

Achievement for All The Structured Conversation

Handbook to support training



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About this handbook

This booklet and the accompanying DVD are part of an overall package, which includes direct training, intended to equip teachers with the core skills necessary to conduct structured conversations with parents and carers of children and young people. The structured conversation is an essential aspect of Strand 2 of the Achievement for All project.

Further details of the structured conversation and the requirements of schools may be found in Strand 2 of the document *Achievement for All: Guidance for Schools*.

The booklet is intended to:

- a) provide guidance to teachers in the skills necessary to conduct a structured conversation (Part 1);
- b) provide a set of training exercises which will support cascaded training to other teachers (Part 2).

A number of useful exercises and handouts are contained in Part 3: Resources to support both practise of the skills and training.

Introduction

Why is there a need for the structured conversation within Achievement for All?

Achievement for All is a pioneering programme intended to support schools and local authorities (LAs) in providing the very best opportunities to ensure children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) fulfil their potential. The project makes support and resources available to bring together current strategies and initiatives established to drive up pupil progress and achievement that many schools and LAs already model as they focus on pupil outcomes rather than educational processes.

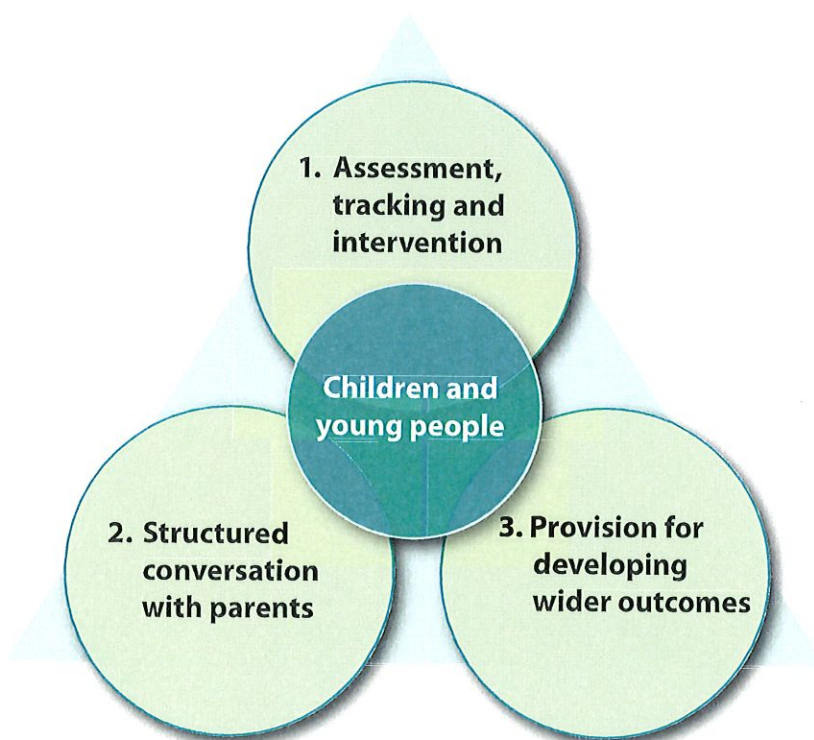
Achievement for All does not offer a single solution to the underachievement of children with SEND; rather the programme endeavours to discover and disseminate the best inclusive practice in improving outcomes for the most vulnerable learners.

One of the key aims of Achievement for All is:

To improve the engagement of parents of children and young people with SEND with their schools.

We want parents to become more engaged in their child's learning, have increased confidence in the education system and better relationships with their child's school.

Parental engagement is therefore at the heart of the strategy for Achievement for All. It is critical to the successful implementation of all three strands of the project (see diagram). There is a particular focus on parental engagement within Strand 2 through the development of the structured conversation.



The need for the structured conversation emerges from two key findings. In 2007 a study by Harris and Goodall¹ found that the engagement of parents with the process of their child's learning is critical to the child's achievement. There is a consistent relationship between increasing parental engagement (particularly of hard to reach parents) and improved attendance, behaviour and student achievement. The second finding arose from the Lamb Inquiry². The Chair of the Inquiry, Brian Lamb, reported to the Secretary of State in 2009: *'What has struck us quite forcibly is that it seems no one has had a discussion with parents about the outcomes they aspire to for their child.'*

Achievement for All is a programme designed to ensure the greater inclusion of all pupils with SEND. If the approach is working well, parents of SEND pupils will be actively engaged in their child's learning and achievement; SEND pupils will participate more fully in school and community life; they will narrow the gap in achievement between themselves and their peers and have a clearer idea of what will constitute good progress for them. The structured conversation is intended to support the greater engagement of parents by enabling them to make their contribution heard and understood by teachers and the wider school.

What is the structured conversation?

The purposes of the structured conversation are clear. These are to:

- establish an effective relationship between parent and the key teacher;
- allow the parent an opportunity to share their concerns and, together, agree their aspirations for their child;
- set clear goals and targets for learning and improvement in wider outcomes;
- determine activities which will contribute to the achievement of those targets;
- identify the responsibilities of the parent, the pupil and the school;
- agree the date and time of the next meeting;
- clarify the most effective means of communication between meetings.

Perhaps most importantly, the structured conversation should help to establish a wider school culture of listening to the thoughts and aspirations of parents of young people with SEND. In short: 'receiving' as well as 'transmitting' information.

If these purposes are achieved then parents should:

- feel more confident to engage with their child's school;
- be given opportunities to contribute to their child's learning, express their views and concerns and be confident they will be acted upon;
- develop appropriately challenging expectations of what their child can achieve.

Schools should:

- be more effective at listening to parents about their child's learning;
- provide better information to parents about their child's learning;
- use the outcomes of the conversation with parents and pupils to improve the learning and teaching for individual targeted pupils.

1. Engaging parents in Raising Achievement: Do parents know they matter? Harris and Goodall (2007)

2. Lamb Inquiry: Report to the Secretary of state on the Lamb Inquiry Review of SEN and Disability Information, Lamb (2009)

Although the purposes of the structured conversation are clear, it is useful to remember that there may be a number of obstacles to opening this line of communication, for example:

- parents may have personal reasons for finding it difficult to engage with the school and its teachers, not least being their own experience of school;
- parents may have lower expectations and aspirations for their child than does the school, and have little motivation to engage further;
- in many cases, the significant adult in a child's life may not be a parent, but a carer or a residential social worker for whom the notion of an engaging conversation may have less resonance;
- there is a considerable level of skill involved on the part of the teacher in conducting a purposeful conversation directed towards achieving several objectives. Some teachers will need support to develop these skills.

Part 1: Guide to the structured conversation

Introduction

The structured conversation as it is described here is intended to:

Facilitate a relationship that develops around the shared purpose of improving the educational achievement of young people with SEND; this will allow the free exchange of information and views; the evolution of supportive teaching and learning strategies and clarity of learning objectives.

An effective structured conversation requires that:

- both participants have some degree of motivation;
- both participants agree the parameters of the conversation that has been contracted;
- the physical context is conducive to an open dialogue.

As a minimum, participants must believe in the *possibility* of a better outcome than they have had before. The environment for the conversation should be reasonably comfortable, quiet and private. Although it may not be said explicitly, there should be a mutual awareness that unless otherwise specified, the contents of the conversation *that do not relate to the child and the child's welfare*, but are concerned with the parent's personal circumstances will remain confidential to the participants.

The conversation is intended to be a mechanism that, once established, will allow teacher and parent to build upon their understanding, share strategies, knowledge about the child, and knowledge about the curriculum and how progress through it is improved and assessed. In other words, to become genuinely collaborative in supporting the child's achievement.

The role of the key teacher

The structured conversations will be held between the parents and a key teacher. The key teacher is someone who has good knowledge and understanding of the child or young person. Critically, this should be someone who can influence provision arrangements and has regular contact with the child or young person and is aware of his or her needs, attainment and achievements. In most primary schools the class teacher would be the appropriate member of staff to meet with parents. In secondary schools it may be the form tutor or it could be, for example, a head of year.

The following guidance is intended to support the key teacher to develop the skills they will need in order to hold the structured conversation with parents.

Considerations for holding the structured conversation

Preparing for the meeting

The key teacher will need to prepare thoroughly for the structured conversation. They will need to gather information about the pupil's progress and gaps in their learning from other staff to add to their own knowledge of the child.

It is also important to gather the pupil's views. Where appropriate the pupil may also be part of this conversation, although this will be dependent upon age, maturity and level of understanding, and the expected length of the meeting. If not directly involved, there should be an opportunity for the child or young person to make their views known. Implementing strategies such as supporting the pupil to develop a pen portrait or 'passport' will provide a tangible focus for these discussions.

A suitable room to hold the structured conversation should be chosen in advance of the meeting. As far as is possible, it should be welcoming with the furniture arranged in such a way as to invite an open conversation and not make the parent feel intimidated. It is important that the room is private and quiet so that the conversation takes place uninterrupted. If an off-site venue is thought to be a more appropriate location to hold the conversation, the key teacher must be confident that all the above conditions are fulfilled.

The school will need to decide how the parents of pupils with identified SEND are to be informed about Achievement for All and their part in it. The key teacher is responsible for ensuring the parents fully understand the purpose and structure of the meeting, the location and the time that it will take place.

Negotiating a contract or agreement with parents

The contract is a verbal agreement between the parents and the teacher about the purpose and outcomes of the conversation.

For example: *'I'd like to find out as much as possible about Hannah and what you think we can do to help improve her maths. We have about 30 minutes. Is that okay with you?'* (Then pause and negotiate.)

Possible elements of the contract include:

- aims of the conversation;
- time available;
- arrangements following the conversation;
- confidentiality.

The advantages of negotiating a contract are numerous:

- the idea of a structured conversation may become less mysterious and threatening;
- the ground is cleared;
- a purposeful tone is set;
- if agreement is genuine both people are more likely to take part wholeheartedly;
- if you do not reach sufficient agreement, at least some time is saved.

It is very helpful if the key teacher is clear and concise about their own intentions and view of the conversation, listens very carefully and above all that genuine agreement is reached before proceeding.

There may be a significant gap between what the parents expect and what the key teacher may expect or can provide. Two parents may also of course not agree with each other about what is best for their child. It is important that the key teacher considers how they will give feedback to the parents throughout the conversation, particularly where there is a lack of common view (see Exercise 1 in Part 3: Resources on page 23).

Aims and confidentiality

The conversation with parents is not intended to be therapeutic or concerned explicitly with the adult's personal needs; it is specifically concerned with meeting the needs of the child as a learner. The purpose of the conversation is to raise the child's academic achievement and enhance their opportunities to achieve in a wider arena. The information and decisions that emerge must be available to school staff in order to support planning and practice. Nonetheless, no conversation is entirely predictable, and it may be that a parent will feel that some piece of personal information is necessary to assist in an understanding of the child's needs or their aspirations.

For example: 'I would have loved to go to university, but there wasn't enough money in the house when I was a teenager, and my parents didn't care enough about me to help out, but I swore that when I had kids of my own they would have the chance if they wanted it'.

Part of this is concerned with the parent's aspirations for his child and is relevant and appropriate for discussion with others. Part of it is concerned with thwarted personal ambitions – and is not appropriate for discussion with others.

Frequency of meeting

It is anticipated that there will be up to three structured conversations with parents during the course of a year. It will be useful to clarify this expectation at the first meeting. Since these meetings will be longer than most teacher–parent meetings, it will also be helpful to discuss at which meetings the child will be present, and whether for all or part only.

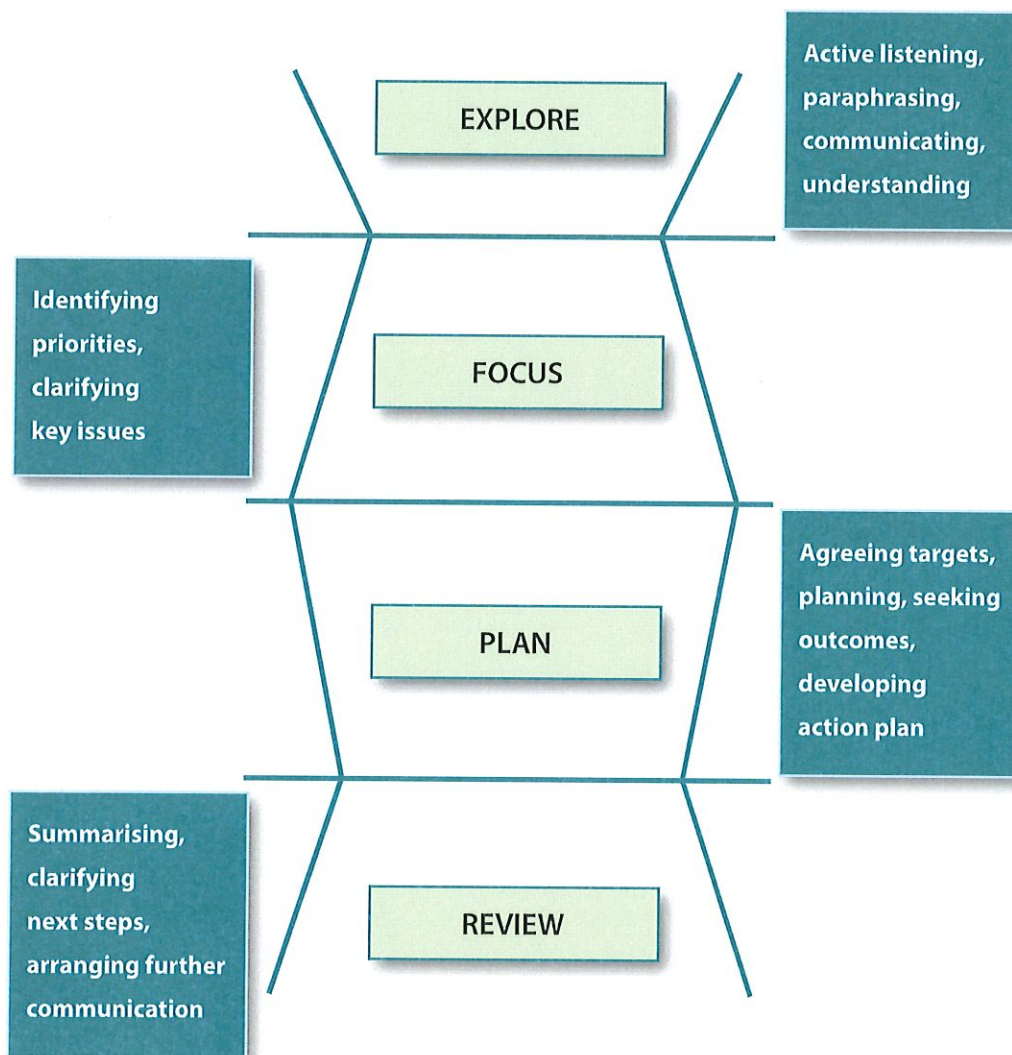
As far as possible, meetings should be aligned to the normal cycle for discussions with parents of all children but should also allow opportunities for parents to initiate a conversation when they have concerns or when they feel things are not going well.

Following the structured conversation, the key teacher will need to inform all the appropriate school staff of the outcomes and agreed curriculum targets. More detailed guidance regarding the requirements of schools may be found on page 34 of *Achievement for All: Guidance for Schools*.

The framework for the structured conversation

It is anticipated that the conversation will be structured around four stages. Each stage is intended either to widen the conversation so that all general relevant issues may be properly understood or begin to narrow it in order to focus upon key points for understanding and action.

The following diagram shows the four stages of the framework:



The key skills needed to effectively implement each of the four stages are explained in more detail throughout this document.

Stage 1: Explore

Skills: attending; paraphrasing; communicating understanding; use of silence

This stage is concerned with helping the parent identify the range of issues they would like to address in raising their child's achievement.

Attending (See Exercise 2)

Attending is partly giving straightforward non-verbal 'messages': looking at the other person, but not staring; being fairly relaxed; nodding, with occasional appropriate smiles; not fidgeting; maintaining open posture (such as not folding arms). As a teacher, it may be important to avoid sitting behind a desk which sometimes appears as a defensive barrier. Attending well is also partly an internal quality – avoiding distractions and concentrating on the conversation and the parent.

This stage of the conversation is concerned with working with the parent in order to establish a direction. The teacher seeks answers to questions such as:

- What does the parent want for their child and believe is attainable in the best possible circumstances?
- What are the child's needs?
- What does the parent think is the limit of the child's capacity?
- What strategies have been tried effectively in the past – either at home or at an earlier stage of education?
- What have been the barriers to achievement?

However, these are difficult questions to answer, and a barrage of such questions will soon leave the parent feeling anxious and beginning to give answers that are unconsidered. It is of central importance, therefore, in this early stage of the structured conversation, that questions lie in the *tentative* tone of the teacher and are grounded in what the parent is saying rather than what the teacher wants to say.

For example:

Parent: *'He said to me the other day: "Cheryl Cole is very pretty," and I said, jokingly, "I don't think she's married." And he said, all serious: "I can't get married. I'm Downs." And it struck me he's all the time conscious of what he can't do. Can't read well, can't make friends, probably won't get a driving licence or a girlfriend.'*

Consider the range of options the teacher has by way of response:

'Well, I'm only qualified to talk about the reading part of that.'

Or

'You never know, he might meet someone who will find him attractive.'

Or

'Has he thought about joining a youth club?'

Or

'Perhaps the most upsetting thing for you is his lack of belief in what he might be able to do?'

Notice that the fourth option is expressed as a question – the question is: *have I understood correctly what you have said and what you are feeling?* Its tone is tentative.

The parent might reply: *'Yes, and I'm afraid school only seems to make him less confident.'*

Teacher: *'Perhaps one of the key issues we need to discuss is how we find ways to help him get a sense of genuine achievement?'*

Notice also that the rhythm here is conversational. There are no long silent periods where the teacher simply listens without response. Nor is the teacher's part of the interaction a series of internally generated questions, rather she is demonstrating an understanding of what the parent is saying through the use of **paraphrasing**.

Paraphrasing (See Exercises 3 and 4)

Paraphrasing (sometimes called *re-casting*) is the single most powerful communication skill because it is the main way in which empathy is communicated and because it clears up more mis-communications than any other skill.

A paraphrase is an attempt to restate in a fresh way the main part of what someone has said without adding any of your own ideas, feelings, interpretations etc. The tone is tentative and slightly questioning and it goes much further than saying *'Yes I see what you mean,'* or *'I understand how you feel.'* Paraphrases can be of thoughts and facts, of emotions or of both together.

For example:

Parent: *'I want my daughter to be a success and I'll do all I can to encourage her to work hard at school and at weekends. It's practice and effort that worked for me, at school and since, but Angelina gets distracted and leaves things till the last minute, sometimes doing her homework over breakfast.'*

There are always a wide variety of possible responses to such a statement and some of these show parents that you are listening and trying to understand their viewpoint better than others. A paraphrase of content here is: *'You believe firmly in working hard and you think Angelina doesn't share this belief.'*

Generally the most difficult aspects of this skill are judging when to paraphrase and when not to (particularly to avoid sounding like a parrot) and paraphrasing several times in a row, thus keeping the focus on trying to help the parents clarify.

Another difficult aspect of paraphrasing is capturing depth or intensity of emotion, which an anxious parent of a child with SEND may very well be experiencing. Firstly, you observe that one or more emotions has been expressed or clearly implied. Secondly, you decide this is an emotion that matters. Thirdly, you choose an apt word. Fourthly, you say it in such a way that the other person can readily check how accurate it is and refine and clarify, for example *'furious and scared'* rather than *'frustrated'*, or vice versa.

A question that a teacher might ask is: *'Why should I be concerned about what the parent's feeling. I am, after all, only paid to teach the child?'* In many ways this is a fair question. The answer is that teachers have a professional responsibility to teach children – including children with SEND. The parents of children with SEND will have experienced, and be experiencing, complicated feelings about their child. In all likelihood it will be very difficult, and counterproductive, to attempt to entirely separate these feelings from the task of engaging with the parent in raising the child's academic and social achievement. Therefore it is useful to acknowledge these feelings and try to work with them as part of the overall aim of engaging the parent constructively in their child's education.

Use of silence

Silence is allowing time for thoughts and feelings, or just a natural pause. The main skill is distinguishing between working silences, natural breaks, and hostile, bored and stuck silences.

If the parent seems deep in thought – thinking through an idea or observation – then allowing silence is very skilful and likely to be helpful. If it's a natural break, a lull, again silence is skilful. For the other kinds of silence, it is best to say something like *'I'm not sure what's going on here...'* or *'I notice you're very quiet. May I ask why?'*

Stage 2: Focus

Skills: summarising, choice points and figure ground; focused questions
This stage is concerned with helping the parent identify the key issues and priorities for action. It involves being explicit about the nature of aspiration and need.

Summarising (see Exercise 5)

Summaries draw themes and points together and give some shape to an interview. They are most useful when a conversation is becoming repetitive, meandering or confused and they have a subtext of *'This is where I think we've got to. Do you agree? What next?'*

If the teacher pauses after a summary and at appropriate moments during a summary, the parent has more chance to correct or add to it.

A variation called a choice point is useful when a parent raises several topics for discussion. The teacher summarises and then adds something like *'Which topic would you like us to take first?'*

For example:

Teacher: *'We've discussed your feelings about the alternative curriculum we are proposing for Mary and you have expressed reservations about her most recent report, and I think you are worried about her friendship group in school. I wonder which of these seems most important to focus on.'*

Alternatively, especially if the parent doesn't want to make a choice, you might yourself suggest which topic to focus on first – perhaps what seems the most straightforward or what seems most pivotal. The parent may then choose a different topic to take first, which is fine.

For example:

Teacher: *'You've talked about him leaving the site at lunch time, and the people he spends time with out of school, and the worry that if he attends the trip to London he might wander off and get lost. It sounds as if you're really concerned by the prospect of John attending the class field trip?'*

Questions (See Exercise 6)

Questions can destroy or illuminate the tone of a conversation. Helpful questions are generally those which help a parent clarify or see a new possibility. The frequently made distinction between 'open' and 'closed' questions is of limited use. Open questions, for example beginning with 'How' or 'Why' can be answered very briefly and may also be unsettling or too daunting as is the very open selection interview question *'Will you tell me about yourself?'*

Conversely, closed questions, those which invite one word answers can be responded to at length. However, two or three closed questions in a row can readily be experienced as an interrogation. Wording too can matter, for example compare *'What should you have done?'* with *'What might you do differently next time?'*

The key teacher should always be prepared to ask the follow-up question, for example if a parent is asking for particular provision the key teacher should ask *'Why do you think that would work?'* By exploring issues openly with the parent, this will allow them to explore what they really want which is sometimes not what they asked for at the beginning of the conversation.

Stage 3: Plan

Skills: giving information; setting goals

This stage is concerned with the actions that need to be carried out to address the identified key issues.

Giving information (See Exercise 7)

An important part of the skill of giving information is checking assumptions about the parents' knowledge and about their reactions to the information. On the one hand, powerful emotions, selective memory, wishful thinking and information overload can make giving information futile.

For example:

Teacher: *'I understand you are considering seeking a special school place for Hayley because she has not made expected progress with us. Yes, you're quite right when you say that we expect all pupils to make two levels of progress in a key stage, but are you aware that there are six sublevels in two key stages, and Hayley has moved from level 2c – the bottom of the level – to level 3a – which is right at the top of level 3 – so she has done remarkably well. Of course, I can't say how well she might have done in a special school. I once knew a pupil who went to a special school and...'*

On the other hand, information can dramatically reduce stress and increase understanding. Giving information is fundamentally different from giving advice. The purpose of information is or should be to help parents make a decision, while advice is suggesting what their decision should be.

Complicated information is more likely to be remembered and acted on if you:

- use simple words and short sentences;
- categorise (e.g. there are three points here);
- avoid jargon;
- write things down;
- check understanding.

For example:

Teacher: *'Hayley is actually making good progress; and is very close to achieving the two levels you are speaking of. If we can agree what needs to be done to support her to achieve just a little more, she can make the two levels.'*

Having identified key priorities, and clarified the issues around them, this stage is concerned with the actions that need to be carried out to address them. It is important at this time that the parent has as much opportunity as possible to say what they may do to support progress. It is also important that the parent and teacher set and agree challenging but achievable targets. These should be framed in language which is clearly understood by both parties and, most importantly, by the pupil. They will provide a framework against which progress can be measured. The processes and activities which will help to secure achievement of the targets should be discussed and ideally should include responsibilities for the parent, the teacher, the pupil and the school.

The focus of goal setting is concerned with raising achievement. It is anticipated, therefore, that goals will be ambitious (i.e. likely to achieve more than the child is now, or will do if they continue at their current rate of progress) and constructed around the principle of identifying the pupil's current trajectory of progress based upon prior attainment and adding an element of challenge.

Focus on outcomes

Critical to the success of Achievement for All is the need for schools and LAs to maintain an 'outcomes based' focus. This applies to all processes developed within each of the three strands and is particularly important at this planning stage of the structured conversation.

The conversation with parents will cover long-term goals for achievement in literacy and numeracy skills and in the wider outcomes. These goals might be the trajectory for achievement at the end of the current key stage within Strand 1; the wider outcomes will focus on goals within the aspects identified in Strand 3. These long-term goals will guide the smaller steps targets set at the planning stage of the conversation.

Setting targets

It is a key principle of Achievement for All that the three strands are interdependent and that progress in one strand will affect change in the other two. It is therefore important that targets set in one strand are clearly linked to improvements in the other two. There is a focus on educational outcomes, but in Achievement for All and in this conversation, there must be an emphasis on how progress in the wider outcomes is going to support this.

When setting targets it is important to adhere to, and build on, the culture of target setting within the school. However the additional focus on targeted children will lead to increased expectations of progress from the teacher, parent and child and result in accelerated, rather than predicted, progress.

A target is a prediction based on past performance, plus a challenge:

Prediction + Challenge = Target

It is the level of challenge which will lead to the realisation of the intended outcomes agreed with the parents and children. The main points to consider are:

- targets need to be based on an analysis of the child's real strengths and areas for improvement. The teacher needs to prepare for the structured conversation so this information is at hand and can be shared;
- all targets need to be practical and agreed with parents and children;
- parents and children need to know what to do in order to make the expected progress to reach the targets;
- any strategies or interventions should be clarified to include timescales and the success criteria that will be used to evaluate impact;
- methods and timescales for ongoing assessment and review should be clarified with the parents and child. It may be at this point in the conversation that ongoing communication arrangements will be made with the parents;
- effective schools have well established systems for assessment, tracking and target setting, including the use of Assessing Pupils' Progress (APP). As far as possible schools should use and build on these systems for Achievement for All rather than creating systems which are different and may not be sustainable.

Statutory guidance

DCSF target setting guidance which is concerned with those longer-term goals states that:

As for all pupils, those identified as having SEN/LDD are expected to make at least two levels of progress in each key stage. In order to narrow the gaps between the achievement of pupils with and without SEN, targets should aim for three or more levels of progress across a key stage where possible. Where pupils are assessed as being unlikely to reach level 1, schools should use P scales to measure progress and set appropriately challenging targets. Data brought together for the Progression Guidance 2009–10, shows that for pupils on the P scales, for those at the lower P levels and at the later key stages it is harder to secure two levels of progress, but nonetheless:

- *over 60% of KS1 pupils, with a prior attainment of P5 to P7, make two or more levels of progress in both English and mathematics by the end of KS2; and*
- *over 20% of KS2 pupils, with prior attainment of P5 to P7 make two or more levels of progress in both English and mathematics by the end of KS3.*

The Progression Guidance 2009–10 provides data which will help schools to set targets and evaluate progress for those pupils with SEND who are working well below age-related thresholds including within the P scales. The guidance has been widely disseminated across LAs; all School Improvement Partners (SIP) should be referring to it. For schools where the guidance has not yet been accessed it can be downloaded at www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/nationalstrategies and search using the reference 00553-2009BKT-EN.

The accompanying professional development course can be also be found at www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/nationalstrategies and search for the Progression Guidance Professional Development Course.

Once targets have been set, schools will need to record them and clarify what records will be kept of any ongoing assessments.

Translating long-term targets into curricular targets

In Strand 1 meaningful curricular targets should be set, at least three times a year, for reading, writing and mathematics. These targets should be set within the context of:

- differentiated planning by the teacher as part of whole-class teaching;
- ongoing assessment for learning;
- the inclusion of pupils with SEND in the whole-school assessment, tracking and pupil progress review structures.

An example form to record the goals, targets and key outcomes of the conversation is included as Handout 5.

Stage 4: Review

Skills: summarising, paraphrasing

This stage provides an opportunity to summarise the key points of the discussion, to clarify the next steps and arrange dates for further meetings or alternative communication.

In essence, the review stage of the structured conversation summarises: *'These are the things we have talked about...'*, *'These are the areas we think are most important in order to raise the child's achievement level...'* and *'These are the plans we have put in place in order to bring about that improvement'* and then asks the question: *'Are the plans working?'*

It is important that the summary is:

- not too lengthy (boring and hard to follow);
- written down at least in note form; and
- is used to furnish a written action plan that may be communicated to other teaching staff and also copied to the parent (see Handout 5 as an example).

The key teacher could ask the parent:

- How well has the meeting gone?
- Is there anything else you want to add?
- Have we missed anything?
- Have we listened to you well enough and do you think we have understood and appreciated the issues?
- Can we summarise exactly what we decided?
- Can we agree when we are next meeting and ways to keep in touch in between?

An important part of the review stage is to establish a very clear line of subsequent communication which should acknowledge at least three routes:

- regular parent-teacher meetings;
- a named person the parent can call to express immediate concerns or get information from;
- the next scheduled structured conversation (usually once each term, three a year).

At the point of the next conversation beginning, the teacher may well begin the conversation with a review of progress to date against the agreed goals and targets. This should then lead naturally into an

exploration of the issues that have emerged as a consequence of the achievement or otherwise of those objectives and outcomes.

To summarise, the meeting should lead to the following outcomes:

- clear and agreed aspirations for the child;
- clear goals and targets for the child;
- a plan of action for meeting the targets;
- a clear line of subsequent communication.

Part 2: Guidance for course leaders

Introduction

This section provides comprehensive information and resources to run a one day training course in the structured conversation. The timetable suggests a breakdown of the day into a number of different activities, each timed to ensure that the material will be covered at an appropriate pace.

The notes from Part 1 will provide background knowledge and information to support each exercise. It is anticipated that all trainers using this material will have themselves completed at least a one day course in the structured conversation.

The course is practical and as well as the skills of conducting the conversation, it deals with some issues that are likely to arise such as confidentiality, strong feelings and challenge.

The accompanying DVD can be introduced as an extract from an interview to practise using a variation of the checklist. Stress that it's not an ideal or model interview.

Materials needed

Checklist of materials for each course

- Copies of the agenda
- Checklist for analysing interviews for observing the DVD
- DVD: *The Conversation*
- DVD: *A Parent's Story* (from Achievement for All Leadership Conferences)
- Flipcharts
- Sticky notes
- Marker pens
- Data projector and Strand 2 PowerPoint presentation

List of training exercises (see Part 3: Resources)

- Exercise 1: Giving and receiving feedback
- Exercise 2: Non-verbal communication
- Exercise 3: Paraphrasing (1)
- Exercise 4: Paraphrasing (2)
- Exercise 5: Summarising and choice points
- Exercise 6: Using questions
- Exercise 7: Setting goals and targets

List of handouts (see Part 3: Resources)

- Handout 1: Setting up triads and small groups
- Handout 2: Observing the structured conversation
- Handout 3: Personality type
- Handout 4: Goal setting with hard to reach parents
- Handout 5: A model record and action plan
- Handout 6: Checklist for reflecting on the structured conversation

Model agenda and notes for one day training course

09.00 Arrive and coffee

09.15 Introduction (slide 1)

Introduce yourself and ask participants to introduce themselves by name, role and school.

09.20 Aims of the day (slide 2)

Go through the aims of the day.

09:25 Overview of Achievement for All (slides 3 to 9)

Explain to participants:

- What is Achievement for All?
- What are the aims?
- What are the three strands?
- What is the structured conversation?
- Why do we need the structured conversation?
- Aims, benefits and difficulties of the structured conversation.

(See page 4 of this guidance or pages 3 to 6 of *Achievement for All: Guidance for Schools* for further details.)

Explain the conclusions of the Lamb Enquiry (the failure of young people with SEND to keep pace with peers; the need to engage parents and carers in their child's education).

10:00 Ground rules of the day (slide 10)

Ask participants what their expectations are of the day and what skills they would like to leave with. Record these on the flipchart. Do not record expectations that are outside the realms of the course.

Go through the key points:

- participate
- be genuine
- be open
- be constructive.

Explain that in order for participants to learn the skills of the structured conversation, it is not useful or instructive to employ methods of role-play. Participants should therefore be prepared to discuss genuine issues at an appropriate level in order to provide material for all to practise with, for example:

- my journey here this morning;
- what I most regret not doing at school (as a pupil);
- what I would like to be doing in five years' time;
- the pupil I find most difficult to teach;
- my worst lesson as a teacher.

10:10 Negotiating a contract or agreement (slide 11)

Explain that the purpose of the verbal contract or agreement is to clearly define the nature of the structured conversation. Chart the principal elements of the contract:

- aims of the conversation;
- time available;
- number of meetings;
- confidentiality.

Discuss the advantages of negotiating a contract:

- the idea of a structured conversation may become less mysterious and threatening;
- the ground is cleared;
- a purposeful tone is set;
- if agreement is genuine both people are more likely to take part wholeheartedly;
- if you do not reach sufficient agreement, at least some time is saved.

10.20 Giving and receiving feedback (slides 12 and 13)

Exercise 1 (15 minutes)

Materials: Exercise 1: Giving and receiving feedback; Handout 1: Setting up triads and small groups, flipchart and pen.

Activity: Explain that one of the principal learning processes in the course will be feedback by group members given by observers as part of a triad (see Handout 1).

It is important that feedback is given constructively and tentatively – but not timidly. Use the material in Exercise 1 to inform and stimulate discussion.

Ask the question: *'Why is negative feedback more likely to be remembered?'* Record answers and discuss.

10:35 The framework for the structured conversation (slide 14)

Show the four stage diagram on slide 14. Explain that the framework is a guide to the direction the conversation should take; opening out as issues are explored, narrowing to a point of focus on key issues and widening as parent and teacher endeavour to find solutions to those issues.

Explain that there are key skills linked to each of the four stages and these will be explored in turn.

10:40 Stage 1: Exploring (slides 15 to 17)

Attending and non-verbal communication

Exercise 2 (15 minutes)

Materials: Exercise 2: Non-verbal communication; flipchart and pen.

Activity: Work through Exercise 2.

10:55 Demonstration of the structured conversation (25 minutes)

Materials: DVD: *The Conversation*; Handout 2: Observing the structured conversation; flipchart and pen.

Activity: View DVD: *The Conversation* Part 1. Ask participants to complete the first section of Handout 2 and provide feedback.

View Part 2 of the DVD. Ask participants to complete the second section of Handout 2 and provide feedback.

Discuss main points that participants have observed, for example non-verbal signals; examples of where the two meetings differed and why that was. Ask: *'How was the teacher different in Part 2 of the DVD and what difference did that make?'*

11:20 Coffee

11:45 Paraphrasing (slides 18 to 20)

Exercises 3 and 4 (45 minutes)

Materials: pp12–13 of the handbook; flipchart and pen; DVD.

Activity: Reiterate what a paraphrase is, and what is its impact. If necessary repeat the final two minutes of the DVD. Work through the two exercises. The flipchart discussion is important and should be used to bring out key learning points. Remember that non-verbal communication remains important even when listening. Try to elicit examples of what observers felt were really effective paraphrases.

12:30 Stage 2: Focusing (slides 21 and 22)

Summarising (slides 23 to 25)

Exercise 5 (30 minutes)

Materials: Exercise 5: Summarising and choice points; flipchart and pen; DVD.

Activity: Work through Exercise 5.

13:00 Lunch

13:45 Use of questions (slides 26 to 28)

Exercise 6 (30 minutes)

Materials: page 15 of the handbook; Exercise 6: Using questions; flipchart and pen.

Activity: Work through Exercise 6.

14:15 Stage 3: Planning (slides 29 and 30)

Setting goals and targets (slides 31 to 36)

Exercise 7 (30 minutes)

Materials: Handout 4: Goal setting with hard to reach parents; Handout 5: A model record and action plan; Exercise 7: Setting goals and targets.

Activity: Carry out Exercise 7.

Explain the use of Handout 5 as a model for recording outcomes of the structured conversation. Ask participants to discuss how they could use the form in their own school context.

14:45 Stage 4: Reviewing (slides 37 to 39)

Review the key points:

- summary of areas discussed, important issues, goals and plans put in place;
- summary should be concise, in writing, understood by parent and colleagues;
- invite parents to check their understanding;
- sets clear line of future communication.

14:55 Reflecting on the conversation (slide 40)

Explain the importance of taking time after the conversation to reflect on how it went.

Activity: Show Handout 6: Checklist for reflecting on the structured conversation.

15:00 Coffee and time for participants to consider questions about next steps

15:15 Feedback on questions and issues

Provide participants with the opportunity to discuss any issues they have or questions around

holding the structured conversations in their school or cascading training to other colleagues.

15:45 Show DVD: *A Parent's Story* (from Achievement for All Leadership Conferences)

15:50 Closing discussion and evaluation

Return to the recorded expectations of the day and ask: *'Have objectives and expectations been met?'*

Ask participants to complete the evaluation form.

16.00 End

Part 3: Resources

Exercise 1: Giving and receiving feedback

This is a group discussion. The course leader explains the principles of feedback and why it is important in the context of this training group.

In order to derive benefit from the course, it is essential that participants learn how to give constructive feedback. This is a useful skill outside of the course – particularly when working with young people who may lack self-confidence.

Useful feedback (to yourself or others) is usually:

- clear, brief and specific, as in the skill of giving information;
- constructively critical – what the person might do differently rather than what you think they did wrong;
- balanced – positive as well as constructively critical;
- expressed as your opinion, not as an absolute truth – you may be wrong.

A ‘sandwich’ structure is sometimes recommended but some people find it too contrived. It is:

1. Positive aspect(s)
2. Constructive criticism(s)
3. Another positive aspect.

Receiving feedback (from yourself or others) can of course be threatening and demoralising, even when the feedback is given skilfully. The following strategies may help:

- Try to see the feedback as potentially useful.
- Separate what is said from your reaction to it (this can be very difficult!).
- Consider asking for clarification, examples, detail, but with a spirit of open-minded enquiry rather than defensively or accusingly.
- Consider checking your understanding.
- Notice if you have a tendency to dismiss positive feedback.

Question: *‘Why are people more likely to recall negative than positive feedback?’*

Record the responses from the group on a flipchart.

Other points for discussion.

- Feedback from an observer is an observer’s opinion – not fact.
- People giving feedback should own it. All feedback begins with an ‘I’ – as in ‘I think...’ or ‘I wonder...’
- The speaker’s feedback on how they experienced the conversation is never in doubt.

Exercise 2: Non-verbal communication

Establish a triad of Listener, Speaker and Observer (the group can be established by allocating each course participant one of three letters A, B, and C; where A is the Listener, B is the Speaker and C is the Observer).

The three people should find a space that allows them to be seated as a group with sufficient space apart from other groups to allow reasonable privacy at a conversational volume.

Ask A (Listener) to talk about a *low level* issue for two minutes (suitable topics include: my journey this morning; why I chose the clothes I am wearing; my favourite radio station).

It is important the topic chosen is *low level*, for example not important or consequential to the Speaker.

Ask B (Speaker) to demonstrate clearly that she or he is paying no attention to what A is saying. This should be done, however, without leaving her or his seat.

Ask C (Observer) to note everything B does in order to not pay attention. It is likely that this will include: closed body language (folded arms, crossed legs, head turned away), lack of eye contact, distracting activity such as note taking, fiddling with pens, papers, etc., doodling, humming, musing out loud.

After two minutes stop the exercise and invite participants to exchange roles: B to speak, C to listen, etc.

After two minutes stop the exercise and take feedback from participants. Ask Observers what was done by the Listener to convey lack of attention (Attending) and note this list on a flipchart.

Ask what impact this lack of attention had on the Speaker. It is likely that feedback will indicate how difficult continued speech is when there is no apparent interest being shown by the listener. Speakers will often say they began to dry up; that they felt frustration and even anger and that they sought to say more outrageous things in order to gain the listener's attention.

From the flipchart notes draw out the opposite non-verbal actions, for example no eye contact – conclude that eye contact helps communication; folded arms – conclude that open posture avoids a physical barrier.

Note: This is an intentionally light-hearted exercise, intended to break the ice of a group that will probably not be familiar to participants, while demonstrating the fundamental importance of non-verbal signals in effective communication.

Exercise 3: Paraphrasing (1)

The course leader uses the framework diagram to show where the participants are in the structured conversation.

In triads:

- A talks for two minutes on a given subject, for example: *'My most embarrassing moment,'* or *'What I would like to be doing in five years' time.'*
- B listens, nodding and closely attending using non-verbal communication – nodding, leaning forward a little, and good eye contact. At the end of two minutes, B attempts to paraphrase what A has said in one or two sentences.
- C feeds back on what was effective in the paraphrase and non-verbal communication.
- A feeds back on what was effective in the paraphrase.
- B summarises what went well and less well.

The roles are exchanged until all three have undertaken each role.

The trainer uses the flipchart to record observer comments on what helped to move the conversation forward or otherwise.

Exercise 4: Paraphrasing (2)

As in the previous exercise, establish triads.

Introduce the topic of *'The book (or film) that has had most influence on me.'*

Ask each member of the triad to speak, listen and observe in turn for 3–5 minutes each. Observer keeps time.

During this period, the Listener should attempt to paraphrase three or four times; maintaining a conversational rhythm as far as possible – i.e. avoid long silences or long periods in which the Speaker speaks uninterruptedly.

At the end of each conversation:

- whoever is Observer feeds back to the Listener;
- the Speaker feeds back to the Listener; and
- the Listener summarises the positive feedback and identifies what could be done better.

The trainer uses flipchart to summarise Observer feedback.

Exercise 5: Summarising and choice points

The course leader uses the framework diagram to show where the participants are in the structured conversation.

As before in triads:

- A is asked to talk about an aspect of his/her life that they wish (participants should be reminded to select a topic that is sufficiently low-level not to cause either them or the interviewer distress if the interview is handled badly – as it may be. Remember, this is training).
- B listens carefully, both attending and paraphrasing at regular intervals. At some stage – probably after no more than 5–7 minutes, B should summarise what has been said, trying to identify clearly each issue that A has introduced; so that the summary may sound like:
'You have talked about the influence your aunt had in your choice to become a teacher, and you have mentioned the fact that you didn't enjoy school yourself driving you to try and teach better than the teachers you had. Also, I think you discovered at university how much you enjoyed drama and performance, and the links you saw with class teaching. I wonder which of these had the most impact on your decision to teach.'
- A continues to speak for another minute or so.
- C gives feedback to B, carefully noting the impact of paraphrase, summary and choice point.
- A also gives B feedback on what helped and hindered the development of their thinking.

General discussion: The course leader explains the value of summary and choice point in helping the Speaker become concrete in what they see as important.

Exercise 6: Using questions

Discuss with the group the value of questions. Attempt to bring out the fact that questions have uses, for example they:

- establish facts;
- elicit information;
- clarify misconceptions.

But they also have limitations, for example they:

- often say more about the questioner's interests and thoughts;
- can divert the speaker from a path that is more useful;
- can close down conversation;
- if overused, can turn conversation into interrogation.

Chart course participants' experience of using questions and being questioned.

The Miracle Question

One question that is sometimes useful in focusing the parent is known as the Miracle Question:

'If a miracle occurred overnight as you slept, and when you woke in the morning you knew that the problem you had worried about was solved and everything was all right, how would you know? What would you see different?'

Explain that this question may be re-framed as simply: *'And how would things be different?'*

In triads, ask participants to work through an interview on the subject of *'Running my own training session on the structured conversation'* to the point of summary and choice point, and then ask the Miracle Question.

This may look like this:

A: *'I think of all the things I talked about, I am most worried that I won't have enough background knowledge to respond to some of the trainees' questions.'*

B: *'And suppose that overnight that worry disappeared. When you woke up, how would things be different?'*

A: *'Well, I would feel confident about the course. I would know more about paraphrasing and the general skills. I wouldn't feel frightened of being found out... of being a fraud.'*

Exercise 7: Setting goals and targets

In triads or possibly in pairs if that seems more suitable to the group:

A relates to B an area in which they would like to achieve. C observes.

Examples might include:

- lose some weight;
- develop a better work–life balance;
- learn a new skill.

B summarises what A has said and invites him to list the reasons why he would like to achieve this goal. At the end of the conversation, change roles.

For example:

A: *'I feel quite heavy some days; not just in my body but in my brain. I remember when I was younger and used to exercise a lot – well, a lot more – I also felt more quick witted. Also, I just want to feel more attractive, youthful, I suppose.'*

B: *'So your goal isn't just losing weight. It's really about regaining some youth and also some capacity you feel you have lost?'*

Having helped A redefine the goal, it becomes clear that losing weight is more of a milestone along the way to achieving something slightly more complex.

B: *'What do you see as the obstacles to losing weight?'*

A: *'I work long hours and I am really tired when I get home. At weekends I am always taking the kids to clubs and shopping and things and there never seems time for anything else.'*

B: *'You put a lot into life, but it sometimes feels you don't get much out for yourself?'*

A: *'Once you have children eh!'*

B: *'So you go to sleep tonight, and when you wake everything has miraculously improved. How would you know?' (Miracle Question)*

A: *'Well, I'm home, I've been jogging, and the clock says 5.00 pm. The fridge is full. I'm wearing a suit I haven't been able to get into for two years and I've done the Times crossword in five minutes.'*

B: *'If we were writing down milestones to your goal, which of these do you think is most attainable?'*

A: *'Work is just silly. I know I am sometimes there when I don't need to be, just because I don't delegate enough. I could get home by 5.00 pm at least two nights a week. And my wife is always saying that it would be cheaper to order shopping online and have it delivered – save all that driving to the supermarket.'*

B: *'Let's make a note of the goal and the steps we have agreed you will take to achieve it, so that we can review progress at our next meeting.'*

Handout 1: Setting up triads and small groups

The triad is the basic training group in this course.

A triad is a group of three people taking the roles of Speaker, Listener and an Observer. The aim is for the Listener to practise a skill with feedback from the Observer and Speaker. Imagine, say, a tennis or acting coach suggesting adjustments and the Listener trying them out, perhaps making several attempts. Then each person in the triad takes a different role until everyone has done all the roles. Each round is usually brief and focused on one or two interventions by the Listener.

Depending on the prior experience of the participants, some preparation for the role of the Speaker may be necessary, for example, suggest some possible topics for them to speak briefly – one to two minutes – about an incident at work, a problem with a relationship or a decision. It is important that at this stage the issues discussed are low-level and unlikely to cause distress either to Speaker or Listener.

A small group structure for more sustained practise of skills is outlined below. The group of five to eight people plus a tutor might meet for several two-hour sessions.

- A conversation for as long as is needed to give useful feedback.
- A pause for the Observers, the Speaker and the Listener as well, to prepare some feedback.
- The Observers, but not the tutor, gives feedback to the Listener.
- The Speaker gives feedback to the Listener.
- The tutor gives feedback to the Listener.
- The Listener, who has been listening intently and not taking notes, summarises without comment the main points of the feedback.
- The Observers remind the Listener of any main points that have been missed (quite often these are positive points) or any perceived distortions.
- Finally, the Listener gives their view of themselves in the conversation and there is a place for general discussion of conversational skills but not of the topic or the Speaker. The focus is firmly on practise of conversing.

Handout 2: Observing the structured conversation

a) Watch Part 1 of the DVD: *The Conversation*

- What seems to help the conversation move forward? (consider non-verbal and verbal language)
- What seems to hinder it? (consider non-verbal and verbal language)
- How do you think the parent feels by the end of the conversation?
- How do you think the teacher feels by the end of the conversation?
- What has changed for either the teacher or the parent?

b) Watch Part 2 of the DVD: *The Conversation*

- What seems to help the conversation move forward? (consider non-verbal and verbal language)
- What seems to hinder it? (consider non-verbal and verbal language)
- How do you think the parent feels by the end of the conversation?
- How do you think the teacher feels by the end of the conversation?
- What has changed for either the teacher or the parent?

Handout 3: Personality type

Teachers can be unsettled by parents whose personalities are very different from their own. They may also misjudge such interviewees as ineffective, immature, difficult, or even suffering from personality disorder, when they are just different.

One theory of the main differences in personality is that some people are:

| More: | Whereas others are more: |
|---|---|
| Outgoing and active | Reflective and reserved |
| Practical and interested in facts and details | Interested in possibilities and an overview |
| Logical and reasoned | Agreeable and appreciative |
| Planning and coming to firm conclusions | Easy-going and flexible |

These terms are deliberately chosen to be positive but most have negative variations, for example, 'on a different planet and flaky' for interested in possibilities, 'boring and plodding' for practical.

People with each of these preferences for behaving in certain (opposite) ways have strengths in some settings and careers and corresponding weaknesses in others. For example some teachers and parents are more energised by a flexible, free-wheeling interview or teaching session while others are more at ease with a highly-structured one.

Similarly, several forms of 'intelligence' have been proposed. For example Gardner's theory includes:

- Verbal-linguistic – facility with words
- Logical-mathematical –facility with numbers
- Visual-spatial – facility with visualising and manipulating images
- Bodily-kinaesthetic – facility with sport, dance etc.
- Musical – sensitivity to sounds and rhythms
- Interpersonal – part of 'emotional intelligence', 'sensitivity to others', to others' emotions and needs
- Intrapersonal – also part of 'emotional intelligence', concerned with awareness of one's own emotions and needs
- Naturalistic – sensitivity to nature.

This theory is controversial but the general underlying principle is that there are other ways of being 'intelligent' than the standard academic way, which is primarily linguistic and logical-mathematical.

Handout 4: Goal setting with hard to reach parents

Some parents are described as 'hard to reach'. Usually such parents seldom attend scheduled meetings (parent-teacher evenings, for example); do not attend or are uncooperative at other meetings. There may be a number of reasons for this behaviour: some parents are afraid of school, partly as a result of their own negative experiences, particularly if they also have experienced barriers to learning. There are also parents, those who might be second or third generation workless for example, who genuinely see little value in education and school.

However, most parents wish to see their children succeed in, or certainly enjoy, school even if they themselves do not feel up to providing direct support. One strategy that has been successful in engaging such parents is outlined below.

Rather than invite parents alone, the teacher sets up a meeting with as many of the significant adults involved in the child's life as possible (within reason). This group may include: grandparents; other family members such as older siblings, aunts and uncles; neighbours and close family friends; possibly a social worker who knows the family.

Prior to the meeting the teacher hangs several large sheets of blank paper (flipchart size) on the walls of the room. At the commencement of the meeting the teacher invites everyone to introduce themselves, then asks the group what their collective ambition is for the child. They may say: *'To be happy'*; *'To get a good job'*; *'To be a footballer'*; *'To get five GCSE A*-C.'*

The teacher may ask the child what they would like (dependent on age and maturity, and whether the decision has been taken to invite him/her).

The teacher charts these aspirations on the paper, and asks the question: *'Which of these is most important to you and the child?'* After some discussion, agreement is reached and the teacher charts the agreed aspiration at the far end of the wall.

Importantly, the charting is graphic/pictorial as well as written. The value of this is it can easily be understood by the child, and by any of the adults in the room who are not fully literate. As a graphic document it is also visually very powerful and memorable.

The teacher then asks the question: *'What do you think are the milestones to achieving this goal?'* These milestones are charted (as well as drawn). Eventually there will be a number of milestones between the starting point and the end aspiration.

The teacher then asks: *'What are the obstacles to reaching these milestones?'*

The group responds with suggestions like: *'He needs to come to school every day.'*

The teacher asks: *'How can we make that happen?'*

From here it may easily be seen how the meeting becomes focused on producing an action plan in both graphic and written form. It becomes the basis for regular review and allows progress against milestones to be easily monitored.

Handout 5: A model record and action plan

| Name of the pupil: | Year group: | Date of meeting: |
|---|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Present at meeting: Parents | Present at meeting: Teacher | Present at meeting: Pupil |
| | | Yes / No |
| <p>Summary of discussion, key points</p> | | |

| | | | |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Overall goals (long term) | Key actions | Progress towards goals | Date |
| | | | |
| Targets: academic | Key actions | Progress towards targets | Date |
| | | | |
| Targets: wider outcomes | Key actions | Progress towards targets | Date |
| | | | |
| Signed Parent | Signed Teacher | Signed Pupil | Review Date |
| Parent | Teacher | Pupil | |

Handout 6: Checklist for reflecting on the structured conversation

Preparation

Did I:

- Reserve a room that was private, quiet and as welcoming as possible?
- Plan the conversation, for example, decide the aim(s), structure?
- Prepare the room and arrange the seating and furniture?
- Clear my mind?

The interview itself

Did I:

- Attend well (listen non-verbally)?
- Overuse any skills?
- Neglect any skills?
- Help the parents talk both freely and to the point?
- Follow up leads?
- Check my understanding?
- Help (if necessary) the parents decide on one or more specific, realistic targets?
- Make sure the pace was conversational and manage any silences?
- Summarise the main points and agree actions?

Overall

- Do the parents appear happier or more concerned now than at the beginning?
- How do I feel? Has the conversation achieved the aims I set out to achieve?
- What about my style, for example, was I warm, abrasive, too formal?
- Are there any implications for my next interview with these parents?
- Do I need to change anything for the next conversation? For example, chose a different room.
- Which two or three key skills could I work on to try next time? For example, following leads, summarising, agreeing points for action.

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