A contradiction in terms?

An evaluation of a single agency home-school support project

Carol Lupton and Christine Sheppard

Carol Lupton, Director and Christine Sheppard, Research Associate at the Social Services Research and Information Unit, the University of Portsmouth, describe, in the context of ongoing debates surrounding services for children with behavioural difficulties who are also likely to be at risk of educational underachievement, an innovative home-school preventative project run by the Educational Psychology Service in one South coast local authority. The evaluation was funded by the Nuffield Foundation and concludes that the project has potential for wider development although short-term funding and inappropriate referrals inhibit its capacity to produce sustainable outcomes. Moreover, problems arising as a result of the lack of social services input highlight the need for properly integrated local services.

Introduction

A review of the literature on methods of addressing children's behavioural difficulties suggests that two key principles underlie effective preventative work. Firstly, early identification and intervention will be necessary in order to prevent a young child's difficulties from developing into adolescent delinquency or adult criminality (Rutter, 1991; Ford & Lerner, 1992; Farrington, 1996). It follows that any intervention would best be conducted at pre-school and/or primary school level. Longitudinal studies of pre-school interventions, such as the American High/Scope Perry Pre-School Program (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1993), claim that they yield long-term benefits, including better educational attainment and social adjustment, as well as more stable relationships and less criminality. They are also more cost-effective than remedial programmes introduced at secondary school level.

Secondly, the complex causes of children's behavioural difficulties, thought to be caused variously by poor socio-economic circumstances (Ruxton, 1996), parenting skills deficits (Smith, 1996), or psychiatric problems (Rutter & Smith, 1995), suggest that any preventative initiative will need to have a correspondingly diverse focus. In particular, it should encompass the two major influences on a child's life: the home and the school (Wolfendale, 1992; Graham & Bowling, 1995). The longer-term success of a single-focus action has been increasingly called into question, both in Britain (Young & Halsey, 1995) and in America (Dryfoos, 1990; Lerner, 1995).

The particular project reported upon here was selected for evaluation from a survey of preventative initiatives (Sheppard, 1997) as it incorporated these two key principles of effective intervention: early identification and a dual, home-school focus. It was, therefore, felt that the project had more potential to contribute towards an effective preventative model than one of the more ubiquitous single-focus schemes to emerge from the survey. The project was also unusual in its community-wide remit, involving the one secondary and all five primary schools on a city housing estate.

Antecedents

The initial concern of the five primary school headteachers was that excluded pupils from the secondary school were fast becoming role models for their younger siblings, resulting in an increase in disruptive behaviour in their schools. The educational psychologist for the area was therefore asked to design a preventative intervention. The resulting project, entitled *Parents and Schools Behaviour Action for Children* (PASBAC), was based on an American model: *FAST Track (Families and Schools Together) Program* (CPPRG, 1992). The American model integrates five intervention components designed to promote competence in the family, child and school and thus to prevent conduct problems (behavioural difficulties), poor social relations and educational failure. Guided by a developmental theory positing the interaction of multiple influences on the development of anti-social behaviour, the FAST Track programme's five components are: parent training; home visiting/case management; social skills training; academic tutoring; and teacher-based classroom intervention. The PASBAC design took a similar multi-systemic approach to prevention, targeting the home, the school and the individual child, and focusing on building behavioural and cognitive skills in the family and school environments, as well as attempting to change the patterns of the child's social interactions with teachers, family members and peers by the promotion of consistent expectations.

Staffing

The staff group in the US FAST Track model includes family co-ordinators, who are required to have prior experience of working with families at risk and who are likely to have a social work degree or training, as well as significant on-the-job experience. The educational co-ordinators, who are also involved, must have teaching experience at the elementary (primary) school level, significant experience with at-risk or severe behaviourally disordered children as well as degrees in counselling, psychology or special education. Class teachers are trained in behaviour management strategies. In contrast, the only staff appointed specifically to the PASBAC project were two parent support workers (PSWs) with limited relevant experience.

The role of the PSWs was to effect behavioural change in the children by applying the principles of social learning theory in the home. On the basis of a weekly home visit, the PSWs worked with parents on a range of skills, such as: boundary setting, establishing clear rules and sanctions, using positive reinforcement and differential attention, developing parental play skills and using naturally occurring situations to foster positive relationships. These skills were fostered by means of a 'demonstration-modelling-referral-practice' approach. The PSWs also liaised weekly with the Special Education Needs Co-ordinators (SENCos) of the five schools, communicating relevant information between home and school and ensuring that the home behavioural objectives were matched in school by the class teacher.

The two PSWs were employed on a 0.75 full-time-equivalent basis and each received one half-day's training for their role in the PASBAC project. The educational psychologist had been hoping to compensate for the lack of formal social services input by recruiting PSWs with family work experience but, as none applied, two people with an education service background were appointed. One central question for our evaluation was the extent to which a single agency could adequately address issues arising in both the home and the school setting. Did the two parent support workers come armed with appropriate skills for work with families experiencing non-educationally specific difficulties and, if not, was the training they subsequently received adequate for the task?

Timescale

A further difference between the two models is that the FAST Track programme features both a universal and a targeted intervention and runs right through the elementary school years, on into middle (early secondary) school. Moreover, the American model incorporates a developmental focus, attending to age-related stress factors, such as initial entry into the education system and the period of transition from elementary (primary) school to middle (secondary) school. The PASBAC project was unable to replicate either of these two aspects, owing to its time-limited funding (initially for two terms only).

Selection of sample

The indicators used to identify children seen to be at risk of developing long-term behavioural difficulties in the five primary schools were: inattention, failure to concentrate, failure to control anger, aggression towards peers and/or an inability to form positive relationships with peers and adults. PASBAC, however, did not have the resources to accommodate all such children. For example, four out of every ten children (748, or 40%) of the total population of 1,864 pupils had been assessed as having special educational needs (SEN), of whom 95 (13% of the SEN group) had been identified as having emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD). PASBAC, therefore, set out to target this latter group as schools found it most difficult to manage and it was the one for which headteachers desired assistance. The referral criteria finally agreed were:

- the child identified as having EBD;
- clear documentary evidence of SEN provision via individual education plans (IEPs);
- parental acknowledgement of the need for assistance both for child and self/selves;
- the child not on the inter-agency 'at risk' register.

While no child would be denied access to normally available support, such as the involvement of social services or the educational psychology service, the extent and nature (or lack) of such involvement would be recorded. In all, 20 children participated in the project, with a male to female ratio of 6:1 and an average age of seven years. The largest single group (7) was on step 3 of the SEN Audit, with six each on steps 1 and 2 and one having no identified special educational needs. Seventeen of the children had IEPs and seven of these had identified learning difficulties. Another key research question thus concerned the extent to which an intervention designed as preventative would succeed with children already presenting a significant level of difficulty/disturbance.

To assess the impact of the project, an experimental approach was attempted in which children were to be allocated randomly to one of two 'treatment' groups (A and B) or to a control group. Emulating the FAST Track programme, the PASBAC intervention comprised five core components:

- individual home teaching of parenting skills (group A only);
- group-based parenting workshops (group B only);
- group-based social skills training for children in school, provided by the SENCos;
- individual academic/behavioural support via IEPs (Individual Education Plans);
- teacher-based classroom intervention (matching home-school behavioural targets).

The UK schemes, however, differed from the US FAST Track approach in two, possibly crucial, ways. The American model randomly allocates by school, rather than child, and all parents receive both home visits and group parenting skills tuition. Another central question for the research (not discussed here; see Lupton & Sheppard, 1999) therefore was the impact of within-school randomisation on the process and outcomes of the intervention.

The investigation

Aims

The aims of the study were to:

- evaluate the operation and the impact of the project from the perspectives of all key participants;
- identify factors which facilitate and those which inhibit the ability of the project to improve the behaviour of targeted children;
- assess the potential of the project for replication.

Design

A case study design was selected (Yin, 1989), given its suitability for the investigation of social phenomena in their *real-world* context. Within this, we employed the approach of pluralistic evaluation (Smith & Cantley, 1984) which acknowledges the multiple, possibly conflicting, criteria of success on the part of different key stakeholders and identifies areas of ambiguity and lack of agreement (Cheetham, Fuller, McIvor & Petch, 1996), as well as of consensus and certainty. A multi-method approach (Weiss & Greene, 1992) was employed to collect documentary, institutional, observational and interview data. This process of 'methodological triangulation' serves to maximise the validity and reliability of the information gathered.

Findings

The findings of the case study evaluation were presented in terms of the separate, but interrelated, issues of process and outcome. The summary of findings outlined below focuses on findings relevant to the three research questions posed above concerning the issue of time-limited funding, the single-agency input and the appropriateness of the target group.

Process issues

Nature of funding

The finding that a few teachers were unaware of the need to set classroom behavioural targets, while others were sometimes forgetting to maintain them, suggests that some class teachers had received insufficient information about, or training in, the objectives and working methods of the PASBAC scheme. This contrasts sharply with the US FAST Track model, in which teachers are specifically trained by programme staff in a 'multi-year' (first through fifth grade) classroom prevention programme conducted three times each week and designed to facilitate the development of self-control, a positive peer climate, emotional awareness and interpersonal problem-solving skills (CPPRG, 1992). The more modestly funded British version did not have the resources to mount a comprehensive teacher training programme, but could have benefited from a short induction workshop and/or a target checklist for each child. Another factor impinging on teacher awareness was the limited time available to the SENCos, especially in the larger schools, to liaise between PSW and class teacher and to undertake the data-collection necessary for the project's outcome measurements. Direct meetings between class teachers and PSWs (and possibly parents) would have released the SENCo to focus on the social skills training of the targeted children. Generally, time and funding constraints meant that both training for participants and ongoing evaluation of the project were necessarily minimal. These constraints also adversely affected the likelihood that those children needing individual support over the longer-term would achieve sustainable improvements in behaviour.

Agency involvement

One disturbing finding was that PSWs discovered, and apparently left unaddressed, situations in which children may have been at risk. For example, two children were reported to be self-harming and physical and/or sexual abuse was suspected in one new referral, but these cases did not appear to have been followed up. This raises questions about the PSW role and the single agency nature of the project. It appeared that the two parent support workers had not been alerted to their responsibilities under the *1989 Children Act*, nor advised to report concerns to their line manager, who could then refer them to social services. Extending the initial training of PSWs to include their statutory obligations was constrained by the fact that the necessary support structures were not in place for some considerable time, owing to problems of staff turnover in the schools. The FAST Track programme, as we have described, requires its family co-ordinators to have prior experience of working with families at risk and they are likely also to have a social work degree, training and significant on-the-job experience. Given the failure to appoint a person with a social services background to at least one of the two PSW posts, it may have been desirable to establish formal links with the local social services department (SSD) for professional advice and/or onward referral.

Target group focus

Four of the 20 children involved were reported to present no behavioural difficulties in school, although interestingly such assessments ignored the fact that a child was withdrawn in class or was unwilling to attend school. In all four cases these children had been referred to the project by headteachers as a result of their mothers approaching the schools for help. Reported behaviour included extreme violence, school phobia and self-harming. When the question was raised, both in PASBAC meetings and in headteachers' meetings, about the suitability of such children for an education service-funded scheme, it was decided that the referrals were inappropriate and were a matter for the local SSD. Another problem resulted from the fact that class teachers tended, perhaps understandably, to refer their most difficult pupils to the scheme. This meant, however, that some of these children had reached stages of difficulty beyond the scope of a preventative project, where referral to the educational psychology service may have been more appropriate.

Parental involvement

One important difference between the US FAST Track programme and its UK counterpart is that the former pays parents to participate as staff members, thus securing their involvement, and crèche and transport facilities are also provided. PASBAC's limited budget could not cover such expenses and, partly as a result, experienced considerable problems with parental participation. In response, a formal process was introduced in which the parent of a newly referred child would meet with the headteacher, the SENCo, the class teacher and the PSW to discuss problems and to agree behavioural targets. The formality of these meetings (usually in the headteacher's office) was deliberate and designed to impress on parents the importance of full commitment. The evidence suggests, however, that they served to discourage, rather than encourage, attendance, with parents finding the presence

of so many professionals intimidating. The solution eventually agreed upon was to allocate the children of refusing parents to the non-intervention, control group, with obvious implications for the experimental approach (Lupton & Sheppard, 1999).

Outcome issues

Overall, the level of satisfaction with the project's outcomes on the part of all participants was found to be high, with all key players reporting gains from their participation. One area in particular was seen to be beneficial (the stronger home-school link) and was stressed by parents and schools alike. The importance of a good home-school relationship has been cited above (Atherton, 1991; Wolfendale, 1992; Graham & Bowling, 1995) and by the authors of the FAST Track programme who maintain that a preventative model requires not only the development of appropriate socio-cognitive and behavioural skills in the child and parent, but also '… the development of a healthy bond between the family and school, child and family, and child and school…' (CPPRG, 1992, p.513). Interviews with parents and school staff broadly upheld this view, with parents revealing that their relationships with the schools, in more than one half of the cases, had been poor or non-existent prior to their involvement in the project, and that greater communication had also improved relationships with their children. For example, some mothers said they were now more inclined to talk to their children about problems in school than to react angrily to a letter from the headteacher, and many class teachers reported a better understanding of a child's difficulties when information, via SENCos, about the home circumstances was forthcoming.

Varying degrees of improvement in the behaviour of 16 of the 20 children studied were recorded by parents and/or schools, with both parents and class teachers agreeing that substantive change had occurred in one half of these cases. The project was seen to be less successful for those children (four of the 20) who had already developed relatively severe difficulties. In the case of one child, for example, where there was disagreement between the home and the school about the extent of behavioural problems, the class teacher reported that the intervention had, in her view, been very unsuccessful and that there had been no discernible improvement in either his loud, rude, demanding manner, nor in his ability to relate to other children or adults. In a second example, both parent and school were in agreement about the severity of the child's difficulties. His mother had reported very disturbed behaviour, such as self-harming, hearing 'voices' and destructiveness, while the SENCo had reported unprovoked attacks on other children. The class teacher reported no improvement after one school term, while his mother reported further deterioration in his behaviour, including a developing interest in playing with sharp knives, a behaviour which she reported she was unable to control. At the time of the interviews this child was awaiting a decision about clinical assessment and a referral to the child and family therapy service was being considered. Such outcomes would seem to raise central issues about the role of other agencies, the importance of explicit and achievable referral criteria and, not least, the need for longer-term help for some children than could be provided by a time-limited intervention such as the PASBAC.

Conclusions

Overall, the view of home and school participants was that the project had been successful in the majority of cases. With some adjustments to its operation and structure, reported elsewhere (Sheppard & Lupton, 1998), it is our general conclusion that the model has the potential for replication and could represent a valuable service to children experiencing the early symptoms of behavioural difficulties, their families and schools. The study thus adds to the arguments for early, preventative investment in children displaying behavioural difficulties in order to reduce the necessity for costlier remedial interventions later in a child's development. The extent to which schools themselves are able to make such investment, however, remains doubtful when SEN resources are of necessity targeted at the children who have developed difficulties beyond the reach of purely preventative interventions.

The central question also arises of whether the PASBAC project and others like it should have some degree of social services input, if only a formal agreement whereby children seen to be at risk may be referred to the local SSD by project staff. It was unclear from the PASBAC data whether social services had been formally approached during the early stages of the project's development, but the lack of any social services involvement was thrown into sharp focus by the child protection concerns raised. Simply excluding children who were currently registered as being 'at risk' was not sufficient to ensure that others equally at risk were not involved. This finding resurrects the debate about the need for inter-agency collaboration and calls into question the extent to which a single agency can take on and effectively address the multi-faceted problems faced by families (Dryfoos, 1990; Schorr, 1988; Hamburg, 1992). Thus Lerner (1995) argues that, in the face of the systemic interconnections of children's behavioural difficulties, programme comprehensiveness *per se* will not be adequate, but will require an integration of services. Our data confirm this view and suggest that family workers in preventative interventions such as PASBAC should have a social work background and/or appropriate professional support and supervision.

The main single factor adversely affecting the longer-term effectiveness of the PASBAC intervention, however, was its lack of financial security. In addition to constraining forward planning and development, limited and short-term budgets inhibited the opportunity for the longitudinal evaluation necessary to establish the nature of the project's 'ultimate outcomes'. It may be that its short-lived existence actually did more harm than good. As Lerner (1995) warns, the withdrawal of a (short-term) programme can result in a community feeling less hopeful and less empowered than it did before the programme was begun. In order adequately to address the issue of sustainability,

programmes need to have staff specifically devoting time and energy to finances, management, strategic planning and fund-raising (Little, 1993). Funding for the PASBAC project was insufficient to allow for this, however, and the extent to which any identified improvement in behaviour was sustainable in the longer-term remains unknown. It cannot be stressed too much, therefore, that the potential of projects such as PASBAC is effectively circumscribed by the short-term and unpredictable nature of their funding. Our final conclusion thus has to be that, if the many identified strengths of the PASBAC and similar models are to be consolidated and their relative weaknesses minimised, continuous, secure sources of funding must be identified at the outset.

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Address for correspondence
Carol Lupton
SSRIU
St Georges Building
141 High Street
Portsmouth PO1 2HY
Email: ssriu@port.ac.uk

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