
EVALUATION OF SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS PARENT PARTNERSHIP SCHEMES

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1. Introduction

The Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) included an element within the GEST (Grants for Education Support and Training) programme for three years (1994-95 to 1996-97) to encourage parent partnership in the area of special educational needs (SEN) and in the context of the 1994 Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs.

The main objectives for the three-year programme aimed at local education authorities (LEAs) and schools in England were:

'to encourage partnership between parents, LEAs, schools and voluntary bodies in the work of identifying, assessing and arranging provision for pupils with SEN, particularly but not necessarily all those who are statutorily assessed and have statements of SEN. The development of active partnership schemes, including the provision of information and advisory services for parents of SEN children and the identification of 'Named Persons'¹ is intended to reduce conflict and minimise the number of statutory SEN appeals'.

2. The Research Study

The research was commissioned by the DfEE to assess the impact of the schemes. The one-year study was carried out in 1996-1997 by Professor Sheila Wolfendale and Mrs. Gill Cook (Research Fellow) from the Psychology Department at the University of East London.

The research aims were to:

- *identify outcomes and provision of parent partnership schemes in a range of different circumstances*
- *identify the effects of the schemes upon parents of children with special educational needs as well as upon the LEA, school and other involved personnel*
- *identify factors that promote effective partnership practice*
- *make recommendations, based on these good practice indicators, as to how parent partnership schemes can be sustained.*

¹ Named persons are volunteers 'who can give parents information and advice on their child's special educational needs' (Code of Practice, page 128).

The research was primarily a qualitative study, utilising case-study methodology and a number of instruments designed to elicit specific information. Core data collection focussed on twenty-five case-study LEAs selected on a combination of characteristics and criteria. The Research Fellow visited each of these and, using a semi-structured interview schedule, interviewed the PPO, his/her line manager, the key SEN officer and the Principal Educational Psychologist. We explored their views on progress of their Parent Partnership Scheme (PPS), progress towards partnership and scheme future directions. She also held focus groups of parents in each LEA. Completed questionnaires were also sent to the researchers by a number of Named Persons in each LEA. Additionally, PPOs were asked to: a) provide information on referrals b) describe the range of their activities and contacts and c) send the researchers the documentation produced by their schemes/LEAs for parents on SEN assessment procedures and local provision.

3. The Findings

There is strong evidence that PPSs in the case-study LEAs have helped these LEAs to meet a significant number of GEST objectives, although there remain a number of areas where less progress is evident.

3.1 Activities common to all the case-study schemes

The LEAs have developed active partnership schemes, core activities of which include:

- i. the provision of information for parents of children with SEN. With only one exception, the LEA PPS has produced written documentation on statutory assessment procedures (under the 1996 Education Act) and on local SEN provision. The quality of the documentation is variable, but in contrast to findings from surveys during the 1980s, the LEAs are producing the material routinely. The researchers received sets of such documentation from 87 LEAs so we have a national context against which to appraise the case-study documentation
- ii. the provision of advisory services. All the case-study schemes have a designated PPO, who is usually the key point of contact. Advisory services provided by the schemes include a

telephone help-line and parental support in the form of mediation/conciliation in cases of actual or potential conflict between parents and the LEA over statutory assessment and placement decisions. A significant number of schemes operate home visiting as part of direct casework with parents

- iii. the identification, training and support of Named Persons (in some areas they are referred to as *befrienders*)

- iv. from their direct casework with parents, PPOs consider that their role is intended to '*reduce conflict and minimise the number of statutory SEN appeals*' and most perceive that they have either averted a parental appeal to the Special Educational Needs Tribunal or reduced the likelihood of conflict leading to a SEN Tribunal appeal. However, to date there is little direct PPO attendance at SEN Tribunal in an advocacy or parental representative capacity.

3.2 A range of PPS activities

The research findings confirm that, with regard to other aspects of the GEST objectives, practice is rather more divergent and patchy and objectives may not yet be fully achieved, such as:

- i. '*encouraging partnership ...*' the majority view of those PPOs, LEA professionals and parents who were interviewed in the course of the research is that partnership between parents, LEAs, schools and voluntary bodies is 'on the way' to being realised, but there were few instances of respondents being unequivocal that the partnership goals, in the spirit of the Code of Practice, have been achieved. Rather, the prevalent view is that progress towards partnership goals is dynamic and evolving; in other words, it is seen more as a process than, yet, an end-state (and see comments below)
- ii. the schools dimension: other concurrent developments have precluded rapid progress towards schools operating partnership practice with parents of children with SEN as outlined in the Code of Practice. According to this research and other sources, these include the fact that PPSs themselves took time to be established and regarded as their priority '*the provision of information and advisory services*'. Likewise, schools' priority during 1994-95, in response to

the 1993 Education Act, was to produce written and publicly available SEN policies. From our research, there are encouraging signs of increasing PPS contacts with schools, often via schools' Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO), and the provision of in-service training

iii. the GEST objectives encouraged LEAs to reach out to and encompass parents of children *'particularly but not necessarily all those who are statutorily assessed and have statements of SEN'*. The research provides clear data that the majority of PPOs become involved around Stage 4 of the Code of Practice (active consideration by the LEA as to whether or not to proceed to statutory assessment under the 1996 Education Act). Yet the data also provides signs that there is often referral (by parents directly or by others on their behalf) to PPSs at Stage 3 of the Code of Practice. The positive indications are that an increasing part of PPS activity is contact and liaison with schools, which could denote, for the future, increased involvement with parents whose children were not at Stages 4 and 5 of the Code of Practice

iv. monitoring and evaluation: the GEST objectives did not require PPSs to undertake these activities and the research did not intentionally seek information on this. However, as the research proceeded, the researchers were informed by scheme or LEA personnel about monitoring and evaluation exercises, and in some instances were offered copies of evaluation reports. The researchers observed that evaluation reports were often based on surveys of parental satisfaction with the PPS service, as well as on routine data collection about, say, referrals. They felt that this denoted a maturing PPS, one that has become established and is able and willing to take stock of itself.

4. Commentary on the Research Findings

4.1 There is strong evidential support for the view that PPSs have made a difference. Their advent in the LEA SEN milieu and culture has been a significant addition to local SEN provision and services and has catalysed thinking around how these services can be made

available most effectively to parents. Those parents who have availed themselves of the support on offer perceive the key post of PPO to be a positive source of information, support and reassurance.

4.2 Respondents generally felt that there is encouraging progress towards partnership but there is much yet to achieve, particularly in schools and also in encouraging more parents to avail themselves of the PPS services. The Named Persons scheme has been successful, but requires continuing investment of time, and training and support resources to maintain it effectively within LEAs.

The full report provides further details of the research process and findings, offers a quality assurance model for PPSs and concludes with recommendations within four main spheres of operation:

- the organisation and place of PPSs
- PPS role and activities
- relations with schools
- quality assurance and review.

Copies of the full report (RR34) - priced £4.95 - are available from DfEE Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ.

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