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Perspectives on Determining Appropriate Provision for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Background

This paper will explore the views of parents, a school and local authority on the process of determining appropriate educational provision for children with autism. Through the use of a survey as well as interviews several key themes emerged. These are the importance of early identification, the process of diagnosis, time waiting for provision to be made, level of input from the key stakeholders, the process of implementing provision and disagreement resolution. The purpose is to identify best practice and suggest ways to improve the process in England.

Research Questions

1. What are the influences that support or inhibit appropriate provision for children with autistic spectrum disorder from the perspective of a school, parents and local authorities?
2. How do the participants consider the current system of appropriating and maintaining provision as working in practice?

Methods

When exploring the system to determine how to secure appropriate educational provision for children with autism, both qualitative and quantitative approaches are used. The research is organised in three main strands (school, parental views, Local Authority views) which are considered as individual aspects first, before drawing these together to focus on the whole (system). Each of these uses the method which best helps explore the strand, while acknowledging the purpose and research questions.

A case study was employed to explore the day to day implementation of educational provision in a school for children with autism. The views of parents were sought through a mixed methods questionnaire asking them for their views on the experience of securing provision for their child with autism (n=738). Finally, the views of the local authority were obtained through semi structured interviews with staff from 5 authorities across the south of England.

In all three foci ethical protocol was followed and consent was granted (BERA, 2004) and as such, identifying details have been changed.

Frame

To aid the exploration of the views of the key players, Systems Theory (Bertalanffy, 1968) has been employed. This ecosystematic approach is useful because it focuses on the influences that interact with the core (which in this case is the child) and sees this as a whole system. It recognized that individuals or institutions come with their own history and priorities; views and opinions, but is the combination of influences and not the individual factor in isolation that is important. No individual exists in a vacuum and the influences that shape the person are fluid and changing and therefore interactive with each other. Systems Theory furthers our understanding of the process of determining provision by investigating the tensions and dilemmas that exist in the two-way flow of influences that occur between individuals and the institutions that combine to make decisions about where a child's educational needs can best be met. This dual causality is a key feature of this model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Research findings

The paper concludes by drawing from the individual strands to inform conclusions about the process of securing provision for children with autism.

Early identification-Children are diagnosed at younger ages but this did not necessarily correlate with a speedy process to appropriate provision. Parents did not find this process straightforward and reported high levels of stress.

Diagnosis-the trend of early diagnosis was generally seen as helpful by parents, but not necessarily so by local authorities. This often led to disagreement about the best place to meet the child's needs as parents wished for autistic specific provision and this is in limited supply.

Waiting times-the guidance from the Code of Practice (DfES, 2001) suggests a waiting time of six months from referral to decision of educational placement. Just over half of the survey parents had provision within the timeframe. Waiting for assessments and disagreement on the preferred choice were the main reasons for delays.

Input-all stakeholders spoke about the positive initiatives in working together. Schools and Local Authorities were realistic about not being able to please everyone, but felt confident in meeting the needs of every child and including parents in the process. When asked about the relationship with the Local Authority and the process of securing provision, parents had mixed opinions. Most reported very high levels of stress (62% n=455). Multiple regression and factor analysis was used to show what factors affected the survey parents the most. Most felt that the procedure was too complex; there were limited options or lack of space at these schools as the main reasons.

Provision into action-Once a child is in school, the picture changes somewhat. The school, Local Authority and parent feel that a good working relationship is established. 87% (n=642) of parents were happy with the input and the action on the input given. Parents felt secure in the fact that their child had a Statement. This is interesting as local authorities are moving away from issuing these in an effort to reduce bureaucracy.

Disagreement resolution-for the majority of parents surveyed, the process of determining provision resulted in their child being placed in the parent's provision of choice (79% n=581). The minority of parents went through disagreement resolution and all sides reported this process as difficult, time consuming and draining of resources.