Structured Conversations and Person-Centred Planning

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Abstract

Context: This action research was conducted in a mainstream primary school with nursery provision, focusing on enhancing parental engagement in the support of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). The study explored the use of Structured Conversations, underpinned by person-centred planning, to ensure that children's voices are central in the assess, plan, do, review process.

Aims: The primary aim of the research is to evaluate the efficacy of Structured Conversations in facilitating effective assessment and planning processes for children with SEND. The research seeks to understand how embedding children's perspectives can contribute to more meaningful and purposeful discussions during the assess, plan, do, review meetings.

Methods: The research was conducted in two action research cycles. In Cycle 1, the planning phase involved refining the research question based on the initial study and literature review, and obtaining ethical consent from participants for anonymous data publication. Similar steps were taken in Cycle 2, where further planning and implementation phases were executed following feedback and reflection on the initial cycle's findings.

Findings: Parents participating in Structured Conversations reported greater clarity, involvement, and satisfaction. They appreciated the child-centred, celebratory tone and felt more empowered to contribute. In contrast, traditional meetings were often perceived as one-sided and unclear in purpose. Including children in the meetings further motivated parental attendance and enriched the dialogue.

Implications: Other educators may find that adopting a person-centred approach in meetings can enhance parental engagement and input, thereby improving the overall decision-making process regarding children's support. The study highlights the benefit of structured methodologies when addressing SEND within educational settings, offering insights into the transformative potential of embedding children's voices in planning processes.

Keywords

Inclusion, special educational needs and disabilities; partnership with parents/carers; Structured Conversations; person-centred planning; pupil voice.

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Action Research for Inclusion and Special Educational Needs and Disability (ISEND): Case Study

Structured Conversations and Person-Centred Planning

Structured Conversations which embed children's voices (using a person-centred approach) facilitate celebratory, purposeful parent/carer assess, plan, do, review meetings (Mainstream, Primary School).

Contents

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Type of setting	Mainstream Primary School with Nursery provision
Age range of pupils	3-11
Roles of the Research Team	Deputy Head Teacher, who is also the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO)

SUMMARY

Research focus	Parental engagement, Structured Conversations, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), pupil voice.
Research question(s)	*Action Research Cycle 1* Are parents (of children with SENDs) happy with the way in which we communicate with them? Do they have any suggestions for improvement? *Action Research Cycle 2* Will using structured conversations for reviews increase parental confidence and engagement in the assess, plan, do, review process?
Overview/Key information	- We wanted to increase meaningful parental engagement for parents of children on the SEN Register. - An initial survey and parent meeting (conducted by the Parent Parent/Carer Voice organisation) showed that parents were satisfied with parent teacher collaboration. - As an initial starting point, it was great to know that parents were satisfied. To take things on a step further we wanted to enhance our parental engagement, deepening the quality of parent school communications. - Meetings with the SENCO at parents' evening and structured conversations were trialled. The former resulted in one-sided conversations led by the SENCO.

	- The focus of the structured conversation and involving the children was successful in making the conversation child-centred, celebratory and motivated the parents to attend. - Bringing in person-centred approaches together with the structured conversation has been a successful approach to increasing parental confidence in the assess, plan, do, review process.
Evidence-informed theory	Structured Conversations which embed children's voices (using a person-centred approach) facilitate celebratory, purposeful parent/carer assess, plan, do, review meetings.

ACTION RESEARCH CYCLES **Appendix 1** illustrates the Action Research Cycles

Ethical consent has been sought to publish this data anonymously

RESEARCH TIMELINE

Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	March	April	May	June	July
Action Research Cycle 1 Step 1: Establish the research focus	**Action Research Cycle 1** Step 2: Study Steps 3-5: Plan 1			Step 6: Do 1 Steps 7-8: Review 1 **Action Research Cycle 2** Step 9: Study 2 Steps 10-12: Plan 2 Step 13: Do 2 Step 14-15: Review 2				Share and disseminate the research (anonymised) with other interested parties.	

ACTION RESEARCH CYCLE 1

RESEARCH FOCUS: Step 1

Initial research interest aim/question (Step 1)	What do parents say would help us to improve parent-teacher collaboration with regard to SEN?

KEY LITERATURE SHAPING THE RESEARCH (STUDY 1): Step 2

Reference	Fleming, K. (2021). *Exploring inclusive partnerships: parents, co-production, and the SEND code of practice (2015).* Doctoral, Sheffield Hallam University. http://shura.shu.ac.uk/29440/
Key point(s) of note	Parents 'reported that they continue to be mostly positioned as unequal contributors to decision-making for their children' (Fleming, 2021) this is not what we want, but do our parents have this view as well? If so, how do we seek to change this?

Reference	O'Toole, L., Kiely, J., McGillacuddy, D. O'Brien, E.Z., & O'Keeffe, C. (2019). Parental involvement, engagement and partnership in their child's education in the primary years. *National Parents Council.*

	https://researchrepository.ucd.ie/server/api/core/bitstreams/b5177ef0-634c-43a0-80c7-366ebdcc5423/content
Key point(s) of note	The parent partnership role is complex and changes over the time children are in Primary school. Also, parents can't be thought of as a homogenous group, and therefore, we might need to do different things for different families. It is also noted that parents of children with SEND might feel alienated by the school if their child has associated challenging behaviours, and they are always expecting negative feedback. This can then create a barrier to other parental engagement opportunities. Further, the parents might need a greater level of support from teachers in terms of managing their child's needs at home. This might not align with what the school feel they need to offer if it is unrelated to learning, or it may be difficult to manage the expectations of parents. Further disagreements might arise if their child's behaviour is different in school to home, and the challenge here is about ensuring that a parent is heard and not made to feel that they are exaggerating or that the behaviour is their fault. Socio-economic factors can play a part, parents might feel intimidated by schools, based on their own experiences of school and/or language and understanding of the education system. This strengthens the feeling of a power imbalance and bias towards school being the influential partner. Is there any evidence of negative stereotyping within our systems/ethos, or do parents perceive that this is the case?

Reference	Dobbins, & Abbott, L. (2010). Developing partnership with parents in special schools: parental perspectives from Northern Ireland. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs, 10*(1), 23–30. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-3802.2009.01140.x
Key point(s) of note	Recognising 'the emotional context of these relationships at an interpersonal and organisational level, so that home–school relations can be realigned to support partnership' (Dobbins et.al, 2010); this is really interesting - is this a barrier to some of our parent relationships?

Reference	Feiler, A. (2010). *Engaging "hard to reach" parents teacher-parent collaboration to promote children's learning.* Wiley-Blackwell
Key point(s) of note	It is important to adapt, be flexible and offer something alternative, maybe not at school, to even out the partnership imbalance and to meet the 'needs of families, rather than considering how parents can change to fit in with school processes.

PLAN 1: Step 3

As part of the process of planning Action Research Cycle 1 and having completed the 'study' phase, the research question can evolve and become further refined.

Revised research question	Are parents (of children with SENDs) happy with how we communicate with them? Do they have any suggestions for improvement?

PLAN 1 and DO 1: Steps 4 and 6

Methods of data collection

- Parent questionnaire – this was conducted online as this has attracted more responses than through a paper copy.
- Organisation of a parent/carer drop-in session – to remove the barrier of talking to school and to encourage open and honest dialogue, this was led by the local Parent/Carer Voice organisation.

Description of research sample, timing and location

Online survey sent to all parents of children with SEND to complete; this was anonymous.

Set up the drop-in session for parents to talk to the representative from the local Parent/Carer Voice group. They were at school from 2pm until the end of the day and no school staff were present to encourage honest dialogue. The representative then gave feedback to the SENCO, this was anonymised.

PLAN 2: Step 5

Ethical consent was sought from each participant to publish this data anonymously.

REVIEW 1: Step 7-8

Data Analysis: process

The SENCO analysed the data from the online questionnaire and added this to the feedback given by the representative from Parent Carer Voice.

Summary of Findings

Research Question

Are parents (of children with SENDs) happy with how we communicate with them? Do they have any suggestions for improvement?

4 parents responded to the online questionnaire. 3 were happy with the way that we communicate, 1 felt that we should communicate more. 1 parent said that they would like a drop-in session when they could meet the SENCo to talk about their child but not a pre-arranged coffee morning. Half of the parents wanted to talk to the class teacher, and half wanted a mix of speaking with the class teacher, the teaching assistant and the SENCO.

From the drop-in session with Parent Carer Voice, only 3 parents came. They were all happy with the communication they received. 1 parent asked advice about their child, one gave a positive example of where they had raised a concern, we had taken action and provided the parent with reassurance and feedback.

This changed the focus of the research question, as parents reported that they were happy with the current systems and processes, and I was expecting that more parents might have suggestions for improvements or weren't happy.
Analysis and next steps leading into Action Research Cycle 2
The findings indicate that parents are generally happy with the way in which we communicate and involve them already; it is acknowledged, however, that relatively few parents engaged with the questionnaire and drop-in session. However, we wanted to increase engagement in the ongoing assess, plan, do, review cycle and not just at those times when a new referral is required or if things are not working well. I wanted to explore the notion that perhaps Teaching Assistants are in a better position to do more of the communication with parents, as they are often on the door before and after school and our parents do tend to have a different relationship with the Teaching Assistants, perhaps less formal, and maybe this would encourage increased levels of parent/school contact/communication. **Next Step(s): Action Research Cycle 2** A drop-in session with the SENCO will be timetabled for the next academic year. In order to define what the next steps were, I read some more literature about ways in which schools had successfully engaged parents and spoke to Brian Lamb (Visiting Professor of Special Educational Needs and Disability, University of Derby). This was in order to synthesise my next research question and activity, as well as acknowledging that while our parents are satisfied, they don't necessarily know what would improve it and therefore might not be able to make suggestions.

ACTION RESEARCH CYCLE 2

KEY LITERATURE SHAPING THE RESEARCH (STUDY 2): Step 9

Reference	Logan, E., & Feiler A. (2006). Forging links between parents and schools: a new role for Teaching Assistants? *Support for Learning. 21*(3), 115–120. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9604.2006.00416.x
Key point(s) of note	Parents in this study felt that the TAs were more approachable, they didn't use 'teacher language', and they were comfortable talking about their child's needs. As a result, they felt more included and that the TAs valued the parents' knowledge of their child more than the teacher.

Reference	Lendrum, A., Barlow, A., & Humphrey, N. (2015). Developing positive school-home relationships through structured conversations with parents of learners with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, *15*(2), 87–96. https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.12023
Key point(s) of note	Parents' involvement increased over the years that the study was taking place; they didn't all come to the first meeting. Indications were positive that 'harder-to-reach' parents were becoming involved, and this increased when the schools were

	flexible with timings, and the structured conversations could take place over the phone. Parents valued the time to talk more holistically about their child, and their ability to do so increased as they felt more 'welcome'. Parents' knowledge of SEND increased, and therefore their contributions became more effective. Schools valued the structure but needed to make some adaptations to the number of children they conducted structured conversations about, or how many a year to make it sustainable.

PLAN 2: Step 10

Revised research question	Will using structured conversations for reviews increase parental confidence and engagement in the assess, plan, do, review process?

PLAN 2 and DO 2: Steps 11 and 13

Methods of data collection

Conducted a structured conversation for 2 children with SEND (limited because of time). Discussed with parents afterwards to collect their views about the process. As a comparison, I gave parents of children with SEND, a parents' evening appointment with myself (SENCO).

Description of research sample, timing and location

Two children were selected from the SEN support stage of the Code of Practice. These children's parents were invited to take part, remit shared. One of the children is in Key Sage 1 and one in Key Stage 2. The conversations took place in school either just after the start of the school day or just before the end, as this suited both parents best as they were already at/coming to school. To best judge the effectiveness of these conversations in a short time, I selected parents that were already fairly engaged in school and their children had been on the SEN register for at least 1 year. All of the meetings were run by the SENCO and, on these occasions, the class teacher wasn't present at the meeting but had written feedback to be read out. The children came for some of the meeting and shared their work.

An additional parents' evening appointment with the SENCO was emailed to targeted parents (12) and they chose a time slot that best suited them. No context was given for the parents' evening appointments other than to review their child's progress.

PLAN 2: Step 12

Ethical consent was sought from each participant to publish this data anonymously.

REVIEW 2: Steps 14-15

Data Analysis: process
Qualitative data was analysed to judge parent attendance, levels of engagement, understanding of the purpose of the meeting and parental satisfaction in the process.
Summary of Findings
Action Research Cycle 2 Research Question

Will using structured conversations for reviews increase parental confidence and engagement in the assess, plan, do, review process?

Parents' Evening sample:

- 17% of the targeted parents didn't make an appointment.
- Of those that did, 60% attended the appointment.
- 75% of these parents didn't have anything that they wanted to discuss; only the SENCO had information to share. They hadn't understood the purpose of the meeting.
- They didn't really know why they had the appointment and assumed that it was because I had something to tell them, rather than it being a joint review of their child's learning.
- While they were happy to meet with the SENCO, all were happy to have just met with the teacher.

Structured Conversation Sample:

- Both parents attended the meetings.
- Both understood why they were there and what the purpose of the meeting was.
- They reported that the meeting had been useful and they felt that they had more to share rather than the SENCO feeding back to them and them just listening.
- The timing suited them both.
- They felt comfortable with the meeting taking place in school, but were open to the idea of it taking place in a different venue or over the phone. They felt that a virtual meeting using a platform like Teams would have caused them anxiety in making sure it was set up correctly and would have put them off attending.
- Both reported that they had a better understanding of their child's progress.
- One said that she would have liked the class teacher present, the other didn't express a preference.
- Both liked that their child was present for part of the meeting.

Analysis and next steps leading to research conclusions

Despite this being a small sample, the findings indicate that conducting structured conversations does improve parental engagement in the assess, plan, do, review process in part, because they are supported to make relevant and broad contributions in comparison to the group of parents who were invited to a meeting. They felt that they were listened to rather than spoken to. Involving the children was successful in making the conversation child-centred, celebratory and motivated the parents to attend.
Next steps would be to increase the sample size of parents in the structured conversation group to see if these results are found within the larger data set.

CONCLUSION

Research aim/question

Will using structured conversations for reviews increase parental confidence and engagement in the assess, plan, do, review process?

Conclusion(s)

This research found that the majority of parents were happy with the communication they received about their child's learning and progress (however, we acknowledge that only a small group of parents completed the survey). We still wanted to explore ways in which we could make parental engagement even better and for it to become more celebratory, rather than engagement increasing when things aren't going well.
I found that parents needed a clear purpose for them being involved and that is why inviting them to meet with the SENCO at parents' evening wasn't very successful; they didn't know why they

were there and so couldn't contribute as effectively as they did when they were clear about the purpose of the meeting and that we wanted their input.
Having the children as part of the meeting increased parental motivation to attend and ensured that the meeting was positive and acknowledged the children's learning and progress as opposed to focussing on barriers.

There were mixed feelings as to who the parents wanted to be at the structured conversation, and this should be investigated further.
The structured conversations were effective at collecting parental views as well as co-creating targets, and parents reported that they preferred this way of working because it valued their contribution, and they had more time to share. This does, however, pose a logistical challenge to implementing it for all children on the SEN register, in terms of time and staffing capacity.
In summary, holding structured conversations does seem to increase parental engagement and confidence in the assess, plan, do, review cycle.

Next Steps

Further research into who should lead and attend the meetings would be beneficial to see if there is a preferential trend for these to be led by the SENCO, the class teacher, or indeed, as the research by Logan and Feiler (2006) suggests, the Teaching Assistant. This can be trialled to see if it: further increases parental engagement and confidence that they are being heard; how much they share about their child's needs, and the effectiveness of the meeting in reviewing and setting targets.

Appendix 1 – Action Research Cycles

Action Research Cycle 1	**Establish the research focus**	**Step 1:** Identify the ISEND area for development which requires research.
	Study 1	**Step 2:** Review the research literature.
	Plan 1	**First Plan**
		Step 3: Start the process of refining the research.
		Step 4: Decide what kind of direction you are going to take (direct or enquiry).
		Step 5: Consider research ethics (engage with the ethics checklist).
	Do 1	**Step 6:** Implement the first plan (either direct action or enquiry as action).
	Review 1	**Step 7:** Review and Reflect.
		Step 8: Analyse the meaning of the data gathered.
Action Research Cycle 2	**Study 2**	**Step 9:** Review further literature if required.
	Plan 2	**Second Plan**
		Step 10: Based on the 'reflect' phase, refine the research (this may involve revising or developing the research questions) and plan the next actions.
		Step 11: Decide what kind of action you are going to take (direct or enquiry).
		Step 12: Seek any further ethical permissions if needed (engage with ethics checklist).
	Do 2	**Step 13:** Implement the second plan – (either direct action or enquiry as action).
	Review 2	**Step 14:** Review and reflect.
		Step 15: Analyse the meaning of the data gathered.