

Parents matter

How can leaders involve parents in the self-evaluation process and further development of children's centre and extended school services?

SCHOOL LEADERS

Report

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Introduction

1.1 Evolving self-evaluation expectations

Government's ten-year strategy for childcare, The Children Act 2004 and the Green Paper, 'Every Child Matters', provides the legislative foundation for whole-system reform in how children's services are delivered. Sure Start's published practice guidance on Children's Centre service delivery constantly refers to the need to consult parents. Self-evaluation formats for Children's Centres and Schools require leaders to state how parents have been involved in the judgments made. Centres are charged with ensuring access to services by those communities whose take up of services in the past have been low.

The statutory annual performance management of Children's Centres is to be undertaken by local authorities, based on a Children's Centre self-evaluation Form. The completion of this form requires Centre leaders to demonstrate how they have involved parents in the self-evaluation process. Subsequent development planning and possibly funding awards will be based on the self-evaluation outcomes. These forms place demands on leaders to be quite specific about how they have gained input from hard to reach families. There are clearly a number of questions that must be faced by the leaders of Children's Centres and Extended Schools. How can leaders:

- Gain the voices of parents across diverse communities?
- Enable quieter, less confident parents to contribute?
- Get parents who are not accessing Centre services to contribute?
- Enable parents to make unbiased contributions?
- Address dilemmas when making decisions informed by parents' evaluations?

Parental involvement and participation was an essential requirement for Sure Start local programmes prior to their development as Children's Centres. The National Sure Start Unit, essentially a government organisation, is quite different from the original Sure Start local programmes as developed in 1998. Local programmes were grown from community development principles and aimed to allow the full participation of parents in determining the content and management of the services offered. It proved enlightening and invaluable for the way Sure Start local programmes developed and for the professional development of those working with young children.

A recent paper written by Tom Bentley and Sarah Gillinson for the Innovation Unit suggests the need to "shift the emphasis in system reform towards the role of users in driving innovation...by focusing on the responsiveness of schools to parents", Bentley (2007, p.4). In the subsequent development of new Children's Centres led by the National Sure Start Unit, parental involvement seems to be moving from engagement to evaluation. Parental involvement appears to be in danger of becoming a requirement demanded by policy makers rather than a sensitively nurtured and valued process. This requires careful consideration by leaders as:

"The decline in the individual's trust in public organisations, including professional bodies...leads to the fear that an organisation will compete to seek its own ends rather than the benefit of its patients or customers." (Temple 2004, xix)

The report's enquiry is looked at from two main directions. Firstly it looks at the messages for all Children's Centre leaders about what can work and why parent participation is so important. Secondly it explores the messages received for leading Children's Centres and the potential value for these reflections in leadership practice.

1.2 Power differentials

When parents are asked to become involved in the self-evaluation of Centre services, the power differential is automatically set. The organisational body of professionals is in effect asking parents to evaluate services being offered which the parents may not have wanted in the first place. The current Labour government is investing huge sums of money into a major programme of change for how children's services are delivered. Whilst the government has set national population outcomes, how these outcomes are reached must be determined by the individual Centres. If leaders of Children's Centres and Extended Schools are going to be successful in reaching the desired outcomes, they will need to ensure that parents engage with the services developed. Parents therefore need to be involved in the developments. Parents can then take a leading role in evaluating the services. Otherwise, parents are powerless and consultation can only be tokenistic. Leaders need to know what questions parents would like to be asked. Margaret Ledwith asks a very pertinent question:

"In what ways are dominant ideas and national policy changes impacting on the diverse lives of local people?" Ledwith (2005, p8)

1.3 Literary review

The Children's Centre Initiative in making full day care a mandatory core offer in order to raise the employment figures for parents appears to be a good example of a top-down approach not meeting local population needs.

"The Childcare Bill is the first ever legislation dedicated to early years and childcare." DFES (2006, p5)

The fact that the title of the Bill contains the word 'Childcare' rather than 'Education' tells us much about the ten-year strategy. Norman Glass, writing about the changes to Sure Start following the National Evaluation of the programme comments on the fact that:

"Early Sure Start documents make very little reference to 'childcare', in the sense of somewhere where the children can be looked after to enable their parents to work; it was all about child development." Glass (2005, p1)

It could be argued that the government's ten-year strategy is driven as much by the potential economic benefit of getting parents into work rather than just the needs of the child and parent. In response to Glass's criticism of the government for 'dismantling Sure Start in all but name', Margaret Hodge, Minister for Children and Families said that on the contrary, the government wished to see 3,500 Sure Start Children's Centres by 2010, Hodge (2005, p1).

Glass goes on to question whether the government's inspirational outcomes will be reached as the approach to early years is changed.

“It is necessary, in the case of early years at any rate, to involve local people fully in the development and management of the programme if it was to take root and not simply be seen as another quick fix by middle-class social engineers.” Glass (2005, p2)

Glass's findings in the evaluation of Sure Start programmes appear to support the beliefs of Paulo Freire who, some thirty years earlier, suggests that change will never be successful if the people in power initiate it. Freire believes in those who are oppressed being encouraged to question the state of play and that they must initiate change. Freire (1972)

In 2002, Ghate and Hazel (2002) conducted a study into parents' perspectives of their lives, living in what were classed as poor environments against the current background of policy focus on children's services. Their study highlighted some of the marked disparities that can exist between the day-to-day concerns of parents and the priorities of policy makers, for instance in terms of the environment in which they were living. For example, 54% of the parents in their study wanted something to be done about the dog fouling as they felt it had a direct impact upon their families whilst only 18% felt that drug abuse had a direct impact.

Diane Quinton's 2004 research findings on supporting parents commissioned by the Department of Health, reinforces the argument for services not to be led by a top-down approach. Quinton's study was undertaken prior to the many recent initiatives such as tax credits or initiatives designed to help parents into work. Quinton found that:

“Support is complex to assess, to get right and to deliver, especially for parenting, because of the balance between the neglect of family problems and intrusion into family life, not to mention ideas of what satisfactory parenting is, how and when this needs support and who should decide that.” Quinton (2004, p 179)

Whilst Quinton's study was focused on the need for parent support in health related services, her findings are relevant to all children's services. She discovered cross-cutting themes about the services that parents wanted. These were that their views should be taken seriously, that they should be listened to and supported emotionally and that they should be treated as partners of 'the team around the child'. Quinton (2004, p193). Parents actually need to be the leaders in evaluating and developing the services.

1.4 Summary of documentation

- The nature of Sure Start local programmes has been changed.
- Demands from child development to adult employment have become intertwined.
- Control has been given to local authorities.
- Centres have been re-branded.
- There have been constant references made to the need for consultation with parents.

Details of methods

2.1 Review of documentation

Guidance documentation published by the DFES and Sure Start was scrutinised for recommendations regarding self-evaluation, national targets and the involvement of parents. Literary research findings, reports and journals concerned with the involvement of parents in evaluating and informing services, were then identified and considered. It was important to clearly distinguish between 'parental involvement in establishments' and 'parental participation in evaluation processes'.

2.2 Characteristics of the case study centres

This report reviews the history and process of parental participation in each organisation's self-evaluation, through associated literature and also in three Children's Centre case studies, where semi-structured interviews were undertaken. Each Centre has a different and distinctive experience. One Centre's distinctiveness is in the joined up professional agencies working with the parents and the long-term sustainability gained through parental ownership. Another Centre is distinguished by the value it places on addressing the power differentials between staff and parents when focusing on the needs of parents and the evaluation of parent groups. The third Centre's focal features are working in a diverse cultural environment and demonstrating that agreed targets are being met. Centres were chosen based on their reputations for working with parents. Interviews were digitally recorded. A written account of the interview was sent to the participants for verification. The summary of findings was then discussed with the leaders of six Children's Centres for the purpose of validation.

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews involving seven main questions were carried out with the leaders of three Children's Centres. The interviews took place in the Centres. Questions were sent to participants prior to the interviews (See Appendix 1). A series of prompts and probes were used to capture the spontaneity of the interviewees' responses.

Numbers and roles of interviewees at each Centre were as follows:

- Centre One – Head.
- Centre Two - Deputy Head and Family Resource Team Leader.
- Centre Three - Deputy Head, Acting Deputy Head of Community Support and the Sure Start Local Programme Evaluator.

2.3 The case study samples

It is important to note that the Centres were selected on the basis of assumed good practice in working with parents. The leaders of these Centres were known to have an interest and value in the role of the parent. Geographically, the Centres were situated in different local authorities and the demographics of the communities they served were very different. This was considered to be of importance if the perspectives gained were

to be useful to other Centre leaders. It would enable some comparisons to be made and allow for the identification of common factors.

Centre 1

Centre 1 is situated in the middle of a visibly typical council estate in the North West of England controlled by the City Council. The Centre is tucked away down a driveway between houses and is not visible from the road. The Centre was built in 1989 and was intended for use by the local ward community only. It was intended to be community directed and all services were to be free of charge. The main service offered was full day care. After eighteen months, the community focus was changed and services had to be paid for. Now that it is a designated Sure Start Children's Centre, the Local Authority is the lead body that holds the decision-making powers. There are two budget streams directly into the Centre, one from education and one from Sure Start of £33,000. Staff from other sectors such as health visitors, funded by the PCT, work from the Centre.

Whilst the City Council held the decision making powers, moves had been made to gain local representation. Each district in the Council had been required to form a 'Children's Centre District Board' made up of strategic partners. Each Centre was also charged with forming an 'Advisory group' with a 50% parent representation, although the Authority felt this may be hard to achieve. The 'Advisory group' was to assist the Head of Centre in steering the Centre to achieve delivery of the core offer and reflect the needs of the local community.

There are approximately 638 children under the age of five living in the ward served by the Centre and approximately 17% of families are from ethnic minority families, mainly Pakistani and Bangladeshi. This figure is low compared to the rest of the city.

Centre 2

Centre 2 was established in 1983 in the South East of England in an industrial town. At this time the town was in political and social turmoil following the closure of its main industry, the steel industry. The Centre began in a small part of the town's empty grammar school and has continued to grow, now occupying the whole building with new buildings attached. It has been recognised world wide for its leading practice in working with parents. From the original nursery provision, it developed into an Early Excellence Centre and in 1999 successfully bid for Local Sure Start Programme funding. Recently the nursery provision has been granted school status.

Centre 3

Centre 3 is situated in a large city in an area of overall high deprivation. It is a new, purpose built Centre opened in 2004. There are 1,512 children under five in the area served by the Centre, of which, 955 are registered with the Centre. The Centre has been built in an attractive park position which is in the hub of the community. It was developed under the wave five of Sure Start Local Programmes. There is a wide range of ethnicity in the area with 24 different languages recorded as being spoken.

Findings

3.1 The spectrum of self-evaluation

What became clear through the semi-structured interviews held in each of the three Centres was that each Centre was at a very different stage in undertaking the involvement of parents in the self-evaluation process. Each Centre's rationale for involving parents in self-evaluation had arisen from a different stimulus ranging from a passionate belief in the value of parents as equal partners, to meeting the requirements of national evaluations, to cultural history. In turn, this appeared to have a direct impact upon the quality of the process in each Centre and the subsequent usefulness of the self-evaluation information gained.

In one Centre, the level of consideration to the whole process of parental involvement in the Centre's self-evaluation was immense. The passionate ethos and values held by the leader of this Centre had clearly been communicated and embedded amongst the senior staff. The level of questioning practice was clearly active throughout the interview. Participants made negative comments about their past experiences of collecting quantitative data for the National Sure Start Unit that "appeared to disappear into the ether". This data collection had been time consuming and of no use to informing future practice. In this Centre, it was also felt that many of the National targets being imposed upon Centres were inappropriate as starting points for service design and delivery. Research was also being undertaken to involve parents as co-constructors of the self-evaluation process. Parents were being asked to put together the questions they would like to be asked.

At the other end of the continuum, a Centre, whilst providing many service activities for parents, disclosed that it was paying a considerable amount of money to a University to collect evaluation data as part its self-evaluation process. The University was charged with gaining information from parents. However, no plans had been made to utilise and act upon the data collected. Certainly, parents were not going to be involved in the feedback of the evaluation. In this Centre, the self-evaluation process appeared to be an exercise to meet authority requirements. In addition, parents' requests for services had been ignored because of the leader's concerns about meeting publicly agreed targets.

Sitting in the middle of the continuum was the third Centre, where the leader appeared to value the involvement of parents in the self-evaluation process but was compromised by the local authority requirements and funding restrictions. In this Centre, the leader was facing an ethical conflict between her professional values and principles and those of the local authority. A poster was placed on the leader's wall stating the need to "swim against the tide". During the interview it became clear that parental involvement in self-evaluation processes was valued as important, but the mechanisms for achieving meaningful involvement were at an early stage of development. Questionnaires were giving a low return, yet this practice was not being questioned as unsuccessful. It was also acknowledged that the black and ethnic minority families were not accessing the Centre.

The semi-structured interviews with the leaders of the three Centres clearly showed the need for all leaders to:

- Research community needs.
- Give in depth consideration to self-evaluation processes.
- Develop shared vision, ethos, values and principles with all staff.
- Develop strong communication channels.
- Address power differentials.
- Be mindful of government targets.
- Take responsive action to parent evaluations.

3.2 Parent representatives

Throughout each interview, clarity had to be sought on various terms used by participants to describe the leadership body. While the terms were freely used by all participants, it became clear that each participant's definition of the term differed from Centre to Centre. These included 'Advisory Group', 'Parent Forum', 'Family Forum', 'District Board' and 'Senior Leadership or Management Team'. The one commonality between all of these groups was that they had all been formed by professional people in power. This was replicated by Sure Start Local Programme Management Boards and Governing Bodies. The make-up and election of parents to these bodies was driven by policy makers, not parents. The parents were also outnumbered by professionals on the various management body models. All of the groups met at times and venues determined by the Centre's professional leaders rather than at times and venues determined by the parents. Professional staff from the Centre were always present at the meetings. In one Centre, the practice was to hold another event to tempt parents to attend prior to the group meeting. There was also an acknowledgement in each Centre that no individual parent or small group of parents can be a true representation of other parents. There is not one homogenous group of parents. However, it appeared that each Centre had found it valuable to start with a small group of parents and then allow the work to 'snowball'.

3.3 A challenging role for leaders of Children's Centres

The interview questions caused the leaders of Children's Centres to start questioning their practice regarding the involvement of parents in self-evaluation. One Centre in particular appeared to regard the consideration of the self-evaluation process as something they had not really considered. It seemed to have been something of an end product that was required by the funding authority. At the Centre where the level of work on parental involvement had tunneled down to parents as co-constructors of evaluations, the question was asked as to whether the leaders really knew what was going on in the parent's lives. None of the Centre leaders visited appeared to be confident or satisfied with their involvement of parents in the self-evaluation process.

Every interview revealed the pressures of meeting targets within constrictions of time scales and budgets whilst trying to cope with massive organisational changes. One Centre gave an illustrational account of feeling unable to provide craft classes requested by parents because of the need to meet publicly set targets.

Discussions arose around the collection of quantitative data that had been required by the National Sure Start Unit and how this data had disappeared once collected. It was felt that data collection had been time consuming and of no value in its use.

Each of the Centres had undergone or was in the process of making staff structure changes following reductions in Local Programme Sure Start funding. People's job roles and responsibilities were being reviewed.

It became clear that Centre leaders face a challenge to ensure effective communication as their organisations continue to grow. The value of timely communication between professionals working from a central base was highlighted. In one Centre, a discussion developed about whether all the valuable day-to-day comments made by parents to staff and key workers were effectively collected and communicated because there were no formal methods for doing this in place. The size of the organisation was felt to be a possible issue for leaders. Recognition was given to the challenge that growing organisations placed on leadership skills and the growing number of issues that now needed consideration.

3.4 Power differentials and empowerment

During one interview, the term 'power differentials' was introduced. The introduction of this term into the interview clarified some of the issues raised in an earlier interview where the parents had been very vocal in the community at one time but this had been almost eradicated by the Council's decision to tell the community what they needed and what would be provided for them. The issue of power was very much brought to mind at the Centre where the parent's request for craft classes had been declined due to the need to meet pre-determined targets.

The Centre that was conscious of power differentials was undertaking some research with a group of parents around their role as evaluators. The leaders of this Centre had clearly differentiated between "consultation" and parental involvement in the process. They felt that with 'consultation' there was a danger of tokenism. They were scathing of "quick fix parenting classes lasting for six weeks" saying this approach typified the government saying to parents "you will have this and this". They also felt that smoking cessation as a Centre target was typical of a top down approach. In order to involve parents in the evaluation process, the leaders felt that the parents must be involved in deciding what questions the process would ask. They also intended to share the process of collating and interpreting the evaluation evidence with the parents. Through this approach, the power differential between Centre staff and parents was being balanced.

The Centre also recognised that sometimes the power lay firmly with the Centre leaders. This was felt to be necessary for the Centre staff to continue working. The example was given of parents wanting services on Sundays and the Centre staff having to say no if they were going to have any kind of work life balance. They felt it was important that in such instances the staff were totally honest when explaining to parents why they were not going to meet their requests.

3.5 Parent responsibility and future sustainability

At two Centres, evidence was found to suggest that there would always be some parents who, once encouraged, would take on community responsibilities and work hard to make things work. An excellent example of this was parents running an independent play group. Because of the parents' work, the Centre's playgroup, providing the session education and care for three and four year olds, was sustainable.

The parents running the group had undertaken professional qualifications and were encouraging other parents to develop their skills and knowledge. The leader felt that the use of the group by other parents, its popularity, was an indication of the parents' evaluation. The key to the success of this group lay in the Centre leader's encouragement, professional support and conviction. This had been required when persuading the funding body to allow the rooms to be used rent free.

3.6 Time

In each Centre, the timescale of developments and the need for time to be allocated for working in partnership with parents emerged. Centre Leaders felt external pressures placed upon them to reach numerical targets were detrimental to their involvement of parents in self-evaluation. The Children's Centre Initiative is yet another time constrained political initiative with funding being allocated on a two year period. The current initiative is time pressured into achieving the end product with inadequate attention being paid to the processes. This is not conducive to the investment of long term work resulting in improved national population outcomes.

Time allocation to the processes of self-evaluation is also an issue for Centre leaders. At one Centre, the parents' role in self-evaluation was regarded as pivotal and resources were being consciously allocated. This Centre was contributing a huge amount of time to developing the process of involving parents in the Centre's self-evaluation. It had placed the involvement of parents as central and prioritised time and resources accordingly.

At the other Centres, self-evaluation was something that came after delivery of the service. Priorities for time allocation and human resources were on service delivery. Leaders discussed the pressures of getting so many services required by the core offer running. Conscious decisions regarding self-evaluation appeared low and in some cases were driven by National Sure Start requirements rather than a true desire to improve service delivery. One of these Centres had a Monitoring Information Officer who collected statistical information. This information was used to decide which groups or classes would be continued, changed or advertised more. They were aware that they did not know whether the classes and groups were having any impact on the parents. In one Centre, parents were asked to fill in a Centre evaluation questionnaire at the end of class/group sessions. The leaders were aware that they did not get negative feedback on these questionnaires because parents would not want to offend them.

3.7 Natural community leaders

It became clear that the natural, strong-voiced parents within the community were a powerful force that each Centre leader was keen to utilise.

One Centre had nurtured a parent who was involved with many community groups and this parent was now employed as a Family Outreach worker. She undertook activities such as standing outside school gates to talk to parents about what they would like to see delivered by the Centre. She had also been responsible for setting up a Family Forum that consisted of twelve parents.

In each of the Centres visited, the strategy of employing parents as parent-to-parent communicators and evaluators had been utilised. This was obviously valued by the leaders of the Centres who felt that parents were more likely to respond openly to other parents rather than staff. One Centre recognised that attention must be paid to the stage where these parents, over time, will not be peer parents but will be regarded as any paid employee within the Centre.

This needs to be considered for long term planning purposes. Centre leaders will need to consider and nurture future parent communicators and evaluators as part of an ongoing programme.

One Centre's leaders explained that when Sure Start's local programme development set the requirement for annual evaluations, they had consciously set an evaluation ethos of using parent-to-parent evaluations. They believed this model was a powerful method of getting deeper, more meaningful feedback from parents. It was felt that this was because the parents all came from the same background, meaning there was a level of trust. Natural community leaders had been trained by the Centre and subsequently employed to undertake evaluation work.

In one Centre, the parent-to-parent evaluation work had informed them that young/teenage mums were not happy to come to the Centre because they felt they would be judged by the older mums. In response to this information, the Centre had segregated the services offered to mothers by age.

However, no evidence was given to suggest that quieter parents were more able to contribute when approached by a peer parent. One Centre felt it was important to respect the parents who did not wish to engage with the Centre. Where follow up attempts were made to engage with parents from whom no response had been received, there had still been no response. Another Centre recognised that in their area, strong extended families existed and these families were happy and proud not to feel the need for any service support.

3.8 Power of informal evaluations

Each Centre commented on the importance of listening to the things that parents are saying within the Centre on a daily basis. Parents make comments about many aspects of their lives, needs and satisfaction with services when talking to staff. Often these comments are simply part of a wider conversation but they give staff very valuable information. A point of interest arose during one interview. Are these valuable interactions being communicated through the hierarchy that has developed within the growing size of Children's Centres? When organisations are small and the leader is working at ground level it is fairly easy to pick up parent comments. Leaders of growing Children's Centres need to consider planning a methodical approach to ensuring that these valuable indicators reach the decision making bodies.

This is particularly important to consider when other agencies are involved in service delivery. How do the comments heard by key workers and other agency staffs get passed on to the Centre leader?

Another aspect of the communication was recognised as the need for staff to feel empowered. The amount of feedback from parents that staff gained during home visits and work within the Centre was felt to be huge because intimate levels of trust are developed between staff and parents.

It is therefore important that the ground staff know how and when they can pass on this information and that it will be listened to and acted upon.

3.9 Attention to detail

Each Centre's leaders made reference to small details regarding the environment created. At one Centre, the Head had picked up on an informal comment made by a father regarding the access to different rooms in the Centre. This had prompted the Head to change the formal room names, involving parents in the process. Room names had been changed from designator names such as 'training room' to the names of locally famous people.

During another interview, the Deputy Head of Centre referred to a comment made by an African parent when she saw some African material displayed in the Centre's entrance area. The material had made this mother feel at home. These were small details within the big picture of Centre developments but were meaningful to parents. It was felt they gave a welcoming message to parents, helping them to feel more confident.

Centre size was again mentioned with regard to how parents feel when walking into a large organisation. It was felt to be important that parent's were recognised and welcomed as they entered the building.

3.10 Weakness of questionnaires

Questionnaires were alluded to during each of the three interviews. No great importance was placed on the value of the questionnaires by any of the leaders interviewed even though they had all used questionnaires. 10% was given as a typical return on questionnaires unless staff helped the parents to complete them. The purpose of the questionnaire being used as a mechanism to avoid bias then became meaningless.

The leaders recognised that some parents may be tempted to write what they thought they wanted to hear, and reluctant to offer negative feedback in the questionnaire. The recognition made by leaders at one Centre that parents were not involved in forming the questionnaire questions are interesting to consider. Would more questionnaires have been completed if parents had been involved in formulating the questions asked?

Another important issue to consider here is that each Centre leader made reference to barriers caused by language and difficulties with translation. One leader made reference to the fact that there was no literal translation for the word 'community' in Russian. One Centre had approximately twenty-six languages spoken in the area it served.

With targets being placed on Centres to reach Black and Minority Ethnic groups and consult with parents, it would seem that questionnaires are not appropriate as a self-evaluation tool for involving parents from culturally diverse communities.

3.11 Funding for evaluation

The reference to funding involved in the processes of Centre self-evaluation appeared to become something of a double edged sword. One Centre has a very limited amount of funding. No funding has yet been prioritised for evaluation purposes, all funding being spent on service delivery. The latter two Centres visited had actually put a large amount of Sure Start Local Programme money into the process of self-evaluation. In one case this had involved commissioning professional researchers through the local university. Comments made at one Centre were particularly interesting. They suggested that the awarding of evaluation to a person other than the group leader had possibly resulted in less accountability amongst these leaders. Taking the responsibility away from the person responsible for service delivery had she felt resulted in less rigor.

At the other Centre, the evaluation had produced masses of quantitative data regarding service users, but Mark Friedman's qualitative question (2005) 'Is anyone better off?' had not really been considered. The evaluations have been undertaken merely to meet national requirements. Financial allocations for evaluation purposes appear to need limiting before they become destructive. Where funding is available for self-evaluation, the process needs careful consideration before the money is allocated.

3.12 Divided loyalties

A cartoon pinned up in one Centre read 'keep swimming against the tide'. It would appear that on some occasions if Centre leaders do as the government requests and seek parents' voices, they will sometimes face conflicts with those responsible for setting and progressing the government targets.

The government strategy: Choice for parents, the best start for children: making it happen (2006) places importance on the increase in women with dependent children working as 'an achievement.' The drive behind encouraging working mothers is part of the government strategy to reduce levels of child poverty. In each of the Centre interviews it was mentioned that there were some parents who had expressed annoyance at being invited to attend activities aimed at helping them gain employment stating that they simply wanted to concentrate on being parents until their children were older. Mothers were complaining about feeling pressurised into work. Leaders felt uncomfortable with the Centre core service requirements to get parents into work through delivering training and Job Centre Plus events when many parents were clearly saying they wanted to enjoy their children's early years by being there for their child. This was a clear indication of conflicting opinions brought about by involving parents in the self-evaluation process. The parents' needs did not match those targets laid down by the government.

In one Centre, parent participation in self-evaluation had placed a growing demand on services during evenings and weekends. A further conflict which may arise for leaders is that between the leader's role in promoting staff well-being and the demands made by parents.

When decisions regarding service delivery are based on a professional's work-life balance, the professional to parent power differential increases. This is also an ethical dilemma for Centre leaders. The conflict lies with the leader striving to meet the family's' needs whilst protecting and nurturing the Centre staff.

3.13 Developing trust

All Centre leaders made comments about the need to act responsively when seeking the opinions of parents. The message was clear that if parents' voices were being sought and gained they must be either acted upon or a good explanation as to why they were not being acted upon must be provided. They all mentioned the need to develop trust amongst parents by being seen to act responsively and be honest with parents if there were reasons preventing or limiting such action. Children's Centre leaders need to consider very carefully how they will respond to parents if they are successful in gaining parental opinion that contradict what the Centre is currently doing or offering in terms of services. Actively responding to parents may mean changes that are seen as negative by staff at the Centre. During one interview the leader said that getting staff to ask the question about themselves "how did I do?" was asking a great deal from staff. Human nature may mean that some people always think they are going to hear horrible things. If feedback is critical the staff need to be supported in how they perceive and act upon the criticism. Leaders need to ask themselves if the staff are emotionally strong and well placed to receive negative feedback.

Conclusion and actions

4.1 Leadership and self-evaluation

Leading multi-agency staff through whole system reform is challenging. Some staff are likely to feel vulnerable as a consequence of change. For staff to then seek parents' views on what they think about them or the work they do is a process that will require sophisticated leadership skills. Parental evaluations will help to contribute to a fuller appreciation of the contribution Children's Centres are making towards improvements in the lives of young children and their families.

Leaders need to ensure parents from all areas of the diverse local community are engaged in the work of the Centre. Approaches to this might be through:

- Identifying a group of natural leaders from within the different types of community served by the Centre.
- Developing a core structure of staff within the Centre that can support this group of parents in their role as evaluators.

Leaders also need to develop competencies in leading a fluid, emotional organisation through inevitable changes and shifts in decision making. They will need to:

- Lead on the development of attitudes and beliefs ensuring that their Centres become true learning organisations.
- Develop the values and beliefs of staff within the Centres, so that parents' voices are respected, valued and acted upon.

Implementing changes in the approach to evaluation and planning is complex. It requires negotiation with the wide continuum of responses to changes that occur in response to parental evaluations. Inevitably there are some staff who are not greatly concerned about the change, some who see the changes as a positive challenge and some who show a negative resistance to change.

“Evolutionary creativity disrupts the existing configuration, its loyalties, values and achievements. It requires the presence of a trusted leader, who, like the internal good parent, contains the tensions that are part of the change process.”
Halton (2004, p116)

4.2 Required leadership skills

In order to act as a champion for parent led needs developments as opposed to outputs defined by funding initiatives Children's Centre leaders are required to employ the following leadership skills:

- Strength and determination.
- Sharing and listening to others view points.
- Formulating clear, well documented plans.

- Determining clear, accountable methods of measuring the effect of the work undertaken against the national initiative outcomes.
- Conflict resolution.
- Negotiation and mediation.

Whilst the communities served by the Centres continue to evolve and change, parents will come and go at a fairly rapid pace due to the age span of the children involved. This demands a culture which is well embedded within the Centre. The Centre cannot rely on individual parents as the leaders. This is where the role of the Centre leader comes to the fore. The Centre leader must:

- Truly believe in and value the parents as leaders.
- Develop a Centre ethos that respects the parents as leaders.
- Disseminate the ethos to all levels of Centre work.
- Be strong and determined to fight for the empowerment of parents in the face of a political agenda.
- Commit to time scales that allow parent participation.
- Gather qualitative evidence led by the parents that illustrates the difference the work has made to them.

4.3 Key points for consideration

Leaders who commit to seeking parents' voices in self-evaluations of their Centre need to consider some specific actions. The case studies suggest that leaders who are committed to involving parents in the self-evaluation of their Centre need to work on:

- Developing the Centre's ethos.
- Agreeing values and principles with all those who work in the Centre.
- Supporting key workers, developing their skills, attitudes and confidence in working alongside parents.
- Developing methods of communication regarding parent's voices.

Appendix 1

Interview Questions

1. Can you outline the processes that you use when undertaking the task of Centre self evaluation? What do you do? Who is involved? How often does this take place?
2. Which services or aspects of your work do you believe have made a positive difference to parents? Do you have any evidence to back this up?
3. How do you go about finding out what parents think or feel about the Centre services? What about the quiet parents or those who do not access the Centre services?
4. What steps do you take to avoid parents saying what they think you want to hear?
5. Do you feel there are any difficulties in getting parents' voices involved in your Centre self-evaluation?
6. Following your most recent self-evaluation of services what would you like to keep, change, develop further or get rid of?
7. Have there been any factors preventing you from making these changes, getting rid of or keeping services?

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