

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION AND LIFELONG LEARNING

**Dyslexia friendly schools and parent partnership: inclusion
and home-school relationships**

by

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Introduction

There has been widespread theoretical and policy interest in the two areas of parent – teacher relationships and inclusive education in recent times, but relatively little work that connects the fields (Vincent, 2000). In this paper we summarise the processes and outcomes of an action research project about inclusive policies and practices in relation to parents of children with dyslexic difficulties. The findings are theorised and discussed in terms of the underlying concepts that relate to the field of dyslexia and provision for children with these designations in mainstream schools, on one hand, and in terms of inclusive policies and practice frameworks, on the other. The project, which was developed by a voluntary organisation (the British Dyslexia Association) concerned with the education of children with dyslexic difficulties, had two distinct, but related strands, a development and an evaluation strand. The development strand took place over two years in five Local Education Authorities LEAs in south-west England with these aims:

1. to investigate and contribute to the development of professional practice in relation to children with dyslexic difficulties in schools and LEAs,
2. to support parents and children who were experiencing problems in obtaining appropriate provision in mainstream schools.

The rationale for the project was to develop good practice models of communicating with and advocating for parents. In other words, it was based on the importance of effective parental partnership and quality inclusive practice for children having dyslexic difficulties. A development officer worked in the five participating LEAs that were selected to represent a range of professional practice and had a mix of urban and rural populations. The aims of the research and evaluation strand of the project were:

1. to investigate the nature and quality of communication between parents, whose children have dyslexic difficulties, and professionals in schools and LEAs, in connection with educational needs and provision;
2. to examine the educational experiences of a sample of parents and their children who have dyslexic difficulties over a two year period, while also taking account of the schools' perspectives;
3. to evaluate the processes and impact of the work of the developmental officer undertaken in the other strand of the project.

Policy context and framework

The two key concepts used in this project were parent partnership and dyslexia-friendly schools (DFS for short). Both have a background in education policy and practice over the last two decades, though the actual terms of reference have changed over time. The DFS notion was used by the British Dyslexia Association, a national voluntary organization, that aims to support the interests of people with dyslexia. It issued a DFS resource pack (BDA, 1999), including a checklist of descriptors of DFSs. In this pack, DFS is defined as one where all teachers:

1. are appropriately trained,
2. aware of the impact of cognitive difficulties on teaching their subject,
3. aware of the strengths and weaknesses of individuals with dyslexia,
4. practice appropriate assessment which focuses on content rather than presentation,
5. make an effort to raise self esteem and enable the child to develop her/his strengths,
6. accept that parents have anxieties and are responded to positively,

7. seek advice when face problems in responding to child with dyslexia, DFSs also have systems in place which:
8. enable children to learn how best to learn,
9. give access to specialist teaching (balance between withdrawal and in-class support) and
10. give access to appropriate ICT to support learning.

Further details about how this has been put into operation in Swansea are found in Mackay (2001).

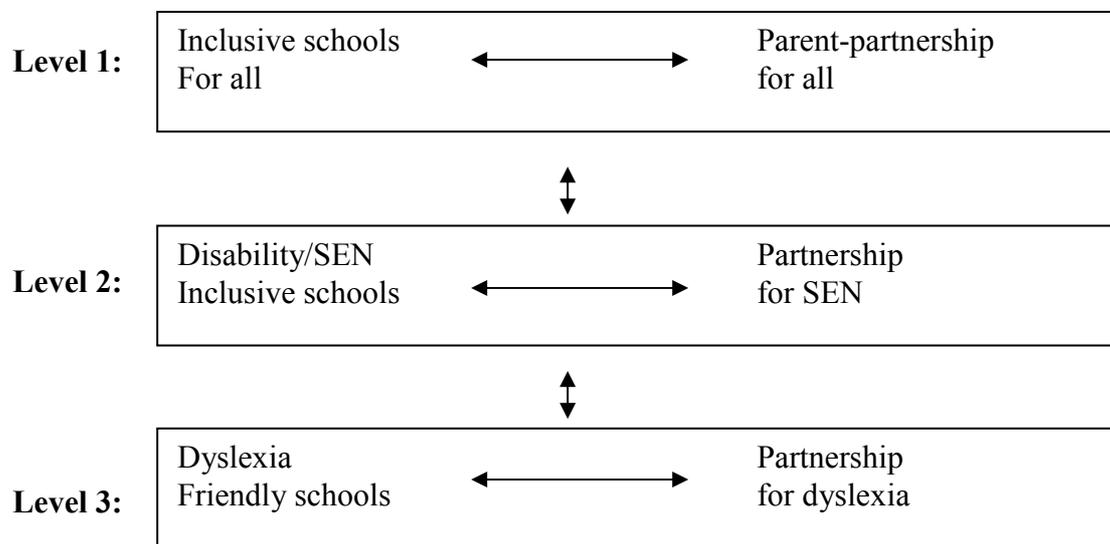
The DFS notion has its origins in the whole school special educational needs (SEN) policy approach and represents the application of this approach to the field of dyslexia. A whole school SEN approach was promoted for all areas of SEN, including specific areas, such as specific learning difficulties/dyslexia, from the 1980 onwards (for example, Thomas and Feiler, 1988). It is interesting to note links between this earlier notion of how schools should accommodate and respond to diverse learning needs and the more recent notion of inclusive schools. This continuity is evident in the fact that some leading proponents of the former continue to be proponents of the latter (Thomas et al. 1998). Despite these continuities, the DFS term departs from the more general 'inclusive schools' term by focusing its interest on those with dyslexia. Here is a contradiction, as inclusive schools are not just about accommodating children with a specific area of SEN, e.g. dyslexia, nor even all children with SEN/disabilities, but all children including those considered to be at risk or vulnerable (see Inclusion Index - Booth et al., 2000). This tension between an all-encompassing and a specific kind of inclusiveness can be traced to a recent developments in the wider SEN field, the growing emergence of interest groups that focus on medically defined areas of difficulties, e.g. dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD and autism.

There is a connection between dyslexia friendly schools and parent partnership. Part of being a DFS is the 'acceptance that parents have anxieties and are responded to positively'. This is where the DFS notion is linked to the parent partnership one and is represented in Figure 1 below. It shows the links between the school inclusiveness / friendly concept and parent partnership at three linked levels of analysis. At the most general and all encompassing level, there is parental partnership linked to notions of inclusive schooling. Inclusive schools, amongst other characteristics, are about greater participation and collaboration. At this level, parent partnership relates to all parents, not to specific groups, while inclusion covers all kinds of diversity and exceptionality, not just disability and specific areas, such as, dyslexia. The middle level concerns all areas of SEN and disability is subsumed in this general level. At the middle level, SEN parent partnership is linked to a school's inclusiveness of all forms of SEN/disability. The third level, the most specific one, concerns a specific area of SEN, that is, dyslexia. It is subsumed within these two more general levels. Here parent partnership is in relation to an interest group, such as dyslexia, linked to a specific version of school inclusiveness, the notion of dyslexia friendly schools.

The model raises questions about the justification and benefits of working at the disability-specific level (level 3). What do notions like DFS contribute over and above broader concepts like inclusive schools? And, what are the benefits of addressing issues of parent partnership for dyslexia, over and above partnership issues for all parents? These are an important questions when the main policy developments over the last 30 years in this country have been about partnership for the diversity of SEN

(level 2) and more recently for all (level 1). However, there has been growing interest in the specific SEN level (level 3) associated with the growth of disability specific interest groups. This is relevant because this was the level at which the project funders made sense of the project aims.

Figure 1: Three levels of policy and practice



The significance of the growth of the inclusive movement in education is the expectation that general education systems become more flexible to respond to greater diversity. Applied to parent partnership, this means that school systems become more flexible to include and subsume most partnership arrangements for SEN and dyslexia. In other words, the main principles and practices associated with home-school relations would be relevant to working with parents of children with SEN in general and dyslexia in particular. However, it can be argued that additional arrangements may be required for an identified minority of parents whose children have SEN. This would involve improving the general partnership arrangements to be more inclusive of the diversity of parents and then seeing what residual and distinctive arrangements were needed. In practice, the national SEN legal framework in England (SEN Code of Practice principles and procedures, statutory assessment and Statements) has not been justified in these terms. It has been assumed that protection is required for a minority whose needs and interests might be ignored by the general school system, without first adapting the general arrangements. This is the key difference between starting with the general school system and its inclusiveness and partnership or starting with the individual experiencing difficulties in learning.

It is relevant that the current English SEN framework has come under increasing criticism. It has been argued that the statutory assessment and Statement issuing system is costly and bureaucratic, stress inducing and alienating to parents, not providing assurance to parents, leading to inequitable resource allocation and not supporting inclusive practices (Audit Commission, 2002). Recent national policy positions have also recognised that more inclusion means *fewer* children with Statements (OFSTED, 2002). The implication is that parent partnership be approached as much as possible starting from general arrangements (level 1), not from a SEN (level 2) or a dyslexia perspective (level 3).

Parent partnership: policy and academic literature

The common versus SEN specific issue in parent partnership was recognised in a DfEE research project on partnership and SEN (Vernon, 1999). Vernon asked whether partnership in SEN is best promoted by targeting the parents of children with SEN or by targeting the parents of all children. Posed this way the question inclines towards an either/or answer, when the preferred answer may be the interaction of both. Focusing on all parents flexibly (including specific groups) may be an priority, but there may be additional focus on some parents of children with SEN in rare and exceptional circumstances. This dual approach requires a continuing interplay and convergence of ideas, values and practices between general parent partnership (level 1) and SEN or dyslexia specific partnership (levels 2 or 3). Croll (2001) makes a point, in a study of parent-teacher contacts, about the relationship between partnership for all (level 1) and partnership for parents of children with SEN (level 2). Where about 1 in 4 of children are designated as having SEN, without or with a Statement, partnership issues are relevant to all teachers and schools; they need to be seen in terms of general partnership arrangements for all.

The nature of parent partnership has been widely discussed in the literature in terms of shared purpose, mutual respect and joint decision-making (Wolfendale, 1983). Pugh et al. (1987) identified parent – teacher relationships along a continuum from non-participation, through support, participation and partnership to control. Though partnership is seen as less than parent control, it is not always clear how participation and partnership are different. Since the Warnock Report (DES, 1978) and in subsequent Government policy positions it has been unclear how far partnership extends beyond sensitivity and respect for parents to include power-sharing (cf. SEN Code of Practices (DfE, 1994, DfES, 2001). These uncertainties need to be seen in terms of changing concepts of parent-teacher relationships. A useful account of these concepts (Bastiani, 1987) identified four models: 1. compensation, 2. communication, 3. accountability and 4. participation.

Compensation, associated with the Plowden Report in the 1960s, assumed that some parents had deficits in their support for their children's education. This model has been criticised for overlooking wider social and political influences on parents. In the 1970s there was a shift of emphasis to good communications between home and school. Its weaknesses were about ignoring what was communicated. However, effective communication is difficult when parents and teachers have different assumptions and when teachers consider that they are there to enlighten uninformed parents. With the education service operating on more market-style principles, accountability and responsiveness to parents assumed increased importance. Despite professional doubts about this model, it has focused attention on the experiences and demands of parents. The fourth model, participation, has been construed by some authors as involving less professional supervision and control than participation (Pugh et al., 1987), but as the same as partnership by others (Riddick, 1996). Despite its appeal, there are conceptual, evaluative and practical problems with the partnership model. Partnership takes place in organisational settings in which parents and teachers work together and this requires time, funds and commitment (Wolfendale, 1983, Bastiani, 1987). Croll (2001) has pointed out that there is a long tradition of teachers seeing parents as problems and contributing to their children difficulties in learning. These assumptions might not prevent partnership but may inhibit equal partnership.

Parent Partnership Schemes (PPS) were first introduced in the UK about 10 years ago. These schemes aim to encourage the development of active partnership practices, for all children with SEN, not just for children with Statements. The objectives were to provide information and advisory services, initiate the named persons scheme to reduce conflict and minimise the number of SEN tribunal appeals. PPSs are supposed to work with parents, provide information and publicity, training, advice and support, networking and collaboration as well as help to inform and influence local SEN policy and practice. These functions are similar to the brief for the developmental officer in the project. In the SEN and Disability Act (2001) LEAs have a duty to provide Parent Partnership services and to appoint an independent person to assist in the 'resolution of disputes' between parents and LEAs and/or schools.

Though evaluations of these schemes have identified many positive aspects (Wolfendale and Cook, 1997), questions were raised about the school end of partnership relationships. Schools were identified as needing support to develop strategies to work more effectively with parents, a finding was reinforced by OFSTED reports on the implementation of the SEN Code of Practice (OFSTED, 1996, OFSTED, 1997). Vernon (1999) also found that parents had concerns about their relationships with schools. In a more recent evaluation of PPSs in Wales, (Wolfendale and Bryan, 2002), many parents reported struggling to get information and advice, with only a minority of parents was positive about the support received from schools.

Our review has shown the scarcity of studies of parental perspectives and parent partnership in relation to dyslexia. One line of research indicated that teachers reported positive relationships with parents of children with SpLD, these relationships being no different from that of other parents (Dyson and Skidmore, 1994). It is interesting, that this study did not consider the parental perspectives, confirming what Atkin et al. (1988) pointed out years ago; research on home-school relationships focuses mainly on the professional rather than parent perspectives. However, one study examined parents' experiences of the identification process and parent-teacher relationships (Riddick, 1996). These parents reported that teachers were slow or averse to suggesting that their child had dyslexia, any teachers dismissive or non-committal about the presence of dyslexic difficulties. The media (magazines, TV and radio) was the main source of information about dyslexia. Most mothers were relieved when it was confirmed that their child was dyslexic and many felt blamed by the school for their child's difficulties: feeling criticised for being over-protective or over-anxious; not doing enough at home, or spoiling children. These studies were relevant to the design of the evaluation study reported in this paper. In another Scottish study (Riddell et al., 1994) of perspectives of parents of children with specific learning difficulties, the focus was on the role of voluntary organizations in supporting these parents to argue for improved levels of resourcing and provision. However, they also found different concepts about the nature of specific learning difficulties/dyslexia between parents, influenced by voluntary organizations, and teachers. Parents had difficulties in persuading schools to do assessments and they also experienced their concerns being sometimes dismissed. The study documented different kinds of strategies used by parents to secure provision with middle class parents reporting more dissatisfaction than working class parents.

Project design and methods

There were 3 specific objectives that informed the design and methodology of the evaluation work:

- i. to examine the experiences of a sample of parents and their children who have dyslexic difficulties over a two year period, while also taking account of the schools' perspectives with a particular focus on the communication between parents, teachers and LEAs,
- ii. to evaluate the processes and impact of the work of the developmental officer,
- iii. to identify interesting and promising policies and practices that promote parental partnership and dyslexia friendly schools.

Parental samples

i. Longitudinal sample:

At the outset we identified 7 families from across the 5 LEAs to comprise a short term two year longitudinal sample. Of these families 4 had already contacted the fieldworker with a query or problem (but had no intensive development officer involvement) and the other 3 had contacted the research team themselves as a result of publicity. The aim was to illuminate these experiences in depth over this period; not to obtain a representative or structured sample. Families were interviewed four times over a two-year period at intervals of 6 months. They were invited to participate, informed about the project and the nature of the commitment and offered an opportunity to decline to participate; none did. All were interviewed in person in the Autumn of 2001 (1 couple was interviewed together, 3 mothers with fathers joining the interview later, and 3 mothers alone). These families involved 5 boys and 2 girls, of whom 5 were involved in interviews and their views used to verify parental perspectives. The second interviews were by phone, the third in person again and the last by phone again. One of the families were not involved after the second interview as there had been a family tragedy. As these parents knew the research team were interested in their progress, several wrote or telephoned in-between these interviews with information or, sometimes, just for a chat.

ii. Development Officer case study sample

This sample was selected to examine the range of referrals (different kinds and 'degrees' of problems) that came to the Officer and to monitor the development aspect of the project. The Officer advised the researcher about a selection of families, though the researcher made the final choice, which in fact covered three of the LEAs. Two families were chosen because their difficulties might require only supplying information (minor difficulties). Another 2 families were chosen because it looked as though their problems might be substantial and the final 3 families for average/intermediate level difficulties. These expectations proved to be correct for all except one family. The sample contained five families where the child in question was a boy and two where they were girls. They were all informed about the purposes of the interviews and invited to participate, which they all did.

As much secondary data was collected for this sample as possible. This involved interviewing professionals involved with the families and getting access to files and paperwork. The latter proved easy as all the parents gave access assessment reports and letters from and to them; school reports etc. The last Ofsted reports of the schools

attended by the children were also collected. However, access to professionals, including teachers, proved more difficult due to lack of teacher time but also refusals where parents were involved in appeals procedures.

Table 1 : Summary of two samples

Longitudinal	Development Officer cases
3 parents who had contacted with the Development Officer	2 parents presenting with minor difficulties
4 parents responding to project publicity	3 parents presenting with average difficulties
	2 parents presenting with substantial difficulties

The LEAs and voluntary organisations' perspectives

To identify interesting and promising policies and practices, details about the five participating LEAs were gained through an initial interview in person with a relevant officer. A second phone interview collected additional and more detailed information. The most recent Ofsted reports on each were also used. The data covered policies, funding, development plans, inclusion, SEN, auditing and monitoring, parents and voluntary organisations, statementing, school based policies and practices. In addition, schools regarded by LEAs as having 'good practice' were also visited. This included 2 schools, from different Authorities, and an independent school, sought by many parents. Voluntary organisations are extremely important for many parents of children with dyslexia. Representatives of four of these associations were interviewed.

Data collection and analysis

All the interviews, in person and by telephone, with parents, children and members of voluntary organisations were semi-structured. The aim was to gain depth of information, to understand perspectives and problems and to generate ideas, understandings and concepts from the data that emerged in a 'grounded' approach. All interviews were taped and transcribed in full and then analysed by two of the authors independently for emergent themes relevant to parent-professional communications. From the jointly agreed themes a working conceptual framework was devised and then subjected to repeated adaptation as more data were analysed.

The data for the evaluation of the Development Officer's work was collected in various ways. The Officer and a representative of the BDA were interviewed about their aims and expectation of the development work. A weekly log was kept by the Officer of new and updates of on-going cases, involving a massive amount of secondary data. Not only did this provide a picture of the Officer's work, it also validated parents' and professionals' accounts of specific events and processes. The researcher and Development Officer also had weekly telephone conversations to elaborate or clarify some of the information. Parental agreement was secured for passing anonymised details onto the researcher. The views of the 7 parents (in the second sample above) on the Officer's support were also collected. At the end of project the Officer wrote a self-evaluation account of her work using headings negotiated between her and the research team (covering for example, interventions, their rationale, outcomes, reasons for referrals, relationships with voluntary organisations). This report was used, along with the secondary data, parents' and others' accounts to validate and expand the issues and processes that she elaborated.

Data relevant to interesting practices was collected from a range of sources: from LEA initial and subsequent interviews, LEA policy documentation, the most recent Ofsted reports on these LEAs, national SEN statistics about these LEAs and from school visits and some parents' interviews.

Findings

1. Parents' perspectives

Details of the 14 parental cases (longitudinal and Officer samples) cannot be reported in this paper (see Griffiths, Norwich and Burden, 2003, for full research report). We present the conceptual framework which we derived from the emergent, with excerpts from cases which exemplify our theoretical analysis.

We identified three main inter-related themes which cover, i. Knowledge in the field, ii. Identity of the mother of the child with dyslexia, and iii. Parental Strategies. We discuss each of these and their relationships in what follows.

Figure 1 : Conceptual framework

