

Customer Voice Research Parental Responsiveness

Sherbert Research



**Research Report No
DCSF-RR179**

Customer Voice Research
Parental Responsiveness

Sherbert Research

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Children, Schools and Families.

© Sherbert Research 2009

ISBN 978 1 84775 577 3

November 2009

Research objectives

The 21st Century Schools White Paper outlined the intention to place a new duty on Local Authorities (LAs) to gather parents' views on the secondary school places available in their area and to act on their views (the parental responsiveness duty). Where there is significant dissatisfaction with the existing provision in the area, the LA would be required to consult with parents further and develop a plan that aims, as far as is reasonable in the overall context of the LA, to address the issues raised.

The White Paper also stated the intention to carry out a trial of the approach to gathering parents' views and how the process would work in practice. With that in mind, the DCSF commissioned this research to explore parents' views, develop the overall approach and refine concepts, language and design ideas for the proposed questionnaire for parents. Discussion groups with parents of primary pupils about to enter Year Six (pupils aged ten - eleven years) were used to elicit views.

Specifically the research aimed to support decision making and establish usefulness about the parental questionnaire including:

- Exploring parental knowledge of and satisfaction with secondary school provision in their area, including the quality and range of secondary schools;
- To involve parents in the development of the questionnaire about secondary school provision targeted at them (to be piloted in up to ten LAs from September 2009), exploring how they interpret words, phrases and concepts;
- To explore parents understanding of the meaning of language including 'choice', 'quality', 'provision' and 'your area' in the context of choosing a secondary school for their children, including the factors that influence them;
- To understand how parents feel and what they are looking out for when thinking about secondary school provision, establishing existing knowledge levels and information gaps ;
- Helping the DCSF decide whether parents will require contextual information or prompts to help them answer the questionnaire in a meaningful way;
- To establish the likelihood of whether parents would fill out a questionnaire, looking at barriers and motivations;
- To explore issues around format / style of questionnaire;
- To explore any unanticipated consequences / impacts;
- To understand when parents think it is the right time to survey them in relation to the secondary schools admissions process; and
- Explore what parents would expect to see in a LA's 'response plan' and what they think about that process including the appeal process (if a certain proportion of parents were not happy with the LA response plan).

Research methodology

Twelve, one and a quarter hour mini discussion groups with parents of children about to enter Year 6 (pupils aged 10-11 years):

- Seven with mums; and
- Five with dads

60 parents in total, from a range of socio-economic backgrounds (AB, C1C2 and DE).

Research took place across England (rural, suburban and city locations) during the weeks commencing 17th and 24th August 2009.

Key findings

Overall the concept of a questionnaire that asked parents for feedback about secondary schools in their area was well received by the majority of parents in this sample. Most agreed they would be likely to fill in the questionnaire. Most thought a simple questionnaire, with a semantic scale followed by space to say why they answered in that way, was a good idea, but they had strong views on what that question should be. On the whole, the parents in the discussion groups did not like the language used in the questions tested here. Parents' motivation and response to the questionnaire relies strongly on the careful execution of the questionnaire and realistic feedback from the LA on how they will address concerns. Therefore parents appreciated the idea of a Local Authority Response Plan.

When parents in this sample talked about their children's education in relation to secondary school it tended to be an enthusiastic and emotionally charged conversation. Parents across all socio- economic groups in this sample claimed they wanted the best available state education for their children and most said they would do what they could do to support this. Therefore it seemed important for them to share their views about secondary schools. The majority of parents would be willing to fill out a questionnaire if they believed they could make a difference to their children's school experience.

Parents in the discussion groups suggested alternative words and phrases for the main question. They said the alternative words would make more sense to parents who would therefore be more likely to complete the questionnaire. Many parents found the phrasing of the questions difficult to answer as the responses offered did not quite fit with their thoughts and experiences. This seemed to be because the current question style and responses are rational, using language that parents sometimes felt was quite inaccessible when the questions are asking about an emotionally charged subject.

Respondents agreed the success of the questionnaire will depend largely on:

- A clear expression of questions, including the proposal of using open questions that invite parents to reflect their feelings
- A semantic scale that resonates with parents thoughts and experiences

They welcomed the idea of:

- A brief and simple explanation of the purpose of the questionnaire

- Contextual information about schools in their area and a description about what is meant by 'Your Area'
- Authentic feedback from the Local Authority on the action they can and cannot implement and reasons why
- A simple and transparent appeals process as proposed

The questions in more detail

The following questions were tested with parents:

- How satisfied are you with secondary school provision in your area?
 - Why is that?
- How satisfied are you with the quality and range of secondary school provision in your area?
 - Why is that?

It was suggested by the DCSF that parents would be provided with a Likert scale to answer one of the above questions, along with a free text box inviting them to say more about why they answered in the way they did. It was proposed the scale would include the following options:

- Very satisfied, satisfied, neither satisfied or dissatisfied, dissatisfied, very dissatisfied

Whilst parents recognised the value and importance of asking them for their views they recommended the following changes:

- The use of 'satisfied' as the measurement was felt to be inappropriate:
 - Parents in general found the closed questions hard to answer given the importance of the topic;
 - They also found the word 'satisfied' hard to relate to in the context of secondary school, as they thought education was more emotive and important, it was also a not a term that they would use to describe how they thought and felt about schools;
- The questions did not encapsulate the depth of emotion parents felt about this subject area, so many found them hard to relate to;
- Some of the language used was inaccessible to all in the sample and was not language they would use
 - Specifically they did not understand the meaning of 'provision', 'quality' was felt to be too broad and 'range' lacked meaning. This meant that many guessed at the meaning of the questions.
- Despite struggling with the language, most parents preferred the second question as it drilled into more detail than the first. However, this question contained two questions combined into one, which they found difficult to answer.

Parents felt that if the current draft questionnaire is used, the initial response that they may give risks being negative rather than thoughtful and may not offer a true response from parents. However, parents suggested some ideas for changing the questions and making them more user-friendly and easier to relate to. They agreed they would need questions to be supported by contextual information so they could be more easily answered.

Question construction and scale ideas

Parents liked the approach of being able to articulate the reasons for their dis / satisfaction using open questions and a semantic scale.

Open question:

According to parents in this sample, the overall question needed to be open and elicitive that uses language that parents understand:

1. Which secondary schools do you know about in your area?
 - Providing contextual information will help them to make an informed response. This could help parents understand about the range as often they are aware of a few schools only
2. How do you feel about the secondary schools in your area? or
3. What do you think about the secondary schools in your area?

And then they thought it would be helpful to include some specific questions that drill down into detail about more specific topics e.g. Quality (Standard was preferred word) For example:

- Thinking about the secondary schools in your area, how do you feel about the 'standard' of them? In particular:

Academic achievement, teaching, equipment, behaviour and discipline, school ethos etc.

Questions like this seem more likely to help parents feel they are giving more meaningful responses and therefore filling the questionnaire becomes a more motivating prospect.

Closed question:

When commenting on the closed questions, parents felt an alternative semantic scale was needed offering a range of responses that reflect their thoughts and feelings. The majority agreed that a semantic scale should be used. They agreed with the current suggestion of offering space to input their ideas in more detail.

Please note that the scale outlined below is an idea used to exemplify the type of scales with which people felt comfortable, rather than a direct recommendation:

Excellent, very good, good, neither good / bad, quite poor, poor, very poor

Timeframe

Parents in this sample said they would be happy to spend ten minutes on the questionnaire. They agreed that the best time to complete it would be whilst they are choosing schools, before or simultaneously with the applications process. Doing it afterwards was less motivating as many thought they would have 'form fatigue'.

Including the questionnaire within the admissions application form seemed an appropriate idea; parents did not express a preference regarding whether it was a tear out form or an additional piece of paper. Most seemed happy to put their names to it, they did not think this would in any way influence their children's chances of getting into a certain school as they could see the two issues were different. Although a few said they felt more comfortable if they could remain anonymous.

The LA response plan

Parents agreed that receiving feedback is essential and would be a motivating aspect of making the effort to fill in the form. Therefore the LA Response Plan was a welcome idea. Parents particularly welcomed the idea of an open and transparent appeals process.

Parents would want to receive feedback from the LA on the findings from the survey including the LA Response Plan if produced. This is because it could help them to feel that they had contributed to something worthwhile and would be able to evaluate their views in relation to other parents in the borough and the country. It would also help to make parents feel that the process was transparent which was very important to the majority. Furthermore, parents recognised that receiving feedback could be good for the reputation of the LA as it would show that it was acting in the interest of the child / children in the LA.

Parents noted that it was important that any language that is used in the feedback is accessible and that they received qualitative information rather than simply quantitative data. For example, "59% said they were satisfied" was not felt to give them enough information, they would like to receive feedback that drills down into some detail and is also expressed in simple, visual ways.

Most said they would be willing to participate in a consultation exercise, as they would feel motivated to influence better schools for their children. The primary incentive was their children (especially if they also had younger children who may benefit from the response plan). The secondary incentive was other people's children, although some were not motivated by doing this for the community at all (AB parents in particular).

A simple and transparent appeals process

The fact that the LA offers an appeals process if parents are not happy with the LA's plan is applauded. They would like to see that the appeals process is simple, clear and fair.

Ref: DCSF-RR179

ISBN: 978 1 84775 577 3

© Sherbert Research 2009

www.dcsf.gov.uk/research

Published by the Department for
Children, Schools and Families