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Practices of Parental Participation: A Case Study

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### *Abstract*

The nature of parental participation in children's education changes rapidly. Growing research points to the large positive effect that parental involvement has on the outcomes of schooling and children's well-being. Based on the results from a case study, this paper examined practices of parental participation in terms of parents working together with a range of professionals, exchanging knowledge and information regarding their child's special educational needs, challenging practices and negotiating Special Educational Needs (SEN) provision. The parents in this study exercised agency, i.e., showing resilience and taking initiative, within a context of shared responsibility and accountability and advocated for their child's right to educational provision. This paper argues for a strengths-based approach towards enabling active parental participation and advocacy.

**Key Words:** parental involvement, participation, advocacy models

## Practices of Parental Participation: A Case Study

### *Introduction*

The nature of parental involvement and home-school partnerships between parents and child professionals is changing rapidly (eg, Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003). Shifts in family structure and value systems, as well as schools' increasing emphasis on accountability and teachers' professionalism continue to shape parent-professional collaborative workings in ways that are not always easily understood, requiring educators and other professionals to re-think about parental involvement and parents' roles and responsibilities.

Internationally, research consistently shows that what parents do with their children at home is far more important to their children's academic achievement than parental social class or level of education (eg., Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003; Diamond, Wang and Gomez, 2004; Walberg, 1984). Walberg's notion of the "curriculum of the home" encapsulates the importance of at-home relationships between parents and children where aspirations are modelled and expectations regarding school outcomes are established. In their review of the impact of parental involvement on children's education, Desforges and Abouchaar found that parental involvement has a large and positive effect on the outcomes of schooling, an effect that is "bigger than that of schooling itself" (2003; p. 88). Parental involvement works indirectly on school outcomes by helping the child build a pro-social, pro-learning self concept and high educational aspirations, suggesting that parents, regardless of their socio-economic status and professional networks, can influence their children's academic attainment and social and emotional adjustment.

Understanding parent-professional interactions has important implications for children's education and care. Over the last two decades, various models have been

proposed to delineate the multiplicity of the relationship between parents and professionals (eg, Appleton and Minchom, 1991; Cunningham and Davis, 1985; Dale, 1996). Cunningham and Davis offered different views to explain the interaction between educational practitioners and parents and the roles they assume. Some parents see themselves as being the passive recipients of educational services and the practitioners as the main source of knowledge and expertise. Others may view this relationship as a choice exercise where parents are active consumers and professional are expected to provide educational services. Finally, some parents see this relationship as being interactive with both parents and professionals working together to provide expertise and resources to support children's learning and ensure continuity of learning support at home.

The notion of parents and professionals working together to support children with disabilities and other Special Educational Needs (SEN) is illustrated in empowerment and negotiation models of parent-professional partnerships. Appleton and Minchom (1991) proposed the empowerment model where the family is recognised as a social system that influences understandings of disability. In this model, although empowerment is its main premise, the expectation lies mainly with the professionals to identify the unique strengths and needs of the family, and incorporate them in their assessment and intervention procedures. Dale (1996) advocated for the negotiation model where parents and professionals engage in negotiation and joint decision making, developing a shared perspective on their strengths, concerns and needs. This professional interaction involves negotiation, bargaining and an active involvement of parents in decision making, with the professionals having an important function in terms of offering advice to parents and helping them evaluate their options.

Increasingly, legislation, starting with Excellence in Schools (DfEE, 1997) and The Learning Age (DfEE, 1998a), emphasises the wider potential of supporting parents through learning to engage with their children's education and strengthen the community through the development of community- school networks and civic engagement based on norms of co-operation and mutual trust. Schools Plus, an initiative by the Department for Education and Skills (DfEE, 2000), has stressed not only the importance of parental participation for improving children's education, but also to create a wider community of learning (Ranson and Routledge, 2005). The SEN Code of Practice (DfES, 2001) has also put mechanisms in place to encourage parental involvement and, more recently, the Green Paper, *Every Child Matters*, (DfES, 2003) has placed an emphasis on providing information and advice, as well as engaging parents to support their child's development.

Although these legislative frameworks stress the importance of parents being actively involved in the decision making with regard to their children's educational provision, the mechanisms that support or hinder such an involvement are not clearly delineated. As Farrell pointed out " ... parents have a much louder voice, there are more mechanisms to support them and they have far greater rights of appeal ... but perhaps more important are the continued problems associated with the bureaucratic and cumbersome statutory assessment procedures" (2001, p. 6).

These concerns with regard to policy enactment and the obstacles towards practices of parental involvement have prompted an interest in deploying social capital theories to understand how family strengths and cultural resources influence parental participation.

## *Social Capital and Parental Participation in Schools*

The World Bank (1999, p.2) has recognised the social and economic benefits of social capital, stressing that schools are more effective when parents are actively involved, with “teachers being more committed and students achieving higher test scores”.

Coleman discussed social capital theories in the context of education (1988), and more recently, Catts and Ozga (2005) explored the interaction between social capital, school and parental involvement.

The connection between social capital and parental participation in schools is multifaceted. Parental involvement has the potential to create social capital but also requires social capital in order to emerge. Linking parental participation and social capital has stimulated an interest in understanding the ways in which different forms of capital are developed, while recognising possible tensions between them as possessed by schools, teachers, parents and pupils (Catts and Ozga, 2005).

Although social capital is a useful way of discussing issues regarding home-school partnerships, it is an elusive and contested concept. Traditionally, research on parent involvement has stressed the role of a middle-class and professional status in legitimising various forms of cultural and social capital, with some families’ cultural capital often being perceived as problematic and less valued within educational institutions (Lareau, 2003).

Gewirtz and colleagues (2005; p. 668) stress the importance of ‘intra-family social capital’ with regard to parental involvement, which emanates from parents knowing how the system works, becoming advocates of their children’s rights, articulating concerns, applying pressure and mobilising systems of support, without relying on social and professional status per se.

### *The Context of this Study*

This study examined the views and practices of parental participation during the process of obtaining a statement for SEN provision for Joe. Joe was three and a half when he was diagnosed with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). When he first started mainstream school (reception year) his speech was limited, and he displayed difficulties with his social and emotional development, language, listening skills as well as literacy and numeracy. Joe required learning and pastoral support to enhance language, communication and social skills. The negotiation and co-ordination of the support services relied on an on-going collaboration between parents, classroom teachers and other professionals, which as this case study illustrates, was not an easy undertaking.

A case study approach was deemed appropriate to examine practices of parental involvement, with Joe's parents representing a case unique in its content and character (Hays, 2004). An important aspect of case studies is triangulation and, therefore, multiple sources of data and multiple methods, i.e., semi-structured interviews, documents, e.g., parents' letters, and classroom observations, were used.

The vignettes presented in this paper were extracted from data collected during semi-structured interviews with Joe's parents (see Appendix A), reception classroom observations and documents, e.g., tape-recordings and letters compiled by the parents, and professional reports (see Appendix B). Data collection, i.e., parents' tape-recordings of Joe's social and linguistic interactions, started when Joe was three and a half years old, after the diagnosis of ASD was given, which continued until the end of Joe's reception year. The remaining data were collected from parental interviews and

professionals' reports compiled during the Statutory Assessment, as well as observations, e.g., fieldnotes from a non-participant observer, at the start and end of the reception year.

The main goal of this case study is to build a detailed portrait of parents' views and feelings with a focus on their involvement in their son's SEN statementing. The statementing process provided the 'lens' to view parents' interactions with professionals from various disciplines, i.e., Teachers, Learning Support Assistants (LSAs), Social Workers, Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs), and an Educational Psychologist towards a decision about Joe's educational provision. Generalisation of the findings was not the goal of this study but it provided rich and contextualised descriptions of one case.

My role as a researcher was peripheral to the statementing process, functioning as a parent adviser / advocate. My intent was to represent the parents' views as objectively as possible; however, it is important to note that the analyses of data also took place through my 'lens'. The triangulation of methods and data provided the context to cross-examine multiple perspectives to ensure that parents' views had not been misconstrued. Furthermore, the parents were provided with a draft of this paper to corroborate or question any of the information and assumptions that have been drawn. The theoretical framework that guided this study was loosely based on Wolfendale's (1984) notion of "authentic" home-school partnerships, as well as strengths-based approaches to parental involvement (Benard, 2006). With this in mind, practices of parental involvement were explored in terms of the extent to which participation was central and active, as well as parents' capacity to build trust relationships, negotiate and challenge professional views and practices. Moreover, parental involvement as

advocacy (advocacy model), which recognises parental agency and action coupled with a sense of shared responsibility and accountability, was explored during parent-professional interactions. Finally, the results were discussed along the lines of social / cultural capital that enabled Joe's parents to become active players and advocates of their child's right to education. It is important to note that the threads of evidence, or patterns of consistency that emerged from the parents' accounts guided the discussion.

#### *Practices of Parental Involvement*

Joe's parents worked with the school and other professionals to share knowledge and understanding about Joe's development, and negotiated provision, resources and access to mainstream education. During their involvement, they acknowledged good practice but also challenged professional views and practices and raised issues about professional boundaries, confidentiality and evidence-based decisions regarding SEN provision.

#### *Sharing Knowledge and Understanding about Joe's Level of Development / Functioning*

Some research in this field stresses the importance of the cognitive aspects of parenting in terms of parents developing knowledge and understanding of their children's learning and social /emotional development (Moran, Ghate and van der Merwe, 2004). Joe's parents liaised with teachers and other professionals to convey information about his level of development / functioning, relying less on official channels of communication, e.g., reports, letters. Communication between professionals will be often assumed by many parents, expecting that what they say, is documented, shared and acted upon. However, there is limited evidence that this happens (Gascoigne and Wolfendale, 1995).

Joe's parents communicated information to school staff, obtained from his paediatrician, Speech and Language Therapist (SLT) and social worker, to ensure that teachers and LSAs were aware of his overall level of development / functioning. For example, the physician identified specific difficulties displayed by Joe with regard to "*understanding the purpose of learning basic skills*", and recommended ways of

*"making the purpose of tasks, e.g., counting, more transparent by having Joe count out objects into the support teacher's hand and stop at a particular number"*.

Moreover, parents' involvement with Joe at home enabled them to share and cross-examine their understanding regarding Joe's functioning. Specifically, during the reception year, a teacher described Joe as "nonverbal" in that he could not engage in question-and-answer interactions. Consequently, when his teacher asked him "*What is your name?*" or "*Would you like to play with a ball?*" Joe did not know how to answer. The parents felt that the information relating to his linguistic functioning obtained by the teacher during her first interactions with Joe was inadequate and misleading. In an attempt to provide more information about Joe's language use, the parents tape-recorded him talking while watching his parents drawing a picture, *saying "Mummy and Daddy can make the puppy be eating a dog biscuit!"* They also requested an assessment of Joe's communicative skills and social interactions in the family setting, rather than a clinic.

In responding to Joe's learning and social needs, the parents were active in testing teaching strategies and, based on what works, recommending these strategies to his teacher. Specifically, they exchanged information about Joe's understanding and use of language, and explained that *he "relies on the literal forms rather than the social dimensions of language"*, encouraging his teachers to "*step over the social niceties*

*and introductions that Joe does not understand, and listen to what he is trying to say".* The parents were eager to communicate with the teachers their view that

*"a teacher who works with any child like Joe must have access to information about his potential, with reference to his particular strengths and weaknesses, to cope with the immense amount of time and effort put into understanding how he thinks".*

In an attempt to shift the focus from difficulties to strengths, the parents shared with his teachers their observations about Joe's abilities, stating

*"Joe has no difficulty with certain puzzles and sorting tasks, or concepts of shape and/or colour, and has an interest in natural phenomena such as the weather, state of matter, principles governing fire, water, ice and so-on, and he demonstrates a good understanding when such things are explained to him".*

### *Negotiating Provision in the Mainstream*

Educational provision was negotiated between parents and professionals from the start of their interaction, and was developed 'with' the parents, rather than 'done to' them. Thus, the decisions about classroom behaviour strategies and teaching methods were developed in a 'bottom-up' manner, and negotiated by taking a strengths-based approach (eg, Benard, 2006; Gardner et al, 2003) towards responding to Joe's requirements as they emerged.

Joe's parents expressed strong views about the social benefits of mainstream education, commenting that attending the village school would give him the experience of

*"a cohesive community which will allow him to choose his forum, and exercise successively subtler strategies for learning to socialize with the others in the various real relations to whom he stands".*

The parents emphasised the emotional experiences gained from Joe's day-to-day encounters with his family and other children in the village within a familiar and stable context. They viewed inclusion as an experience of social cohesion, a sense of belonging within existing social networks, and the relationships of trust and tolerance involved.

In negotiating mainstream education, Joe's parents got involved in mobilising and directing resources and professional expertise, and ascertained the rights of the other children in the classroom by commenting that teachers

*"may have gone too far in the direction of trying to give Joe a successful academic experience, and not far enough in the direction of insulating the staff and other children from the effects of his presence in a mainstream school".*

Moreover, the parents acknowledged *"how demoralising it may be for teachers catering for a child with an ASD who do not always see positive results of their demanding efforts"*, and maintained a balance between safeguarding the right of their child to a mainstream education and ascertaining the rights of the other children.

With regard to resource allocation, although SEN funding is a controversial issue, the mechanisms whereby resources are deployed are rarely debated. The parents in this case study were concerned about the extent to which funding affected Joe's educational provision.

*"We attend meetings with some of the experts in which the terms of reference were levels of funding, when the same experts might have been able to give important educational advice by comparing notes with Joe's teachers ".*

They stressed the need for another model of allocating resources and sharing expertise through good communication between professionals and access to each other's observations and expertise when collectively making suggestions about educational provision.

### *Recognising Good Practice*

Joe's parents commented that, overall, the professional support received had been competent, especially when the terms of reference of the assessment and intervention were clear. They spoke about the Educational Psychologist's involvement in particular, describing his work as an example of:

*"competence and completeness, gathering diverse pieces of information systematically by interviewing a half-dozen neighbours, pre-school and play-school staff and ourselves; observing Joe at home and in the local pre-school; and reading reports and listening to cassette tapes compiled by us, medical professionals and the learning support teacher".*

According to the parents, this professional followed a rigorous method by cross-examining / triangulating observations of Joe's linguistic and social behaviour across different settings, providing a

*“balanced and complete picture of many issues that would influence the choice of school placement, and an extremely accurate picture of both his abilities and disabilities”.*

Moreover, the parents found the SLT’s observations of Joe’s functioning to be accurate in capturing his language and social skills in a naturalistic context. For example, they agreed with SLT’s observations that

*“Joe is very aware of events happening around him; is extremely cooperative during structured activities; can independently move to an activity of his choice in a nursery; can understand longer and more complex language in familiar situations; and uses symbolic-play material appropriately”.*

The parents were satisfied with the learning support provided by Joe's LSA whose role was to prepare him before he engages in tasks set by the classroom teacher (preparation stage) and after he has completed a task by repeating newly acquired skills (consolidation stage). The parents described the LSA’s interaction as “one in which Joe and the support teacher function as one student, carrying out assignments that the teacher gives either to Joe or to the whole classroom, unless Joe can successfully complete an assigned task by himself”. This view was corroborated during observations where Joe had made good progress during reception class in terms of engaging in ‘Yes-No’ type of conversation, following instructions and routines and attempting to take the perspective of others.

The opportunity to facilitate the communicative interactions between Joe and Joe's professionals during assessments was described as a good practice by the parents. They stressed the need for the professionals to be aware of Joe's language use to ensure the validity of their assessment. The father described an interaction between Joe and a physician as follows:

*“As I was there, I explained in language Joe could understand what a doctor is and what she was going to do and roughly why. Joe was extremely co-operative. I felt confident when the physician adjusted her instructions for Joe by asking him ‘to press harder on the pencil’, referring to the full indirect object (the pencil) in that this bit should not be omitted for a child like Joe, using a type of language which was clear and complete”.*

#### *Challenging Professionals' Views*

In their interactions with the professionals, Joe's parents recognised integrity and good practice, but also challenged some professionals' views about provision. At times, there was a clash between professionals' advice and parents' views of “what works at home”, which was often resolved through dialogue. For example, Joe's parents challenged professionals' advice on “setting boundaries” as a means of supporting Joe's social and emotional development, with the father stating

*“being the one who first helped Joe develop language and has spent more time with him than any other person, and who most closely shares his understanding, I haven't felt the need to set boundaries in that we have developed other less structured ways of relating to each other”.*

On a different occasion, Joe's teacher recommended reward-based behavioural strategies to encourage Joe to participate in classroom tasks. The father felt that these strategies were not "right" in that he observed how distressing it was for Joe to change his plans without understanding the underlying reasons. The father visited the reception class, and observed Joe "calmly playing with tape recorders, making pictures, looking at books, though not at the same time as the other children", and "felt that his behaviour in class was fine". However, the teacher's view was that parents "should make him do more things". Joe's parents' account regarding the application of reward-based strategies was as follows:

*"Joe was asked to engage in certain activities. Not understanding the reasons, Joe would struggle against the LSA and laugh. There were frequent meetings with a psychiatrist from the council, who gave advice about specific problems as they may arise. There was no way for us, as parents, to challenge the whole model of what education should mean to a child."*

Joe's parents approached the teacher and explained "what it means to ask a child with an ASD to do something without having any understanding as to why he is asked". Through dialogue, Joe's parents were able to express their worries and suggest a few behaviour strategies tested at home. Specifically, to minimise inappropriate behaviour, e.g., screaming, parents encouraged Joe's teacher and LSA to provide him with detailed explanations, whenever possible, about expected behaviour. The parents stressed that "because Joe doesn't ask questions, one must be aware of when he might be curious and willing to accept explanations".

Joe's parents also challenged the SLT's methods of applying a behavioural reward system to support the development of Joe's language. The parents felt that minimum progress was made from a SLT "working with Joe without our presence to support the context of the interaction". With parents not being involved in the speech and language therapy sessions, important information about Joe's language in the family context was never communicated, resulting in what the parents described as

*"limited outcomes and feeling uneasy when the SLT told us to 'hold out a cup of juice, but don't give it to him until he attempts the word 'juice.' "*

### *Challenging Professional Practices*

Joe's parents raised concerns about the validity of certain assessment procedures; some professionals' limited understanding of Joe's linguistic and social functioning; the accuracy of the reports and the guidance on teaching offered; the mode of disseminating information among professionals; and, most importantly, the process of deciding about SEN provision.

The parents expressed concerns about the artificiality of some of the assessment procedures and the arbitrary descriptions of the tasks involved. Specifically, during an assessment, the parents felt that the instructions by a test administrator (eg, "*Why don't you go over there and see if you want to try to stand on one foot,*") exceeded Joe's language ability in that he "*had to decode this arbitrary preamble of chat, involving abstract gesture and language*".

Moreover, with regard to the language used during assessment, the parents observed that

*“some professionals did not know how to use language to communicate with a child with an ASD, resulting in underestimating Joe’s linguistic abilities, and describing him as being ‘uncooperative’. When Joe was asked by a physio-therapist to descend a set of stairs ‘to see the train’ and then to go up again, once Joe realised that there was not any train there he refused to go up again”.*

Regarding the accuracy of the reports, the parents expressed concerns about some of Joe’s language transcripts included in the SLT’s report. The parents stated that

*“the sentence ‘train go under bridge’ sounds wrong. Joe's speech has never been elliptical. Even as a young baby, he would have said ‘The train went [goes, is going, or will go, as appropriate] under the bridge’. It is a feature of his disability that his speech has a too-perfect mechanical precision”.*

Furthermore, the parents challenged the content of some reports, especially the links between diagnosis and teaching. For example, they referred to a report that "abstractly stated that Joe’s difficulties in understanding how to behave are ‘less often seen’ in older children". They felt that clearer indicators, such as chronological age, may be more useful to guide teachers. They were also concerned that some reports contained conflicting information about Joe's use of modalities for learning. For example, they commented that the statement "Joe has a very visually-based understanding" is inconsistent with other professionals’ views and parents’ observations of Joe's learning.

Finally, the parents challenged the processes that underlie decisions regarding provision and educational placement, i.e., Special Educational Needs (SEN) statement. They referred to generic assumptions that *“the Education Department takes all the points of view into account”*, questioning the nature of these accounts and *“whose views are expressed”*. Specifically, the parents argued that obtaining an SEN statement should not be based on a collection of fragmented pieces of evidence and disparate professional decisions or "votes", but on integrating multiple pieces of evidence. The father specifically stated

*“I am unhappy that a procedure is in place whereby any professional asked for advice for educational statementing should automatically assume they are being asked to make a decision about what sort of educational provision is best. Educational statementing is not a vote, in which each professional votes for his favourite choice of provision. If all the statements draw conclusions one way or the other about types of educational placement, and little else, the Education Department can do little other than tally the results as in a vote”*.

Finally, Joe’s parents raised concerns about some professionals breaching confidentiality and crossing professional boundaries. Specifically, the comments made by a Social Worker regarding family circumstances, i.e., social isolation, feelings of helplessness, financial difficulties, and those concerning the child's special educational needs were contested by the parents.

### *Confidentiality and Professional Boundaries*

Ethical considerations, such as confidentiality and disclosure of private information, are particularly important when dealing with families with children with disability. For practitioners, it is not always easy to tease out information that is relevant and, thus, appropriate to be disclosed in educational reports, and information that should remain confidential. Making these decisions requires an understanding of children's family practices, values and beliefs, as well as the parents' views about what they consider sensitive and relevant information.

Joe's parents felt that the Social Worker's statement about the family's financial situation was inappropriate to be included in an educational statement that will be circulated widely among professionals, school staff and neighbours who volunteer their services to the village school. The parents argued that comments that "*would be helpful to the friends and neighbours who will be working with our son, and which might, for instance, welcome them to become involved*" should have been included instead.

The parents also questioned the involvement of a Social Worker during the Statutory Assessment, and felt that her assumptions and arguments were simplistic and not based on an understanding of the family situation. Moreover, the parents felt that the Social Worker made decisions about educational placement based on a limited information regarding their and their child's functioning, transcending her professional boundaries. As the father stated

*"It is entirely inappropriate for the Social Worker, while successfully dealing with family issues to make some argument along the lines 'he should go to a*

*special school because his mother is depressed and if he goes to a normal school and it doesn't work she might become more depressed'."*

In their involvement, Joe's parents advocated their child's rights and own values and engaged with various professionals. Therefore, it is relevant to discuss the extent to which these practices of parental involvement constitute an authentic partnership and a model of advocacy.

#### *A Model of Authentic Partnership?*

Wolfendale (1984, p.14) described 'authentic partnership' as an interaction between parents and professionals whereby

- Parents are active and central in decision making generally and its implementation;
- Parents are perceived as having equal strengths and equivalent expertise;
- Parents are able to contribute to as well as receive services;
- Parents share responsibility, thus they and professionals are mutually accountable

Joe's parents were accountable, responsive and willing to share responsibility to support their child's education and well-being. Although, occasionally, there was a clash of views and practices, the parents also experienced receptivity, e.g., acceptance of their views, and were encouraged to bring equivalent knowledge and expertise regarding their child's needs.

#### *Perceived Equality and Shared Responsibility*

Wolfendale (1984; p. 14) advocated that parents can bring “equal strengths and equivalent expertise” into their interactions with the professionals, and this notion of equal strengths permeated some of the practices of parental involvement described here. Joe's parents did not perceive education as a set of services delivered to their child passively in a ‘top-down’ approach. Rather, they exercised agency, e.g., initiative and a sense of control, by playing an active part in their child's learning and through co-constructing educational provision that is right for their child as a result of a dynamic dialogue and trusting interactions with the professionals involved.

Dale (1996) observed that often parents do not enjoy an equal relationship with the professionals in that they often lack the power to influence decision making and the expertise to advocate for their children’s educational provision. In a partnership between parents and professionals, equality does not necessarily mean that parents bring equal amounts of specialist knowledge but can bring equivalent perspectives about their child’s functioning. However, parents who experience social exclusion or lack confidence in the education system may be less confident to become involved in their children's education.

#### *Parental Involvement Based on Trust and Respect*

In their collaboration with the professionals, Joe’s parents were mutually accountable, kept open channels of communication, made suggestions regarding classroom guidance, articulated concerns and needs and mobilised systems of support, e.g., locating and accessing educational services. They formed with some educational practitioners what Gewirtz and colleagues (2005, p. 655) describe as “respectful and productive bonds”. Joe’s parents did not perceive the educational provision offered at

school as being instrumental in nature, e.g., developing basic literacy and numeracy skills only, but an exercise to build trust relationships with the school staff. The parents stated that

*“What parents want is a sense of fairness, trust, integrity and good will. The situation where parents meet all the professionals is often very emotive and relying on a teacher ‘to say the right thing at the right time’ can be very reassuring. I was moved by the words you wrote at the end of his report that you wished well and will miss him. I realized you must have written the same words many times before, and yet this doesn't detract from the experience of the feeling which those words convey, that Joe has graduated from an important experience of his life”.*

Although Joe's parents formed a good partnership with the professionals, conflict and disagreement were also part of their exchanges. The potential for conflict in the roles that professionals and parents assume has been discussed in the literature of home-school partnerships (Case, 2000; Gascoigne and Wolfendale, 1995). As Case (2000) observed, during parent – professional interactions, consensus and dissent are both likely outcomes. Within the context of a negotiation, dissent is not necessarily against partnership; it has the potential to offer parents a critical space to articulate the implications of professional contributions and delineate areas of disagreement. Partnerships do not operate within absolute notions of agreement and disagreement but in the spaces between. At times, Joe's parents challenged assessment procedures and professionals' decisions about provision. They also ascertained their child's rights within what they perceived to be an *“inflexible education system”* with the potential to misrepresent parents as having a problem and not the solution.

### *Misrecognising and Misrepresenting Parents*

Traditionally, parents and family issues have been perceived as 'deficit', with this view changing slightly over the years (deficit model). In the 70s, parents were viewed as being in the need to compensate (compensation model) for the problems they bring and their negative influence on their children's academic performance (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003). Both the deficit and compensation models of parental involvement construed parents as needing remedy, whereas the professional practices and support systems are seen as being "non-problematic" (Todd, 2003, p. 282). As Desforges and Abouchaar (2003; p. 89) concluded in their review, parental support programmes are designed and introduced by "some non-parental source", and aim at solving "a perceived insufficiency of self-motivated parental involvement" by inducing parental participation. Thus, negative assumptions about parents may still persist, in the form of deficit, compensation or induced participation.

Gillman et al (1997; p. 676) stated that parents are often objectified as 'cases and problems', resulting in 'misrecognising' parents' values and perspectives. Also understandings of social /cultural capital as being tied to SES and social class, can potentially lead to overlooking the importance of starting "from an assessment of the resources of a community, rather than adopting the traditional deficit model" (Kilpatrick et al, 2003; p. 419). Taylor (1992; p. 25) argued that recognition of people's values and beliefs is paramount for their sense of self-worth and dignity, and referred to the notion of "misrecognising people" when others around them "mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves".

In this case study, deficit assumptions were evident in the practice of some professionals who stressed the need to ‘remedy’ deficit in the parents’ views, values and choices. For example, deficit assumptions were made in the health visitor’s interpretation of parents’ styles of interaction with their child summarising them along the lines of “social isolation and peculiar use of language with their son”. Joe’s father pointed out that:

*“The Health Visitor insisted that Joe’s language and social difficulties resulted from my unusual way of speaking with him; that, because we were isolated in a village instead of in a large city, he was, in effect, learning a backwards dialect. His advice was that we needed to become more cosmopolitan, and that I had to begin using more flexible speech.”*

The parents explained that they need to work with the linguistic and communicative means Joe has to ensure that he develops basic language skills. Specifically, a misunderstanding arose when parents used what they called a “*template language*” to which Joe was able to engage. The Health Visitor claimed that the parents “*were not giving Joe a chance*”.

Occasionally, parents’ views and comments were not taken into account, nor were they recorded with accuracy, despite their relevance to Joe’s functioning, as the father observed:

*“When we first entered an assessment area, Joe moved towards a number of puzzles and toys and began rapidly investigating them. I knew that if a*

*psychologist sat with him after he had already done all the activities on his own, she might not be able to motivate him to do them a second time. I insisted that if the equipment were to be used to assess Joe, it should be hidden until time of the assessment. Later, I explained that my concern was that Joe's behaviour is quite good when he is with someone who uses language he understands. I gave an overview of Joe's language to the professional responsible, and this led to a summary in the report, stating 'the father is concerned that Joe doesn't understand situations and that his language consists of template sentences', missing the point altogether."*

The parents stressed the need for professionals to be active in "*valuing the strengths that families bring and removing blame*" placed on parents whose children's difficulties are often perceived as resulting from an improper and irresponsible upbringing. The parents commented that statements such as "*it would be debatable as to whether his difficulties are due to his diagnosis or his current home circumstances*" are not helpful to be included in an educational evaluation.

Diamond, Wang and Gomez (2004) affirmed the importance of recognizing differential forms of social /cultural capital to assess the resources and capabilities that exist in families. Too often, the focus is on what is lacking in children's home environments and parents' roles rather than on the potential resources and capabilities that might exist. Although poverty and social disadvantage have a serious impact on parenting, perceived deficits in families are likely to make parents feel powerless and perhaps less capable of building productive bonds with the professionals. Parents' values, culture and socialisation practices shape the decisions they make about their

involvement with schools. Thus, building on these forms of social /cultural capital is likely to foster stronger connections between schools and parents.

### *Parental Involvement as an Advocacy Act*

The practices of parental involvement illustrated in this case study are summarised in terms of sharing knowledge about Joe's strengths and needs, liaising with school staff and other professionals, taking a critical stand towards professionals' views and practices, building trust relationships and sharing the responsibility for ascertaining their family values and their child's rights within a wider sense of citizenship.

These practices of parental participation draw upon, and extend the empowerment and negotiating models of parental involvement, in that they recognise and legitimise parents' strengths and cultural capital. Parental involvement, as illustrated here, constitutes an advocacy act in that parents exercised agency in the context of mutual responsibility and accountability, and co-constructed their child's educational provision. Parental participation as advocacy puts an expectation on parents to identify their needs, recognise their strengths, challenge practices and negotiate decision making, express dissent but also develop resolution. Moreover, it acknowledges the multiplicity and plurality in parental roles, power relationships, notions of equivalent strength and mutual responsibility and accountability, challenging notions of family's social capital and values as being problematic.

Within this model of parental involvement, parents constructed a social and a critical space, what Goodnow and Collins (1990) called a public arena, to engage with professional views and practices, moving from a needs-based approach to strengths-

based models and, finally, to parental participation as an advocacy act, where both power and responsibility are shared. Furthermore, the advocacy model suggests that parental involvement should be embedded in a network of reciprocal social relations, where parents' contributions are respected and their needs are understood as being diverse rather than deficient.

### *Conclusion*

This study stresses the need for parent mentoring schemes to pay closer attention to parents' values, human / cultural resources and their potential to exercise agency, i.e., sense of control, coupled with action, especially for parents of children with diverse and often complex needs and requirements. Gardner et al (2003) advocated the promotion of parents' strengths as a significant aspect of parental support programmes. The systems that support parental involvement need to be calibrated according to the family strengths and needs, and take into account cultural practices and rituals with regard to child rearing, friendship networks, understandings of SEN and disability and capacity to access resources and expertise.

In a study on family learning and community development, Ranson and Routledge (2005; p. 69) stress the need to move from the 'external and instrumental' to the 'internal goods' present in families and communities, and build on them to support parents function as active citizens and advocates of their children's rights. The internal goods that exist in families have the potential to balance provision of parental support that is relevant to their values with autonomy and problem solving.

Parent learning and mentoring schemes should consider the diversity in the ways parents become involved with their children's education. Russel and Granville (2005) found that the perceptions and expectations about parental involvement, and the roles

and responsibilities that parents expect the school to offer vary widely. They found that the majority of parents want to be more actively involved with their children's education; however, patterns of communication, language and cultural norms and expectations may pose barriers to their involvement. Also, the requirements of the parents vary; some may need advocacy, guidance or information about education and care, whereas others may have the capacity for advocacy and are ready to share power and responsibility with the professionals.

Finally, enabling active parental participation can be achieved with parents and professionals being responsive to and respectful of each others' views, and capable of exercising agency, i.e., sense of control, enacted through self-reflection, advocacy and a sense of shared power and responsibility.

### *Acknowledgement*

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Note: 'Joe' is a pseudonym for confidentiality purposes.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Schedule

Ways of being involved:

1. Were you involved in putting systems of learning and behavioural support in place for Joe? How and to what extent?
2. Throughout your interaction with various professionals, did you feel that you had strengths to offer / contributions to make? What were these?

Interacting / Communicating with the professionals:

3. Did you find it easy to talk to professionals about Joe's strengths and needs and receive sufficient feedback?
4. Was 'being active' encouraged by the professionals you interacted with?

Educational placement:

5. What made you decide to place Joe in a mainstream rather than a special school setting?
6. Are you satisfied with the degree of teaching and learning support Joe received in the mainstream?

Views on professional practice:

7. What are your views with regard to the clarity and usefulness of the reports produced by the EP, Health Visitor, Speech and Language Therapist and Social Worker?
8. What are your views with regard to the validity and thoroughness of gathering evidence, eg, interviews with you, reviewing previous documents, cross-examining reports (language used, impact of professional meetings)?
9. In your view, were there any examples of good professional practice?
10. Did you, at any stage during the assessment process, disagree with the professionals' views and practices? In terms of:
  - Your views being mis-represented, misunderstood or not taken into account;
  - Not feeling confident about strategies / recommendation that were offered by the professionals regarding Joe's communicative / social –emotional functioning?
11. In your view, was an ethics framework in terms of confidentiality, informed consent, followed during the Statutory Assessment?
12. Overall, how would you judge the process of obtaining an SEN statement?

## Appendix B

### Excerpts from the interview with Joe's parents

Ways of being involved:

1. Were you involved in putting systems of learning and behavioural support in place for Joe? How and to what extent?

*From the start, my view was to ensure, as much as I could, that systems are in place to support Joe. I had the impression, that there exist a few "tricks of the trade" which we were not yet party to. For instance, in the meeting in January at school, while the Educational Psychologists seemed well in control of the theoretical side of things (and in agreement with the way I understand things), the specific questions which the specialist physician from the CDC asked showed me that he was aware of specific difficulties Joe has had in understanding the purpose of learning basic skills, and of ways of making the purpose more transparent (for instance, having Joe count out objects into the support teacher's hand and stop at a particular number, to make the purpose of counting more transparent). Though certainly this was not a top priority, perhaps it might be nice if every twelve months or so, a very knowledgeable specialist were to visit, observe the teaching, and make himself available for questions.*

*It is admirable that, basically inventing what they needed for themselves, Joe's teachers have learned how to teach him. We just wanted to make sure that any expert advice or help which is needed is available. In addition, the issue of behaviour was one for which I wanted to be able to offer a coherent strategy, as far as supporting school's efforts at home.*

2. Throughout your interaction with various professionals, did you feel that you had strengths to offer / contributions to make? What were these?

*Yes, certainly, offering information with regard to Joe's language and behaviour. Teachers who work with any child like Joe must have access to information about his potential, with reference to his particular strengths and weaknesses, and to help them cope with the immense amount of time and effort it takes to understand how he thinks.*

*My belief is that it is my responsibility to offer information about Joe's functioning to the professionals. Joe is curious about lots of issues. Because he doesn't ask questions, one must be aware of when he might be curious. As we sat on the grass, he made a screeching sound and looked at me. I explained to him that he can make that noise outdoors, but that in infant school any loud noise would distract the other children from their schoolwork. I explained that the purpose of infant school was to teach both him and the other children how to read and write, and that if he makes any loud noises, infant school can't work.*

*Since this explanation, Mrs. XX told me, Joe never did make that screeching sound again in school, but he did make it in assembly. This is a typical experience: a good explanation will be understood, and Joe will apply it conscientiously and with a good*

*heart. One later may have to deal with the fact that he is applying your explanation in too straightforward a manner.*

*In another case, Joe was asked to engage in certain activities. Not understanding the reasons, Joe would struggle against the LSA and laugh. There were frequent meetings with a psychiatrist from the council, who gave advice about specific problems as they may arise. There was no way for us, as parents, to challenge the whole model of what education should mean to a child. It was my responsibility to share my insights about his behaviour with his teachers.*

Interacting / Communicating with the professionals:

3. Did you find it easy to talk to professionals about Joe's strengths and needs and receive sufficient feedback?

*I was informed through receiving various reports, but in some cases I have concerns about the accuracy of reports. Regarding the SLT's report, I am in agreement with nearly all of her observations, such as*

*(i) Joe is very aware of events happening around him. (ii) He is extremely cooperative during structured activities. (iii) In the Nursery, Joe can independently move to an activity of his choice. (iv) In familiar situations Joe can understand longer and more complex language. and (v) Joe seems to have appropriate use of symbolic play material.*

*I am, however, concerned about what I perceive to be some inaccuracies in the reports. The quoted sentence, "Train go under bridge," just sounds wrong. Joe's speech has never been elliptical. Even as a young baby, he would have said, "The train went [goes, is going, or will go, as appropriate] under the bridge." It is a feature of his disability that his speech has a sort of too perfect mechanical precision.*

*I'm also concerned about conflicting information provided by the SLT: "Joe has a "very visually based understanding" is opposite to the Physician's investigations. My own sense, too, is that Joe listens extremely carefully to what is said to him, but doesn't always pay attention to accompanying gestures.*

4. Was 'being active' encouraged by the professionals you interacted with?

*I would say yes, although, in certain cases, my views were disregarded or simply misunderstood. Eventually, they started seeing me as an extra resource, and not just someone who brings problems and expects professionals to come up with answers.*

Educational placement:

5. What made you decide to place Joe in a mainstream rather than a special school setting?

*Giving him a cohesive community experience would allow him to choose his forum, and exercise successively subtler strategies for learning to socialise with the others in the various real relations to whom he stands. I think that living in the village has been*

*extremely helpful. He can recognise the same children on the street as he knows from playgroup, and he can listen to his mother speaking to their mothers, and understand to some extent the issues they are discussing.*

*The benefits of Joe having been in school this year extend beyond the academic. Joe has been invited to birthday parties, and is known by many local children. Older children are fascinated by Joe, and call out to him whenever they see him, which he enjoys. Joe sometimes rides his bicycle to school, and he is proud that he doesn't need training wheels. He is also aware that the other children see him riding like the big kids, and this boosts his self-esteem.*

6. Are you satisfied with the degree of teaching and learning support Joe received in the mainstream?

*Yes, my own feeling is that the school may have gone too far in the direction of trying to give Joe a successful academic experience, and not far enough in the direction of insulating the school from the effects of his presence.*

*Judging from how things worked when I was functioning as a support teacher for one afternoon, Mrs. XX' relationship with the support teachers is one in which Joe and the support teacher, as a team, function as one student, carrying out assignments Mrs. XX has given either to Joe or to the whole classroom (unless Joe can successfully complete an assigned task by himself). As it is, Joe's experience this last term-and-a-half has been broadly a success. He is able to read the occasional sentence in his story books, and to do some of the arithmetic worksheets. In addition, his language has increased dramatically since being in school.*

Views on professional practice:

7. What are your views with regard to the clarity and usefulness of the reports produced by the EP, Health Visitor, Speech and Language Therapist and Social Worker?

*Psychologists sometimes abstractly state that some difficulties in understanding how to behave are "less often seen" in older children. It seems more accurate on Mrs. XX part to be aware of a concept of an age level of social functioning as an approximate guide, moderated by a description of how Joe's behaviour is also different from that of a younger child.*

*I would now like to bring up a problem which SLT doesn't discuss: Joe's difficulty estimating the need to explain context. When Joe said "He threw the Cheerios," note that he omitted the natural preface: "I have a brother. His name is Jamie. He threw his cheerios." It seems that without contact with home, it is sometimes difficult for a stranger to make intellectual contact with Joe. When the SLT correctly writes "In familiar situations Joe can understand longer and more complex language," the question shouts out: What is it that goes wrong in unfamiliar situations?*

8. What are your views with regard to the validity and thoroughness of gathering evidence, eg, interviews with you, reviewing previous documents, cross-examining reports (language used, impact of professional meetings)?

#### *Language used*

*When the health visitor came, to test Joe's understanding of plurals, she held out some blocks in her hand, and said, "What are these?" My reaction was instantaneous: how was Joe to know that she was referring to the handful of blocks? If she had asked, "What is in my hand," Joe would have been able to answer, "Some blocks are in my hand." The health visitor claimed I "wasn't giving Joe a chance." She felt the test should be administered in "plain English." I was sure that unless I were allowed to translate what she said for Joe, he wouldn't know what she was asking him to do.*

*The health visitor insisted that the difficulty was that my way of speaking with Joe is unusual; that, because we were isolated in a village instead of in a large city, he was, in effect, learning a backwards dialect. We needed to get a car and become more cosmopolitan, and I had to begin using more flexible speech.*

*In another occasion, to test whether Joe could stand on one foot, the administrator of the test made a sentence like "Why don't you go over there, and see if you want to try to stand on one foot," which exceeded Joe's language ability. Joe first had to decode this administrator's quite variable and arbitrary preamble of chat, involving many other issues of gesture and language.*

*My real concern was that Joe's supposed behaviour problems are always a result of Joe being handled by someone who hasn't enough language in common with him. With me, Joe has always been the most cooperative child imaginable. When Joe was being assessed, Joe in fact did have little common language with his assessors. A physical therapist asked him to "descend a set of stairs "to see the train." At the foot of the stairs (where there was no train), she asked Joe to go back up, and he refused. Thus, his behaviour when he was isolated from me, seemed uncontrollable, but only because there was no-one there who could speak to him sufficiently fluently.*

*There was one such opportunity for just Joe and I to be together with an assessor: during a medical exam, I brought Joe in to see Dr. XX. As we were there, I explained in language Joe could understand, what a doctor is, and that Dr. XX is one doctor. I explained what she was going to do and roughly why. Joe was extremely cooperative, as natural for him, and this fact is even reflected in the report, where Dr. XX writes, "Joe was cooperative during the medical examination and allowed me to examine him."*

*I should add, Dr. XX is one person who does have enough understanding of language to have spoken to him even when he was young. She records in her medical assessment that Joe had understood her instruction when he was drawing, "Press harder on the pencil." Besides myself, I know of no-one else but Dr. XX with the competence to understand that the full indirect object "... on the pencil" may not be omitted, for a child like Joe.*

*There are many other examples I observed, when Joe was working with stacking cups and Dr. XX said, "Take the little one's out," for instance, where Dr. XX used a type of language which was clear and complete, and ideal for Joe.*

#### Impact of professional meetings

*Regarding funding, it was frustrating to attend meetings with some of the experts in which the terms of reference were levels of funding, when the same experts, say, by comparing notes with Joe's teachers might have been able to give important educational advice.*

9. In your view, were there any examples of good professional practice?

*Yes, there were many:*

*The physician made some very useful observations and recommendations regarding Joe's learning basic skills: -- for instance: when Joe counts out objects into your hand does he know how to stop at a prescribed number -- reminded me that ideally we should have at least some input from a specialist Psychologist this year.*

*I was extremely impressed with the scientific method the Educational Psychologist applied; instead of recording his prejudices after failing to engage Joe in conversation, he interviewed a half-dozen neighbours, pre-school and play-school staff, we as parents, and many staff at Joe's Nursery. He quietly observed Joe at home and the local Preschool. He read reports by us, and listened to cassette tapes. He read reports by Joe's trained support teacher (a volunteer who contributed several hundreds of hours of her time) and spoke extensively to her. He read the medical reports based on many home visits by Dr. XX, and the reports by the speech therapist specializing in autistic difficulties. I would characterise his work as an example of competence and completeness, gathering diverse pieces of information systematically by interviewing a half-dozen neighbors, pre-school and play-school staff and ourselves; observing Joe at home and in the local pre-school; and reading reports and listening to cassette tapes compiled by us, medical professionals and the learning support teacher. Analyzing all this information systematically and carefully, he gave a balanced and complete picture of a great many issues which would be involved in his choice of school placement, and an extremely accurate picture of both his abilities and his disabilities.*

#### Disagreement / Conflict

10. Did, at any stage during the assessment process, disagree with the professionals' views and practices? In terms of:

- Your views being mis-represented, misunderstood or not taken into account;

*At times, my own comments were recorded in a distorted way. When we first entered an assessment area, Joe made a beeline towards a number of puzzles and toys, and began rapidly investigating them all. I knew that if a Psychologist sat with him*

*after he had already done all the activities once on his own, she might not be able to motivate him to do them a second time. I insisted that if that equipment were to be used to assess Joe, it should be withdrawn until time of the assessment. The Psychologist agreed, and I was whisked in to record my ``concerns" for Dr. XX. I explained that my concern was that Joe's behaviour is quite good when he is with someone who has enough language with him, but that his language works in a unique way. I tried to give an overview of how Joe's language works, and this all led to the summary: Joe's father is concerned that Joe doesn't understand situations and that his language consists of ``template sentences."*

- Not feeling confident about strategies / recommendations that were offered by the professionals regarding Joe's communicative / social –emotional functioning?

*There was some disagreement with the use of reward-based strategies to motivate Joe do more and set boundaries. One of the teachers commented that I should ask Joe to do more, she adds, ``He was behaving well because you didn't make him do anything." But, it is true that, for instance, if I wanted to make Joe touch the green parrot in his parrot book, I still couldn't make him. Yet, since he was a baby, if I've been working and needed a tool, I can rely on him to go and bring it to me.*

*My approach isn't the one prescribed by XX, of setting boundaries; being the one who first helped Joe develop language and has spent more time with him than any other person, and who most closely shares his understanding, I haven't felt the need to set boundaries in that we have developed other less structured ways of relating to each other.*

*There have been some damaging interventions, which I hope will be a lesson. Once, for instance, a Social Worker came to the house on the basis of Joe's mother being depressed --- and conversations were restricted to that topic--- but then the Social Worker extrapolated as far as recommending a particular choice of educational placement for Joe while she was totally ignorant of his experiences in school!*

*While the Social Worker's report would be quite adequate in representing the sources of Joe's mother's depression, which we all discussed in detail, it would be quite inappropriate if used as a report for 'statementing' for Joe. They should be valuing the strengths that families bring and removing blame. The connection is intricate and diverse between the issues which the Social Worker is dealing with, concerning our isolation, inexperience, and feelings of discouragement, on the one hand, and the issues which Joe is dealing with, concerning often having to put up with people who don't know how to supply the type of information he is asking for, and him not knowing how to show them what he needs to know.*

*It is entirely inappropriate for the Social Worker, while successfully dealing with Joe's mother, and totally ignorant of Joe, to make some argument along the lines ``Joe should go to a special school because his mother is depressed and if he goes to a normal school and it doesn't work she might become more depressed."*

*Also, the Social Worker's report makes the following comment "It would be debatable as to whether these are due to his diagnosis or his current home circumstances." It is outside her expertise to make comments as such.*

11. In your view, was an ethics framework in terms of confidentiality, informed consent, etc, followed during the Statutory Assessment?

*Here is an example of lack of confidentiality: The Social Worker's report says ``The family's financial resources are being stretched to the limit." Now, even assuming this statement to be true, or to be of interest in connection with Joe, it is certainly inappropriate to have such information in Joe's statement, where our neighbours, and many of the friends and volunteers who work with Joe, will see it. There might be things a Social Worker could write which would be helpful to the friends and neighbours who will be working with Joe, and which might, for instance, welcome them to become involved.*

12. Overall, how would you judge the process of obtaining an SEN statement?

*I am unhappy that a procedure is in place whereby any professional asked for advice for educational statementing should automatically assume they are being asked to make a decision about what sort of educational provision is best. Educational statementing is not a vote, in which each professional votes for his favourite choice of provision. If all the statements draw conclusions one way or the other about types of educational placement, and little else, the Education Department can do little other than tally the results as in a vote.*

### **Documents Analysis (tape recordings, parents' letters and professional reports)**

Document 1: Parents' report on Joe's reception year (tape recording)

This report is in part a note to thank Joe's teachers this year for the work they have done for him. Regarding the fraction of that work which I directly observed, it has been a pleasure for me to watch him respond, and to think about particular methods which successfully addressed Joe's individual problems.

I'll begin with Mrs. XX's written account of Joe's adjustment to school, when he first started. I felt this document contained particularly perceptive observations. The basic observations were as follows:

Regarding his behaviour:

Joe's level of maturity was of a much younger child, such as a two- or three-year old, but that, unlike a young child, he didn't learn rapidly from negative reinforcement.

Regarding his learning:

(to paraphrase)`` If we want to obtain a predicted outcome from Joe, we must persistently try many approaches, until he has had time to process the thought and formulate a reply. "

Regarding Joe's understanding of texts:

“Joe doesn't recognize what a child would normally see as the main point of an illustration.”

## **Document 2: Letter sent to school by Joe's parents**

Dear Mrs. XX,

As you may already know from the list of children in your pre-school, our son Joe is due to start school in September. We are writing to you in advance because he is soon to undergo the statementing procedure. While Joe has learned English grammar and syntax successfully, he is behind in spontaneous and social usages. He doesn't seem to be aware that it is necessary to indicate he's listening, for instance, by glancing up or nodding his head, so strangers tend to stop speaking to him too early.

In conversations, he seems to be putting words in one's mouth; at the store, for instance, saying "Would you like a piece of chocolate, Joe?" Also, because he doesn't resolve the two points of view in a conversation, some forms of question-and-answer dialogue don't yet make sense to him.

Judging from initial feedback from Joe's paediatrician and other specialists he has seen, he is, on the other hand, quite good cognitively. We have known for some time that Joe has no difficulty with certain puzzles and sorting tasks, or concepts of shape, colour, etc. At home, Joe expresses an interest in natural phenomena such as the weather, states of matter, principles governing fire, water, ice and so-on, and he demonstrates a good understanding when such things are explained to him.

If you and the staff feel it might be appropriate to admit Joe to the local school, we are willing to request at the statementing meeting any extra help or resources you might need, such as a part-time assistant, who could ensure that Joe completely understands at least some of the assignments at the time, and who could convey to us what he is learning so we can give him extra help at home. We are willing to supplement the council's resources, to whatever extent is possible.

## **Document 3: Letter to Headmistress**

Dear XX,

I am writing to thank you for having had Joe in school during the past three years.

During our first meeting, when we presented arguments for Joe to attend the school, your only statement was that the decision had not yet been made. And yet, we came away with a sense of calmness and security. We realized even then that the decision would be based on carefully-considered grounds of best practise.

Over time, I became aware of a steady and sure sense of integrity on your part. I recall Joe's first few months --- moving from half-time to full-time support. You set out the whole interpretation of this interval as a time of determining Joe's educational needs. With less clear perspective, these first months could have been interpreted as a

painful process of failure. Instead, they constituted a time of assessing the resources that would be required for Joe to access the curriculum in the long term.

I've always enjoyed reading your reports about Joe's situation. They are succinct and accurate, and also insightful. I remember reading the minutes which you wrote of one of our meetings with Dr. XX and others. Among the minutes, our comments were represented, in a very clear form, the points which we had been hoping to make.

What parents want is a sense of fairness, trust and good will. The situation where the parents meet all the professionals is often very emotive, and relying on a teacher to say 'the right thing at the right time' can be very reassuring. I was moved by the words you wrote at the end of his report that you wished well and will miss him. I realized you must have written the same words many times before, and yet this doesn't detract from the experience of the feeling which those words convey, that Joe has graduated from an important experience of his life". Reading those words was the one time I felt emotional, during all these last several months. I am extremely pleased Joe has had a complete experience during these crucial years.

### **Classroom Observation**

Fieldnotes:

At the start of the reception year, Joe was described by his teacher as 'nonverbal'. She asked him questions such as 'What is your name?' or 'Would you like to play with a ball?' and he did not know how to answer.

When I observed Mrs. XX interacting with Joe towards the end of the reception year, he displayed a high level of language. According to his parents, before starting school, Joe never used the word "yes," he learned this word at school, and I observed Mrs. XX early in the year communicating with Joe through a long series of "yes - and - no" questions, as in the game of 20 questions (the parents informed me that this game continued at home).

I observed Mrs. XX telling Joe "Soon it will be time to go into the hall," for a special assembly, to which Joe responded by going to sit near her desk. The other children joined him, and I realized that he was following the procedure of gathering at a usual place prior to changing rooms. With some help from the teacher, he was predicting changes in classroom routine.

I observed Mrs. XX negotiating with Joe at length concerning what would be a suitable activity. As there were other children waiting, I could see that this was a huge inconvenience.

An interesting activity was carried out by the Learning Support Assistant to support Joe take others' perspective. When Joe would intentionally give a series of answers which he obviously knew were incorrect, she would respond by giving him an intentionally wrong answer, and he'd become "flummoxed." By seeing from the other's point of view what is the virtue in correct answers versus wrong ones, he was therefore induced, to a degree, to prefer to give correct answers himself.