

LITERATURE REVIEW

WHAT DO PARENTS THINK OF EP SERVICES?

Background

Since the 1980's there has been growing political pressure on public services to be held accountable for the services they provide. This has focused attention on the concept of accountability. Clark and Stewart (1985) promoted a public service orientation with high quality services responsive to customer needs. The notion of services as commodities has subsequently become more popular, resulting in a more commercial attitude to service delivery, and an improvement in the methods used to secure service users' feedback (Dowling & Leibowitz, 1994). There have consequently been repeated calls for services to evaluate their practice (DfEE, 2000; Scottish Executive, 2002; DfES, 2006) and the Currie report (Scottish Executive, 2002) stated that many services in Scotland were making use of the performance indicators (Scottish Executive, 1999) as part of their self-evaluation.

There was acknowledgement that such evaluations needed to encompass the view of parents. For instance, the DfES (2006) report recommended that services have a framework of evaluation which takes into account the views of parents (amongst others) and, more recently, one of the Lamb inquiry's recommendations was that evaluations should include the impact of EP activity on parental confidence (DCSF, 2009a). The point has been made that the responsibility parents have (in particular, the emotional commitment and the 24-hour contact with their children) places them in a unique position from which to comment on services to children.

Many articles have suggested that parental involvement in service evaluations is not only politically appropriate, but has also contributed positively to service developments (Anthun, 2000; Cuckle & Bamford, 2000; Squires et al, 2007). For instance, Anthun's (2000) study of EP services in Norway suggested that improving procedures to ensure parent participation was likely to improve perceptions of service quality as well as enhancing the effectiveness of the problem solving process.

There are, however, limitations on how safe it can be to generalise from such research, as there is wide variation in structures and role (Cuckle & Bamford, 2000). There is also the perennial problem that the parents whom services would most like to hear from (e.g. those most disaffected) tend to be the least likely to respond to evaluations. Any lack of response introduces the notion of a bias, which may skew the results and threaten the validity of the exercise. Dowling and Leibowitz (1994) also remarked upon the unreliability of some findings, due to low return rates. Their own attempts to interview parents were dogged by parents being unwilling or unable to cooperate, failing to respond to letters and being out when visited.

Feedback from Major Reports

Many of the major reports cited earlier also sampled the views of parents on the EP input they had received. These can be divided into aspects for improvement and more positive feedback.

The DfEE (2000) report indicated that parents wanted:

- More readily available information about what EPs do (also a criticism in Scottish Executive, 2002). Parents did not always understand the EP's role and in some cases this had led to an initial reluctance to agree to their child being seen. In particular, many parents had not understood the distinction between an EP and a child psychiatrist.
- To know how they could access EPs without having to go through the school. Parents perceived EPs to be an important source of support and wanted information on how they could access EPs more directly. Where parents had telephone access they valued this; furthermore, they indicated that whilst they might not use it, the knowledge that they could do so was reassuring. In the DfES (2006) report a number of parents also reported having difficulty in accessing EP support. Where referrals were mediated by schools, the differing priorities attributed by parents and schools were viewed as an obstacle to access. Stringer et al. (2006) suggested that adopting a time allocation system could reinforce schools' perception that the service is for them. This in turn could lead to schools challenging an EP's wish to see parents when school staff thought it unnecessary and resentment over an EP taking time to respond to a request from a parent to see their child.
- More time with the EP. Where the EP had taken the time to explain their report in detail, it had allowed parents the opportunity to ask questions. They appreciated time spent explaining their child's needs and particularly what they could do to support their child at home. This was also a theme in the Currie Report (Scottish Executive, 2002) where both parents and schools indicated that EPs often did not have sufficient time to deliver either the breadth or the intensity of services they required.
- Earlier involvement, especially where their child had complex needs, and subsequent opportunities for more ad-hoc contact to discuss their child's needs (e.g. helpline or drop-in centre).
- Help with the home-based problems. They wanted strategies for managing the behaviour exhibited within the home. This extended to reassurance that the strategies they were already using were appropriate.
- Continuing involvement after their child had been Statemented. A number of parents said that the EP had been supportive up to and during the statutory assessment procedure but that once the Statement had been completed there was little follow up.

In addition to the points above, the Currie report (Scottish Executive, 2002) noted that whilst all categories of service users reported high levels of satisfaction with EP services, parents registered:

- Concern about the 'independence' of advice offered by EPs as employees of the LA and an associated concern about the difficulty in obtaining a second opinion in cases of disagreement
- The need for a more joined-up inter-agency approach towards their child's needs

Details about the parental contribution to the DfES (2006) report were provided in a later article (Squire et al., 2007). This was based on a questionnaire distributed in ten services. In line with the points made by Dowling and Leibowitz (1994) about the difficulties in sampling the views of parents, whilst 300 questionnaires were distributed only 91 were returned. The research was also based on the assumption that the questionnaires were sent randomly to parents. In practice this may not have happened. Consequently, a cautious interpretation was advised. Only a small minority (about 10%) felt that EP involvement had not been particularly helpful. In some cases this was linked to factors which were not under the control of the EP. An example of this was the perception that the school was not following the EP's advice; hence the involvement was having little impact. They also associated a failure to implement advice with a lack of resources within the school. In some cases this led them to conclude that Statementing was the only solution. Squires et al (2007) also reported other issues emerging from the parental feedback:

- Parents found EP involvement helpful when the assessment was directly related to the questions identified. It was unhelpful when the EP carried out a range of tests which had no face validity in respect to the problems raised.
- Some parents found it helpful to have their views confirmed but others were frustrated if the assessment did not help them develop a better insight into their child's difficulties.
- Parents felt that good verbal and written feedback was detailed, named the condition (although this might not always be deemed appropriate by EPs), provided practical strategies about what parents and teachers could do, provided information about alternative sources of support and was presented in a way that was emotionally supportive.
- Parents wanted to be properly involved and informed about what was happening. They did not like it if the EP worked with the child or teachers without providing parents with feedback. Building on the comments about written reports, parents indicated that they felt frustrated if the EP was not open and they were not given "*the full picture*". There is also resonance here with advice accommodating LA policy and the issue of independence identified in the Currie report (Scottish Executive, 2002).
- Simple, comprehensive and intelligible reports were considered helpful. Those that used jargon or failed to help them understand numerical information were seen as unhelpful.

On the positive side, the DfEE (2000) report indicated parents generally valued the EP involvement they had received (also Scottish Executive, 2002 and DfES, 2006). Parents often regarded EPs as an advocate for their child

and perceived them to be able to influence what schools did in respect to their child (*"schools listen to educational psychologists"*). Many parents also perceived EPs to have a valuable role in mediating between themselves and their child's school. Schools expressed a similar view, with 66% reporting that they perceived liaison work with parents as an on-going priority for EPs. Parents also saw EPs as a source of advice and information on particular areas of SEN and valued their knowledge. They found it reassuring that EPs had prior experience of children similar to their child. They also saw the EP as a source of advice, signposting them to other agencies.

The DfES (2006) report acknowledged that casework, which focused on assessment and intervention for individual children, was greatly valued by parents. The majority of parents (88%) rated such involvement as either 'very helpful' or 'helpful'. Parents frequently commented on how the assessment had led to a better understanding of their child (or in some cases had confirmed existing hypotheses) and provided strategies for use at home and school. Over 90% of parents considered that the EP made a distinctive contribution within the multi-agency package they received in relation to their child. Many parents (65%) also commented on how EPs had a positive emotional impact on their child, particularly in relation to their child's 'capacity to get on better with others'. A few parents also commented on how the EP's report helped to make schools more accountable for providing appropriate support to their children. Lastly, 97% of the parents felt that EP services were needed and the majority felt that they had received a good service. Their view was that EPs facilitate access to particular types of support; help schools monitor the effectiveness of the support provided; act as an advocate for the child and provide emotional support in addition to information. By far the most frequently reported aspect thought to facilitate their work was the quality of relationships established by the EP with the parents, children and other agencies DfES (2006). Parents commented on how this had enabled them to reveal sensitive information and receive difficult feedback.

Service Evaluations of Parental Views

Dowling and Leibowitz (1994) conducted semi-structured interviews with 18 families who had received EP support and found that parents were generally highly satisfied with the service they received. The most commonly expressed positive views were that the EP:

- Was accessible and gave their concerns appropriate consideration
- Took them seriously and acknowledged the legitimacy of their concerns
- Knew the procedures for securing support
- Mediated between the parents and school
- Provided an assessment, which gave insight into what was happening.

However, parents were less satisfied when time was rushed, or when they were unable to see the EP without the teacher being present. They were satisfied with the input provided but wanted more of it (see also DfEE, 2000; Scottish Executive, 2002 and DfES, 2006). There were some reservations about the impartiality and independence of the EP as an employee of the LA

(also Scottish Executive, 2002). More specifically, they felt that they had been given insufficient information about resources in the private sector. Pre-empting more recent findings parents wanted more information about what educational psychologists do and how they could contact them earlier on ("*before the problems 'blew up'*" - Dowling and Leibowitz, 1994, pp 247).

Anthun (2000) studied a number of EP services in Norway. He extracted four factors from the responses, which were *participation* in the service process (to be active partners), *courtesy* of the psychologists, the *effectiveness* of the services, and the feeling of *security* perceived by parents and the child. Moreover, the strongest service quality expectations were in the order reported here. Put more simply, parents wanted to be listened to, informed about people's intentions in respect to their child, feel secure during the process and end up with effective solutions to their child's difficulties. Parents' experiences of the service were generally positive. Amongst the criticisms were the lack of follow-up (23%), concern where they perceived conflict in their interaction with the EP (20%), frustration where they were given no concrete advice as to what to do (20%), unhappiness that they had been coerced into having their child referred (17%), and not being appropriately listened to (15%) (also reported by a few parents in the DfES, 2006, report). Parents seemed willing to wait for the EP to see their child but were frustrated by waiting between the referral and the initial contact.

Clearly some caution needs to be exercised when considering studies from other countries but the identification of parental views as falling into four factors provides an attractive framework for evaluation. It is also of note that in 47% of cases parents had referred their child, with only 33% of referrals coming from schools. This stands in contrast to the 70% of referrals coming from schools reported in Scotland (Scottish Executive, 2002) and implies more might be done to open access to parents.

Cuckle and Bamford (2000) conducted 30 telephone interviews and sent out 500 questionnaires to the parents of children who had recently been seen by an EP. This survey received only a 17% return. The majority of parents expressed satisfaction (or better) with the service they had received. Parents were generally pleased with the way assessments had been conducted, although some wanted this to be based more on direct contact with the child and less on the comments made by others. Expressions of satisfaction with the service included praise for professional sensitivity. They also found it particularly helpful to be given alternative ways to interpret their child's behaviour. Many felt better informed about the nature of their child's difficulties as a result of the involvement. The main criticisms of EP services were that they would have liked:

- *More parental involvement.* Parents needed reassurance that their contributions were valued and taken into account in the provision made to meet their child's needs.
- *More information.* Expectations about the service differed and dissatisfaction mainly concerned a lack of information about what was

- involved. A substantial number wanted more information about what was going to happen as a result of the involvement.
- *Earlier involvement of services.* Concerns were registered about the time taken by a school to recognise a difficulty and to make a referral.
 - *More support in schools.* Dissatisfaction often arose from inadequate funding to implement recommendations. Parents wanted to see more connectivity between advice and funding, so that schools could act on the suggestions made. By way of illustration, many parents would have liked more staff to implement programmes and reassurance that their children's needs would be met appropriately in school.
 - *General help and support.* Parents wanted more tangible and practical support, including support from groups who understood parents' problems.
 - *Less lengthy process.* Although many factors lie outside of the control of the EP, some parents were concerned about the time taken between the initial assessment and the issuing of a statement

The lessons Cuckle and Bamford (2000) took from this study were essentially that uncertainty is stressful and counter-productive to the fostering of a partnership. Hence parents needed better information about services and procedures. Firstly, they needed help to understand the roles of different services in order to avoid frustrations and confusion. Secondly, they needed to know about the stages of the code of practice, including, in the case of statutory assessment, the time scale and possible reasons for delays. They felt that the procedures needed to be explained by the school when difficulties are first identified and reassurance offered that the special needs of their child were not being ignored. If an EP became involved, parents needed to understand what and why information was being sought and the process that would be followed.

Dr Roger Norgate
Hampshire Educational Psychology Service Research & Evaluation Unit
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