Assessing children's social and emotional wellbeing at school entry using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire: professional perspectives.

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Abstract

Emotional and behavioural disorders in early childhood are related to poorer academic attainment and school engagement. In one local authority area in Scotland, the routine use of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) has been introduced as part of the transition process between pre-school establishments and primary education. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with pre-school staff in order to explore their views of this initiative. The SDQ was welcomed as an opportunity to highlight children's social and emotional development. However, concerns were raised. This study suggests that it is feasible to assess children for emotional and behavioural problems at school entry.

Introduction

Children's social, emotional and behavioural development is recognised widely as an important contributing factor to subsequent success at school (Eivers et al. 2010, Grimley et al. 2004, Scottish Government 2008a, Bradshaw et al. 2010). The shift from the learning environment of nursery (kindergarten) and home to formal education is a significant transition (Barry et al. 2009, Ahtola et al. 2011). Success in this process may depend on a child's capacity to adapt to a more structured classroom surrounding as well as their ability to behave in ways that conform to the expected norms of the class and school (Eivers et al. 2010, Cassidy 2005, Margetts 2009). Early identification of potential social and behavioural difficulties provides an opportunity to intervene when a child is young (Scottish Government 2008a, Van Leeuwen et al. 2006, Stone et al. 2010) in order to minimise the possibility that problems will persist into later childhood and beyond (Van der Meer et al. 2008). This article focuses on the views of nursery staff about assessing children's social and emotional development at school entry using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire.

Nursery education plays an important role in providing children with the skills necessary for successful transition to school (Whiteley et al. 2005, Prior et al. 2011). Moving from one educational setting to another may involve a change in location, teacher and philosophy. Pre-school education is typically child-focussed with children being able to choose their activities and with whom they wish to interact. In contrast, primary education is more teacher-centred with children expected to 'fit in' with the rules and regulations of the larger class (Cassidy 2005). Social, emotional and behavioural difficulties at school entry may inhibit children's ability to adapt to these changes (Eivers et al. 2010, Cassidy 2005, Margetts 2009). Difficulties with inattention, social interaction and emotional regulation at school entry are associated with poorer academic attainment in later years (Bradshaw et al. 2010, Margetts 2009, Prior et al. 2011).

Successful transfer to primary education is helped by strategies such as continuity and communication between pre-school and primary teachers (Margetts 2002). The implementation of a new curriculum in Scotland, known as the 'Curriculum for Excellence', based on common principles for the education of children from the age of three years until they leave school between 16 and 18, is intended to provide continuity in learning. Moreover, it offers an opportunity to improve the transition process between pre-school and primary education (Scottish Government 2008b). Communication between pre-school establishments and primary schools nevertheless varies from area to area. Typically, nurseries prepare individual profiles of children which highlight their strengths and development needs (Cassidy 2005). These transition records are passed from nursery to primary schools at school entry. There is no consistent approach to the identification of potential social, emotional and behaviour problems (Cassidy 2005, Whiteley et al. 2005).

Background to the research

This study was undertaken in the largest local authority area in Scotland. In Glasgow, approximately 5500 children start school each year. The school year runs from August to June with one intake into the first year of primary at the beginning of the school year. Children can start primary school in August if they

turn five years of age before 1st March of the following year. As a consequence, it is possible for children who are aged five years and five months to be in the same class as children who are eleven months younger.

Before starting school the majority of children attend an early years' establishment from the age of about three years. Establishments include play groups, nursery schools, nursery classes in primary schools and early years' centres operated by the local authority, as well as the independent and voluntary sectors. Glasgow City Council commissions nursery places for children from independent and voluntary sector 'partnership' establishments. In Glasgow nursery placements are provided by 115 local authority establishments and 87 operating in 'partnership'. Even though each child is entitled to attend an early years' establishment from the age of three, attendance is not compulsory. It is estimated that in Glasgow 89% of eligible children have a registered place in nursery in the year prior to starting school (National Statistics 2010).

In order to assess social, emotional and behavioural difficulties at school entry the use of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman 2001) has been introduced as part of the routine process of transition for children about to start school in Glasgow. The SDQ is a brief screening questionnaire for emotional and behavioural problems (and resilience factors) designed for 3-16 year olds. It is regularly used as a screening measure and is effective in identifying the co-morbidity of attainment and behaviour problems in educational contexts (Lindsay et al. 2000). The specificity and sensitivity of the SDQ for the presence of emotional and behavioural difficulties is good, with the SDQ identifying over 70% of individuals with conduct, hyperactivity, depressive and some anxiety disorders (Goodman et al. 2000). It is also now used routinely for monitoring the emotional wellbeing of looked after children in England.

The SDQ comprises a 25-item questionnaire with five subscales: conduct problems, emotional symptoms, hyperactivity/inattention, peer relationship problems and pro-social behaviour. Each subscale has five questions. The twenty individual scores from the four 'problem' scales can be summed to give an overall

measure of psychological vulnerability. It takes about five minutes to complete. There are two standard versions for use with 4-16 year olds – one for completion by teachers, one by parents or carers. In addition, there is a slightly modified version that is intended for use with carers or teachers of children aged three to four years (Youth in Mind 2011). In the summer term of 2010 and 2011, nursery staff were asked to complete the 4-16 year old version for every child eligible to start school in the following August. Those working in local authority establishments were able to complete the questionnaire on-line within educational services' computer management system (SEEMIS). Partnership nurseries were asked to complete a paper version for each child and return the questionnaires to the local authority's department of education services for processing.

Study aim

This study was part of a larger programme of work that examined the feasibility of a whole population approach to assessing social and emotional difficulties in children at school entry. The aim of the study reported here was to explore the views of nursery staff about assessing social and emotional wellbeing of children at school entry using the SDQ.

Method

Twenty-two nurseries across Glasgow were approached purposively in order to achieve the inclusion of differing socio-economic areas as well as a mix of local authority (n=14) and 'in-partnership' nurseries (n=8). Interviews (n=25) were conducted with two broad groups of staff: nursery head teachers (NHT, n=14), defined as those with managerial responsibility and without direct responsibility for a group of children, and child development officers (CDO, n=11), defined as those with direct responsibility for a group of children. In total, 21 members of staff took part in one-to-one interviews and four chose to be interviewed in two joint interviews. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The interviews were semi-structured. An interview topic guide was used by the researchers in a flexible manner, allowing some areas to be discussed in greater depth, depending on the relevance for the participant. The topic guide included

questions about the process of preparation for the completion of the SDQ, completing the SDQ, the perceived value of using the SDQ and the information obtained.

Data analysis

The transcribed interviews were imported into the qualitative data analysis program QSR NVivo 9. A thematic analysis was conducted by the researcher (JW), who carried out the majority of the fieldwork. Thematic analysis is an established method in qualitative analysis that identifies and reports patterns within the data (Braun et al. 2006). There are, however, no fixed rules (Robson 2002); indeed Tesch (1990) identified 26 different approaches. In this study, the approach was inductive, in that themes emerged from the reports of the participants. The method of analysis consisted of a number of phases starting with familiarisation with the data and finishing with the production of the final account. First, by reading and re-reading the transcripts, the researcher became familiar with the data. Next, initial codes were generated by systematically coding interesting features of the data. These codes were then collated into potential themes which brought together all the data segments relevant to a particular theme. After this, the themes were reviewed for coherence and their representation of the data set. The process, however, was not linear. There was continual movement between the complete transcripts, coded data segments and the on-going analysis in order to review and re-define themes. In this way a thematic framework was developed (Braun et al. 2006, Dey 1993). The themes developed were discussed and reviewed with the other members of the research team. A subset of transcripts was reviewed by the team allowing for discussions about the utility of the thematic framework devised and to consider the links between themes.

Ethical considerations

Informed consent was obtained from participants prior to interview. Personal details about each participant were kept confidentially. Any identifiable personal information in the audio-recordings was removed during transcription. Ethical

approval was obtained from the local university research ethics committee (FM07509; 28 September 2010).

Findings

We identified four main themes. The first considers the viewpoint that the SDQ had acted as a vehicle to highlight a child's social and emotional development. A second theme examines opinions about the SDQ form. The third theme explores the idea that interviewees felt a professional responsibility for the collected information. The last theme addresses interviewees' thoughts about being asked to complete the SDQ for children starting school.

Ready for school?

In general, the interviewees appeared to see the completion of the SDQ as an opportunity to highlight the emotional and social development of children to their parents and prospective primary school,

> "it gives people a wee bit more insight into this wee one, he could be a wee Einstein but…no social skills" *[NHT.09]*

Making sure children were emotionally and socially ready for school was considered one of the roles of nurseries,

> "that is the most important thing for a child, I mean some of the parents come in and say 'oh, he can read and he can write', and 'they know their colours', you know, 'I think he's ready for school', whereas we might say, 'no'…he could be really clever but he's not ready socially and emotionally to go to school…that is one of the first things that we like to make sure that the children are ready, socially and emotionally, or otherwise they wouldn't be able to carry on through school" *[CDO.08]*.

Thinking about and completing the SDQ had appeared to have provided a focus for nursery staff in their discussions with parents about these aspects.

There was, however, a general belief that completing the SDQ had not brought to light anything about individual children that was not already known,

> "*[the SDQ]* just kinda gave the girls *[the key workers]* a chance to put down on paper what they already know about the children…it didn't highlight anything that they didn't already know" *[NHT.05]*.

Nevertheless, a minority of child development officers indicated that completing the SDQ had helped to draw attention to a previously unrecognised potential difficulty. One head teacher suggested that completion of the SDQ had highlighted areas of children's emotional and social development she had not thought about previously,

> "*[the SDQ]* probably brought a lot of children to light, d'you know, like …'often complaints of headache, stomach-ache or sickness'…and you think, why do they often complain about not being well?…*[so]* it also highlighted some wee children that maybe we had never actually thought about *(in this way)* before" *[NHT.04]*.

Interviewees felt that the information from the SDQ could provide primary school teachers with greater insight into the children when they started primary school. However, they were less certain that teachers would pay attention to it,

> "as long as it's read" *[NHT.05]*

> "I think they probably do all their own assessments when the children arrive at school" *[CDO.07]*.

These doubts seemed to stem from an impression that the transition documentation routinely completed by nurseries was not normally consulted by primary teachers,

> "I think that's always been the problem with some transition records, they have been sent and if teachers don't deem it to be of interest to them, or they don't think that's going to help them out in preparing their class…they just don't read the information being sent" *[NHT.05]*

It was more or less straight forward

Overall, interviewees felt that the SDQ form was relatively straightforward to complete. A quarter of the interviewees did not appear to have found any of the questions difficult,

> "I think it *[the SDQ]* was quite self-explanatory…the staff have not had any difficulties, there haven't been anybody come back yet, 'I don't know how to do this'…I think it's quite straightforward" *[NHT.07]*

> "I found them *[the questions]* quite straightforward" *[CDO.09]*.

However, many interviewees raised concerns about the wording of some items within the SDQ. Two particular statements ('often lies or cheats' and 'steals from home, school or elsewhere') caused considerable unease,

"I just didn't like the bit about lying and cheating and the stealing"

[NHT.12]

"parts of it *[the SDQ]* I found quite difficult to answer, especially pertaining to this age group…one in particular, 'does this child steal?'…another one about lying" *[CDO.05]*.

In explaining their discomfort some interviewees referred to the example of children who took toys from the nursery home. However, this was not seen as 'stealing',

"all the nice things we have in the school, it's easy to put something in your pocket but that's not stealing" *[NHT.12]*

"if they're going to the toilet…they'll just automatically put something in their pocket…and then they forget…and they go home…we would never even think of a child stealing" *[NHT.13]*.

Several of those interviewed said that children in this age group might not always tell the truth,

"they will say, 'well I never done that, it wasn't me', and you know perfectly well that you've just seen them do it" *[CDO.04]*

"we've got children who come in here and tell me all sorts of stories about what they did at the weekend…and when the mum comes in and I say to her 'I hear you were away at the' and she will say 'no'" *[CDO.05]*.

In these circumstances not telling the truth seemed to be seen as either a self-protection mechanism or a sign of an active imagination rather than 'lying'. Interviewees suggested that lying and stealing were intentional acts that, in the pre-school age group, children lacked the moral reasoning to understand,

"for children at that age, I don't think they really understand…I don't think they'd have that kinda knowledge about it" *[CDO.04]*

"I think that children at this age are still very much learning about right and wrong…somebody stealing…that's very much an intentional behaviour" *[NHT.11]*.

Getting it right for each child

In general, the nursery staff we interviewed suggested that they had a professional responsibility for the SDQ information collected about children in their establishment,

> "I just feel that there's a responsibility…that you have to get it right for that child" *[CDO.05].*

Getting it right for an individual child was facilitated by staff's knowledge of 'normal' child development and their experience of working in nursery settings,

> "staff have to be able to make well-judged evaluations of what a child is DOIng, what a child is thinking, and how a child is actually performing against the norms, and that is something that takes skill and it takes experience" *[NHT.02].*

In addition, there was a feeling that deeper understanding of individual children was needed,

> "to sit down and fill that *[the SDQ]* in properly and accurately you need to know the child to fill it in" *[CDO.02].*

Many of the child development officers interviewed emphasised that they had this knowledge.

> "we do know our children inside out" *[CDO.07]*

> "you're working with a lot of these children every day, five days a week for a year, you do get to know them" *[CDO.04].*

A concern for professional responsibility seemed to be linked to fears among the nursery staff that the SDQ assessment might act as a 'label' which could influence a primary teacher's attitude and approach to an individual child,

> "you were thinking, do you really want to send this *[the SDQ]* along and *(you're)* singling that child out straight away, you know, so the teacher's like, 'oh we've got a wee fidgeting liar that's coming in here'…so straight away I've labelled that child" *[NHT.06].*

Concern about professional integrity could explain why, in more than half of the establishments in this study, the SDQ had been completed as a collaborative exercise among staff, for example, in discussions between child development officers or dialogue between a nursery head teacher and an individual child's key

worker. In three of the establishments where the child development officers had been given the sole responsibility for completing the SDQ, their assessment was apparently verified by the head teacher before the information was transferred to the computer system,

> "they *[key workers]* do it *[the SDQ]* by themselves and then they speak to the head of centre…she'll look over them and then you know if there's something that…she wants to question, she questions it and then they'll give her the answer and then as long as both are happy, then that's the finished product" *[NHT.05]*.

In two nurseries, where either a child development officer or the head teacher had taken sole responsibility for the completion of the SDQ in the previous year, the interviewee said that they planned to change their approach so that the SDQ was completed collaboratively in future.

Completing the SDQ in collaboration appeared to be one way that individual nurseries had overcome the perceived subjective nature of the assessment,

> "different members of staff see children differently…depending on the relationship they have with them" *[NHT.12]*

> "there is times when…they *[the children]* are with a different member of staff they might act differently so it is good to do it *[the SDQ]* as a team" *[CDO.08]*.

While staff were concerned that the way SDQ questions were answered might depend on who was completing the form, there was also a worry that having three possible answer categories meant there was room for individual interpretation,

> "what I might think is 'not true', 'somewhat true' or 'certainly true' might be completely different to someone else" *[NHT.08]*.

Several interviewees expressed frustration at the lack of guidance they had been given,

> "I would like to know a wee bit more information…what does the 'somewhat true' mean?…like you can take your interpretation of that" *[NHT.04]*.

Furthermore, having only three categories to choose from was felt potentially to limit the individuality of each assessment,

"'cause you had to think of them as individuals when you were filling them *[the SDQ]* out…you could've done with more space for a wee bit of an explanation" *[CDO.02]*

"it's easier to explain things about a child, but it was just…the boxes that you were to tick, you couldn't put an explanation in it" *[CDO.08]*.

Being able to add an explanation might have been one way to overcome the concern raised by one head teacher,

"there could be outside factors that impact on a child and their behaviour and where they are emotionally…I can think of one wee one at the moment and her wee life had been turned upside down, I mean in the last six months she has changed from the girl I've known for the previous eighteen months…but that is only because of where she is at the moment, between two houses and mum and dad splitting up" *[NHT.12]*.

While there was an overall feeling of a professional responsibility to get it right for each child, there seemed to be an underlying concern about parental reactions to the assessment.

"I don't know how parents would feel if they saw this questionnaire"
[NHT.04]

"I think some parents would be…'what do you mean?'…some might not think too much about it, but some may…be not happy" *[NHT.05]*.

As these quotes illustrate, interviewees expressed anxiety about how parents might react both to the questionnaire and to the way staff responded to the questions about their child. This anxiety, raised in the discussion of our previous theme, appeared to be related to concerns expressed by some of the interviewees in connection with the wording of the questionnaire. It is not known whether these fears influenced the completion of individual questionnaires.

Completion of the SDQ for each child at entry to primary school was considered to be a service evaluation rather than a piece of research. As a result, nurseries were asked to inform parents about its completion rather than obtaining explicit parental permission. This was an issue of concern for several interviewees,

"we are such a consent orientated organisation and certainly in pre-fives we can't put a sticking plaster *[band-aid]* on a child without consent, never mind administer a questionnaire" *[NHT.01]*.

The nurseries took different approaches to informing parents about the purpose of the exercise. Three interviewees said they actively sought parental consent before they completed the SDQ. In the other nurseries, the amount of information shared with parents varied from showing parents an example of the SDQ form to explaining that the local authority's department of educational services had asked them to complete a new form. None of the interviewees reported any negative reactions from parents.

It's another piece of work

In general, there was a feeling that completing the SDQ for each child was (yet) another piece of work that staff in nurseries were being asked to complete,

> "it's *[the SDQ]* just, I hate to say it, it's **another** thing we're DOIng as part of the process of these children going to school" *[NHT.04]*.

Many interviewees talked about how the request to complete the SDQ for each child starting primary school in August had added to their workload. The timing was also a concern for many. Unfortunately, technical difficulties had delayed the collection of the SDQ information until the last two months of the summer term,

> "at this particular time of the year it's extremely busy…most nurseries at this time of year find the paperwork quite overwhelming, so this *(was an)* extra bit of work" *[CDO.05]*

> "it was May/June that we completed it, which is a really busy time for nurseries because you are DOIng transition records, and parents' meetings, and end of year events" *[NHT.01]*.

Three of the nursery heads talked about significant staff shortages they had to manage. The welfare of the children was prioritised over completing paperwork and the SDQ could seem like additional administration,

> "I am there on the floor *[in the room with the children]* because we're short staffed…and that's when office duties are supposed to take second" *[NHT.04]*.

In half of the local authority establishments, staffing issues were cited as one reason that the SDQ had been completed in paper format, rather than using the form directly on the SEEMIS computer system. In these nurseries, an administration worker had been given the task of transferring the information

from the paper form to the electronic one. It was felt that the paper questionnaire could be completed by a staff member whilst being present on the 'floor' with the children, rather than going into an office with computer access,

> "in order for the staff to complete it *[the SDQ]* you need to take a staff member out of the playroom to do it…our staff, they don't have non-contact time" *[NHT.01]*.

Moreover, lack of easy access to the computer management system was an issue in several of the establishments. In addition, the computer literacy of those potentially filling in the SDQ was raised as a concern,

> "we were being asked to do it on-line and…that would've been quite challenging for staff who didn't have particularly great, you know, computer skills" *[NHT.11]*.

For one head teacher the paper format had been advantageous when completion of the SDQ was a collaborative effort.

> "I find the paper copy probably easier, it works for us because you're at a staff meeting *[to discuss the SDQ for each child]* and you're sitting there, where *[on-line]* you've got to get staff round one computer" *[NHT.13]*.

Discussion

Study Limitations

The findings of this study should be considered in light of the following limitations. Responsibility for the development of early years, child health and educational policies within the UK is devolved. Hence, services in Scotland are structured and provided in a different way from those in England, Wales or Northern Ireland. This study was limited to nursery staff working within one local authority area in the west of Scotland. It is possible that transition processes differed from other potential settings. This may affect the transferability of the findings.

This study relied on self-report. Participants may have given answers to the questions in ways that were perceived to be socially desirable to either their managers in educational services or the research team (Robson 2002). In addition, the majority of nursery staff were asked for their views about completing the SDQ

in retrospect, which introduces the potential of recall difficulties. For many, nearly a year had passed since they had completed the SDQ. Indeed, a few had to be shown the questionnaire in order to remember it. Also, it is possible that during the time lapse experiences were re-interpreted.

The method used to recruit nursery staff may have compromised the dependability of the findings. The Educational Services department of the local authority supplied the research team with a list of nursery establishments that could be approached to take part in this study. It is possible that those that were suggested were those known to co-operate with policy implementation. It has not been possible to determine the representativeness of the views expressed.

Study Strengths

The qualitative methodology of this study meant that the views of nursery staff could be explored in a way that would not have been possible using other methods. The introduction of the SDQ at school entry was innovative. To our knowledge, it is the first time that the SDQ has been used by nursery staff systematically to assess children's social and emotional functioning at school entry.

This qualitative study examined the views of nursery staff about assessing children's social and emotional functioning at school entry using a structured instrument. Findings suggest that, in general, use of the SDQ was viewed positively. It was seen as a chance to highlight, to primary teachers, aspects of a child's development beyond their cognitive abilities. Completing the SDQ was found to be relatively simple even though the nurseries were under pressure from competing priorities. Nonetheless, there was a strong belief that the version of the SDQ form used, including an item about 'lying' and 'stealing', was inappropriate for pre-school children.

The perspective of nursery staff in assessing children appears to be a neglected area of research. In British Columbia (Canada), kindergarten teachers have completed the Early Development Instrument (EDI) for all children (aged 5-6

years) since 1999. The EDI consists of 104 questions covering five areas of development: physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive development, and communication skills and general development. However, this assessment is used as a population screening tool (Hertzman & Williams 2009), rather than a way to communicate the strengths and problems of individual children at point of transition. There is no published information about how teachers view the completion of the EDI.

Whiteley and others (2005) implemented the use of the Early Screening Inventory–Revised (ESI-R) assessment in four nurseries as a pre and post intervention measure. The ESI-R assesses fine and gross motor skills along with cognition and language skills. Feedback from nursery staff was limited to a structured questionnaire which was returned by six respondents. In the study respondents considered that using the structured assessment tool had helped them to identify difficulties that had been previously unrecognised. In contrast, the majority of people in our study felt that the SDQ did not highlight any new difficulties. However, it is difficult to make comparisons between the two studies as the two assessment tools were designed to measure different areas of a child's development. It is possible that nursery staff have more experience assessing social and emotional development and are, therefore, more likely to recognise problems without the use of a structured instrument.

Other studies tend to focus on views of 'good practice' at transition, which includes effective communication between nursery and primary schools. The perception, in this study, that primary teachers pay scant attention to transition documentation is endorsed by research by Stephen and Cope (2003). In qualitative interviews with 20 primary one teachers, only half made reference to the transition records they received from nurseries. In another study by Cassidy (2005), teachers felt that written information could be misinterpreted and preferred to rely on their own personal observations. This suggests that developing effective communication strategies to ease children's transition to school may be challenging. It is possible that the information from the SDQ could

contribute to the process. Primary teachers' views are being examined in a further study.

Implications

The findings from this study have influenced the way that nursery staff will be asked to complete the SDQ in future years. First, it is planned that completion will take place earlier in the school year when time pressures are, perhaps, less. Second, in response to the concerns about the wording of the certain question items, in 2012 nursery staff will be asked to complete the three-four year old version of the questionnaire. This modified version uses replacement questions for those that ask about 'lying' and 'stealing'.

Conclusion

In this study, nursery staff welcomed the opportunity to assess children's social and emotional functioning formally using the SDQ. Even though there were some misgivings about particular items, using a structured instrument was felt to be relatively straightforward. This suggests that, from the perspective of nursery staff, it is feasible systematically to assess children for social, emotional and behavioural problems as part of the routine transition process at school entry. The values and beliefs of nursery staff as well as practical issues, such as the timing of completion, nevertheless need to be considered prior to implementation.

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