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Consultation, negotiation and compromise: The relationship between SENCOs, parents and pupils with SEN

Introduction

The 1994 Salamanca Statement explicitly called on all countries to embed the principle of inclusion in their education policies and practices so that all children could access the mainstream (or regular) school system (UNESCO, 1994). Inclusion principles have more recently been reinforced by a number of global and European policies such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO, 2009) *Policy Guidelines on Inclusion in Education*. One outcome of the UK Government's commitment to inclusive educational policies was an increase in the number of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) being taught in mainstream schools, which meant that special educational needs coordinators (SENCO) became much more a part of the culture of mainstream secondary schools (Maher and Macbeth, 2014). The SENCO has been given much more academic attention recently in part because of the centrality of their role in attempts to facilitate an inclusive learning environment in all curriculum subjects. The role of SENCO is broad, diverse and often depends on the SEN needs of individual schools (Wedell, 2004). According to the *Special Educational Needs Code of Practice* (DfE/DoH, 2014) a key part of the SENCO remit is to develop SEN provision, disseminate SEN resources and work closely with parents and pupils.

There is an ever expanding body of research that has analysed the distribution of SEN resources in mainstream secondary schools, and the importance of appropriately resourced subject areas for creating inclusive learning environments. The influence of head teachers, school governors, senior management teams (SMT) and, for the purpose of this article, SENCOs over the development of SEN provision and resource allocation has been given specific attention because of their positions of authority within school hierarchies (see, for example, Maher and Macbeth, 2014; Wedell, 2004). The extent to which parents and pupils with SEN can and do influence where SEN resources go and what is done with those resources has been neglected. This is despite (1) the former coalition government's promise to diffuse power to parents so that they have more ownership of SEN provision (DfE 2011); and (2) *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2003) promoting the inclusion of children's views in matters affecting them, which would include the development of SEN provision and distribution of SEN resources. The limited research that has analysed the involvement of parents (see, for example, de Boer, Pijl and Minnaert, 2009) and pupils with SEN (see, for example, Prunty, Dupont and McDaid, 2012) has often sought their rationale for and experiences of attending a mainstream school. Therefore, this article aims to analyse, from the perspective of SENCOs, the extent to which parents and pupils are able and willing to influence the development of SEN provision and distribution of SEN resources in mainstream secondary schools. It is important that an understanding of SENCO views and experiences is sought because the extent to which they consult with and value (or not) the involvement of parents and pupils will influence whether these key stakeholders are able to influence decision that impact their lives because, ultimately, 'the power to decide' still resides mainly with the school. The next sections will outline the research approach used to gather data for this article.

Participants and interviews

The primary data used in this article was gathered as part of a much larger research project. While Stage One of the research used online surveys, the semi-structured individual interviews conducted with SENCOs are the focus of this article. All of those who agreed, in the online surveys, to being interviewed were contacted via email. This form of purpose sampling (Webster, Lewis and Brown, 2013) is strategic because it is criterion-based in that participants are recruited on the basis that they are able to answer the research questions posed (Mason, 2002). The criteria for recruitment were that SENCOs had to: (1) have completed the online survey; (2) be currently working in a mainstream secondary school in England; and (3) have experience working with parents and pupils with SEN. Twelve SENCOs were interviewed for between thirty minutes and two hours. The length of the interview was determined by the time available to SENCOs and the relevance of the conversation to the research objectives. A wealth of relevant data was generated, thus allowing for a detailed discussion of SENCO views and experiences of working with parents and pupils with SEN.

Interview recording and transcription

All SENCOs agreed to the interviews being recorded via an audio device. It was explained that audio recordings would be transferred to a passcode-protected file on a personal computer and deleted from the recorder to ensure data protection (Bryman, 2012). After each interview the audio recording was transcribed verbatim at the earliest possible opportunity to ensure that ambiguity in the recordings could be accurately interpreted through recall (Kvale, 2007). Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of participants, colleagues, pupils and schools. Once transcription had occurred, the text was emailed to the participant for validation (Bryman, 2012). None of the SENCOs disputed the textual interpretation of their interview.

Interview data analysis

Interview transcripts were coded using NVIVO to identify reoccurring themes. Coding involved the systematic analysis of data and the giving of labels to text that was of theoretical salience to the educational views and experiences of SENCOs (Saldana, 2009). The SENCOs did not allocate their own categories of convenience when responding to interview questions. Therefore, the coding – which unavoidably involved a degree of interpretation – used the research objectives and key issues that emerged from the review of literature to guide. The key issues to emerge from the coding are discussed below.

The power and influence of parents

The power and influence of parents, over the allocation of SEN resources and the development of SEN provision as part of attempts to cultivate an inclusive culture in schools, was a key theme that emerged from SENCO interviews. SENCO L, for instance, suggested: ‘Parents are part of every decision that is made and every conversation that is had... I would never ever hold a meeting without a parent...’. While many SENCOs explicitly used the term ‘consultation’ when describing the relationship and power dynamic with parents, many of the comments both implicitly and explicitly indicate that the power to decide appropriate provision resides mostly with SENCOs:

‘Obviously, there are times when we have to inform them [parents] as opposed to consulting with them because, at the end of the day, it’s our professional judgement as to what a pupil needs rather than asking the parents what they think’ (SENCO I).

Similarly, SENCO K suggested: ‘It might occasionally be that you have to make a decision and then tell the parents about the decision’ (SENCO K). The rationale for having such authority over the development and implementation of SEN provision, according to SENCO K, is legitimised through their knowledge and educational experiences (Williams, 1981) of SEN. The importance of ensuring that SENCOS understand the complexities of each individual subject becomes apparent when we remember that SEN is a contextual concept in that a pupil may require additional provision in one subject but not another (DfES, 2001). One potential outcome of involving parents in every decision is that the mechanisms that aim to ensure that inclusion is achieved may slow considerably thus meaning that pupils, teachers and LSAs have to wait longer for SEN provision to have a meaningful impact in lessons. Now, from the data available it is difficult to say whether the consultation that does occur informs the ways in which SENCOS endeavour to shape an inclusive culture in school, or if the consultation is tokenistic. More research is required that analyses the extent to which the wants and wishes of parents influence the actions of SENCOS. Only then will a more adequate assessment of the power of parents over the SEN norms and values of schools be achieved.

Parents empowering SENCOS

Some SENCOS claimed that parents empower them through the freedom they are given to make decisions: ‘The majority of the parents trust us as a school that we know what we’re doing. They don’t expect us to be on the phone all the time or saying we’ve had to change something slightly’ (SENCO C). SENCO K echoed this claim by suggesting: ‘Some of the parents that I know very well they’ve said to me: If you have to make a decision then do it because I know you’ll do the right thing’. Here, it appears that a perception of trust vindicates the monopolisation of decision-making and thus the power of SENCOS. Therefore, if SENCOS

want to continue to exercise their influence over the development and allocation of SEN provision and resources, they need to ensure that parents (continue to?) trust their judgement. The development and maintenance of a trusting relationship may also ensure that the mechanisms that aim to ensure inclusion is achieved run smoothly because parents can actively attempt, with varying degrees of success, to influence the inclusive norms and values of school if they choose to do so, as highlight below.

A rationale for consulting parents

Other SENCOs were more adamant about the importance of and justification for consulting parents. SENCO J, for example, suggested: ‘If there are any concerns from parents we don’t dismiss them and say it’s not important. It is important to them because it is their child, and they need an answer to whatever the problem is’. This comment identified the importance of parents being a part of the mechanism through which SEN information flows so that they can ask relevant questions relating to their children. In contrast, SENCO L suggested that consultation allows parents to take a more active, than reactive, role because: [parents are the] ‘... people who know the child best. We have the child for 6 hours of the day whereas they have them for 18 hours a day’. From the comments made by these SENCOs, then, consultation with parents is promoted because they are the ones who best understand the needs and requirements of the pupils that SENCOs endeavour to include. Therefore, parents can – and, according to some SENCOs, should – play an important role in attempts to cultivate an inclusive culture in all subjects.

The power of parents over attempts to cultivate an inclusive culture is illustrated by the following comments:

... in the past we had a complaint [from parents] because we colour-group our students in key stage three according to ability [in PE] and our smallest group only consisted of 12 students. Here, we had parents saying, you know, when it comes to team activities it's very restricting so we've tried to address that. This year we've changed it all around so that there's more of a balance between the groups so that team sports can take place that are more competitive rather than just you six versus us six, which was very static with the same people (SENCO B).

This comment is the only one that explicitly details how the parents have bonded together to resist the established arrangements in schools. The collective actions of this group who, according to the evidence provided above, have varying degrees of influence over SEN norms and values in schools, has resulted in pedagogical change in physical education (PE) in this instance. There were many other examples of parents resisting established educational customs through voicing disagreement or disapproval during meetings. For example, SENCO L suggested:

They [parents] could disagree with something at a meeting and we could discuss it and we could say: that obviously isn't the way forward so we need to change that and we need to make sure that the way forward is taking all things into consideration.

For this SENCO, it appears that the decision making process is often a collaborate effort between SENCO and parents. Unfortunately, the extent to which subject teachers and LSAs are part of this initial consultation is difficult to say. All that can be said is that they were not mentioned when the interview focus turned in this direction.

Consulting pupils with SEN

Some SENCOs were quick to mention the importance of involving the pupils themselves in meetings: ‘I do have those conversations with parents but I also like to have them with the child because I think it’s important that they feel listened to rather than having all these adults making decisions about their education’ (SENCO C). Some attempt appears to be made here to empower pupils by involving them in the decision making process. This is in line with one of the fundamental principles of the *Special Educational Needs Code of Practice*, in which it is explicitly stated that ‘the views of the child should be sought and taken into account’ (DfES, 2001: 7). The extent to which the pupil can influence the course and dynamic of the meeting and, thus, the decisions that are made is hinted at when SENCO C expanded on the topic:

Sometimes the children will disagree with what the parents want. Sometimes they disagree with what I feel is right but only by working together can we come to a compromise. Everyone’s got to be on board with the education of a pupil and if anyone isn’t engaged then that’s where we come across difficulties.

The power of some pupils with SEN is illustrated by the claim that compromises have to be made if the pupil does not accept the decisions of SENCOs. The extent to which pupils influence the decision-making process is difficult to say with the evidence available. Perhaps, ‘compromise’ involves SENCOs endeavouring to minimise the level of pupil resistance so that, ultimately, their wants and wishes are achieved. Indeed, comments made by SENCO H suggested that meetings with pupils are useful in that they allow SENCOs to: ‘Work out what the child thinks is best, and if what the child thinks is wrong then you have to negotiate so the child does work with the plan that you’ve put in place’. Similarly, SENCO K stated: ‘If you want to get them [pupils] to cooperate with you they need to be involved’. For these two SENCOs, and SENCO I, leadership and authority over SEN provision is maintained through ensuring that pupils accept decisions already made. In short, the extent to which the decision

making process is a collaborative effort between SENCO, parents and pupil may be minimal with power skewed towards SENCOs and, to a lesser extent, parents.

Conclusion

The article found many cases of SENCOs consulting with parents when it comes to the development of SEN provision and distribution of SEN resources. While this consultation does not appear to be tokenistic, the final decision about where SEN resources go and what is done with them resides mostly with SENCOs. Given that the SENCO is supposedly the SEN and inclusion expert, this finding is perhaps unsurprising. Nonetheless, the power and influence of parents was acknowledged through an example of collective action that stimulated pedagogical change in physical education. This is a good example of how the actions of parents can and sometimes do constrain the actions of SENCOs and influence what happens in schools. Whether parents would be able to exercise such influence over the pedagogy of higher status subjects such as English, maths or science is difficult to say with the evidence available. Maybe this is simply another example illustrating the subordinate status of physical education in secondary schools in Britain (see, for example, Maher, 2014; Maher and Macbeth, 2014).

Many SENCOs did shed light on the importance of and justification for consulting parents. It was argued that parents understand the needs and requirements of their children much more than SENCOs or other educational professional, thus meaning that their views should be sought. Interestingly, there was no suggestion that pupil views should be sought because they are most aware of their own needs, requirements or capabilities. Instead, the rationale for consulting pupils with SEN was mainly to ensure that they 'bought into' the decisions made

by others. The plan, it seems, is to develop consultation strategies that minimise pupil resistance.

From the findings of the research it appears that a perception of trust vindicates the monopolisation of decision-making and thus the power of SENCOs. Therefore, if SENCOs want to continue to exercise their influence over the development and allocation of SEN provision and resources, they need to ensure that parents trust their judgement. Only through an open, honest, supportive and cooperative relationship can this be achieved. Parental involvement and support is greatly important in facilitative inclusive education (Palmer, Fuller, Arora, and Nelson, 2001). To close, inclusive education is a universal right, which requires all countries to provide policy, support and resources to all educational centres to enable them to respond to, and secure the educational success of, *all learners* (EADSNE, 2010).

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