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Perceived responsibility for developing and maintaining home-school partnerships; the experiences of parents and practitioners

Abstract

Encouraging partnerships between parents of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and educational practitioners is a key theme in educational policy in England. However, there are unanswered questions regarding whether parents and teachers are mutually responsible for developing and maintaining these partnerships, as well as a paucity of literature eliciting the views of educational practitioners from an SEND context. This paper draws on a study which explored parent and teacher experiences of partnership, specifically focusing on perceptions of responsibility regarding the development and maintenance of these partnerships. In-depth interviews were conducted with 22 parents of children with a wide range of SENDs, and 15 educational practitioners. Findings highlighted that although there appeared to be perceived mutual responsibility regarding home-school communication, educational practitioners were overall held accountable for developing and maintaining partnerships, and were required to be trustworthy and approachable in order for positive home-school relationships to flourish.

Keywords: special educational needs; parents; practitioners; home-school relationships

Introduction

Encouraging parents and educational practitioners to form effective partnerships is a major concern of education policy within England, and has been for decades (Department for Education (DfE), 2015; 011; Department for Children, School and Families (DCSF), 2010; Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2007; Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), 1997). This is due to the suggested benefits that successful home-school partnerships have for parents, teachers and pupils, where communication and working together are the key focus of these relationships (Harris and Goodall, 2007; Reynolds, 2005; Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003).

Teachers are under more pressure than ever before (Galton and Macbeath, 2008), as well as a reduction in funding and resources, the marketisation of schools (Hicks, 2015) and recent SEND legislation further redefining SEND and consequently reducing classifications of 'typical development' (DfE, 2015). There are therefore immense pressures surrounding the relationships between parents of children with SEND and teachers, which affect partnership working. Nevertheless, a paucity of literature has explored perceptions of responsibility for developing and maintaining these partnerships. This is crucial to examine due to widely publicised parental dissatisfaction with home-school partnerships in both England and beyond (Broomhead, 2014; Hess *et al.*, 2006; Duncan, 2003). Information regarding who to direct interventions towards is therefore essential, which can be obtained via exploring parental and practitioner accountability for developing partnerships.

This study sought to understand parent and teacher perceptions of responsibilities for encouraging and maintaining home-school partnerships. The experiences of both parents and staff were elicited, due to the voices of educational practitioners having been neglected previously within the very specific context of SEND and partnership. Although this paper specifically refers to parent-teacher collaboration involving children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), the findings have wider implications for home-school partnerships more generally.

It is important to identify from the outset that partnership is defined and interpreted in many varying ways (Todd, 2007; Wolfendale, 1983). A wealth of attempts have been made to

define partnership, but there is no universally accepted definition due to the complexity of this concept. For example, partnership has been defined as individuals sharing a purpose, mutual respect, and the willingness to negotiate, as well as an exchange of knowledge and making decisions together (Cross, 1989; Pugh, 1989; Mittler and Mittler, 1983). More recently it has been suggested to be related to acquiring knowledge from other individuals involved (Westergårda and Galloway, 2010).

Furthermore, Vincent (2000, 5) defined partnership as the ‘actual, intended or, more often, ideal relationship between parents and teachers’. This definition is useful in the sense that it provides information about the frequent outcomes of home-school partnerships, in other words that partnership is expected but is not always reported to occur between parents and schools. On the contrary, it fails to identify any key characteristics of the concept and what it actually involves, which signifies the continuing issues related to defining partnership.

These issues regarding defining partnership are exacerbated by indications that policy within England which has explored this concept has failed to provide appropriate definitions (DfE, 2011; DCSF, 2010; Lamb, 2009; DfES, 2007; OfSTED, 2007), and instead assumes that partnership is collectively understood. For example bold, vague statements have been evident throughout policy previously such as ‘we will help professionals...work in partnership with parents’ (DfES, 2001, 4) and ‘it is important that schools work in partnership with all parents’ (DCSF, 2010, 32). These phrases are clearly difficult to interpret without being supported by a clear definition of partnership.

Nevertheless, based on a review of previous research, there is evident controversy regarding whether parents and practitioners are satisfied with home-school partnerships. In relation to SEND cases, both in England and elsewhere, several studies have proposed that parents of children with SEND have effective home-school partnerships with educational practitioners (Burton and Goodman, 2011; Spann *et al.*, 2003). For example, Spann *et al.* (2003), based on structured interviews with forty-five parents who had children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder in the US, identified that the majority of parents felt they were highly involved in

the development of their children's special educational provision, had effective partnerships with staff and engaged in successful communication.

On the contrary, the vast majority of literature in this area has suggested that parents of children with SEND do *not* have effective partnerships or communication with their children's schools (Broomhead, 2013; Peters *et al.*, 2008; Runswick-Cole, 2007; Whitaker, 2007; O'Connor *et al.*, 2005; Duncan, 2003; Russell, 2003; Todd, 2003; Case, 2000), with Hess *et al.* (2006) indicating that schools lack interest in developing partnerships with parents of children with SEND. For example, Lindsay and Dockrell (2004) identified that parents of children with SEND did not feel in partnership with their children's schools, whilst Hess *et al.* (2006) proposed that parents felt they did not have a voice when associating with educational professionals. However, it is evident that previous literature in this area has concentrated on eliciting the views of *parents*, subsequently neglecting the voices of educational practitioners in specific relation to SEND.

Although there is a paucity of research in this area which has obtained practitioner perspectives, this has not prevented research suggesting that the personal qualities of educational professionals influence the effectiveness of home-school partnerships. For example, literature has suggested that it is essential for staff to appear approachable and accessible, as this influences trust that parents place in practitioners (Centre for Social Justice, 2011; Hodge and Runswick-Cole, 2008; Knopf and Swick, 2007; Hess *et al.*, 2006; Stoner and Angell, 2006; Tschannen-Moran, 2004; Keyes, 2002). Trust is a major issue to consider, due to indications that it is a pre-requisite for developing collaborative relationships between parents and schools, although it is another concept which is difficult to define (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). However, Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000) stated that trust;

Is fundamental to functioning in our complex and interdependent society...in every facet of our lives, we are dependent on other people to behave in accordance with our expectations. It is imperative that we have confidence that our expectations of other people will be met

(Tschannen-Moran and Hoy, 2000,

549)

Tobias (2009), based on interviews with parents of children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder, identified that parents expressed satisfaction towards teachers who were approachable and projected a positive attitude to them and their children, even when parents wanted to discuss minor concerns. This was supported by Sheldon *et al.* (2010) who, based on interviews with sixteen mothers of children with SEND, found that when head teachers were perceived as approachable, accessible and caring, by being willing to listen to parental concerns, or providing additional support for parents despite being frequently busy, much trust was placed in them by parents.

On the other hand, there are unanswered questions regarding who is responsible for developing and maintaining home-school partnerships. For example, no investigation has examined whether parents need to appear trustworthy and approachable for positive partnerships to flourish, or whether this is solely the responsibility of educational practitioners. This is an essential area to examine, as if interventions are to be developed to improve partnerships then information regarding who to direct these interventions towards is crucial. Additionally, a paucity of research has elicited the experiences of educational practitioners, and has instead focused on parental experiences. It could be acknowledged that if one side of the partnership does not feel the partnership is working then, by definition, it is not, however the lack of voice given to educational practitioners is problematic considering home-school partnerships involve two 'sides', parents and teachers, and it is therefore important to consider both parties. Finally, a lack of literature has explored the concepts of trust and approachability from an English educational context, which is consequently a necessary area to examine due to potential cultural variation.

Based on the above, this paper discusses a study conducted in the North West of England, which investigated perceptions and experiences of home-school partnerships, more specifically exploring the perceived responsibilities held by parents of children with SEND and teachers with regards to developing and maintaining partnerships. The views of educational practitioners were elicited, as well as parental views, in an attempt to counterbalance the focus on parental experiences in previous research.

Methodology

The study detailed in this paper forms part of a wider study examining socio-emotional aspects of home-school relationships between parents of children with SEND and educational practitioners. The research was based on an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, which provided the opportunity to explore key experiences of participants in a detailed manner (Smith *et al.*, 2009). Although deemed to be a relatively ‘young’ approach to qualitative research (Larkin *et al.*, 2006, 105), IPA is informed by hermeneutics, phenomenology and ideography (Smith and Eatough, 2006), indicating that the methodology has well-grounded theoretical underpinnings.

Participants were 22 parents of children with a range of SENDs, and 15 educational practitioners employed at mainstream and special schools within the North West of England. Parents participating all had children formally recognised as having an SEND, including Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties, Down’s Syndrome, Cerebral Palsy, Autistic Spectrum Disorder and Behavioural Emotional and Social Difficulties. 10 of the children were educated in special schools, with 12 being educated in mainstream settings.

Educational practitioners participating in the study held a range of positions in mainstream and special school settings. This included head teachers, class teachers, Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENDCo’s), teaching assistants and home-school liaison officers. Their employment involved working with pupils with SEND, and consequently their parents, on a regular basis, therefore ensuring that the research questions were of significance to them. Seven practitioners were employed in mainstream schools at the time of the study, whilst the remaining eight were working in special (mainly BESD) school settings.

Two semi-structured interview schedules were produced; one for all parents and one for educational practitioners. Interviews with parents ranged in length from 30 minutes to over three hours, whilst interviews with practitioners were between 30 and 90 minutes. They focused on two central questions;

- (1) How do you feel about the partnerships that you have with parents of children with SEND/the teachers supporting your child?
- (2) How do you feel about communication with parents of children with SEND/teachers at your child's school?

With regards to data analysis, all interviews were transcribed in full and analysed utilising the five-stage IPA guidelines produced by Smith *et al.* (2009). It is essential to point out that a case-by-case analysis was conducted. In other words, stages one to four were completed for participant one, continuing to complete stages one to four for the remaining participants in turn, as advised by previous literature (Howitt and Cramer, 2008; Osborn and Smith, 2008). This is due to the idiographic nature of IPA (Smith et al, 2006; Smith, 2004). The five-stage IPA process is as follows;

Stage 1 *Immersion in the data*: involved reading and re-reading the transcript, as well as listening to the participant's audio-recording, to encourage familiarity with, and immersion in, the participant's experiences

Stage 2 *Initial noting*: resembled a free textual analysis, where any data of interest was commented on. Making descriptive comments (relating to the actual content of the transcript), linguistic comments (such as repetition, hesitation and laughter), and finally conceptual comments (interrogative notes with the use of theory and concepts)

Stage 3 *Developing emergent themes*: developing succinct statements to summarise segments of comments made during Stage 2. Reducing "the volume of detail...whilst maintaining complexity" (Smith et al, 2009, p. 91)

Stage 4 *Searching for connections across emergent themes*: involved combining themes (if they centred on a similar concept), or discarding them if they did not appear to be of relevance to the research questions. A table of super-ordinate and sub-

ordinate themes was then developed for the participant, with the table also providing evidence from the participant's original transcript to support the theme

Stage 5 Searching for connections across all interviews: involved the combining and relabelling of themes, with the end result being overall tables of super-ordinate and sub-ordinate themes for parents and practitioners

Findings

Interviews with parents of children with SEND and educational practitioners yielded the following key findings. Firstly, interviews highlighted that the more specific, day-to-day aspects of partnership (namely communication) were deemed to be the responsibility of parents *and* staff. However, developing and maintaining these partnerships as a whole were the responsibility of practitioners, and appeared to be influenced by trust and approachability. This questioned the phrase 'partnership', as well as the concept of mutual accountability, considering educational practitioners were predominantly responsible for sustaining partnerships with parents.

Home-school partnerships

Firstly, an apparent key factor influencing the effectiveness of home-school partnerships (in other words, school and home working together towards a shared purpose, Westergårda and Galloway, 2010; Wolfendale, 1983) related to whether the head teachers of the schools their children attended were viewed positively by parents. That is to say, parents who reported effective home-school relationships were extremely positive about the head teachers of their children's schools;

Lauren (parent):* the head teacher has been fantastic, he really is a good head...he really encouraged partnership to take place, and he's got an open door policy...he's fantastic, he's really good

Adele (parent):* the head teacher is absolutely fantastic, so yeah they're really, really good that way, they keep you really well-informed

Abby (parent):* it's just the most fantastic school ever, and I honestly can't speak more highly of it honestly... the head teacher is inspirational she really is, I mean she just goes above and beyond what you need

This suggested that the head teacher approach to matters such as SEND, partnership and inclusion influenced the whole-school approach to these issues, and consequently the approaches of other practitioners. This indicated that developing effective home-school partnerships between parents of children with SEND and professionals predominantly lay in the hands of head teachers; a 'top-down' approach.

Furthermore, practitioner approachability and trustworthiness (in other words, being dependent on others to behave in accordance with our expectations, Tschannen-Moran and Hoy, 2000) were also highlighted by parents and staff themselves as key factors for developing successful home-school partnerships;

Tara (parent):* I can walk into that school anytime I want and go into his classroom, they'll let you in, they've got absolutely nothing to hide

Janet (parent):* they've got an open door policy at the school, they're really flexible about meeting...they're really good about that, every teacher she's had has been like that

Elaine (mainstream SENDCo):* making yourself available to talk to parents is important, you've got to be approachable

Jackie (mainstream SENDCo and class teacher):* the most important thing is to try to build a relationship between you and the family to one of trust and frankness

John (mainstream head teacher and SENDCo):* you have to build up that trust

Jean (teacher at BESD schools):* when parents get to know you and they know that they can trust you, that's when a relationship develops but it takes time, it does take time for them to trust you

Steven (head teacher at BESD school):* it's about working at that relationship and getting the confidence and trust

The effectiveness of home-school partnerships therefore appeared to be strongly dependent on the approaches of educational practitioners. That is to say, staff needed to be approachable and trustworthy to build rapport with parents; factors which perhaps did not need to be reciprocated by parents themselves. This therefore questioned the phrase 'partnership' and whether mutual reach (Warin, 2009) between parents and professionals was occurring, considering parent-school relations were heavily influenced by the approaches of practitioners. However, parents may not have needed to appear trustworthy as practitioners had less emotional investment in the situation. In other words, practitioners were not dependent on the trust of parents to carry out their job or engage with them, whereas much more was at stake for parents; the education and well-being of their children. In addition to this, parent-teacher pairings occur by assignment as opposed to choice (Keyes, 2002), and initiative must therefore come from the latter. However, it is difficult to establish from these responses what actions or interactions from practitioners actually led parents to trust them, other than practitioners 'needing' to be available and approachable. This has links with trust being an elusive yet desirable moral goal (Hinshaw, 2007).

Nevertheless, these findings indicated that educational practitioners had many socio-emotional responsibilities with regards to appearing approachable and trustworthy to parents, in addition to their key role of educating their pupils. This also reinforced the importance of obtaining both parent and staff perspectives when exploring home-school partnerships. On the other hand a specific element of partnership between parents and teachers, home-school communication, was not deemed to be the sole responsibility of practitioners. This is discussed below.

Home-school communication

Firstly, the vast majority of parents reported satisfaction with home-school communication (in other words, the written and/or verbal exchange, both formal and informal, between parents and practitioners);

Rebecca (parent):* I can't think I'd need any more communication, and they send home newsletters and things like that

Louise(parent):* there's two way communication going on

Abby (parent):* I can't fault the communication and you can ring up whenever...and there's a parents' group that's run by the secretary, there's parent liaison stuff

This was promising and was supportive of the work by Spann *et al.* (2003), who identified that eighty per cent of parents with children with SEND were highly or moderately satisfied with the communication that they had with their child's school. On the other hand, it contrasts with literature which identified that parents of children with SEND were dissatisfied with home-school communication (Peters *et al.*, 2008; Runswick-Cole, 2007; Whitaker, 2007; Hess *et al.*, 2006; Paradice and Adewusi, 2002). However this could be because, surprisingly, many parents suggested that *they* were responsible for developing and maintaining this communication with educational professionals;

Michelle (parent):* we've always instigated a lot of the meetings, we said we wanted an annual review but we wanted a termly meeting as well and I think that's really worked, we suggested it

Sandra (parent):* the communication is what you make of it, it's what you create as a parent, you can't sit back and say no one tells me anything because it's up to you to say can you come and see me, or can you ring me then,so if you want to improve the communication it's up to the parent, you can't blame the school

This was interesting, in that parents accepted responsibility for developing and maintaining communication with staff, indicating that if there were issues with communication then it was down to parents to resolve them. This contrasted with practitioners themselves, who identified that *they* were responsible for keeping in contact with parents. In relation to parents of children with BESD, this often involved staff paying for transport to ensure parents came to the school for annual review meetings (or teachers travelling to parents themselves);

John (mainstream head teacher and SENDCo):* I think school has to lead with communication...initially it's got to be the school, because parents are a little bit intimidated sometimes

Daniel (head teacher at BESD school):* so you'll get 'I haven't got enough money to get a taxi down this morning, so I can't come into school to speak to you' and well Mum you only live up the road you don't need to get a taxi, or you can hop on a bus 'well I don't know what bus comes' so you get that sort of thing...and more often than not if they've come on the bus I'll give them the money to get home with, or I will go out there instead

The above findings could have indicated that there was conflict between who was deemed responsible for maintaining home-school communication, with parents and teachers failing to recognise that the other was more responsible for continuing contact. However, a more understandable explanation is that parents and educational practitioners were *both* accountable for communicating with one another, which highlighted the importance of mutual responsibility with regards to communication.

Discussion

This study qualitatively explored the perceived responsibilities held by parents of children with SEND and educational practitioners, with regards to developing and maintaining home-school partnerships. Several significant findings were noted. For the more 'day-to-day' aspects of home-school partnerships, such as maintaining communication, parents and practitioners appeared to be mutually accountable. However educational professionals appeared to be solely responsible for developing and maintaining partnerships as a whole, concentrating on the socio-emotional aspects of the relationships, in other words approachability and trust, to encourage parents to engage with them. The implications of this for practice, and future practice, are as follows. Often interventions are directed towards parents, with insinuations that they are hard to reach, (Crozier and Davies, 2007). The study reported in this article necessitates how educational practitioners should reflect on their own practice and opportunities for socio-emotional exchange with parents, as well as the approachability of themselves and the school. This is especially important within an SEND context, where home-school relationships are frequently emotionally charged. Nevertheless,

this once again reinforces the demands placed on educational practitioners alongside their educational responsibilities.

The head teacher approach to SEND and partnership matters had a significant influence on the effectiveness of home-school partnerships. This indicated that developing effective partnerships with parents may lie in the hands of head teachers, with head teachers being in an excellent position to influence the importance placed on forming partnerships with parents. Based on this, it is essential that head teachers set appropriate examples regarding how to form positive relationships with parents, and ensure that SEND and partnership are highly regarded issues. Nevertheless the further responsibilities that this places on head teachers, in addition to their many current pressures, are crucial to acknowledge, with Tucker (2010, 68) suggesting that there is a 'growing list of activities and services that head teachers are expected to provide'. Head teacher approaches to SEND and partnership are also evidently embedded within their own experiences, values and attitudes towards the role of parents and SEND. Nonetheless, head teachers need to ensure that SEND and partnership matters are conveyed as being of key importance.

Moreover, the importance of practitioner approachability and trustworthiness highlighted in this study supports much previous literature (Centre for Social Justice, 2011; Hodge and Runswick-Cole, 2008; Knopf and Swick, 2007; Hess *et al.*, 2006; Stoner and Angell, 2006; Tschannen-Moran, 2004; Keyes, 2002; Whalley, 1997). For example a US investigation by Shelden *et al.* (2010), based on interviews with sixteen mothers of children with SEND, found that mothers placed much trust in teachers when they were approachable and willing to listen to parental concerns. Additionally, Tobias (2009) identified parental satisfaction when teachers were deemed to be approachable and positive. Nevertheless, the current study's findings add to this previous research by questioning whether mutual responsibility for maintaining partnerships occurs, as educational practitioners interviewed appeared to be largely accountable for developing and maintaining these partnerships, rather than parents.

Based on this, it is evident that the concepts of approachability and trust are essential foundations to build positive relationships on, which educational practitioners must strive for.

This highlights the following question; *can we expect all practitioners to form trusting relationships with parents?* Perhaps not. However, we can expect them to *convey* trust by ensuring that they are approachable and available to parents. Simple strategies such as meeting parents at the school gates to discuss issues, ‘spending time’ with parents (whilst acknowledging restrictions), and an ‘open-door’ policy (which parents in this study identified they were satisfied with) could convey these personal qualities. On the other hand, it is again important to recognise the additional socio-emotional responsibilities that this places on educational professionals.

Finally although contrasting to much previous literature (Peters *et al.*, 2008; Runswick-Cole, 2007; Whitaker, 2007; Hess *et al.*, 2006), it is beneficial that most parents and educational practitioners were satisfied with home-school communication, and were taking mutual responsibility for developing and maintaining it. Perhaps it is therefore necessary to encourage parents to take responsibility for developing and maintaining partnerships more generally, in addition to communication, rather than solely holding educational practitioners accountable for these responsibilities.

This study has provided a qualitative exploration of parent and teacher understandings of home-school partnerships, and perceptions of accountability for maintaining and developing these partnerships. As much previous literature had identified parental dissatisfaction surrounding home-school partnerships and, more specifically, parent-teacher communication, this study provided the opportunity to investigate ideas of responsibility for maintaining partnerships, providing information on who to direct interventions at when attempting to improve home-school relations. Interviews indicated that parents and educational practitioners were not mutually accountable for developing and maintaining home-school relationships; in other words forming partnerships did not appear to be ‘two-way’, as professionals were predominantly responsible. Nevertheless, the more day-to-day aspects of partnership, such as communicating with one another, were the perceived responsibility of both parents and staff. These findings suggested that although parents had some responsibility for communication, practitioners were accountable for encouraging and managing parental engagement on the whole, implying that interventions intending to

improve home-school partnerships need to be directed towards the actions of educational professionals. Although this study specifically focused on SEND, the implications of these findings are of relevance to an international audience whose work involves considering or actively forming partnerships with parents (regardless of whether they have children with SEND).

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