

Experiences of Ethnic Minority Parents Representation

KEY FINDINGS

- 84% of parents said that they had never served on a Parent Council
- 55% of the parents who had not served on a Parent Council expressed interest but felt that at present they would not be able to get involved citing barriers including time, child care and language
- Many of the parents had not experienced parental representation in their home country, with several stating that there was very little contact between home and school
- 93% of respondents stated that they believed that parental involvement was important

REPRESENTATION

The right for parents' views to be taken into consideration is explicitly stated in the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006

The Act provides a framework for ensuring that parents have the opportunity to express their views and have these taken into account on matters affecting the education of their children, the school's arrangements for promoting parental involvement and other matters or issues of interest to parents. It makes provision for parents to be members of the Parent Forum at a school, and to have their views represented to the school, education authority and others, through a representative Parent Council for the school.

Parent Councils, in their role representing the views of parents in the school have considerable influence- including involvement with the recruitment of head teachers and the senior management team, developing policies and supporting the school during school

inspections. It is the role of the parent council to facilitate communication between parents and the school, raising concerns where appropriate and feeding back information to parents. The Gathered Together project was created following a survey by the Scottish Parent Teacher Council and Bemis Scotland into the levels of EM parental involvement in Parent Councils. The Scotland wide survey found that 77% of Parent Councils had no ethnic minority members and there was concern that this meant the views and issues that EM parents experience were not being represented in their children’s schools.

INVOLVEMENT IN THE PARENT COUNCIL

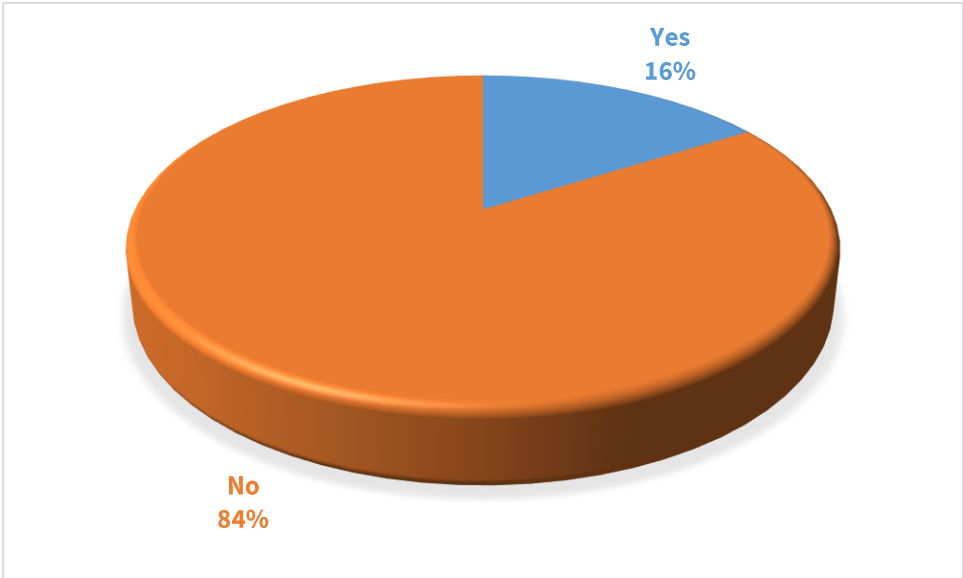


Figure 1: Have you ever served on a Parent Council? (Sample size: 160)

134 parents said that they had not served on a Parent Council, of the 26 parents who had 2 parents had been involved in their home country (both from Greece), 5 had attended for a short period of time.

Yes but just for few times as I started a course at college (Mother, Pakistan)

I have only been once but I did not understand so I left (Mother, Somalia)

2 of the respondents said that they did not attend but another member of their family had served on the PC

Not me, my husband did 2 years (Mother, Eritrea)

8 parents had been involved for less than a year, 4 had been involved for 2 years and 2 parents had been involved for over 5 years.

When asked if they would be willing to serve on a Parent Council 76 parents said that they would in willing to become a member, however almost all of them felt that it would not be possible for them to join at present. They identified time, language and childcare as key barriers

Yes, but I am too busy in my job and wouldn't probably have enough time for it” (Mother Poland)

Only if interpreters will be provided. That will help my communication between parents and school and other parents whom English is main language (Mother, Iraq)

I wish to, only if I find a child care suitable during meetings and events” (Mother Libya)

65 parents said that they would not be willing to become a member. They identified similar barriers to involvement.

17 respondents identified language as a reason they would not want to be involved

No and I wouldn't be eager to join the council- partially because I do not like to talk in public and I feel my language skills are not the best. It makes me feel uncomfortable to speak in English in public” (Mother, Poland)

21 respondents stated that they were too busy, with work and child care commitments

No; too busy, no help with childcare, single parent” (Mother, Gambia)

Rather not, I wouldn't be able to attend the meetings due to work commitments” (Mother, Poland)

Several respondents did not feel confident enough

No; too shy (Mother, UK)

No; I feel shy and husband may not like it (Mother, Pakistan)

Two parents stated simply that they did not want to

No; I don't want to! (Mother, Iran)

UNDERSTANDING OF THE VALUE OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

While the parents we interviewed were reluctant to become involved in the formal avenue to have their views and opinions heard 93% of the parents felt that parental involvement was important. Parents stated that working in partnership with the school was important and that it gave them the opportunity to understand how their child was progressing. Other parents spoke about the positive impact that parental involvement can have on children, showing that their parents value school.

Also for children it's very good to see that parents are involved in school- I feel it encourages my son to progress even better (Mother, Greece)

Yes, it allows parents to learn about child's progress, be part of the school life and your child can see that you are interested and involved (Mother, Poland)

Several parents also explicitly mentioned the value of their opinion and the benefits that their ideas could bring to the whole school

I believe parents would make a lot of improvement to the school by their valuable contribution (Mother, Malawi)

The school needs the parents' opinions (Mother, Pakistan)

In being asked about parental involvement several parents agreed that it was important but pointed to language and cultural barriers, stressing the importance that the right support is put in place to enable parents to become involved

Parents need to be provided with interpreters so that they can contribute, it is always the language barrier that stops parents taking part (Mother, Kuwait)

Yes, at least you get to speak about issues that your kids face, just have a say; but if you don't speak English how would you do this? (Both parents, Syria)

Another mother agreed that it was particularly important for parents from another culture to become involved as this would give them opportunities to find out how the education system works and ways to support your child, however it can be difficult to become involved when you feel like an outsider.

Yes- especially for foreigners who don't understand the system- need to find out. But as a foreigner you don't always feel comfortable to join in/ change things (Mother, Romania)

EXPERIENCES OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN HOME COUNTRY

Parental involvement and bodies like Parent Councils are not universal concepts. Parents who come from countries where there is very little parental involvement, or it takes a very different form, need to be given information about their rights as parents and what is expected of them by the school.

In the questionnaire we asked parents what the role parents had in their child's school- for many parents there was often very little contact between home and school

Once a year the school sends an invitation to the parents to attend meeting in school to receive information about our children progress (Mother, Iraq)

Parents have no role in the school back home. School doesn't allow parents to take part in anything. They are only called when there is trouble (Mother, Eritrea)

In some countries the parents play a much greater role in supporting their child's learning and parents take an active role in supporting their child with homework

Parents are very involved, especially with helping children with homework. But no Parent Councils, clubs in school. The system is very different (Mother, Bulgaria)

The school doesn't do much in terms of education, the responsibility is left with the parents to teach their children most work is done at home. Each class has more than 40 children (Mother, Bangladesh)

When asked to compare levels of involvement between their home country and Scotland 50% of the respondents felt that their level of involvement would be about the same.

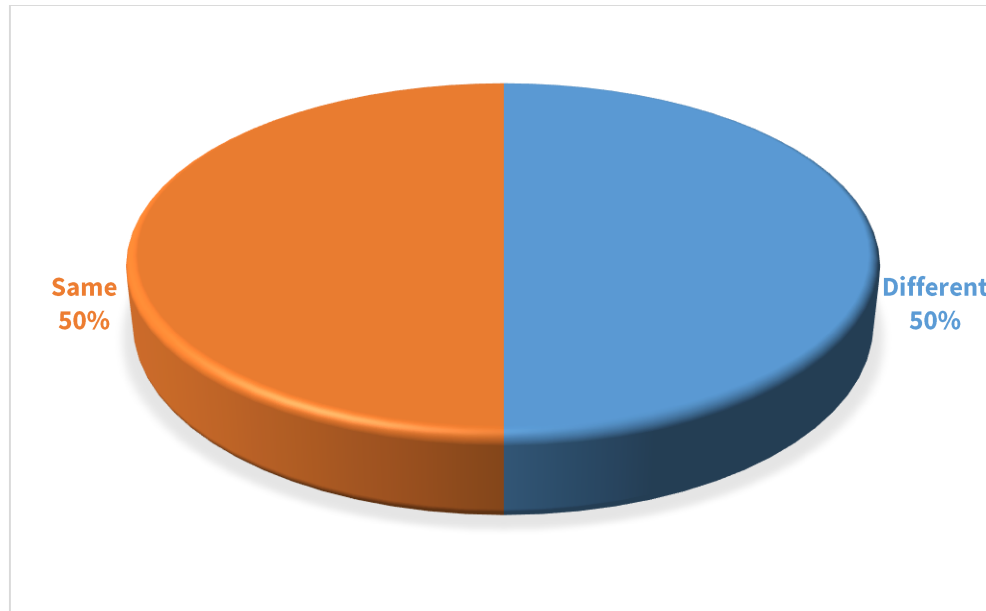


Figure 2: Do you think your involvement in your child's school would look different in your country of origin? (Sample size: 108)

Many parents, particularly those from Pakistan, felt that they would be more involved in their home country as there would not be the same linguistic and cultural barriers.

I think so—I would be more involved as I'd feel more confident to step in. Here I feel I have different values from most other people (Mother, Romania)

Other parents said that they felt they had the opportunity to express themselves and felt that they could work in partnership with the school

Of course there is no comparison. Here parents are important, in my country parents are looked at as the enemies of teachers. All always conflict between them (Mother, Algeria)

Here parents are more respected than where I come from, they can address concerns and their views are important (Mother, Afghanistan)

In all the parents' responses there were few references to representation and having their voice heard beyond individual issues relating to their children. There appears to be little awareness of their right to have their voice heard on issues at a wider level.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While the parents interviewed displayed a clear understanding of the importance of their involvement in their children's learning, there was far less knowledge of parents' right to

have their voice represented. When asked about participation in the Parent Council the majority of parents were either hesitant or unwilling to join, citing barriers including language, time and not having a sense of belonging to the school community.

When speaking to parents about their experiences of education in their home country it was evident that most have not had experiences of representation of their views within the school.

In light of the findings of this questionnaire we would make the following recommendations:

- Ensure that all parents, particularly those who are not from Scotland or have English as an additional language, are aware of the Parent Council in the school and the work that it does to represent parents. This should be embedded into the enrollment process so that all families starting at a school are aware of their rights to representation.
- Develop a clear simple guide to the Parent Council and the role of parental involvement in Scotland to be available in every school. Explore possibility of providing translated versions or having podcasts of the guide in key community languages.
- Engage with community organisations and groups supporting families to build their knowledge of the work of Parent Councils and the potential to use Parent Councils as an additional channel to raise concerns in the school.