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Disability and the Restructuring of Welfare: Labour's Approach to Special Educational Needs

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Is there a way out of the myths of parent partnership?

A consideration of the possibilities parent partnership services might have in creating authentic partnership.

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Abstract

Parent Partnership Services are now required in every LEA in England and Wales. Research has documented parents' experience of dissatisfaction when engaging with services responsible for providing for children's special educational needs, and differences in priorities and assumptions between parents and professionals. The analysis in this paper suggests that Parent Partnership Services have the potential to make the system work in a more understandable, friendly, respecting and involving way for parents. Evidence is drawn from interviews in Newby LEA with twenty-four parents and both LEA and voluntary agency Parent Partnership Officers. However, tensions and assumptions were identified which suggest a limit to authentic partnership possibilities. The political nature of the discourse of partnership continues to be ignored. There remains little awareness of the need to negotiate the meaning of partnership. Partnership was assumed to be a 'good', with little understanding of the need to work in ways that avoid its potentially disempowering effects. Parent Partnership Officers represent a further tier of 'professionals', which for some parents remove them from those who are the decision-makers. Parent Partnership Services remove from schools the arena of parent partnership when a child is undergoing statutory special needs assessment. Such services move this area of partnership into a space between schools and the LEA – which may distance responsibility of schools to take seriously the need to engage with parents as partners.

Introduction

Authentic partnership is assumed in this paper to be that defined by Sheila Wolfendale:

parents are active and central in decision-making generally and its implementation;
parents are perceived as having equal strengths and equivalent expertise;
parents are able to contribute to, as well as receive, services;
parents share responsibility, thus they and professionals are mutually accountable.

(Wolfendale, 1985, p14).

Similarly, Gillian Pugh has consistently emphasised shared purpose, mutual respect and the willingness to negotiate (Pugh, 1989). Cross (1989) defines partnership as exchange of knowledge, common purpose and joint decision-making.

Authentic partnership has been difficult to achieve. This paper considers issues from literature and how these have been addressed in current government policy. The policy is discussed by reviewing policy discourses since parent partnership schemes were introduced in the early 1990's. The extent to which such initiatives are able to address the issues raised in the literature is discussed via data from a Parent Partnership Service offered by a LEA in the North of England, Newby, and with reference to a national survey of Parent Partnership Schemes (Wolfendale & Cook, 1997).

Conceptualising the Relationships between Parents and Professionals: the Literature

The image of parents held by professionals and the defining guise of the relationship professionals and parents assume they will have with each other has changed over the last two centuries. Prior to the 1970s parents were primarily regarded as a "problem" (DES, 1955, p77). Parents were either viewed as in need of psychiatric counselling to cope with grief from the birth of a child with severe learning difficulties (Read, 1985, p17, Sandow et al., 1987, p12) or they were required to change, being seen as the main influence on their child's response to school (DES, 1967, Evans, 1975, p14). In the 1970s parents started to be viewed in guises other than "problematic": as teachers in a compensation (Barton & Moody, 1981, Thomas, 1978), or "transplant" model (Jeffree, 1980, quoted in Mittler & McConachie, 1983, p9, Topping, 1986). As clients, parents were allowed an honorary role of teacher in order to provide information and to carry out the advice of professionals, to enable professionals to use parents as change agents (Cameron, 1986, Daly et al., 1985, Gliedman & Roth, 1981, p231, Newson, 1976) (Clarke, 1982, Cunningham & Davis, 1985, Cunningham & Sloper, 1978, Mittler & McConachie, 1983, Mittler & Mittler, 1982). Such involvement also lies within a 'compensation' view of parents, casting them both as a part of the problem and as professional aides. However, a 'deficit myth' continues to underlie parent/ professional relationships, expressed through the belief that large groups of parents are lacking in interest or ability to help and support their children. A deficit discourse underlies almost every initiative to involve parents. Conversely, 'professional practices' are treated as non-problematic (Barton & Moody, 1981, p135).

Research suggests that dissatisfaction with professionals, and differences between parents' and professionals' priorities and assumptions about their relationship, have remained common experiences over the last thirty years (Cross, 1989, Galloway et al., 1994, Piper & Howlin, 1992, Sandow, 1994, Sandow et al., 1987, Thomas, 1978). As late as 1987 Sandow, Stafford and Stafford found little evidence that either parents or professionals were trying to build partnership or saw it as a goal. However, Cross's (1989) research indicated that partnership was a goal of parents but not of professionals in her research tracing the path to the inclusion of parents in the Scottish statutory system of assessing children special educational needs - of recording. Professionals looked for a restricted involvement of parents, whilst parents felt that not all information was shared and there was little mutual responsibility for the child's education.

Sandow, Stafford and Stafford (1987) found parents were concerned, and rated as number one, that the professional should keep in contact with their child and know their child, whereas professionals rated this as tenth. Professionals assumed parents would be negative towards remedial and special provision and need convincing, but parents indicated this was not their view (Sandow et al., 1987, p146). Rather than partners, educational psychologists saw their role in terms of advice and information givers (Sandow et al., 1987, p150). Sandow et al (op cit) summarised that professionals presume parents "seek specialist expertise, information and advice, and above all a guaranteed solution to the problem", but found that "parents seek individual attention to their child's problem based on close knowledge of the child gained by frequent contact with him" (p149). However, there were some similarities in perspective: both parents and professionals had minimal concern for integration and both felt the assessments took too long.

Galloway, Armstrong and Tomlinson's (1994) carried out research into twenty-nine children going through the statutory system in England of assessing children special educational needs (sometimes referred to as 'statementing'). All children were deemed to have behavioural difficulties. Parents thought educational psychologists' reports did not reflect the open discussions they had held with educational psychologists in which the child's behaviour problems were considered in the context of the school's own shortcomings and lack of LEA resources. Parents felt reports concentrated on within-child factors like psychometric tests that had not been discussed with them, leaving

many parents "bewildered and resentful". This situation can be explained by the observation that the educational psychologists were acting for different clients in each situation - as the parent advocate and advisor in their discussions of the shortcomings of the school, and as LEA representative in their report to the panel.

Parents assumed that professionals communicated to each other and passed on important information parents had provided about the child (Gascoigne & Wolfendale, 1995, p47). Parents expected that what they said would be noted, communicated and acted upon - particularly in primary schools. When that did not happen it suggested to parents that their input was not valued. Parents assumed they were tapping into an existing partnership among the professionals: it was a shock to find professionals worked in an isolated manner in which channels of communication were fraught with difficulties of protocol, practical difficulties and politics.

A key assumption is that partnership is understood in the same way by all partners and is clearly defined – however it is rarely defined in any documents supporting partnership (DES, 1967, DFEE, 1997, Warnock, 1978). Attempts to delineate parent and professional roles seem to flounder on a lack of distinctiveness in role (Mittler, 1979) or on differences in role which suggest several possibilities for conflict (Gascoigne & Wolfendale, 1995). A further myth is that partnership is an unquestioned good. However, research suggests that partnership might disempower parents by making it more likely that parents go along with the professional view of the situation (Armstrong, 1995) (Galloway et al., 1994). Some parents felt their contribution was only listened to when they were confirming professional views, and professionals seemed to direct them towards a consensus. Norwich (1993) found educators (head teachers, teachers, SENCOS, support staff and educational psychologists) in the UK and USA recognised ideological dilemmas associated with identification, integration and curriculum, but not parent professional relationships. This suggested that partnership was accepted into the articulated professional role, but was seen as unproblematic.

A further damaging assumption is that parents represent an homogenous group whose needs can be met. However, even if there were such a possible identifiable group of people called parents, there is little evidence of attempts to base policy on actual parent needs and views (Hughes, 1993) (Hughes et al., 1994). Many parents of children with

special educational needs are required, by the need to liaise with teachers over the assessment and education of their child, to have a relationship with schools that is different to that of other parents, and one they may not wish to have. Tomlinson (1981a) distinguishes between parents that have been "sent for and told" about their children's difficulties from those who have been "consulted". Parents of a child with severe learning difficulties (Sandow et al., 1987, p25) are likely to have a very different relationship to professionals from those with a child who has a reading difficulty first discussed when the child is 6 years old. Parents also vary in the possibility of drawing upon the resources of pressure groups. In the area of special educational needs parent characteristics (such as level of confidence and level of education) and characteristics of the child's learning difficulty interact to differentially empower parents (Gascoigne & Wolfendale, 1995, chapter 2, Riddell et al., 1994).

It is in this context of multiple difficulties in the relationships between parents and professionals that government policy has looked to influencing parental participation in decision making about children's special educational needs. Research has suggested relationships that often fall short of authentic partnership. This paper outlines the development of the policy initiative to evolve parent partnership services before looking at the possibilities offered by such services and their limitations.

Parent Partnership Services – Labour's Approach

The main governmental response to this problematic area has been Labour's initiative to develop Parent Partnership Services. These had their genesis in the previous administration. In England, parent partnership projects were partly funded by the Conservative government through the GEST scheme (Grants for Education Support and Training) for three years from September 1993. The government criteria at the time (listed below) suggested a particular perspective partnership:

- ◆ the reduction of conflict between parents and the LEA;
- ◆ the provision of information to parents about special educational needs and about various aspects of assessment;
- ◆ the achievement of increasing partnership with voluntary agencies;
- ◆ the recruiting and training of 'named persons' to support parents; and

- ◆ the inclusion of specific measures to increase the participation of parents who had previously been less involved in decision making.

(see DFEE 1993, 1994 and 1995)

Funding for such schemes was withdrawn after three years, and many LEAs were unable to support them. Labour's Green Paper, 'Excellence for all children. Meeting Special Educational Needs' (DFEE, 1997), published in October 1997, signalled that 'Parent Partnership Services' would be a key plank in their policy for meeting children's special educational needs and that the Standards Fund would be used to expand the number and scope of such services. They highlighted three dimensions: choice, entitlement and partnership. Choice was coded and limited – since parents were expected to choose mainstream provision, and the government aim was to increase choice within mainstream for children with special educational needs. Entitlement referred to parents being permitted to know what schools would be able to do to meet their child's special educational needs - but not entitlement in terms of specific kinds or levels of provision. The section on partnership contained an interesting mixture of discourse. There was an assertion that schools need parents' knowledge about children in order to make the right decision. Parents were to be empowered to work with the school and local services to ensure their child's needs are properly identified and met. An independent advisor was to be available to all parents whose needs are being formally assessed (previously known as a named person, (first mentioned in the Warnock report: DES, 1978). The government document that followed the green paper, Meeting Special Educational Needs: A Programme of Action was published in England in November 1998. Plans made in this document are referred to in guidance for the SEN and Disability Act 2001, particularly the requirement for LEAs to make arrangements for parent partnership services. The LEA may provide the services themselves or may contract the service to the voluntary sector, and must publicise the services to parents and schools. Such services were to be in place by January 2002. The 2001 Code of Practice suggested a new emphasis on parents, with a very early chapter devoted to 'Working in Partnership with Parents', and detailed guidance defining parental responsibility, key principles for working in partnership with parents, and standards for effective parent partnership services. The emphasis in the Code of Practice is on flexible services, the 'empowering' of parents to play an informed and

active role in children's education, networking and collaboration with other services, and the neutrality of advice and information.

But how likely was it that parent partnership services would be able to encourage authentic partnership? Evidence is used from one parent partnership project in its first year of operation, set up during the time of the previous government. This is considered alongside the findings of a national survey of parent partnership services (Wolfendale & Cook, 1997).

Newby Case Study Research Data – and its Context

I was involved in Newby LEA's parent partnership scheme from September 1994 - September 1995, whilst also working as an educational psychologist (EP) for the same LEA, in the North of England. I worked 0.3 as an LEA parent partnership officer (with another educational psychologist working with me, for a day a week, in the same role), 0.2 as an educational psychologist, and 0.5 days a week as a lecturer at Newcastle University. At the same time a local voluntary agency, Disability Support, had started to look at ways it could support parents of children with special educational needs. The two EP Parent Partnership Officers (hitherto referred to as EP PPOs) worked closely with Disability Support to develop the LEA service. Money was found by Disability Support to employ its own PPO, and two people were appointed in a job share, with the EP PPOs involved in the selection process. The voluntary agency PPOs are hitherto referred to as DS PPOs.

Data drawn upon in this paper was from a variety of interviews documents and notes relating to Newby's parent partnership scheme. An interview survey of parent perspectives on statutory assessment was carried out to inform the policy of the EP PPOs. Interviews were also carried out with the other EP PPO, with the two DS PPOs in the same LEA, and with the Director of Disability Support. Account was taken of project documents, notes of all meetings and project activities.

Looking for Partnership in a Parent Partnership Project

Evidence from the project documents and interviews suggested that partnership was now clearly on the agenda for both LEA and voluntary agency professionals. However, it was not a concept with which the 24 parents, interviewed as part of the project, were

very familiar. Interviews with parents took place prior to any parent partnership scheme being available in Newby LEA. However, an important feature of Newby's educational psychology service was that the educational psychologists already saw themselves as doing a lot to support parents. Letters from the LEA concerning the statutory assessment process known as 'statementing' were always delivered to parents by the educational psychologist to give parents an opportunity to talk about the process. The draft 'statement' of special educational needs, a legal document setting out a children's needs was also delivered and discussed with parents in their home.

The children of the parents interviewed attended mostly mainstream primary (13), special (8), and only three attended mainstream secondary with support. The children represented a random 20% of all those who had had a statement confirmed by Newby LEA in the previous school year.

Parents were given a one hour semi-structured interview at a venue of their choosing – usually their home. Parents chose whether, if there were two parents, both should be present, and in all cases they chose to have one parent interviewed. Parents were asked about what had happened during the assessment and their views of the different stages.

Varied questions were asked about the extent to which views had been included and parents had been informed – to investigate various aspects of partnership. It was believed important to use the word partner in an interview question. This term is used so often in policy and literature but little was documented in the literature about what it meant to parents. However, since partnership can mean so many different things, more specific questions about aspects of involvement in the assessment were asked first.

Newby Parent Views on Partnership

The results suggested a complex picture. Assessing whether parents feel partners involves looking both at their involvement and at their views of various aspects of the assessment process – and the experience was very different for each parent. General results are presented with some verbatim responses to indicate the complexity of views parents have about the assessment of their child, and, associated with this, the complexity of issues involved in assessing partnership.

No parent interviewed said they disagreed with the assessment going ahead and only two said it had come as a surprise. Most (14) said they had known their child had special needs since they were very young, either a toddler or in first school or early primary.

Parents were asked a general open question about what happened during the assessment. Eight said that what had happened had been OK, and seven others mentioned specific visits to a doctor or the EP. They were not asked detailed questions about what they thought about what happened during the assessment because most seemed quite vague about what it had involved. Parents might remember going to a place, say the medical centre, but not whom their child saw, or what happened. Many parents in the sample answered the questions relating more to the present, or to the whole time they had worried about their child, and had an unclear idea of the actual assessment period and what it entailed, but five parents seemed to have a particularly unclear understanding of the process.

These five parents could answer either none or very few of the initial questions in the interview, so the questions were abandoned early on. All five knew that their child had extra help in school, and three could answer questions about their views about their child's education. However, none had any clear idea of the assessment process, and could not remember letters and reports or visits. One had a lot to say about how the school was caring for her child, who had severe learning difficulties, and felt the teachers and the doctor did not enough listen to her views - such as the way she should be fed, her need for a calliper, or that she should use the computer more. Another remembered the EP, and had been pleased he had written her ideas down since she felt it was easier to say what she thought than to write. However, she did not know what a statement was, did not remember the letters or reports. Another could only remember the immediate present, and questions about letters, reports, etc. she related to the past week, not the statement period. However, she felt she had nagged the head teacher and education to get the help she wanted, was satisfied with the outcome, and to this extent did not seem powerless. Another parent had had so many visits from different professionals that she did not read any of the letters and she asked her daughter to deal

with it all. A fifth child was living with a foster mother who did not know anything about the child's statement, just that he attended a special school.

Parents were asked various questions to find their views of the outcome of the assessment. Sixteen parents were satisfied with the outcome of the assessment, and five were not satisfied. However, when questioned further, nine of those who had said they were satisfied said they still had major reservations about their child's educational provision. Many of the reservations were to do with feeling they did not know how things were going, but others had more specific concerns.

For example, one parent was pleased with their child getting up to three hours extra help, but felt hardly informed about progress, and was worried that her child was being sneered at by friends and given over simplified work. This parent was also unsure if he was actually getting the help and frightened that if she complained he would be moved to a secondary special school.

Another parent said:

I don't know how its going. Worried he'll get worse, the kids at the unit are rough

Half the parents (11), thought the assessment had come at the right time for their child, but nine felt it should have happened sooner. Similarly, ten parents thought the time taken by the assessment was satisfactory, but eleven thought it took too long. One parent was pleased the assessment took a long time since she felt the young age of her child meant that a longer time was needed to assess the child's needs, to give the child time to respond to interventions and to develop. We looked at whether the parents who felt the assessment had taken too long were those whose assessments had taken longer than the six months advised and now required by the code of practice. Five of the parents who said the assessment had taken too long had official completion times of six months or less. Their comments suggested that they were complaining about a general delay in something being done for their child, not simply in the official assessment time, and that they thought of the time from when their child was first identified as having special education needs as the start of the assessment. Indeed I would suggest that many parents had little idea of the official time their child's assessment took. One parent thought they had filled in the parent advice form two years

ago, but the official completion time of this particular assessment was given by the LEA as four months.

A third of the parents (8) felt the reports were satisfactory. Parents' comments about the reports were pertinent and interesting. One said that the report did not show their child in a bad enough light, but another said that it was very hard looking at bad things written about their child. Another found it hard in the words to find their child, not that the report was inaccurate, but that it did not seem to give a real picture of their child. For a parent whose son has severe learning difficulties and had exceeded predictions about how long he would live, the outcome of the assessment was having what they felt about him and his condition written down on paper. He was already at his school so the assessment did not affect his placement. However, the parent did feel that the statement may have a bearing on what happens when he is 19 years and leaves school.

Parents were asked whether they were able to give their opinion of their child's needs. Eighteen remembered being asked for their views, and all eighteen referred to the form they had filled in, often with the help of the educational psychologist or a teacher. One parent said the EP had wrote everything down and they had been able to say all they wanted to. six parents felt the level of information give satisfactory, whilst four felt it had not been satisfactory. Eleven said the educational psychologist had explained things to them, and four of these had also had the process explained by the teacher or head teacher. Ten parents said they had questions about the process, and nine of these said the questions were answered. Five said they had not had any questions. Due to the system used by North Tyneside pupil support, it is likely that an EP had explained the process to all parents. Most parents could not give very detailed answers about ways the information could have been improved, and to obtain such detailed answers they would probably have needed to have been interviewed during the process of assessment, or soon after its completion.

One parent felt very confident about the system since her husband is in education. She felt they had enough information, and that everything the LEA gave her was enough. The EP was very approachable, explained things and answered questions as it all happened. This parent felt very confident now about her views about her child and her ability to be more equal with the professional. She said that it would have been different

if her son had been statemented at the age of three "*when you feel everyone else knows more*".

Parents were asked to suggest improvements in the system. Just under half those interviewed (10) said they would like either more information, or ideas of questions to ask the various professionals. One parent said "*you don't know what to ask half the time - but EP told us everything - if it hadn't been for her I'd have know nothing - always getting letters*".

Another parent said:

"Parents should know before review meetings what decisions are in mind and the extent of problems so that it doesn't come as a shock. Worry was terrible. Reports before as well. There was not a copy for me to take home, no time to digest reports in the meeting. Came home feeling I should have said that."

Parents were asked whether they would have liked someone independent from the LEA, such as another parent or someone from a voluntary group, to talk to during the assessment. In other words they were being asked if they would have liked, in retrospect, a named person. Ten said they would have liked someone in such a role whilst eleven said they would not, and the remaining parents did not know. Of those who would, five wanted this person to be another parent, three someone from a voluntary group and two someone else (ie aunt, church member). Of those who did not want a named person, six said they could talk to their psychologist (or teacher or educational welfare officer), one did not see any point in talking to someone who did not have any influence with the local authority and the remaining parents did not give further explanation of their views. One said a named person would be useful if the child had been more borderline, but there was no doubt that their child needed a school for children with severe learning difficulties.

Just under half the parents interviewed (11) would have gone to a support meeting of parents all starting assessments at the same time, but four of these had reservations about attending such a meeting. Those who would not wish to go to such a meeting, and those who would but with reservations, gave reasons that were to do with maintaining privacy. One felt she would make a fool of herself at a meeting.

On the direct question of whether parents felt a partner in the process, eleven of the twenty-four said they did feel a partner, six did not, and seven did not know. Four felt they could have been more included as a partner, whilst seven felt partnership could not have been better.

Parents said they would give the following advice to a friend going through the assessment:

Push for everything, don't give up

Go to the school yourself. Don't let it go on too long. Try to get help soon.

Keep an eye on your child. Keep him close.

Grit your teeth and hang on. It's not worth it - hope you get more than we did

Get an independent report and ask around

Ring my psychologist. I'd tell her what I went to and I'd only give advice if asked

Not to worry - they know what they're doing. At the end of the day it's your decision

To go along with it - it does help your child

In the early stages try to find out as much as you can. Insist on talking to the people involved.

Not to worry but to go ahead.

Be totally honest about what your child can do and what his needs are

Be patient. Work with the professionals. Listen very carefully. Co-operate together.

Find out more information about what assessment means

Parent interviews indicate major needs for further support when a child is subject to assessment of special educational needs. A significant minority of those interviewed (5) had little idea at all about the assessment. Others indicated varying needs for information and more personal needs for support through a worrying process.

Perspectives on the Role of the PPO

Research interviews with parents suggested a wide scope to improve the support and information given to parents in many ways. Interviews with Parent Partnership Officers

looked at how they carried out their role in order to investigate the possibilities of this role for authentic partnership. Role perceptions were looked at in some depth to enable more theoretical reflection on the possibilities of the role in general terms. One hour semi-structured interviews were carried out with each PPO. Findings showed complex but important differences in how each saw their role. Espoused roles of all PPSs seemed to be similar. However, conflict over the management of individual parents indicated differences in role perspective.

One DS PPO saw her role in terms of advocacy, in terms of "giving people the opportunity to find out the information so they have the voice" (interview, p5). She described listening to parents, over two meetings, to provide what parents were asking for. She saw herself as a professional advocate, able to summarise the parents' views, without taking sides with the parents or the LEA. The other DS PPO saw herself as having a flexible role with different parents. For example, she provided "emotional support" for one parent who felt assessment to be a battle, but who was well able to write her own letters. She provided help in understanding the paperwork for another parent. With another parent she attended meetings, and her role was to ask questions if jargon was used. She stated that she did not argue points for the parent since this would be likely to "disempower her more" (interview, p6). She described her presence in meetings as providing parents with a kind of armour: "Because they felt they had so much against them, and they wanted to show they had somebody on their side" (interview, p7). Her personal test of her involvement was: "have I made them feel better in some way, have I made this frustrating, difficult, complicated process, plus all the other emotional package that comes with it...." (interview, p22). She made a distinction between her normal role with parents and her role with a parent she was representing at a tribunal. In the latter, she had a sense of taking over, sorting out the paperwork, and making a judgement about the child's needs.

For the educational psychologist working in partnership with parents was central to her work and was how she would approach any other person. Involvement was the same as partnership. Partnership involved: honouring the difference in roles; not deskilling oneself as a professional; and recognising parents' superior level of engagement with their child. She gave the example of the way she supported parents in writing their advice (the parent report) for the statement:

I'm often a scriptwriter for parents, and I use their words, because they're often orally good, but would be terrified by the actual writing, or they have very good insight. I've just recently done one with a parent and we read through what we'd agreed, and I'd done the writing. And I said, it sounds good, doesn't it. She said, yes, and she said, I wouldn't have thought any of that was relevant, in other words, whether he sleeps and what he eats, and all this sort of thing...It's lively,So that is an empowering experience.

(EP interview, p19)

However, the EP PPO and one of the DS PPS's disagreed with the particular role adopted by the other DS PPO. The EP PPO compared compared her own role with the (in her view) "deskilling" way that, she believed, the other DS PPOs worked with parents on the same task:

.....She says, oh, you can't put that, this would be a better way of putting it. You can't say, he can't count from one to five, you say, he has poor numerical skills. So you don't actually, you put down what you think would get what the best outcome for that child.....Nothing to do with the parents, it's getting the procedure good

(EP PPO interview, p18)

The implication is that the EP PPO understood the DS PPO to believe that parent advice should be written like professional advice in order to obtain more resources from the LEA:

... getting something out of the authority. And if you've done really good advice, you might get...I think it's not going to make them partners. It again pushes them into thinking they aren't that skilled, they need somebody to help them, they need somebody to talk for them, they need somebody (EP PPO interview, p19)

In the EP's opinion, a positive role, for a PPO in a voluntary agency, was the role of the second DS PPO:

She always rings up about problems, she always sees what level they're supposed to be at. She always answers them at that level. And she doesn't immediately assume a problem is how it is expressed. (EP PPO interview, p15)

The EP PPO's description of how a PPO should not operate was to go through the Code of Practice with "a fine tooth-comb", spending hours and hours with parents, anticipating problems, anticipating problems and "undoing a year's work" with a particular parent to do with the labelling of her child.

One DS PPO saw the other DS PPO as lacking sensitivity: "she does bamboozle parents into taking over things, doing all the paper-work, wanting to type up eight pages in very formal English" (Disability Support interview, p10). She also thought the other PPOs own child's disabilities influenced her approach to parents in an unhelpful, and an unrecognised, way.

Such a role was, the educational psychologist thought, really meeting the needs of the PPO. Other EPs, the Educational Psychologist PPO stated, were unlikely to refer parents to the DS PPOs since they needed to feel confident that, in the context of their already pressurised lives, this would not lead to further problems to be dealt with. Indeed, a key aim for the EP PPO's, as stated by the Principal Educational Psychologist, was the removal of conflict between the voluntary agency Disability Support and the LEA.

Professional Identity and Neutrality

Key to the different perspectives on the PPO role, was the professional identity of each, and the nature of the PPO's employer. The EP PPO said she thought professional training provided a kind of neutrality, but she recognised that a particular role was provided by the identity of the employer:

... I think that if you, I think who employs you is very important, because you do have a role to carry through, you've been funded, after all, by education, to put through measures which are going to make smoother running for the authority, as well as getting involved parents... E.P.s are neutral in as much as they're used to being more objective, and being able to balance what they hear from everybody

(EP PPO interview, p13)

However, the Disability Support Director saw the role of the EP PPO as far less neutral:

... the Ed Psych at the end of the day is projecting the view of the bureaucracy, I would say, the LEA. It isn't their personal opinions, and I think that is the important thing, is their role is as a professional in an assessment situation

... She sees the EPs client as the child, but from a resource led focus rather than one that is needs led, from a need to be realistic about the provisions that are available. (interview Disability Support Director, p14)

The nature of the professional role interfered, she thought, with the LEA PPOs ability to authentically represent the parent perspective, or, to "speak out" on behalf of the parent. The Educational psychologist recognised such conflicts, but indicated that her professionalism meant that she was prepared to be in conflict with the LEA if she believed a particular outcome was needed for the child. By the same token, she could also be in conflict with the parent, though this, she said, was rare. She indicated that she was able to take on both roles, LEA representative and parent supporter. Both DS PPOs felt independence from the LEA was important in terms of credibility with parents. There was also recognition of the possibility of lack of impartiality. One of the DS PPOs said that if she had taken on the PPO role two years previously, when the situation with her child was different, the role would have been problematic due to the presence of her own agenda. The EP PPO made a distinction between advocacy and befriending:

I think you've got to actually separate, and this is something I want to try and do on Wednesday, is separate the befriender's role from the advocacy role. There are always going to be a few cases where there is conflict. And there is the tribunals and all that sort of thing. And I have tried to say that, you know, you could quickly pick up those who would want to do that, and you need a different sort of person to be an advocate. C has introduced herself often, in just ad hoc meetings, I am a parent advocate. (EP PPO interview, p18)

There was, in claims of role identity in relation to terms such as independence and advocacy a tacit recognition of the politics at the centre of the PPO role. However, there was little evidence of explicit recognition of the effects such politics might have on the relation between PPOs and parents or of the need to clarify and define the kind of partnership parents and PPOs might wish or assume.

Problems and Possibilities for Authentic Partnership

Parent Partnership Services have the potential to make it easier for parents to negotiate the process of special educational needs assessment. Any service designed to provide more information about the process and to support parents in meetings or writing reports will go some way to meet parent needs as suggested in past research (Sandow et al., 1987) (Cross, 1989) (Galloway et al., 1994). Such services also have the potential to meet many of the problems expressed by the parents in the Newby parent interviews. PPOs have the potential to give more time to help parents to know what is happening in an assessment. A parent folder designed by both DS and EP PPOs was aimed to assist in this and was welcomed by parents. The provision of Independent Parent Supporters can also help in all the detail – in preparing for and attending meetings and assessment visits, in writing and reading reports. Parents may value talking to someone who does not have responsibilities to the school of the LEA. Research into ten Parent Partnership Services nationally found general endorsement of the services, with 75% of parent focus groups expressing satisfaction (Wolfendale & Cook, 1997). Parents valued highly the availability of a person to provide support when needed, the provision of information, and the reduction in the feeling of isolation.

However, limitations for authentic partnership are suggested. Parent partnership services have created a separate service to work with parents. This is, in effect, a new tier of professionals. Whilst helping and supporting parents this has also had the effect of removing 'parent partnership' from schools and also from key professionals responsible for special educational needs. Problems in parent relations with schools, and school distrust with the Parent Partnership Services, were identified as problematic by parents in the national survey (Wolfendale & Cook, 1997). The additional tier may remove parents from those who are able to directly influence their children's educational provision – and such a concern was commented upon by parents in the Newby scheme. There is evidence that parent partnership needs to be located more directly in the relationship between parents and schools, and that current services may do little to improve relations between parents and schools. Newby parents found major concerns about educational provision remained even after they had achieved a satisfactory statement. Many parents did not seem to have confidence that their child's needs were being attended to, and the assessment process did not seem to have made them feel

any more confident about this. Parent Partnership Schemes as currently conceptualised are likely to deflect action away from the discussions between parents and teachers necessary to achieve such confidence.

There are 'key principles for communicating and working in partnership with parents' listed in the Code of Practice (DFES, 2001). However, the need for parties to discuss the meaning of partnership or the definition of roles is absent from policy documents, from the actions taken by the Newby service, and from responses to Wolfendale and Cook's (op cit) national survey. This represents a failure on the part of services to recognise the political nature both of SEN assessment and of any advocacy role adopted by those involved. A discussion of roles would provide an opportunity to recognise the differing power and position of the different parties, and may help to redress any potentially disempowering effects of partnership. The discourse of 'independence' or 'neutrality' of Parent Partnership Officers evident in the policies of Labour and the last government suggest some recognition of the political nature of advocacy. However, research suggests that independence of information may not be a major issue for parents if they feel they are able to get adequate information from the LEA (Leming, 1999, Wolfendale & Cook, 1997). This was the majority view of parent partnership officers interviewed by Wolfendale and Cook. Furthermore, the emphasis on 'independence' may be a naive solution, suggesting that neutrality is possible, hiding any agendas of the personnel running a particular parent partnership service. Such agendas may include one of persuading parents to 'fit in' with LEA perspectives, or may view the LEA as an institution to be fought against, or may occupy other positions. Once again this suggests the need to discuss roles and perspectives.

Current policy represents a complex mixture. There is respect for parents as equals as denoted in the call, in the Code of Practice (DFES, 2001), for flexibility over the timing and structure of meetings, and for respect for the validity of differing viewpoints. However, a continuing deficit discourse is also evident in the call, once again in the Code of Practice (op cit), to empower parents to take an active part in their child's education. Such a call is an assumption that parents might not be taking such a role, and needs teachers to inform them how to do this. Of particular concern is the continued exclusion of, or failure to find ways to include, some parents from involvement

in services assessing their children those of parent partnership, as suggested by the Newby parent interviews and the national survey (Wolfendale & Cook, 1997).

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