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Knowledge is the key... A grounded theory study exploring parent carer experiences of an Educational Psychology Service within pre-statutory stages of early intervention

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Research Aims

- To explore parent and carer experiences of involvement with a Local Authority (LA) Educational Psychology Service (EPS)
- To identify influential factors to help create an understanding of mechanisms that enable or hinder parental engagement
- To use findings to support conversations around the improvement of practice for Educational Psychologists (EPs) and EPSs to increase parent/ carer engagement to best support YP, families, communities and wider service users.

Key Messages

The research indicates that knowledge is a key, overarching concept for enabling effective parental engagement with information sharing at the centre. EPS responsiveness was found to cross all aspects of involvement with families, with EPs striving to deliver intervention early in the life of the problem, aiming to diminish potential parental battles to access support.

Participants

Focus Group

An initial focus group was used to support the development of questions to be asked within individual semi-structured interviews that would occur later in the study. This was to give voice to parents and carers and use their experience to guide what should or should not be asked.

Themes from the focus group discussion were transferred into questions with each comment or theme included and represented somewhere within the initial set of interview questions.

Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews involved the researcher asking questions, generated from the focus group, with the option for participants to raise additional aspects as they wished.

Interviews were conducted individually and were audio recorded.

Five parents of children with SEND that had been offered or accessed LA EP support within early intervention stages were interviewed. These were spread across two LAs in four different settings with the fifth pupil electively home educated.

Data Analysis

- Interviews were transcribed and analysed using Constructivist Grounded Theory approaches
- Interview transcripts were reviewed with important words and phrases identified
- Comparisons were made between interviews to identify themes and begin to recognise patterns and capture meaning
- Data analysis led to important concepts being created called categories.

Findings

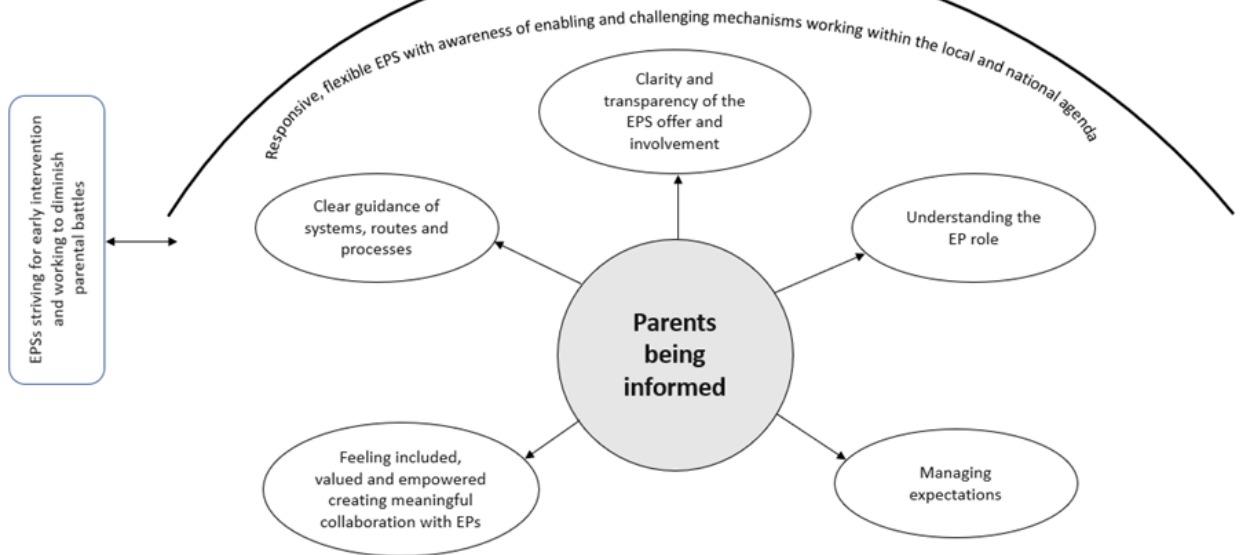
Analysis of parental experiences, captured in interviews, led to the construction of seven overarching categories:

Category number	Category title
Category 1	Emotional strain creating a barrier to EPS engagement
Category 2	<i>Feeling uninformed - unless you're in the know, you can't access that help (category title taken from a direct participant quote)</i>
Category 3	<i>It's knowledge. Knowledge is key to it all (category title taken from a direct participant quote)</i>
Category 4	Parents having to fight and feeling like a battle - schools acting as gatekeepers to support
Category 5	Elusive EP role and the unknown reality - contrasts in expectations and involvement
Category 6	Wider system influences: multifaceted mechanisms impacting access and engagement
Category 7	Parents know what they want: earlier support, clarity, guidance, transparency and responsiveness

Grounded Theory

A theory was developed that was grounded from the analysis of participants' experiences with an EPS. A visual illustration of the final grounded theory is presented here:

Knowledge is the key



This framework represents an overarching focus on knowledge, parents being informed, EPSs being responsive, striving for early intervention and working to diminish parental battles to access support.

This includes the following related elements that participants felt would support engagement:

- Clear guidance of systems, routes and processes
- Clarity and transparency of the EPS offer and what involvement will look like
- Understanding the EP role
- Managing expectations
- Feeling included, valued and empowered creating a meaningful partnership
- Responsive EPS where EPs adapt their approach to meet the needs of individuals whilst acknowledging that EPs need to work within local and national agendas
- EPs striving for early intervention, providing support to YP early in the life of presenting difficulties
- Working to diminish parental battles.

Implications

Findings provide suggestions and possible implications for improving parent/ carer engagement within the professional practice of EPs and EPSs, with potential applicability to other LA teams.

Possible recommendations

- EPs adapting their practice to be responsive to the individual needs of families and their circumstances

- EPs striving to offer flexible dates, times and locations for families within the remit that exists for working hours within an EPS
- EPs to consider sharing their professional contact details and remaining open to interaction during the period of their involvement
- EPs to introduce themselves and explain their role when beginning involvement to reduce ambiguity, manage expectations, provide clarity around involvement and generate an opportunity for information sharing and question answering
- EPSs to generate user-friendly information, shared in appropriate ways and locations, to maximise take up
- EPSs to try to create a clear offer for schools and families, including routes and referral pathways with consideration for direct parent/ carer access
- EPSs to maintain a positive working partnership with schools and settings, recognising that EPSs need to consider their position in providing a service that schools value and endorse
- EPSs to creatively explore their service delivery models to strive for early intervention, wherever possible, whilst attempting to manage the ever-growing demand for EHCPs.

Research Limitations

A considered limitation of the present study is the small sample size and the narrow range of LAs from which data was obtained. Different participants may have resulted in contrasting findings.

All participants in this study had experienced some form of EP involvement. It would be wrong, therefore, to assume that conclusions drawn from the present study are widely generalisable to populations that experience significant engagement difficulties.

Findings may be limited to the areas in which data collection took place which suggests caution may be required if applying findings or the grounded theory framework to other EPSs.

Future research

The current study would benefit from increasing and extending the sample to include a wider range of LAs. This would support the incorporation of potential geographical, population and practice variations, and enable a broader collection of experience and practice.

Future research could also be extended by exploring perceptions of parents that have been unable to engage in EPS support. In addition, exploring service users from multiple genders and varied cultural, social and economic backgrounds may give a deeper understanding of mechanisms which can influence engagement.