

Understanding parental confidence in an inclusive high school: a pilot survey

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A questionnaire was developed and trialled in an inclusive high school with the aim of understanding factors that contribute to parental confidence in school provision for students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Parents of all students at School Action, School Action Plus and those with Statements of special educational needs were surveyed. Although the response rate of 38% was relatively low, responses overall were very positive. The survey findings provide evidence to support the whole school approach and areas for further development are discussed.

Key words: parents, inclusion, SEND.

Introduction

This research was conducted in a large secondary school in the north-west of England, undertaken against a backdrop of a whole school model of support that has been developed by the first author at Priestnall School, Stockport. Priestnall recently became the first secondary school in Stockport to be judged as 'outstanding' by OFSTED (<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/inspection-reports/find-inspection-report/provider/ELS/106133>). The inspection report made specific reference to the school's inclusive ethos, and the 'outstanding care, guidance and support carefully tailored to students' needs'. The school's provision for students with autism has been highlighted as a real strength (Morewood *et al.*, 2011). Part of the success of this developed 'whole school' approach has been the 'saturation model' evolved by the first author over the past decade as SENCo (see Morewood *et al.*, 2011). This clear whole school approach, using a streamlined support staff with increased emphasis on teacher training and peer education (Morewood, 2011) has seen a clear shift in the inclusive ethos of the community, as identified by OFSTED.

As part of this whole school approach, staff training and development have been given a high priority within the school, especially in relation to students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) (Morewood, 2010). The first author regularly delivers keynote addresses to national conferences and writes papers in relation to the developing practice established and evolving at Priestnall

School; this confidence measure is developed in a context of real success (best ever GCSE results in Summer 2011 – 76% of students gained 5+ A*–C including English/Maths and 92% gained 5+ A*–C) and against a backdrop to documented inclusion. Therefore, in so far as it is possible, this measure has been developed and trialled in an environment that records high levels of success in all aspects of school measurement, therefore reducing emotional responses to patchy provision and issues to do with support.

Literature review

General parental satisfaction with schools has been measured quite widely, as part of school inspection frameworks such as OFSTED (2006) and in relation to changes in models of education delivery, such as the growth of academies. OFSTED (2006) reports that parent satisfaction in the UK has steadily improved and is associated with factors such as school ethos, leadership, pupil behaviour and welfare and school effectiveness in handling issues such as bullying. Parental choice of school has also been found to be a predictor of satisfaction levels (Hausman and Goldring, 2000). Surveys of parental satisfaction have also highlighted the importance of addressing the needs of specific groups of parents, such as African American parents (Thompson, 2006) and parents of students with special educational needs and disabilities (Parsons *et al.*, 2009). Throughout this article the term parents is used to refer to both parents and carers.

In relation to parents of students with special educational needs and disabilities, parental satisfaction is a contested area that has become a focus of Government concern (Lamb, 2009). The Lamb Inquiry draws attention to the variability of parents' experiences and argues for greater engagement with parents through honest and open communication. Parsons *et al.* (2009) undertook a postal survey involving 562 parents of students with diverse needs in mainstream and specialist settings. Their questionnaire focused on aspects of parental involvement including accessibility, attitudes, disability awareness and aspiration. They judged their respondents to be a fairly representative sample and many parents identified their child as having more than one area of difficulty. Overall, responses were largely positive in relation to quality of support, choice of school and

impact of disability legislation. A main factor related to parental dissatisfaction was whether parents had needed to ask the school to change an aspect of provision for their child. Parents of students with behavioural and social difficulties whose children attended mainstream schools were also least likely to be satisfied. This has also been highlighted in previous studies of particular groups, for instance Batten *et al.* (2006) in relation to autistic spectrum disorder (ASD).

In addition to identifying general trends in relation to parental satisfaction, researchers have also attempted to look in more detail at factors that might underly satisfaction in order to help to identify specific factors that might contribute to better parent–school relationships. Forsyth *et al.* (2004) and Adams *et al.* (2009) sought to go beyond simple measures of satisfaction and developed a general Parent Trust Scale, based upon previous studies of parent–school trust. Adams *et al.* (2009) argue that schools need to create a climate for genuine parent–school collaboration which increases trust and improves results. Relationships between parents and school staff are complex and Adams *et al.* argue that relational trust is built through consistency of interactions at the group level, for example parent interactions with teachers as a whole. In a study of parents in 79 schools, Adams *et al.* (2009) used several questionnaires, including the Parent Trust Scale, to demonstrate that school-level factors such as parent perceived influence on decisions has greater impact on levels of perceived trust than contextual factors such as school size, deprivation or prior pupil attainment.

Small-scale studies of parents of students with special educational needs and disabilities have also sought to understand factors that might mediate parental satisfaction. A small-scale study by Hoida (2008) investigated the link between parent satisfaction and the relationship qualities of empathy and positive regard among a group of parents of students with emotional and behavioural difficulties. Multiple regression analysis showed that parent experiences of empathy and positive regard were significantly related to and predictive of parent satisfaction. In a UK study of a project to support parents of students with dyslexia, Norwich *et al.* (2005) argued that support for students with special educational needs and disabilities needs to go beyond narrow categories of SEND and address the wider needs of all students with special educational needs and disabilities. They also advocate ‘wider professionalism’ of school staff in developing genuinely collaborative relationships with parents of students with special educational needs and disabilities by appreciating parents’ expertise and responding to concerns with sensitivity.

In relation to students with learning difficulties who attended mainstream or specialist provision, Saint-Laurent and Fournier (1993) also found parental satisfaction was mediated by other factors. They administered a satisfaction questionnaire to 33 parents and measured students’ progress in reading, maths and social skills. They found that satisfactory communication between home and school increased

positive parental perceptions of progress in maths and reading, but actual progress in these areas was not related to parental satisfaction. Students’ progress in adaptive behaviours such as community self-sufficiency and personal-social responsibility was also related to parental satisfaction.

Method

Questionnaire construction

Parental satisfaction has been measured in many different ways, often using surveys and questionnaires. These have usually been developed for a specific purpose (OFSTED, 2006; Parsons *et al.*, 2009). As satisfaction is quite a broad concept researchers have also attempted to delineate more clearly some of the constructs that might underly or inform a better understanding of parental satisfaction. Underlying constructs highlighted in the literature such as trust, collaboration and communication have informed the construction of the questionnaire in the current study.

The questionnaire used in the current study draws upon the work of previous researchers who have attempted to study concepts such as parental trust in more detail. Drawing upon the work of Adams *et al.* (2009) the questionnaire includes general items that aim to assess how parents perceive the school in meeting the needs of all students. Statements such as ‘I really trust this school’ and ‘this school has high standards for all children’ are drawn from Adams *et al.* (2009) and aimed to tap into parents’ general perception of trust. In the light of previous research the questionnaire was also designed to elicit perceptions in more specific areas related to the experiences of parents of students with special educational needs and disabilities. For instance, ‘the school values my knowledge of my child’ focuses on parental partnership (Norwich *et al.*, 2005; Lamb, 2009), while statements about preparation for leaving school and participation in wider community activities draw upon the work of Saint-Laurent and Fournier (1993). The importance of parental involvement in decision making (Parsons *et al.*, 2009) is covered by statements such as ‘I am able to influence decisions about my child’s education’, while quality of relationships between parents and staff (Hoida, 2008) and the importance of inclusive practice (Norwich *et al.*, 2005) are also addressed.

The initial drafts of the questionnaire were trialled by a small group of parents as part of an interactive discussion, in addition to the first author seeking advice via email from national parent support networks and partnerships. The measure was developed through consultation into the version used for this study. It is still seen as an evolving tool and, as mentioned later in this article, increased trials will allow for fine-tuning and development into a confidence measure that can be used across the UK and potentially beyond.

In order to maximise response rates the questionnaire was brief. It included five questions requesting brief demo-

graphic information and 20 parental trust/confidence items using a 5-point Likert scale format. The questionnaire also included space for any additional comments that parents might wish to make. Further information on the questionnaire can be obtained from the authors on request.

Data collection

After the questionnaire was finalised, it was sent out with stamped addressed reply envelopes and a covering letter. The letters referenced the fact that all replies were anonymous, analysed by an external researcher and that the data collected would be made freely available upon analysis. There was no specified time for replies; however, at the end of the summer term, those received were analysed and interpreted.

Questionnaires were sent to 38 parents of students with Statements and 43 to parents of pupils at School Action or School Action Plus. It was explained that the feedback was optional and the low number of returns may be due to it being sent out at the start of the summer term, which is a busy time of year when exams and other events may take priority.

Priestnall School operates several positive communication strategies (see Morewood, 2011) including ‘text-home’ systems and positive postcards, in addition to email communication and face-to-face meetings. It is likely that some parents did not respond as they felt confident with the processes established and did not consider the need for completing the measure a priority at this time.

Data were collected separately from parents of students with and without Statements of special educational needs. This enabled analysis according to whether students were identified as School Action or School Action Plus or had a Statement of SEN in addition to analysis of the combined dataset. Likert responses were analysed using descriptive statistics. Quantitative data were entered into SPSS and an Excel spreadsheet in order to create frequency graphs for the dataset as a whole and to compare groups. In addition box plots were used to compare response distributions between groups for individual questions.

Qualitative comments were entered into a matrix and clustered into themes, using a thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This also enabled analysis of themes across the group as a whole and comparison between groups.

Findings

Overall results

As mentioned previously the response rate of 38% was low. The response rates for parents of students with a Statement was higher at 49%, compared with 25% of parents of students

Table 1. Responses by year group

Year Group	Number of responses
7	3
8	13
9	6
10	4
11	3

without Statements. However, this may not be symptomatic of a lack of confidence – indeed perhaps the opposite; although there has been little exploration of reasons for non-response, Nakash *et al.* (2008) interviewed people who had responded and not responded to a postal satisfaction questionnaire. They found that those who were most satisfied with the care they had received were least likely to respond, indicating that saliency is an important response factor. Sending a reminder has also been found to increase questionnaire response rate (Swan *et al.*, 1980); however, timescales of the current study did not allow for this to be undertaken.

Of the 31 parents who responded, eight were parents of girls and the remaining 23 were parents of boys. The response by year group is summarised in Table 1, while response by type of SEN is summarised in Table 2. Table 2 is representative of the range of needs among students at Priestnall.

The graph in Figure 1 shows the average ratings for the entire dataset of 31 parents of students and young people with special educational needs. As the scale ranged from 1 to 5, with 1 representing the strongest agreement with each statement, those items rated lowest represent the most positive parental responses.

As can be seen from Figure 1, all parents surveyed viewed the school as achieving well in almost all areas (ratings of 2 or below). The most favourably rated areas included: knowing who to contact if there was a concern; feeling listened to by the school; perceiving staff as ready to help; not feeling worried when my child is at school; and feeling my knowledge of my child is valued. The areas that needed more development included: keeping parents informed; helping children to participate in wider activities; preparation for leaving school; and providing information about local clubs and support for parents.

Results by group

Results were also analysed further by group. Analysis of means and standard deviations by student gender showed a

Table 2. Responses by type of SEN

Type of SEN	Number of responses
Learning/reading	13
Language	11
Behaviour	7
Social	11
Physical	8
Specific	11

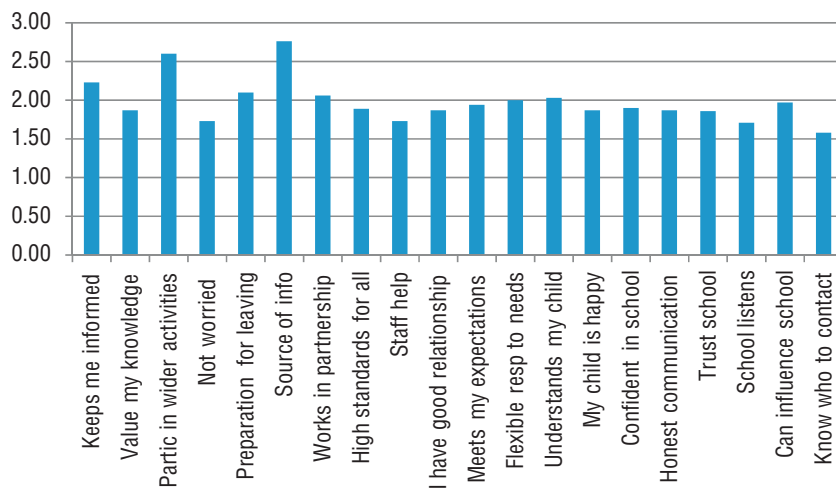


Figure 1. Mean ratings of parents of all children with special education needs (N = 31)

varied pattern throughout the questions and no general trend for parents of girls or boys to respond more positively or negatively overall. However, comparison of students with Statements and those without Statements of special educational needs indicated a trend towards more positive perceptions among the parents of students with a Statement, as indicated in Figure 2.

Compared to parents of students without Statements, parents of students with Statements felt that they were better informed and communicated with, their knowledge of their child was valued, they could influence decisions about their child, they had a good relationship with the school, the school understood their child, school was preparing their child well for leaving school and school provided parents with information about support systems. Both groups of parents had similar views about how flexibly the school responded to individual needs, how well school staff listened, how confident they were that the school could meet their child's needs, how much they trusted the school, how much they felt that the school has high standards for all children, how much they perceived school staff as helpful and how worried they were when their child was at school.

There was slightly more agreement between the two groups in relation to more general statements (6/9) about the school than more specific statements designed to assess the views of parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities (5/11). A larger sample would enable potential trends at a more fine-grained level, such as type of need to be explored more fully.

Further analysis at the group level also highlighted some differences in patterns of responding between the two groups. For some questions there tended to be a wider spread of responses among the parents of students with Statements, as indicated by outlying items within the dataset. An example is provided in Figure 3.

The questions where parents of students with Statements expressed more varied responses were those asking about keeping parents informed, honest communication, being listened to, knowing who to contact and whether their child was happy at school. As these outliers were only two or three parents, this could reflect more varied opinions among this group or simply some misinterpretation of the rating scale. Given this small number of exceptions it is not

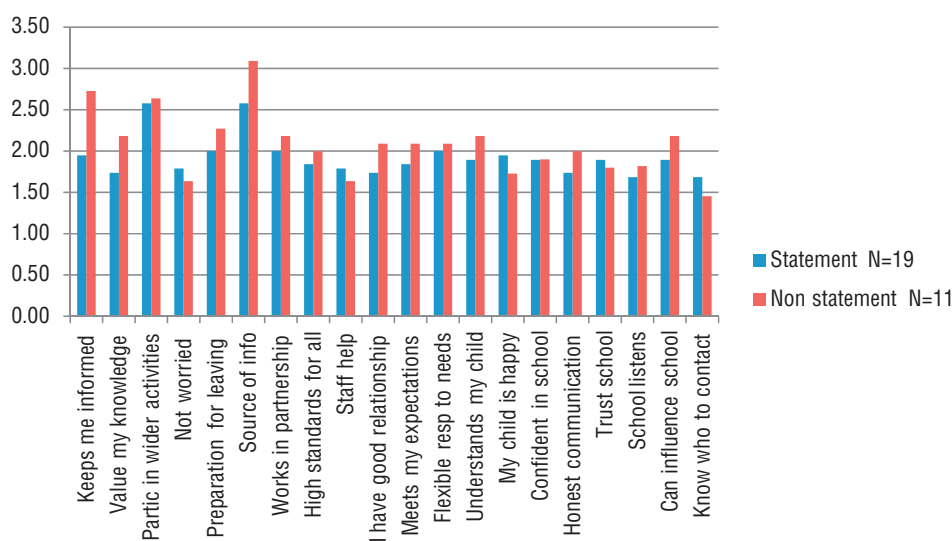


Figure 2. Mean ratings by SEN group

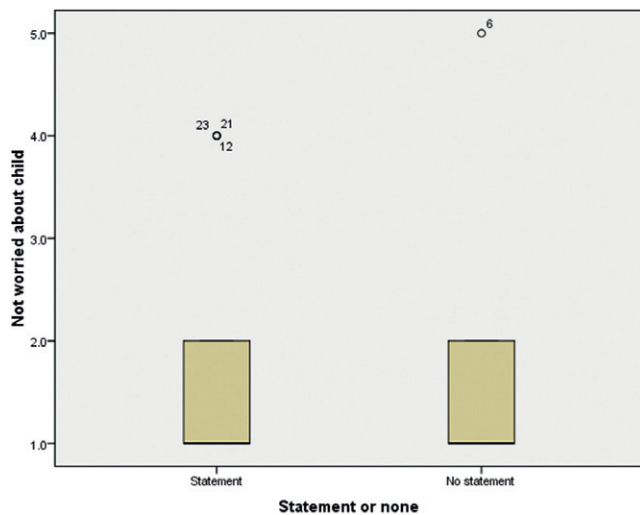


Figure 3. Outliers within the data

possible to establish whether this is a significant pattern. However, a larger sample would make it possible to establish whether there is a distinct pattern, for instance whether particular groups of parents such as parents of students with social difficulties are reporting more concerns.

The majority of parents did not complete the additional comments section. However, the overall positive trend, particularly within the group of parents of students with Statements, was reinforced. Comments included: *'We are really pleased with our choice of school for our son. We have seen a definite improvement in his knowledge and maturity'*; *'I'm very happy with the school. I know they try their best to meet my son's needs. My son couldn't be in a better school'*.

Parents of students without Statements also made some positive comments but they also expressed more concerns, particularly in the areas of communication and wider staff awareness: *'As parents we have to instigate meetings about our child's progress. The school haven't contacted us about concerns'*; *'I would like the teachers that I have spoken to regarding my child's education to phone me back as he or she says they would'*; *'More training is required for some "old school teachers" to understand behaviours e.g., aren't just the child being rude/naughty'*.

A parent of a student with a Statement also identified that some departments might be more inclusive than others: *'I have directed my comments to the school as a whole, if it was just learning support I would be more positive'*.

These data might help to account for the different experiences of these two groups of parents, as parents of students without Statements may be more likely to have contact with a wider range of staff and less contact with specialist support staff. They may also highlight some additional need for educating parents of students who do not have the most complex needs about levels of support relative to their child and the context of the whole school approach established at Priestnall.

Discussion

The current exploratory study provides promising evidence of good levels of parental satisfaction, trust and confidence in one individual high school where meeting the needs of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities has recorded well-documented success and is a high priority. These findings provide support for previous research which has also identified that in general parents of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities are satisfied with provision (Lamb, 2009; Parsons *et al.*, 2009). The findings are also promising as they begin to address the satisfaction of parents of young people for whom there has been most concern in mainstream. Parsons *et al.* (2009) identified that parents of children with social and/or behaviour difficulties in mainstream were those most likely to express concern. In the current study a third of the sample were reported to have social difficulties and a quarter had behaviour difficulties, but high levels of satisfaction were reported overall.

In common with Parsons *et al.* (2009) parents tended to identify a number of areas of need rather than just one area. In the study by Parsons *et al.* (2009) the parents of children attending special schools were more likely to identify a complex range of needs for their child. However, the current study also shows that a range of young people with complex needs are also being successfully included in this mainstream setting. This would also reinforce Norwich *et al.*'s (2005) argument that it is important for schools to develop an inclusive approach for all pupils rather than focusing more narrowly on the needs of specific groups, which was highlighted as a strength at Priestnall during the OFSTED inspection in 2011.

As the current study was conducted in a high school, the data provide some evidence to support Adams *et al.*'s (2009) argument that parents' perceived parental influence is an important factor. It would be useful to undertake the survey in other schools to see if factors such as school size or level of deprivation are more or less important than perceived parental influence in a UK context.

As only a small number of additional comments were made by parents these findings can only be tentative. It is interesting, however, to note that concerns were in areas such as wider inclusion and having to ask the school for changes. This would also concur with Parsons *et al.* (2009) who found that having to ask for a change to provision was a source of dissatisfaction for parents.

The survey highlighted that there continues to be a need for ongoing staff training and information sharing, even in a school where this is well established. For all young people with special educational needs and disabilities there is also a need for interventions that bridge school and community and provide preparation for leaving school. A larger sample would enable analysis by group to see if any specific approaches to supporting students were more important for

parents of particular groups, for instance home–school communication strategies for those with social and communication difficulties.

Creating a positive ethos is seen as a cornerstone of effective inclusion for young people at Priestnall School, and as a key element of good practice across all settings. Maintaining a consistent positive focus through all aspects of work within the school is central to this, and helps to challenge stereotypes and raise expectations (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008). Examples include:

- postcards home;
- text messages to parents;
- letters and telephone calls to parents that support and reward positive aspects of each student's day;
- positive reward charts and target sheets linked directly into areas of challenge, with immediate short-term rewards;
- positive focus in training and development activities.

Although the number of returns meant that it was not possible to undertake a more detailed statistical analysis of the structure of the questionnaire and the constructs within it, it did appear that including general and specific items within the questionnaire did seem to pick up on the higher level of input and individualisation for pupils with higher levels of need. It might also be helpful to trial the questionnaire across a whole school to establish whether the inclusion of specific items for parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities is more important for this group of parents.

Limitations of the research

The current study is limited by the small sample and low response rate. It may be that particular groups of parents may have chosen to respond, for instance those who were less satisfied, which could have skewed the results. The data appear to indicate that parents of young people at School Action and School Action Plus may have been less satisfied than parents of young people with a Statement of SEN. A useful next step to inform practice in the current school might be to interview parents of pupils at School Action and School Action Plus to establish whether this group of parents are actually less satisfied and whether any additional work might be needed to extend collaborative practice and shared understanding for this group of pupils.

The results are also limited to one school with its own particular culture and context for inclusion. A larger sample size in the current school would help to improve response factors and make the study more representative. Conducting the study across a larger number of schools would also enable comparison with other schools where inclusion may be more or less of a priority. It would also help to identify differences in parental confidence between schools and

identify whether there are any differences in parental response according to category of SEND or level of support.

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