

'Was the psychologist helpful?' Parent/carers' perceptions of educational psychologists

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This paper reports some of the findings of a pilot survey of parent/carers' perceptions of the quality of service experienced following some contact with an educational psychologist (EP). A random sample of parents on the database of Portsmouth's educational psychology service was sent a postal questionnaire seeking their views on some basic measures of satisfaction with the service. The results are described and discussed in the light of the outcomes of similar evaluation exercises reported in the literature, and some implications for professional practice and future surveys are discussed.

Introduction

Much has changed since Wright and Payne (1979) were able to justify excluding the views of parents from their seminal evaluation of the psychology service in Portsmouth on the grounds that a pilot attempt to obtain them had proved to be "extremely time consuming and the results confusing" (p59). Cherry (1998) offers an overview of attempts to overcome these problems in the intervening 20 years or so. EPs now function within the guidance towards greater collaboration and consultation with parents in the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (DfES 2001). In addition to this, the working group established by the DfEE to investigate current and future good practice within the profession recommended in July 2000 that a regular parent satisfaction survey should form part of the minimum qualitative measurements of feedback from users of EP services.

Although increasing amounts of attention are being paid to parents' views, what does not appear to have emerged clearly from the literature yet is a consistent sense of what parents really value when they express satisfaction with the services provided by an educational psychologist. Cuckle and Bamford (2000) report high levels of parental satisfaction with services such as Portage and Child Guidance, concluding that parents "liked alternative ways to interpret behaviour" (p369). Gibson (1997) reports a small scale survey of parents of pre-school children showing that, whilst parents commented favourably on EPs' interpersonal skills and ability to explain LEA procedures, for 71% of the sample the greatest source of satisfaction was that the EP had recommended a particular school "...and then had been responsible for getting their children into the appropriate educational provision" (p94). On the other hand Anthun (2000), reporting parents' perceptions of quality in a psychology service in Norway, suggests that it is the process through which services are delivered, rather than any tangible outcomes, that parents may be most sensitive to when they are deciding whether they have received a 'quality' service.

The present paper reports part of the outcomes of a pilot study into parent/carers' satisfaction with the educational psychology service (EPS) in Portsmouth carried out in 2001/02. A brief postal questionnaire was sent to 113 parents/carers, this being a random sample of names placed on the EPS database in the preceding 12 months. The range of contact with an EP included parents/carers who had received only brief written communication and those who had experienced a number of meetings with the psychologist. None of the families was identified as requiring translation of the questionnaire into a language other than English, but a parent partnership service was enlisted to support completion by three families where parents/carers were known to have literacy difficulties. The response rate was 33%.

As this was a pilot study its scope was kept deliberately narrow, with an aspiration to discover basic levels of satisfaction or otherwise with the psychology service and some explanation for the responses offered. To this end, the questionnaire was structured around a simple question: 'Was the psychologist helpful?', with a 'Yes/Don't know/No' response format. In a brief covering letter the term 'helpful' was defined as: 'made a positive difference to you or

your son/daughter'. What follows is a light-touch analysis of the reasons, where given, for the responses offered

Results

Inspection of the reasons given by parents who responded 'Yes', 'Don't know' or 'No' suggested that they could be grouped under broad categories for the purposes of analysis. Reasons given for a 'Yes' response (76%), that the EP had been helpful, centred around:

The EP's interpersonal skills/qualities eg: "...kind...polite...professional manner..."

The EP gave clear information eg: "...made things easy to understand...told us a lot of information..."

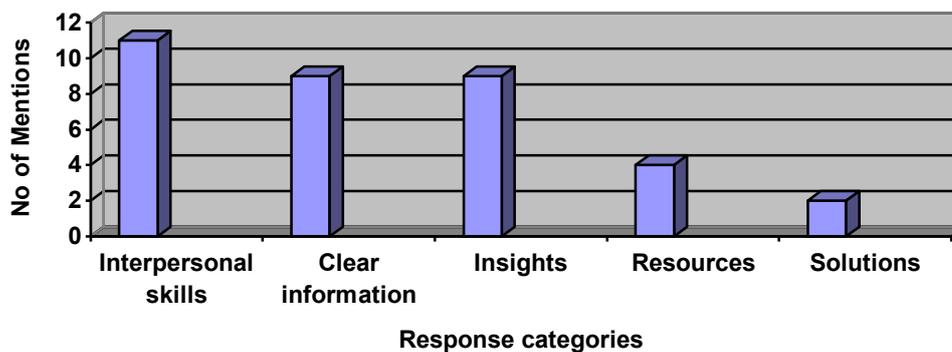
The EP offered insights/new perspectives eg: "...helped me understand my daughter, we get on better now...gave me a positive attitude to my son..."

The EP helped secure resources eg: "...sorted out a placement...helped us to get speech and language therapy..."

The EP gave solutions eg: "...suggested ways to help my child...gave us a plan of what to do next..."

The incidence of comments under these broad categories was as follows:

Figure 1: Reasons given for 'Yes' responses by category



Inspection of the reasons given by parents who responded **'No'**, that the EP had not been helpful (13%), suggested the following broad categories:

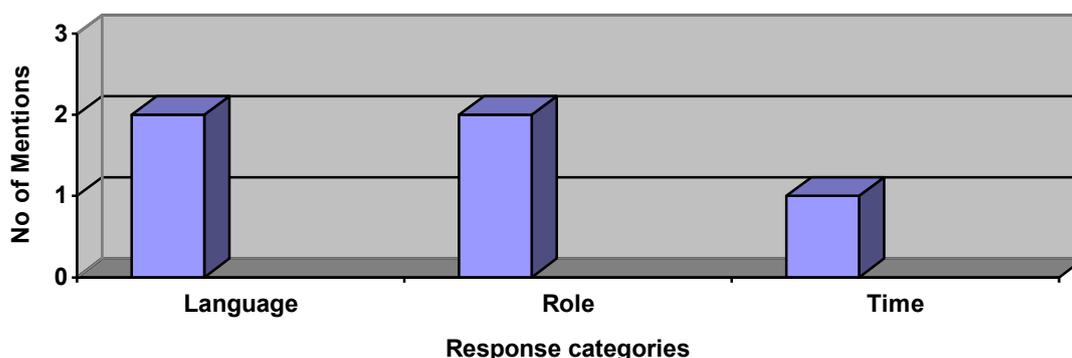
Lack of clarity in EP's language eg: "...too many long words...next steps not clear..."

Lack of clarity about EP's role eg: "...seemed to take the school's side...only helped the school..."

EP gave insufficient time eg: "...didn't see my daughter or follow up in school..."

The incidence of responses was as follows:

Figure 2: Reasons given for 'No' responses by category



Reasons given for a **'Don't know'** if the EP had been helpful' response (11%) were grouped into the following broad categories:

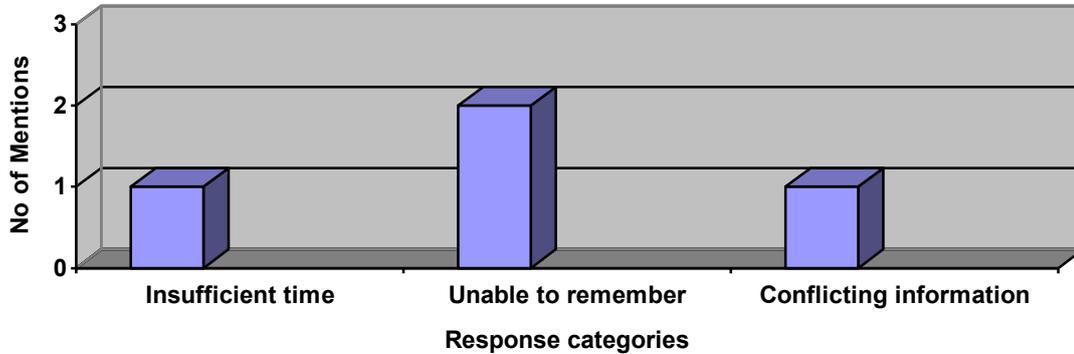
The EP gave insufficient time eg: "...spent too short a time with my son..."

Parent unable to remember the consultation/intervention eg: "...can't remember!...wasn't there..."

EP gave conflicting information eg: "...she disagreed with the speech therapist which confused us..."

Incidence of these responses was as follows:

Figure 3: Reasons given for 'Don't know' responses by category



Discussion

These results support and contradict findings from other broadly similar surveys of parent satisfaction with educational psychology services. For example Gibson's (1997) finding that interpersonal qualities are highly valued is supported here, but there is little evidence of parents' satisfaction depending on the delivery of resources or alternative provision. In fact Anthon's (2000) suggestion that process is more important than product in the delivery of EP services seems well supported by these responses in which parents appear to have held EPs' facilitative skills (professional manner, offering insights, giving clear information) in high regard. Anecdotally, EP colleagues in Portsmouth have expressed concern from time to time that parents appear to view them as gatekeepers of resources and/or purveyors of 'magic wand' solutions to their children's difficulties. These results are encouraging evidence to the contrary. On the other hand, although the actual number of mentions was small, there are clearly issues for EPs to take on board about explaining their role more clearly and framing all their comments and observations in accessible, non-technical language.

As Cuckle and Bamford (2000) note, there are likely to be very "local" effects in data such as those presented above. As they are unlikely to have experienced a range of different psychology services, parents' views will inevitably reflect the different aims, aspirations and working practices of the particular psychology service that has engaged with them. The pilot study reported here was intended to inform a regular sampling of parents' views. A clear next step will be to take up the challenge outlined by McKeever (1996) and make parents aware of explicit service quality criteria against which they will be able to make more specific and focused evaluations.

Although it may not be a straightforward matter to generalise the results presented here to psychology services throughout the country, it is hoped that the issues raised in this paper will make a helpful contribution to professional debates about ways of engaging ever more effectively with parents and carers of the children and young people with whom we work.

References

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