

Blame, guilt and the need for 'labels'; insights from parents of children with special educational needs and educational practitioners

Karen Broomhead

Previous research on home-school relationships and blame has concentrated on the experiences of parents with children with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD). This has led to the voices of educational practitioners, as well as parents of children with other special educational needs, being neglected. This article, by Karen Broomhead of Lancaster University, details part of a larger study examining socio-emotional aspects of home-school relationships between parents of children with special educational needs and educational practitioners. The study reported in this article explored perceptions of blame via semi-structured interviews with 15 educational professionals and 22 parents of children with various special educational needs. The findings reveal that parental experiences of blame and guilt were influenced by the nature of their children's special educational needs, which consequently influenced parental focus on obtaining 'labels' of special educational needs for their children. The implications of these findings for educational practitioners are discussed.

Keywords: special educational needs, home-school relations, labelling, blame, attitudes

Introduction

Developing positive relationships between parents and teachers is a key concern of education policy in England (DfE, 2011; DCSF, 2009), due to the widely publicised benefits of effective home-school relationships for pupils, parents and schools (Harris & Goodall, 2007; Reynolds, 2005). Yet literature suggests that some parents experience difficulties when developing relationships with schools, including some parents who have children with special educational needs (O'Connor, 2008; Whitaker, 2007; Hess, Molina & Kozleski, 2006). As nearly 21% of all pupils in England were on the special educational needs register in 2012 (DfE, 2012), problems with home-school collaboration may be affecting many parents and their children. However, although the practical issues surrounding home-school relationships (such as parental satisfaction with home-school communication and support) have been explored frequently (see Parsons, Lewis, Davison, Ellins &

Robertson, 2009), there has been much less concentration on *socio-emotional* issues. One socio-emotional issue that has a key influence on home-school relationships is blame, which is essential to explore further with reference to special educational needs due to the emotionally charged nature of this area.

This study sought to understand blame (including self-blame, or guilt) within the context of home-school relationships, by eliciting the experiences of parents of children with a range of special educational needs which previous literature had not considered (in specific relation to blame), thus providing the opportunity to explore the influence of the *nature* of a child's special educational needs on parental experiences. Educational practitioners were also given a voice in the process, as they had been neglected in previous research. This article explores parental and educational practitioner understandings and experiences of blame, guilt, and the need to obtain 'labels' of special educational needs for children, with reference to the influence of the nature of children's special educational needs.

Background

Sher (2006) defines blame as an attitude that a person takes towards himself or another individual, due to that person 'fail[ing] to conform to some moral standard'. The issues regarding blame and special educational needs are situated within the wider context of parental blame, with parents being blamed for a wealth of societal problems, such as anti-social behaviour and falling school standards (Moses, 2010; Runswick-Cole, 2007; Moran & Ghate, 2005). This blame is due to the UK governmental focus on 'parental determinism', where parenting is viewed as the 'overwhelming factor determining a child's future' (Peters, 2011). Parents are consequently perceived as needing to be more responsible, with policy concentrating on interventions that develop parental responsibility (Easton, 2011; Broadhurst, 2009; DfES, 2007). There has been a renewed interest in parental responsibility over the past two years due to the ramifications of the 2011 riots in several UK cities, where much of the violence was attributed to ineffective parenting (Lewis & Malnick, 2011).

Furthermore, a wealth of previous literature has suggested that parents, more specifically mothers, are regularly blamed for their children's difficulties in cases of behavioural,

emotional and social difficulties (BESD), with frequent reference being made to ineffective parenting and a lack of discipline (Francis, 2012; Peters, 2011; Moses, 2010; Stace, 2010; Ryan & Runswick-Cole, 2008; Rogers, 2007; Harborne, Wolpert & Clare, 2004). This blame has been enhanced by the recent special educational needs Green Paper, which proposed that BESD should be removed from the special educational needs framework and instead these pupils should be viewed as a vulnerable group due to their home circumstances (Ellis & Tod, 2012; DfE, 2011).

On the other hand, little research has identified that parents blame professionals. The predominant view appears to be that of educational practitioners blaming parents for the onset of BESD in children. However, much previous investigation in this area (Francis, 2012; Peters, 2011; Ryan and Runswick-Cole, 2008; Rogers, 2007; Harborne et al., 2004) has solely consulted *parents* about blame, with parents stating that they felt blamed by professionals. Although Croll and Moses (1985) explored teacher perspectives on blame and highlighted that parents were deemed responsible for inappropriate behaviour, this dated research only provides a quantitative insight into the phenomena under investigation. Additionally, this study concentrated on attributions of 'misbehaviour' rather than examining formally recognised BESD cases. Furthermore, although the work of Miller (1995) briefly considered practitioner perspectives and 'difficult' pupil behaviour, the predominant focus of this research was how to manage pupil behaviour in consultation with educational psychologists, as opposed to the causes of BESD. The experiences of educational practitioners had therefore been neglected when exploring perceived causes of BESD and the home-school relationship.

Nevertheless, it has been suggested that these perceptions of BESD being caused by ineffective parenting contrast with the views of parents of children with BESD (Francis, 2012; Gerdes & Hoza, 2006). For example, Harborne et al. (2004), via interviews with ten parents of children with AD/HD, identified that parents perceived their children's condition as having biological causes. However, an in-depth investigation into the perceived causes of BESD with both parents and teachers has not been conducted, as identified above.

Furthermore, the blame expressed towards parents of children with BESD has clearly dominated this research area. As a result, little consideration has been given to the experiences of blame that parents of children with special educational needs other than BESD have encountered. The only study which has briefly explored blame and special educational needs more widely is that of Francis (2012), in a US context. Based on 55 interviews with parents of children with various special educational needs, Francis (2012) identified that parents of children with physical conditions (such as cerebral palsy), which had evident biological causes, did not experience blame. However, in addition to potential cultural variation, it is essential to point out that once again the experiences of teachers were not elicited, consequently shedding no light on whether practitioner blame was

extended towards parents of children with special educational needs other than BESD.

A wealth of research has also reported that parents of children with a variety of special educational needs frequently experience self-blame, or guilt, and it has therefore been proposed that the guilt process is experienced by parents regardless of the nature of their children's special educational needs (Francis, 2012; Moses, 2010; Holt, 2009; Peters & Jackson, 2009; Blum, 2007; Glogowska & Campbell, 2004). However, Mikelson, Wroble and Helgeson's (1999) US findings contrasted with these findings, by identifying that parents of children with biological conditions such as Down's syndrome did not blame themselves, and instead attributed their children's difficulties to biological factors or 'fate/God's will'.

Finally, much previous literature has suggested that formal diagnoses of BESD, often referred to as 'labels', reduce parental blame due to the diagnosis shifting blame away from the parent onto an uncontrollable, biological 'condition' (Ryan & Runswick-Cole, 2008; Blum, 2007; Harborne et al., 2004; Litt, 2004). Hinton and Wolpert (1998) refer to this as a 'label of forgiveness' and suggest that parents of children with BESD are guilty until proven innocent (in other words, guilty of causing their children's BESD until their children receive a formal diagnosis). Much less research has examined the importance of labelling with parents of children with other special educational needs. However, links can cautiously be made here with how diagnoses, and more specifically Statements, of special educational needs are perceived to have 'passport benefits' (Pinney, 2004) to specialised support and resources (Riddick, 2012; DfE, 2011; Lauchlan & Boyle, 2007; Ho, 2004). Nevertheless, although there has been preliminary investigation into the importance placed on labelling by parents, and the reasons for doing so, this previous research has concentrated on the experiences of parents of children with BESD.

Based on the above, there was much scope specifically to explore perceptions and experiences of blame and guilt (in BESD and non-BESD cases) with parents of children with special educational needs and educational practitioners. This was due to previous literature in this area having focused on providing parents of children with BESD with a voice, with little consideration for parents of children with special educational needs other than BESD, and educational professionals. Therefore, the aim of the current study was to gain an understanding of parental and educational practitioner experiences of blame, guilt and labelling within a special educational needs and home-school relationship context. The views and experiences of both parents of children with special educational needs and educational professionals were elicited, which complemented the heavy focus on *parental* experiences in previous literature. More specifically, the experiences of parents with children with various special educational needs were obtained. This was to avoid the assumption that issues regarding blame, guilt and labelling were only of importance for parents of children with

BESD, which previous research had not acknowledged, while also simultaneously recognising the significance of BESD cases. The research question explored during this study was: what are the perceptions and experiences of parents of children with special educational needs (both with and without BESD) and educational practitioners, regarding blame in relation to these children's difficulties and behaviour?

The data reported in this article were elicited as part of a wider study exploring socio-emotional aspects of home-school relationships between parents of children with special educational needs and educational practitioners, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

Methodology

The research study was approached via interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), a qualitative methodology which focuses on gaining an in-depth understanding of how participants make sense of significant life experiences (Smith, Flowers & Larkin 2009). More specifically, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 parents of school-aged children with special educational needs, and 15 educational practitioners (in line with the British Educational Research Association's 2004 ethical guidelines). To explore the influence of the nature of children's special educational needs on experiences of blame and guilt, parents were separated into four sub-groups based on their children's difficulties: 'with BESD' (such as attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD), oppositional defiance disorder (ODD) and Asperger's syndrome); 'without BESD' (any special educational needs which did not involve socially inappropriate behaviour); 'visible special educational needs and socially inappropriate behaviour'; and finally 'classic ASD' (autistic spectrum disorder).

Educational practitioners involved in the research were employed in both mainstream and special schools, held a range of positions and had different amounts of special educational needs experience. Eliciting the views of parents of children with special educational needs and teachers was essential, due to home-school relationships clearly involving both parents and professionals. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise here that parents and teachers involved in the study were not 'paired cases' (Fyelling & Sandvin, 1999), for ethical and practical reasons. Parents were accessed via an online forum for parents of children with special educational needs in the north-west of England, as well as through activity groups for children with special educational needs in the locality. In relation to educational practitioners, mainstream and special schools within the immediate area of the research were contacted via email and/or post. The essential criteria when recruiting educational professionals was that they had contact with pupils with special educational needs and their parents as part of their employment.

Parent interviews revolved around whether they had experienced blame or guilt in relation to their children's special

educational needs, and also examined the importance they placed on obtaining special educational needs 'labels' for their children's difficulties. Interviews with educational practitioners focused on who or what they perceived to be the main causes of BESD and other special educational needs, as well as exploring their perceptions of labelling. The majority of parents were interviewed in their own homes (while two were interviewed at a local university), and all educational practitioners were interviewed at their workplace. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to over three hours in length, and all were audio-recorded. With regard to data analysis, the five-stage IPA process developed by Smith et al. (2009) was followed, with each participant allocated a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality.

Findings

Interviews with parents of children with various special educational needs, as well as educational practitioners, yielded many interesting findings. These key findings revolved around blame towards parents of children with BESD, leading to much parental guilt, which contrasted with the lack of blame or guilt experienced by parents of children with other special educational needs. These parental experiences of blame and guilt consequently influenced parental focus on obtaining labels of special educational needs for their children, and their reasons for doing so.

Blame towards parents of children with BESD

Parents of children with BESD perceived that educational professionals blamed their children's BESD on ineffective parenting:

'I'm blamed because there are a significant proportion that feel okay he's got his problems but really if somebody was just firmer with him he'd be fine'.

(Sarah, 'with BESD')

'... they think that it's parents that are going wrong for the child to be how they are ... they blamed me and said "oh we'll put you on parenting courses" ... it makes you feel as though it's your fault, you're doing something wrong'.

(Melanie, 'with BESD')

Blame towards parents of children with BESD from educational practitioners was also heavily evident in the responses of staff themselves, with all professionals interviewed perceiving BESD to be due to ineffective parenting. The phrases 'chaotic', 'dysfunctional' and 'no boundaries' were frequently used by practitioners to describe the home lives of children with BESD, identifying a discourse of social breakdown, as the following comments show:

'... you can get children where it's just downright bad parenting and it's no wonder the child is the way they are because they're being dragged up ... some of these children's problems are just down to dysfunctional families'.

(Jackie, mainstream SENCo)

'... parents are responsible because the children have no boundaries, they live chaotic lives ... so to that point of view the dysfunctional aspect, the no boundaries then they are responsible'.

(Jean, teacher at BESD school)

On the other hand, many educational practitioners acknowledged that it was too simplistic to blame BESD solely on ineffective parenting, accepting that BESD in some cases could be due to medical issues, or indeed a variety of causes which Holly (a teacher at a BESD school) referred to as *'good old bit syndrome, bit of this, bit of that'*. An interesting metaphorical example was provided by Steven (a headteacher at a BESD school):

'... it's a complex mix and I think [sighs] it's almost like a recipe and depending on what ingredients you throw in the result will be different ... so they're all ingredients in that mix, so I don't think there is one cause'.

It was also essential to take social disadvantage into consideration when exploring blame in BESD cases. The parents of children with BESD whom staff spoke of were frequently referred to as unemployed, receiving benefits, or living on council estates with few aspirations. These pressures may have influenced their ability to parent *'effectively'* (although caution is required when considering what constitutes *'effective'* parenting, particularly from the perspectives of middle-class educational practitioners towards socially disadvantaged parents). Thus blaming BESD on ineffective parenting appeared to be too simplistic, as suggested by Bev (a mainstream SENCo):

'... when you unpick the problems it's not really anything to do with how these parents are parenting their children ... it's the pressures on a family where perhaps there is addiction or abuse, no work, no money, difficult children, too many children ... it's easy to forget that those pressures are perhaps impinging on the child, whereas if you're A N Other middle-class person with a nice husband whose coming in with a regular income, your circumstances and how you manage are very different'.

The views of professionals perceiving BESD to be caused by ineffective parenting contrasted with the experiences of parents of children with BESD, who, in their interviews, identified that their children's difficulties had biological causes. For example, *'it's a chemical imbalance of the brain'* (Melanie) and *'chromosome gene fault'* (Hannah) were explanations used by parents to explain their children's BESD. This signified a shift in blame regarding BESD from the parents onto their children, by indicating that their children had an *'imbalance'* or *'fault'*. However, it may actually have been parents attempting to identify an uncontrollable cause for their children's BESD, to reduce their feelings of self-blame as well as to decrease blame towards their children.

No blame towards parents of children with other special educational needs

The blame towards parents of children with BESD by educational practitioners contrasted markedly with the lack of blame experienced by other parents. Seventy-three percent of parents in the remaining three sub-groups perceived their children's special educational needs to be biological, uncontrollable conditions. Mainstream staff also viewed learning difficulties as uncontrollable and *'real special needs'* (Jackie) which pupils were *'born with'* (Elaine), and were due to *'how [the] brain's wired'* (Bev). Jackie's comment indicating that learning difficulties were the only *'real special needs'* was extremely concerning, as it implied that BESD may not have been viewed as a legitimate special educational need, even by staff with much special educational needs experience (in this case a SENCo). This reflects current UK policy, where intentions have been identified to shift BESD away from the special educational needs framework into a *'vulnerable'* group classification (Ellis and Tod, 2012; DfE, 2011). The vast majority of parents in these three sub-groups consequently identified that they did *not* feel blamed by educational professionals; for example, Kate (*'without BESD'*) commented, *'I don't feel that the school blame me ... I don't think they look at me and think oh she's a bad mother'.*

These differing parental experiences of blame, based on the nature of their children's special educational needs, appeared consequently to influence parental guilt.

Parental guilt

The extent of blame towards parents of children with special educational needs also appeared to influence the self-blame (or guilt) that these parents experienced. Parents of children with BESD reported feeling intensely guilty for their children's special educational needs; for example, Sarah (*'with BESD'*) commented, *'there may be elements that are down to parenting ... I feel guilty, yeah I feel very guilty'.*

A vivid explanation was provided by Hannah, the mother of two sons with BESD:

'... of course I'm to blame they're my genes, doesn't matter if it's nature or nurture, both things are my doing ... I did it, I made it, pre-womb, inside womb, after womb, and so all blame lands on me ... I have guilt over should I even be using Mr Muscle sprays around the house, should I be dressing them in natural cotton and should we be doing yoga, you know have I made the right intervention'.

The maternal guilt experienced by Hannah, and indeed by the other parents of children with BESD (who were mostly mothers), was clearly intense. Indeed, the above quotation from Hannah indicates that she assumed sole responsibility for her children's difficulties, even when discussing genetics, and also experienced guilt regarding which interventions she should implement to support them. This implies that parents of children with BESD could experience guilt for a

long period of time, due to the frequent choices they have to make regarding how to support their children.

The extreme guilt experienced by parents of children with BESD contrasted strongly with the lack of guilt reported by parents of children with other special educational needs, whose comments included:

'... we know it's nothing we've done, so it's not because we've been drinking or smoking, it's just one of those things'.

(Kelly, 'visible special educational needs and socially inappropriate behaviour')

'... I don't feel you know it was because I had that glass of wine while I was pregnant'.

(Sandra, 'classic ASD')

The lack of guilt experienced by parents of children with special educational needs other than BESD could have been due to little blame being placed on them by educational practitioners. However, it may have also been due to parents perceiving their children's special educational needs to be uncontrollable, preventing them from feeling guilty as they thought that they were unable to prevent their children's difficulties. For example, Kelly experienced little guilt as her daughter Sally had Down's syndrome, a disability which is caused by an extra chromosome; that is, it has a verified, uncontrollable cause. Another interesting example is Sandra, who referred to her religious beliefs frequently during her interview. She viewed her son's severe autism as being due to the wishes of God, who gave her a son with ASD as she was deemed by God as able to cope. Although differing immensely to Kelly's experience, Sandra still clearly viewed her child's special educational needs as being out of her control, thus preventing her from experiencing guilt. These experiences of guilt (in addition to blame) also influenced parental focus on obtaining labels of special educational needs for their children.

Labels for absolving blame

All parents of children with BESD discussed how acquiring a 'label' for their children's BESD was essential, with the reason being to reduce feelings of blame and therefore excusing them for their children's difficulties by viewing the special educational needs as innate in their children:

'... when you've got that diagnosis it's a big relief and it's a big weight off your shoulders and you think well I was right all along'.

(Melanie, 'with BESD')

'... it meant I am not going mad there is something wrong and he isn't just naughty because I'm a bad parent, there was a reason that things were going so badly wrong'.

(Hannah, 'with BESD')

The focus on labelling by parents of children with BESD to absolve blame was also supported by ten educational professionals. These practitioners suggested that parents viewed specific BESD labels, such as AD/HD or ODD, as necessary to reduce the blame towards them, and to provide an 'excuse' for their children's perceived inappropriate behaviour:

'... some parents want a diagnosis to say "it's not our fault because they've got this condition" ... it's almost like an excuse ... a devoid of responsibility'.

(John, headteacher and SENCo at a mainstream school)

'... as soon as their kid has the label of ADHD, that absolves them of any kind of blame for any of their behaviours, because they have a condition or a syndrome ... it can be used as an excuse for poor parenting'.

(Jenni, teacher at a BESD school)

On the other hand, parents of children with BESD were still blamed by professionals and still felt blamed even though their children had formal diagnoses of BESD, with many also having Statements of Special Educational Needs. This was despite parental perceptions that formal recognition of their children's BESD would reduce blame. It was interesting that parents of children with BESD still perceived labels to be important for reducing parental blame, despite continuing to experience blame and guilt once their children had acquired these labels.

Labels for funding and support

Whereas parents of children with BESD were predominantly focused on labelling to absolve their own blame and guilt, parents of children in the remaining three sub-groups were focused on acquiring labels to ensure their children received funding and support:

'I wasn't happy until he finally got the diagnosis ... because then it went into a Statement, and they put more things in place for him at school'.

(Adele, 'without BESD')

'... without that label he wouldn't have the speech and language therapy'.

(Sandra, 'classic ASD')

The focus on labelling for pupil support was also reflected in staff responses. Although expressing concern that they were overused, educational practitioners suggested that labels were helpful as they could provide a way to access support for pupils with special educational needs:

'... if you have the label then the school have to put in support for it'.

(Christine, mainstream educational practitioner)

'... if there isn't an identification of what additional need these young people have, how can you actually attach to them the number of provisions that you need to make things work'.

(Daniel, BESD educational practitioner)

These statements highlighted the common perceptions, of parents and professionals, that labels could have key benefits for pupils with special educational needs with regard to support.

Discussion

This qualitative exploration of parental and educational practitioner experiences of blame and guilt has yielded several key findings. Firstly, the nature of a child's special educational needs had a key influence on whether their parents felt blamed by educational practitioners, as well as whether educational practitioners viewed parents as responsible for their children's difficulties. Secondly, the nature of a child's special educational needs, as well as evidence of blame, appeared to impact on parental guilt. Finally, parental experiences of blame and guilt consequently influenced their focus on obtaining labels of special educational needs for their children, and their reasons for doing so.

The intense blame towards parents of children with BESD highlighted in this study is a finding that supports an overwhelming wealth of research which has reported the common perception of BESD being attributed to ineffective parenting (Peters, 2011; Moses, 2010; Stace, 2010; Rogers, 2007). This view is also problematically evident in recent UK policy (DfE, 2011). Nevertheless, practitioners in the current study were also open to ideas regarding the causes of BESD, and were not fixated on simplistically solely blaming parents for their children's difficulties. This therefore challenged the above literature which indicated that BESD is assumed to be due to ineffective parenting, and recognised the importance of giving voice to educational practitioners. It is important to acknowledge the influence of social disadvantage (and family pressures) on parenting abilities, as many educational practitioners in the current study did, and this supports previous research (Centre for Social Justice, 2011; Kiernan & Mensah, 2011; Vandewater & Lansford, 2005). On the other hand, parents of children with BESD perceived their children's difficulties as having biological causes, which supports previous investigation (Francis, 2012; Gerdes & Hoza, 2006). For example, Harborne et al. (2004) demonstrated that parents of children with AD/HD viewed their children's condition as having innate, biological causes, while others perceived AD/HD to be caused by inappropriate parenting, and the current study's findings are in line with these results.

The blame towards parents of children with BESD contrasted strongly with the lack of blame experienced by parents with children with other special educational needs. Ensuring that parents of children with special educational needs other than BESD had a voice in this process proved essential, as the nature of a child's special educational needs had a clear influence on parental experiences of blame. The influence of the nature of children's special educational needs in the current study challenged the research by Francis (2012), which identified that parents of children with special educational needs other than BESD, such as learning difficulties, experienced blame. However, Francis (2012) did not elicit the views of educational practitioners, and thus an

overall understanding of whether blame was evident in non-BESD cases was not obtained. The findings of the current study highlighted that parents of children with special educational needs other than BESD did not feel blamed, which was reinforced by professionals.

Additionally, parents of children with BESD experienced much guilt, which is consistent with a wealth of literature (Francis, 2012; Moses, 2010; Holt, 2009; Peters & Jackson, 2009). However, many parents of children with BESD in the current study experienced guilt for a long period after diagnosis. On the contrary, parents of children with other special educational needs did not report any guilt, which contrasts with previous literature (Moses, 2010; Blum, 2007; Glogowska & Campbell, 2004). Nevertheless, it does provide support for research by Mikelson et al. (1999), who found that parents of children with conditions such as Down's syndrome attributed their children's difficulties to 'genetic flukes' or 'fate/God's will', and therefore did not experience guilt.

Finally, the focus on labelling by parents of children with BESD to absolve blame and guilt supports much previous research (Ryan & Runswick-Cole, 2008; Blum, 2007; Harborne et al., 2004), with Hinton and Wolpert (1998) referring to these as labels 'of forgiveness'. However, findings from the current study highlighted how parents continued to experience blame *after* diagnosis, despite believing that labelling would eradicate their culpability. In contrast to this, parents of children with special educational needs other than BESD in the current study were only interested in labelling if it led to an increase in support or funding available for their children. These 'passport benefits' (Pinney, 2004) of special educational needs diagnoses for accessing support and resources are well documented (Riddick, 2012; DfE, 2011; Lauchlan & Boyle, 2007; Ho, 2004).

The implications of these findings for practice are firstly that home-school relationships were clearly fragile due to the fact that they are suffused with notions of blame and guilt, with emotions evidently running high. Based on this, there needs to be a shift in focus from preoccupation with attributing blame, towards developing positive home-school relationships and supporting the needs of pupils. If home-school relationships are built on the foundations of trust and approachability, they may provide educational practitioners with the opportunity to question the family values and norms of BESD cases, and the need to obtain labels of special educational needs. Additionally, it would be beneficial for educational practitioners to reflect on how their chosen teaching and learning styles, and the environment in which they teach, could also impact on the behaviour of children with BESD, and indeed all pupils. An indirect result of this practitioner reflection could also be a reduction in blame.

Furthermore, social pressures on parents, such as unemployment, were reported to impact on parenting abilities. Community involvement is therefore crucial, as parenting abilities cannot be separated from the often negative social

circumstances that parents are dealing with, which may consequently impact on their capacity to parent effectively. This needs to be reflected in policy, with interventions focusing on reducing the wider issues of social deprivation experienced by families of children with BESD. It is also important to consider how communities as a whole can work together to support vulnerable members of the community, rather than developing strategies which intend to 'make parents more responsible'.

Finally with regard to labels, the current special educational needs system which emphasises a labelling culture needs to be addressed; although this is evidently a contentious issue, deeply rooted in debates about inclusion and support (Riddick, 2012; Squires, 2012; Forlin & Chambers, 2011). The recent special educational needs Green Paper (DfE, 2011) has recognised the overuse of labels, but as it stands

parents still view labels as the key way of reducing blame and/or obtaining support for their children.

This study has provided an in-depth, qualitative insight into parental and educational practitioner perceptions of blame in special educational needs cases. The nature of a child's special educational needs was the predominant influence on parental experiences of blame and guilt, as well as whether staff blamed parents. These experiences of blame and guilt consequently influenced parental focus on obtaining labels of special educational needs for their children and their reasons for doing so. These findings provide an original contribution to previous literature in this area which had neglected the voices of educational professionals, as well as parents of children with special educational needs other than BESD, while simultaneously recognising the significance of BESD cases.

Reference list

- Blum, L.M. (2007) 'Mother-blame in the Prozac nation: raising kids with invisible disabilities', *Gender and Society*, 21 (2), 202–226.
- Broadhurst, K. (2009) 'Safeguarding children through parenting support: how does every parent matter?', in K. Broadhurst, C. Grover and J. Jamison (eds) *Critical Perspectives on Safeguarding Children*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Centre for Social Justice (2011) *No Excuses: a review of educational exclusion*. London: Centre for Social Justice [online at http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/client/downloads/CSJ_Educational_Exclusion_WEB_12.09.11.pdf].
- Croll, P. & Moses, D. (1985) *One in Five. The assessment and incidence of special educational needs*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- DCSF (Department for Children Schools and Families) (2009) *Your Child, Your Schools, Our Future: building a 21st century school system*. London: DCSF [online at https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/21st_Century_Schools.pdf].
- DfE (Department for Education) (2011) *Support and Aspiration: a new approach to special educational needs and disability: a consultation*. London: DfE [online at <http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/Green-Paper-SEN.pdf>].
- DfE (Department for Education) (2012) *Special Educational Needs in England, January 2012*. London: DfE [online at <http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s001075/sfr14-2012v2.pdf>].
- DfES (Department for Education and Skills) (2007) *Every Parent Matters*. London: DfES [online at <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationdetail/page1/DFES-LKAW-2007>].
- Easton, M. (2011) *England Riots: the return of the underclass*. BBC News [online at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-14488486>].
- Ellis, S. & Tod, J. (2012) 'Identification of SEN: is consistency a realistic or worthy aim?', *Support for Learning*, 27 (2), 59–66.
- Forlin, C. & Chambers, D. (2011) 'Teacher preparation for inclusive education: increasing knowledge but raising concerns', *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 39 (1), 17–32.
- Francis, A. (2012) 'Stigma in an era of medicalisation and anxious parenting: how proximity and culpability shape middle-class parents' experiences of disgrace', *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 1–16.
- Fyelling, I. & Sandvin, J.T. (1999) 'The role of parents in special education: the notion of partnership revised', *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 14 (2), 144–157.
- Gerdes, A.C. & Hoza, B. (2006) 'Maternal attributions, affect, and parenting in attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and comparison families', *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology*, 35 (3), 346–355.
- Glogowska, M. & Campbell, R. (2004) 'Parental views of surveillance for early speech and language difficulties', *Children & Society*, 18 (4), 266–277.
- Harborne, A., Wolpert, M. & Clare, L. (2004) 'Making sense of ADHD: a battle for understanding? Parents' views of their children being diagnosed with ADHD', *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 9 (3), 327–339.
- Harris, A. & Goodall, J. (2007) *Engaging Parents in Raising Achievement: do parents know they matter?* London: DCSF [online at <http://www.education.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/DCSF-RW004.pdf>].
- Hess, R.S., Molina, A.M. & Kozleski, E.B. (2006) 'Until somebody hears me: parent voice and advocacy in special educational decision making', *British Journal of Special Education*, 33 (3), 148–157.
- Hinton, C. & Wolpert, M. (1998) 'Why is ADHD such a compelling story?', *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 2 315–2317.

- Ho, A. (2004) 'To be labelled, or not to be labelled: that is the question', *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 32 (2), 86–92.
- Holt, A. (2009) '(En)gendering responsibilities: experiences of parenting a "young offender"', *Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 48 (4), 344–356.
- Kiernan, K. & Mensah, F.K. (2011) 'Poverty, family resources and children's educational attainment: the mediating role of parenting', *British Journal of Educational Research*, 37 (2), 317–336.
- Lauchlan, F. & Boyle, C. (2007) 'Is the use of labels in special education helpful?', *Support for Learning*, 22 (1), 36–42.
- Lewis, J. & Malnick, E. (2011) 'UK riots: fifth of riot suspects are children', *Telegraph*, 13 August.
- Litt, J. (2004) 'Women's carework in low-income households: the special case of children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder', *Gender and Society*, 18 (5), 625–644.
- Mikelson, K.D., Wroble, M. & Helgeson, V.S. (1999) '“Why my child?”: parental attributions for children's special needs', *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 29 (6), 1263–1292.
- Miller, A. (1995) 'Teachers' attributions of causality, control and responsibility', *Educational Psychology*, 15 (4), 457–472.
- Moran, P. & Ghate, D. (2005) 'The effectiveness of parenting support', *Children and Society*, 19 (4), 329–336.
- Moses, T. (2010) 'Exploring parents' self-blame in relation to adolescents' mental disorders', *Family Relations*, 59 (2), 103–120.
- O'Connor, U. (2008) 'Meeting in the middle? A study of parent-professional partnerships', *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 23 (3), 253–268.
- Parsons, S., Lewis, A., Davison, I., Ellins, J. & Robertson, C. (2009) 'Satisfaction with educational provision for children with SEN or disabilities: a national postal survey of the views of parents in Great Britain', *Educational Review*, 61 (1), 19–47.
- Peters, E. (2011) 'I blame the mother: educating parents and the gendered nature of parenting orders', *Gender & Education*, 24 (1), 119–130.
- Peters, K. & Jackson, D. (2009) 'Mothers' experiences of parenting a child with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder', *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 65 (1), 62–71.
- Pinney, A. (2004) *Reducing Reliance on Statements: an investigation into local authority practice and outcomes*. London: DfES [online at <http://www.education.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR508.pdf>].
- Reynolds, J. (2005) *Parents' Involvement in Their Children's Learning and Schools: how should their responsibilities relate to the role of the state?* London: Family and Parenting Institute [online at http://www.familyandparenting.org/Filestore/Documents/publications/Parental_Involvement_Reynolds.pdf].
- Riddick, B. (2012) 'Labelling learners with “SEND”': the good, the bad and the ugly', in D. Armstrong and G. Squires (eds) *Contemporary Issues in Special Educational Needs: considering the whole child*. Maidenhead: McGraw Hill.
- Rogers, C. (2007) 'Disabling a family? Emotional dilemmas experienced in becoming a parent of a child with learning disabilities', *British Journal of Special Education*, 34 (3), 136–143.
- Runswick-Cole, K. (2007) '“The Tribunal was the most stressful thing: more stressful than my son's diagnosis or behaviour”: the experiences of families who go to the Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal (SENDIST)', *Disability & Society*, 22 (3), 315–328.
- Ryan, S. & Runswick-Cole, K. (2008) 'Repositioning mothers: mothers, disabled children and disability studies', *Disability & Society*, 23 (3), 199–210.
- Sher, G. (2006) *In Praise of Blame*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, J.A., Flowers, P. & Larkin, M. (2009) *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: theory, method and research*. London: Sage.
- Squires, G. (2012) 'Historical and socio-political agendas around defining and including children with special educational needs', in D. Armstrong and G. Squires (eds) *Contemporary Issues in Special Educational Needs: considering the whole child*. Maidenhead: McGraw Hill.
- Stace, H. (2010) 'Mother blaming; or autism, gender and science', *Women's Studies Journal*, 24 (2), 66–70.
- Vandewater, E.A. & Lansford, J.E. (2005) 'A family process model of problem behaviors in adolescents', *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 67 (1), 100–109.
- Whitaker, P. (2007) 'Provision for youngsters with autistic spectrum disorders in mainstream schools: what parents say – and what parents want', *British Journal of Special Education*, 34 (3), 170–178.

Address for correspondence:

Karen Broomhead
Lancaster University – Educational Research
Bailrigg
Lancaster LA14YW
UK
Email: k.broomhead@lancaster.ac.uk

Article submitted: September 2012
Accepted for publication: December 2012

Copyright of British Journal of Special Education is the property of Wiley-Blackwell and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.