear neither unreasonable nor unrealisable. The sense of frustration, and often humiliation, of consultations with teachers is also genuinely felt. For some parents, notably working class parents and those with little or no English, school remains 'another country' with its inscrutable professional discourse.

The survey showed that those schools where perhaps most liaison with parents was needed, were those that tended to send out fewer reports to parents. But just as we should not interpret non-involvement by parents as lack of interest, neither should be we presume that the teachers in these schools are less concerned than other teachers. In order to understand how it is that the gap that appears to exist between professional practice and parents' needs it is necessary to move beyond simplistic attributions of blame and look at the systemic and structural factors that impede communication.

It is often claimed that parents are disadvantaged in their relationships because of the greater status invested in professional power. Macbeth (1989), for instance, argues that 'like a server in tennis, the teacher has the advantage': parents are visitors to the teacher's territory; the teacher holds the 'power props' and acts as a powerful gatekeeper to privileged information. There are however a number of dimensions to this that need teasing out. One concerns the very nature of professionalism, that by definition embodies a notion of expert knowledge. This is a relational property that means that parents and teachers will never be 'equal partners' in dialogue. It also needs to be recognised that they have different responsibilities and interests. As Beresford and Hardie (1996: 150) point out 'By their nature parents and schools have a different orientation - one towards their individual child and the other towards the whole establishment'. Because of this it is not possible for teachers to give parents everything they would ideally like. As some of our parents recognised: 'No piece of paper however it is organised would tell you everything you wanted to know'; 'They're never going to make us happy, not 100%.'

It also needs to be recognised that teachers have interests in limiting the demands that are made on them. Teachers' associations have recently voted for reductions to their current workload, particularly to what they see as 'unnecessary bureaucracy' which seems to include disseminating information to parents (*Times Educational Supplement*, 10/4/98 p7). The National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT), for instance, requires that teachers limit any document to 400 words, including pupil reports, which should be restricted to one per year. Professional interests and parental requirements are clearly out of step here.

There are also other aspects of professional practice that impede effective communication and useful liaison between teachers and parents. The class and cultural attributes of teachers set them apart from those who are 'different', particularly working class and ethnic minority parents, and closer to middle class parents. Crozier's (1997: 196) study showed that 'relationships thrived particularly well where parents' views of education and the needs of the child matched those of the teachers'. She also argued that there is a class basis to different conceptions of partnership, in that working class parents were happy to let the professionals 'do the job' whereas middle class parents were more interventionist. We found little evidence of this. Our working class respondents may have found intervening more difficult, but certainly wanted to be more actively engaged than they currently were in helping their children learn. In general, our evidence suggests that the desire for greater participation was widespread but frustrated through lack of awareness and resources of time and money on the teachers' side and a sense of inadequacy from parents.

As we have seen, it seems unlikely that legislation can overcome these obstacles. As Bastiani (1996: 59) argues: 'Singly, or together, government legislation or administrative requirements do *not* offer either an adequate or credible version of how things might be, or a satisfactory basis for the planning of a school's work with its parents.' Meeting legal requirements, giving parents mountains of written information, being available to talk about pupil progress and having high attendance at home-school events do not in themselves constitute good practice (Bastiani 1993).

It would seem more likely that the way forward is to develop extended forms of professionalism that recognise the limits as well as the strengths of teacher knowledge. Teachers need to take as their starting point the assumption that parents *are* concerned and interested in their children's education and that lack of involvement does not indicate lack of interest. Understanding lack of involvement means developing awareness of why it is that some parents find communicating with schools so difficult, unproductive, and even painful. Schools need to take a critical look at their existing arrangements. Part of this must involve reviewing procedures from the perspective of those who are *least* like the teachers themselves.

Teachers need to take seriously the ambitions and expectations that parents have for their children, and recognise that although they are the educational experts, parental knowledge about their individual child is

also valid. Walker (1996) argues that teachers are likely to complain that parental hopes for their children are often unrealistic. Perhaps this is why teachers are so reluctant to make explicit their own evaluations of student ability. But parents found this lack of explicitness about their children's actual level of attainment very frustrating. Teachers' interpretation of performance in terms of their own expectations left parents confused about just how well their children were doing. Teacher expectations seemed to be lower than those of parents, and, while parents may be over-ambitious for their children, it is also the case that professional evaluations can be incorrect. In relation to working class and ethnic minority pupils, it has been shown that teachers tend to under-estimate ability. Parents need to know what these estimates are either to address or to challenge them.

However, exhorting teachers to change their perceptions of parents is unlikely to effect change unless there are mechanisms to achieve this and resources in place to support them. Some of these resources are more readily available than others. There are, for instance, a number of publications outlining strategies and models of good practice that will extend professional awareness and provide practical recommendations, but the uptake of these is limited and intermittent: '... few schools seem yet to have developed effective mechanisms and ways of working that enable this to grow and be consolidated on a school-wide basis. So existing work remains patchy, uneven and sometimes, as far as parents are concerned, infuriatingly inconsistent' (Bastiani 1996: 67-68).

Local education authorities may have a crucial role to play in developing policies and co-ordinating practice (Morgan 1996). It is, as Bastiani (1996) points out, paradoxical that at the same time as government policies were promoting the importance of 'parent power', the agencies that had done so much to facilitate home-school work were undergoing swingeing cuts. But, while much of LEAs' capacity to co-ordinate across schools has been eroded over the last ten years, there are signs that they will be given a greater role in the future (DfEE 1997b).

Change may also be effected through various parent organisations. The Campaign for State Education (CASE 1996) has campaigned to promote awareness of rights and encouraging participation on individual and collective fronts. The Advisory Centre for Education (ACE 1997) has also argued that parents work collectively through governing bodies. But there are also signs that voluntary sector organisations working outside schools are becoming involved. The Citizen Organising Foundation (COF 1998), for instance, operates in a number of areas in the country and has put in place paid organisers to work across schools within a locality. Their task is to 'identify, train and nurture leaders from among parents, teachers and other sections of the local society' with a view to improving standards of achievement through giving parents a more direct involvement in their children's education.

Schools may be able to work with these networks in order to share the load. Certainly in relation to ethnic minority parents, especially those with little or no English, schools need to help develop and tap into bilingual support networks (Kahin 1998). It may also be that greater use of community settings for parent-teacher consultations may encourage attendance from parents who feel reluctant to come to school (Beresford and Hardie 1996).

But even these strategies are unlikely to bring improvements unless schools are clear about the purposes of home-school reporting. Schools need to know not just the overall aim of the home-school reporting policies, but be clear about the agenda of each individual encounter. Is the primary purpose of reports to inform or to involve? Are they summative or diagnostic? Are parent-consultations about resolving worries or developing joint strategies? Unless these questions have been addressed it is hard to see how meaningful dialogue can be established.

7: Recommendations

Many of the difficulties recounted in this report are connected with home-school relationships in general, and there are already many well-informed recommendations on how schools and other agencies can improve practice (Bastiani 1989; Alexander et al 1995; Bastiani and Wolfendale 1996; Bastiani 1997). However, in relation to school reporting in particular, and on the basis of this research, we suggest the following courses of action.

On a national level

- The findings of this research indicate that *existing legislation on home-school reporting should be reviewed.*

- We would recommend that *information on the system of home-school reporting, outlining the expected frequency, timing and format of school reports and parent consultations, should be included in the prospectus given to parents when their children start school.* In addition, expected reporting procedures may usefully be included as part of the proposed home-school agreement (DfEE 1997b).

- In general, the form, content and tone of communications appear to be as important as their frequency. Nevertheless, we would recommend that *schools be required to provide written reports to parents about pupil progress twice each school year.*

- In terms of content, it is worth looking to Scotland where more detailed guidelines advise not only two annual reports (one long report during the year and a brief update) but also recommend 'Next Steps' - practical ways in which parents can help their children (SOED 1992). Given parental support for such advice, we suggest that *the inclusion of targets in written reports be recommended at a national level.*

- There are a number of often isolated initiatives in home-school liaison that need to be further explored and disseminated. In terms of resources, we recommend that central government *invest funds in LEAs and voluntary sector organisations for the development of new and existing home-school projects.*

- Any review of the legislation of home-school reporting also needs to involve extending professional awareness of its importance and difficulties. We recommend that *greater priority be placed on issues surrounding home-school reporting in initial and continuing teacher education.* This may involve specific training regarding communication and listening skills.

On a local level

- In general, LEAs do not seem to play an important role in helping schools with their home-school reporting. We would endorse Morgan's (1996) view that *LEAs should develop well worked out policies that both guide and assist schools.*

- One of the findings from the survey was that the most academically able students (those in 6th forms and in grammar schools) appear to receive more feedback than others. One way of ensuring greater consistency across schools is for *LEAs to monitor the frequency of reporting within local schools and help under-reporting schools increase the quantity and quality of feedback given.*

- The LEA is also well placed to act as an intermediary between schools in order to *disseminate models of good practice.*

- LEAs are also better placed to co-ordinate or offer special provisions that are beyond the means of individual schools. An obvious area in which they can help schools is by *providing more interpreters and translation facilities.*

- In addition, we recommend that *LEAs play a greater role in helping schools liaise with voluntary sector organisations and community networks.*

On a school level

Written reporting

- Although schools appear to be fulfilling their legal obligations and responding to the new climate of parental accountability, we recommend that *governing bodies undertake a critical review of current arrangements that actively seeks out the experiences of diverse groups of parents in the school community.*

- The need for schools to provide information that is comprehensive, clear and consistent has been widely extolled (eg Alexander et al 1995), but there are a number of aspects that need particular attention. Specifically, we recommend that *teachers make a clear distinction between grades achieved relative to contemporaries and professional interpretations of individual attainments.*

- Despite teachers' concerns about the demotivating effects of negative comments, there seems little to be gained from giving parents' false impressions of their children's achievements at school. We recommend that *teachers move away from using reports as a means of positive reinforcement at the expense of honesty.*

- We have already suggested that schools provide targets in reports, but care needs to be taken to ensure that these are useful. In this respect, we recommend that *schools devise 'SMART' targets (DfEE 1997c); ie, ones that are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-related.*

- If even 'SMART' targets are to be useful, the current cycle of reporting may need to be altered. We recommend that *the development and reporting of targets be timed to follow closely the collection of teacher forecasts during the autumn term (DfEE 1997c), with feedback on progress provided later on in the school year.*

- It is important that information concerning pupils' social and emotional life at school is not squeezed out of the report by the increasing volume of curriculum details. We recommend that *subject reports always include brief information regarding pupils' social well-being.*

- In terms of special provisions, although we recognise that it will not be possible for schools to translate reports into all the home languages found in some schools, more could be done than it currently is. Future developments in computer-generated systems need to be explored. Although translation facilities are not yet widely available, the technology does exist and may become a feature of commercially produced systems in the future. In the meantime, we would recommend that where reports cannot be translated, *schools should send letters informing parents of the dates of reports and parent-consultations in the parent's home language.*

- It is also important that *schools record details on parents that will facilitate contact.* In addition to the information that parents already give schools, schools need to ascertain home language, preferred mode of contact, the identity of intermediaries who can be contacted, and any other special provisions they may need to help them liaise with the school. Particular care needs to be taken to ensure that the parents of children arriving during the school year are included in any such procedure.

Parent-teacher consultations

- As Beresford and Hardie (1996) argue, attendance at parents' evenings is only one measure of participation and perhaps not the most fruitful, however it does provide a useful indicator. We would therefore recommend that *schools put in place procedures to monitor attendance at parents' evenings.*

- In terms of improving attendance, there are a number of strategies that can be developed. However, one which seems to be unhelpful in the long run is encouraging parents to attend in order to pick up their children's reports. We recommend *the practice of distributing reports at parents' evenings be discontinued.*

- Particular care needs to be taken to ensure that parents of children with special educational needs receive a coherent account of their child's progress. We recommend that *communication between special educational needs co-ordinators, form tutors and subject staff takes place prior to parents' evenings.*

- The issue of non-attendance at parents' evenings has been raised by many schools, and it is unlikely to be resolved through any single strategy. There have been suggestions that greater use of video and audio facilities, and home visiting, might facilitate involvement, but each of these create difficulties and are likely to meet with varying success. Ways of increasing parent participation need to be worked out at a school level, and we therefore *recommend that strategies be developed and trialled as part of the critical review of overall reporting procedures advocated earlier.*

- There seems to be little point in bolstering attendance, if the quality of the exchanges is unsatisfactory. It is in this area that we think the most radical reworking needs to take place. We recommend that *parent-teacher consultations be moved towards the start of the year wherever possible and used to clarify the year's plans and set targets with the parents.*

- Unfortunately, but inevitably, there is no way that this can be done productively without increasing the amount of time for teachers. We recommend that *annual parent teacher consultations be spread over two consecutive nights for each year group or, perhaps ideally, undertaken in the daytime, either at a weekend or during half-term.*

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