

## Parents as Partners in the Education of Children With Special Educational Needs

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### Introduction

From the 1980s onwards, national legislation and reform have increasingly sought to make specific provision for children with Special Education Needs (SEN) a component feature of inclusive educational policy. This has been articulated in successive regional and national legislation (Department for Education and Employment [DfEE], 1998; Scottish Office, 1998; Department of Education [DE], 1998; DfEE, 2001; Scottish Executive, 2002, 2004; Department of Education and Skills [DfES]; 2001; 2002; 2004; DE, 2005), each of which has retained an emphasis on, and commitment to, the inclusion of children with SEN in a mainstream setting where possible.

In recent years in Northern Ireland, the numbers of children with a statement of SEN have risen by just over twenty-five per cent. Although the numbers of pupils in the primary and post-primary sectors have substantially risen, the figures for special schools have also increased. However, the rise in numbers of pupils with a statement has occurred alongside a contrasting decline in pupil numbers. Figures for the total pupil population in the primary, post-primary and special school sectors in the same period reveal a drop of between two per cent and six per cent (DE, 2004).

### Research Context

To date, the role of parents and their engagement with the school and its wider population have had little prominence in Northern Ireland (DE, 1998; O'Connor *et al.*, 2003). To explore this further, a research study sought to:

*"investigate, describe and analyse the experiences and perceptions of parents of statemented children in mainstream and special schools in Northern Ireland within an evolving educational environment."* (O'Connor, 2006)

The research related to two significant issues on SEN policy and provision in Northern Ireland. Firstly, it sought to address an integral and hitherto unexplored gap in the consultation process, namely, the experience of parents of children with a statement of SEN. This was the first time that parents had been consulted on current arrangements for the statutory assessment and statementing processes outlined in the Code of Practice (O'Connor *et al.*, 2003).

Secondly, it was undertaken against a backdrop of revised domestic and national educational policy and legislation for SEN, disability and inclusion. These changes have

had, and will continue to have, implications for the status, remit and delivery of special education. New legislation and policy relating to educational provision for pupils with SEN was drafted and implemented during the lifespan of the project. In the intervening periods between the three phases of the research, this was most visible in the introduction of the revised Disability Discrimination Act (The Stationery Office, 2005a) and the Special Educational Needs and Disability Order in Northern Ireland (The Stationery Office, 2005b), and concurrent legislation for SEN in other parts of the UK (DfES, 2001; Scottish Executive, 2004). For schools in Northern Ireland, the profile of special education became enshrined as a commitment to greater inclusive practice, and as a right for children and their parents to secure a placement in the mainstream environment; at the same time, the position and function of special schools was recognised (DE, 2002; 2004; 2005; Department of Education and Training Inspectorate [DETI], 2006).

### **The Role of Parents**

The shortfall in parental consultation and the introduction of revised legislation have drawn attention to the intricate relationship between parental participation and special education. The various agendas for inclusive reform stipulate the role and function of other key stakeholders beyond the immediate school environment, and make particular reference to parents. Parental preference for inclusion has broad support in Northern Ireland. In a recent survey of the public's understanding of, and attitudes to, disability, it was found that three in five people were in favour of children with disabilities attending the same school as non-disabled children; furthermore, over half of parents with school age children supported this and an additional forty per cent had no objections (Office of the Minister and Deputy First Minister [OFMDFM], 2004).

Children and their families are constituent stakeholders in education. By default, it is reasonable to expect consideration of perspectives beyond professional domains if education is to be fully inclusive (Frederickson and Cline, 2002). However, previous studies in Northern Ireland have highlighted the limited and often alienated relationship between parents and the broad education environment, particularly around understandings of, and provision for, children's learning needs (DE, 1998; Monteith *et al.*, 2001). Productive discourse should be characterised by the collective voice of parents, children, teachers and other associated professionals, "*... because parents and their children are most affected by the outcomes of the inclusion process, it is important to include them where possible*" (Bennett *et al.*, 1998: 39). However, limited investigation of parents' views has perpetuated the consensus that multiple perspectives of theoretical and experiential opinions are rarely obtained (Frederickson and Cline, 2002).

### **Research Methodology**

The research study combined qualitative and quantitative data collection over three distinct, but inter-related phases. The sequential progression from one phase to another

facilitated a detailed mapping of the richness, complexity and reality of parenting a child with SEN.

Phase I: The Questionnaire (N=1054)

Phase II: Telephone Interviews (N=96)

Phase III: Personal Interviews (N=20)

### **Key Findings**

The key findings have been assimilated around four themes. They represent a singular viewpoint of current SEN policy and inclusive practice in Northern Ireland that has hitherto not been conducted on such an extensive scale. The findings are explored within the context of current policy and legislation for SEN in Northern Ireland, with reference to ongoing educational and curriculum changes, and against contemporary philosophical and theoretical reasoning outlined in the literature review.

#### **Theme 1: The Policy and Procedure of Special Education**

The issues identified by parents in both the quantitative and qualitative phases of the research have highlighted some core areas of concern in policy arrangements for SEN provision in Northern Ireland which suggest that the current system is ill-devised to meet the needs of children with SEN and their families. The most pressing of these has been the prevalence within Education and Library Boards (ELB) of an overly administrative and non-accessible system that has neither evolved to take account of the personal dimension of SEN, nor to be fully representative of the contemporary language of inclusion. For parents, this did little to validate the relevance of the statutory processes or the additional provision they purport to offer. Although intermediary and short-term suggestions may forestall a potential crisis, they represent a temporary stop gap and cannot be interpreted as a panacea for a policy framework that is in need of substantial review. It is perhaps crucial, then, that the current review of SEN is seen as a timely opportunity to review SEN provision within a streamlined, coherent and unilateral policy framework that retains the needs of children and their families at its core.

The policy and procedure of SEN is undoubtedly an elemental feature in the assessment and statementing processes. However, the relationship that a parent has with associated professionals is equally significant. This is explored in the following theme.

#### **Theme 2: The Relationship with Professionals**

The relationship among children with SEN, their parents and other constituent groups was invariably dependent on the nature, duration and purpose of any given interaction. Crucially, attitudes of other people towards disability and SEN were a fundamental indicator of institutional and individual value bases. Within the context of this research, school ethos and the behavioural responses of the school community and other

professionals represented the benchmark by which parents most consistently perceived provision for, and responses to, special education, disability and inclusion.

The main deficiencies of responses to SEN were exposed in the two areas which arguably, defined parents' expectations on the educational and other provision for their child, namely - teacher training and a designated ELB contact for the duration of the statutory processes. The perceived lack of consistency in both these areas was a recurrent feature across the three phases of the research. Importantly, the presumption of an innate understanding of diversity and inclusion did not overtly direct parents' responses; rather, it was the will amongst teachers and other professionals to learn and to acquire new skills. Clearly, the establishment of committed and accountable practice that serves the educational, emotional and social interests of children with SEN and their families should be a priority.

This, in turn, raised questions around claims to greater inclusive education. The success or failure of inclusion strategies was, to some extent, reflective of the investment and commitment applied to corresponding educational policy. This is discussed within the following theme.

### **Theme 3: Inclusive Practice**

The issues identified by parents in the qualitative phases of the research highlighted strong support for inclusive education. The collective social, emotional and academic benefits were widely acknowledged as tangible evidence of positive inclusion. However, parental approbation was conditional and suggested that the perceived reality of mainstream education continued to be viewed with some reticence. The most pressing issue for many parents was the capacity of the mainstream environment to meet the increasingly diverse learning and other needs of all pupils - with or without SEN. This presumption was based on the belief that some schools lacked an institutional vision and pedagogical skills-base to successfully accommodate children with additional learning needs. Much of their concern was directed towards a perceived shortfall in training by both teaching and non-teaching support staff, which impacted on relationships with the SEN child, and on subsequent classroom practice. For many, then, expectations of specific training programmes were a fundamental component of future inclusive policy.

The issue of inclusive schooling was indicative of the aspirations and expectations that parents held for their child's education. Their perceptions were shaped and influenced by interaction with professionals who could define their experience of inclusion and SEN provision in a mutually collaborative relationship. The following theme, then, looks at the role of parents and their perceived role with the various professionals involved in the education of their child.

**Theme 4: The Role of Parents**

The personal interviews revealed almost unanimously that parents did not consider themselves partners with those professionals responsible for the educational provision of their child. Their commentary suggested, instead, a relationship characterised by professional distance and non-collaboration. This finding sat somewhat incongruously alongside the parental consideration that they provided a unique expertise and insight into their child's condition. Additionally, within the linguistic framework of educational marketisation, parents were less inclined to accept the nomenclature of consumer, viewing it as a sterile concept that belied the humanity at the heart of the statutory processes.

The prospect of an autonomous support service that would guide, advise and represent parents was unanimously supported. The main benefits of such a service were identified in terms of the advocacy that it would confer and the option of third party representation, particularly for difficult negotiations.

**Conclusion**

The combined findings of the quantitative and qualitative phases of the research and the corresponding discussion clearly highlighted the unique position that parents occupy within theoretical and empirical discourse on SEN and inclusion. Their status provided an intimate and unparalleled insight into the reality of parenting a child who is different, and the challenges that this might bring. For this reason, their voices and their participation represent a crucial dynamic in any future discourse on SEN policy.

The research findings revealed that although parents were broadly satisfied with current statutory arrangements for their child's SEN, their satisfaction was qualified by a series of caveats relating to policy and practice. These included institutional and individual responses to difference, the obligation by ELBs to fulfil standardised conditions set down in the Code of Practice, the capacity of the mainstream environment to respond to increasingly diverse classroom practice and parents' own role within a perceptibly over-bureaucratic system.

Undeniably, the experiences and perceptions of parents provided a singular insight from a key constituent group, and represented a valuable contribution to the SEN and inclusion debate. The premise of parents as partners in their child's education has, so far, remained an elusive relationship, although it is not a position that parents wish to occupy. The common thread running through each phase of the research was the essential desire of parents to seek the best educational provision for their child. It was a salient reminder that children are at the heart of a process that sometimes overlooks this reality. This research, then, could be of use to policy makers, researchers, parents and teachers who wish to ensure that SEN and inclusion remains grounded in the humanity of difference.

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