

Measuring Service Quality

Service Quality

Service quality is best achieved through a clear focus on the needs of current and potential service users. It is the individual's experience of a service that forms the basis for their assessment of service quality. Distinctions are drawn between 'quality in fact' and 'quality in perception'. Quality in fact means conforming to specifications and standards, quality in perception means that service users think they have received the quality expected. It is no use achieving the factual quality if the perceived quality is not right. Inspections of services look at quality in fact and in perception.

The right quality is achieved when expectations of service users are fulfilled, needs satisfied, and demands met. Clarifying the 'quality factors' (determinants or categories) in a service and judging the importance of each helps decide the priorities for quality improvement. It is quality factors that produce the customers perception of the quality of the service

The model of service quality that is now widely acknowledged emphasises the importance of service user feedback. Quality as perceived by the service user is seen as the gap between the expected service and the perceived service. A service user may perceive a service as providing more than was expected, resulting in a judgement of high quality, or the provision may be less than was expected and a service user judgement of low quality results.

Children's Community Services

A project to identify the quality factors associated with children and young people's community services. The approach drew on findings from other research that consumers use similar criteria in evaluating the quality of a service, even when the services themselves are different. The approach described in this research found consistency in children's expectations in different settings.^{i, ii}

A questionnaire was developed using the critical incident technique with children and young people to identify adult behaviours that were considered to be helpful or unhelpful to them in relation to the purpose of the involvement as they saw it. The primacy of the child's perspective was acknowledged in the development and refinement of the questionnaire.

Children and young people within the age group 7 - 16 years participated. The data collected was subjected to formal statistical (factor and reliability) analysis and the following criteria were identified as being significant to children and young people in their evaluation of service provision.

- ☐ **A trusting relationship with the worker based on honesty and provision of prior information**
- ☐ **A warm and friendly environment**
- ☐ **Adaptability of the worker**
- ☐ **Consideration of the child's needs, wants and feelings**
- ☐ **Empowerment of the child**
- ☐ **Information and explanation in suitable language and in confidence**
- ☐ **The worker's experience and willingness**
- ☐ **Empathy with the worker**

Subsequently small groups of children and, separately, groups of professionals were asked to examine all of the items in the questionnaire and reach consensus about which items were similar and could be grouped together. The different groups of professionals arrived at broadly similar combinations. The children and young people produced quite different groupings. It was notable that the items in the children's groupings coincided to a moderate extent with the factors determined in the statistical analysis, whereas the professional groupings did not coincide with the factor analysis at all.

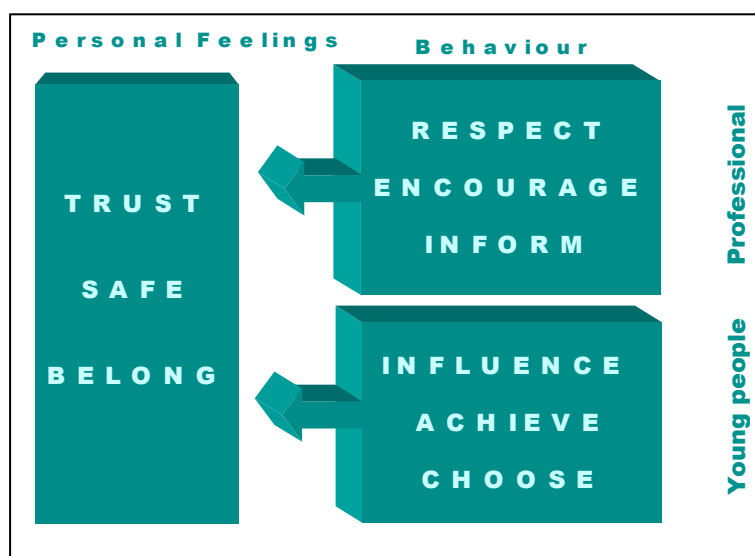
It is commented in the research report that 'here was some support for the appealing assumption that children's perceptions as users and recipients of services are influenced by different considerations than the professionals who provide them, and hence some justification for the previously made claim that we cannot rely just on the views of professionals but need to find and use a variety of ways to 'measure' children's views and expectations'

Children and young people in Out of Home Care

An understanding of young people's expectations about living away from home is of paramount importance as a foundation for the development of service quality. Drawing on a range of research, and consulting young people a model has been developed which provides a framework for analysis and for reporting on expectations and levels of satisfaction.

Key issues from the perspective of young people who are looked after, are grouped under three major headings:

- How they feel in terms of trust, safety and belonging, a way of describing this is the condition or state of the young person
- How professionals and adults in general behave towards them in terms of respect, informing them and encouraging them
- How they themselves are able to behave in terms of choice, influencing things and achieving things. This describes the young person's ability to make choices, and participate, and do well, in things that affect them.



Feedback from young people about their current experiences in respect of each issue provides information about their perception of service quality.

CONVENTIONAL METHODS

Conventional methods for gathering opinions, such as questionnaires, focus groups etc., can be only partially successful. In practice only a few people can share their views directly, and even then may say what they think they are supposed to say. Some may find it difficult to focus and concentrate on all the issues that a questionnaire raises, or may find the questionnaire difficult to understand, boring or too much like another school test or examination. For children and young people the likelihood of them participating may depend on how interested they are in the survey method. New media approaches can overcome many of these difficulties, and draw on the increasing use of computer technology for communication and for entertainment.

ⁱ Davies M; Dotchin J Improving Quality Through Participation in Cloke C; Davies M; Participation and Empowerment in Child Protection. Pitman. London 1995

ⁱⁱ Dotchin, J; Davies, M; (1995) "*Understanding children's and young people's perceptions of the services provided for their protection*" in Teare, R; Armistead, C; (eds) "Services Management: New Directions, New perspectives" Cassell, London, 1995