

## **Involving Parents of Students with Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties Successfully in the Education of their Children**

**The purpose of this article is to demonstrate practical strategies that can be implemented by teachers to involve parents of children with profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD) successfully in the education of their children. Active involvement by parents was experienced when some of the strategies, which were based on a combination of practical experience and a review of the literature, were implemented.**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

One of the most important aims in the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (Ireland, 2004) is to provide for the greater involvement of parents of children with special educational needs (SEN) in the education of their children. After working for many years with parents of children with SEN in special schools and as a primary teacher in mainstream schools, the author has come to believe that the key of teaching any child effectively lies in the involvement of parents in the education of their children. This article begins by outlining a rationale for parental involvement with particular reference to involving the parents of students with profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD), provides a brief review of the literature and outlines some examples of innovative practice as explored and practised by the author.

### **RATIONALE**

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2002) reminds us that parents are the first educators of the child and have a wealth of knowledge about their children. Furthermore, the class teacher is the professional who brings skills to the child's learning and is often the first and most regular contact point the parent has with the school. It is therefore important that a good relationship, based on mutual respect and communication, is established for the child to benefit from education (NCCA, 2002). Munn (1993) notes that parents and teachers have the same goals for the schooling of children and want the education process to be a happy, productive and effective experience for the child. Epstein (1993), Guralnick (1989) and Powell (1989) cited in Rainforth and York-Bar (1997) indicate that students whose parents are involved in their education, experience more success in school than students whose parents are less involved. Wyman (2000) argues that well-informed parents will usually be able to take positive steps towards helping their children. In addition, Indelicato (1980) cited in Lombana (1983) proposes that when families and educators work together, students perform better in school, teachers report greater satisfaction with their work and parents have more positive feelings about the school.

Students with PMLD have complex needs. Because the degree of the learning difficulty is so severe students may be functioning at a developmental level of two years or less and may have additional severe physical and/or sensory impairments (Ware, 1996). The

responsibilities of parents and teachers to provide medical and physical care to students with PMLD tend to dominate most other aspects of interaction between them. As noted by Lacey (1998) cited in Aird (2001) the circumstances of students with PMLD dictate that no one person can ever hope to be able to identify the extent of an individual student's difficulties and what the implications of these learning difficulties might be for their education and care. Parents know their children best, have assessed their abilities and have observed them over long periods of time (Wyman, 2000). Parents also have specific hopes and plans for their future. Wyman notes that planning with parents helps the child to achieve much more in school and Leyden (1998) similarly remarks that good schools encourage the involvement of parents in their children's education. Having taught students with PMLD, the author is convinced of the particular benefits of collaboration between teachers and the parents of students with profound and complex needs. However, my experience suggests that parents of students with significant difficulties are sometimes unsure of how to become involved in the education of their children.

Personal experience as a teacher of students with PMLD confirms the effectiveness of parental involvement in their child's education. Not only did parents feel more involved in the education of their children, but as a teacher the author learned so much about the students from their parents. This concurs with research done by Bricker and Squires (1989) cited in Rainforth and York-Barr (2001) which indicates that parents are accurate assessors of their child's abilities and that their contributions can be extremely valuable in the program-planning process.

### **PARENT-TEACHER PARTNERSHIP**

Research by Turnbull and Turnbull (1986) cited in Hornby (1995) shows that teachers in both special and mainstream schools find interactions with parents to be a major stress in their jobs. In the Irish context a traditional deference to authority figures may have contributed to a barrier in communication between parents and professionals (Garvey and Niall, 1991). Freeman and Gray (1998) cited in Winter and Schafer (2003) emphasize that for teachers to be serious about children's learning, the preparation for a parent-teacher partnership should start in initial teacher training. Teachers need basic listening, counselling and assertiveness skills to include parents effectively in the education of their children (Hornby, 1995). Hornby also reports that teachers need group leadership skills so that they can organize group experiences for parents such as parent education programs.

Young (1991) cited in Hornby (1995) reports the findings of a survey of contact between home and school which was conducted with 72 parents of children attending a special school in the north of England. This found that sixty nine percent of parents wanted to have contact with the school by means of parent-teacher interviews, sixty seven percent by telephone calls, fifty percent by home visits, forty seven percent by home-school diaries and forty per cent by means of letters. Surprisingly, only fifteen percent had received home visits whereas fifty per cent indicated that they would have appreciated them. Clearly, it is important for schools to offer parents a range of communication options.

### **The Needs and Expectations of Parents**

Expectations are beliefs of what may or may not happen in the future which originate from an individual's personal experience and beliefs (Russell, 2003). These are affected by social interaction with individuals, as well as organisations, legislation and cultural

standards (Russell, 2003). Parents of students with exceptional needs have a need for working relationships with teachers based on understanding and trust (Mittler, 2000 cited in Winter and Shafer, 2005). Lombana (1983) notes that in order to respond properly to the needs of parents, educators must determine the types of involvement parents want and need. Citing a survey by Gallup (1977), Lombana suggests that parents identify better communication as one of the characteristics of an ideal school and argues that parents need more special occasions in which school personnel and parents could work together. She reminds us that the greatest expectation parents have regarding schools is general participation in the school program where they would be regarded as full partners in the education venture of their children.

Lombana (1983) describes several main expectations of parents when dealing with educators. Parents expect educators to see them and their children as total people, without being labelled or categorized, expect to receive support in understanding and relating to their children and want appropriate explanations and recommendations in terms they can understand. Hornby (2000) states that parents also expect to meet others who have children with similar difficulties through schools. Wyman (2000) cites the example of a parent of a child with PMLD who expressed the need for time to accept the child's difficulty and to realise that there are no miracle cures available. Likewise, Garvey & Niall (1992) note that parents may not accept their child's difficulties and may have expectations that cannot be fulfilled regarding instant diagnosis, prognosis and cure. Moreover, some parents may reject the need to work towards independence for their child, asserting that the child has SEN and feel they have to protect the child from the world (Foster, 1977 cited in Lombana, 1983). To conclude, parents of students with PMLD have to make tremendous adjustments in their aspirations and thinking regarding education (Wyman, 2000). Wyman finds that by recognizing all these needs and expectations parents and schools will work together effectively.

### **Expectations and Needs of Schools and Educators**

Jordan (1994) cited in Winter and Shafer (2005) identifies that many parents are of the opinion that schools exclude them from important decisions concerning the education of their children, while educators on the other hand feel that they make great efforts to involve parents. Hornby (1995) highlights the fact that educators want both parents, if possible, to visit the school on a regular basis, expect parents to have realistic expectations of what their children are capable of achieving and to support them in reinforcing school programs at home. Teachers appreciate the honesty of parents about any circumstance at home that could affect their children's performance in school.

In addition to the above points, Rosmann and Crosswhite (1992) note that all teachers expect parents to accept responsibility for questioning decisions and for asking questions. They need parents to participate in planning programmes for their children, to carry them out and to assess them. Hornby (1995) points out that if teachers are not genuine in their relationships with parents, and if they hide behind their professionalism, a huge barrier to communication with parents will be created. Hornby advises teachers and other professionals to communicate the attitude that nothing is hopeless and that every situation can be improved. Furthermore, Hornby notes that teachers need to develop empathy with parents in order to create an effective parent-professional partnership. Rainforth and York-Barr (1997) suggest that when the goals of professionals do not equal those of parents, some professionals may judge parents as less effective and view them as opponents. Professionals may feel that they can answer all questions, which is unrealistic,

because many students with SEN present complex challenges for professionals and one discipline will not possess all the information to address a child's learning difficulties. Educators should be realistic and aware that role and time constraints can affect their attitudes, perception and interactions with others. In conclusion, parents present diverse expectations of schools and teachers. It is therefore important that schools recognise these differences in the implementation of parent involvement in the educational context (Rainforth and York-Barr, 2001).

## **MODELS OF PARENT-TEACHER COLLABORATION**

According to Mittler (1978) cited in Barton and Tomlinson (1981) the teaching of a child is wasted unless he or she can use it in real life settings or at home. Hence, collaboration with parents is vital (Mittler, 1978 cited in Barton and Tomlinson, 1981). Hornby (2000, 2002) explains six models for parent-professional collaboration. In the *protective model*, teachers and parents view themselves as playing complementary, but different roles in the education of children. Parents are responsible for the care of their children while teachers are responsible for the children's education. In the *expert model*, professionals regard themselves as experts on all aspects of children with SEN while the parents' role is to receive information and instructions from professionals about their children. In the *transmission model*, parents are trained by teachers to assist in the education of their children. An example of this approach is where parents are trained to use a reading program to teach their children to read at home. The *enrichment model* makes provision for parents to contribute their expertise to the school curriculum for example by visiting the school to teach aspects of technology that the school is unable to provide. In the *consumer model*, parents are seen as consumers of educational services. The school provides the parent with relevant information and a range of options they can choose from, but the parent makes the decision.

Hornby (2002) also describes the *partnership model* built on mutual respect and support, shared expertise, joint decision-making and effective two-way communication between teachers and parents. Hornby considers the partnership model as the most appropriate model for relationships between parents and teachers. Similarly, Dale (1996) highlights the equality and mutuality of the relationship rejecting the notion that teachers (and other professionals) should assume a dominant role. Dale proposes a *negotiating model* based on negotiation for partnership work in which parents and teachers contribute different strengths to their relationship, and thereby the potency of collaboration is increased. In this approach, parents are viewed as being experts on their children and teachers are viewed as being experts on education. In the next section of this article the examples of practice in building a constructive working relationship with parents of children with PMLD are based on the partnership and negotiation model as outlined above.

## **DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE PRACTICE**

To involve parents of children with PMLD effectively in the education of their children, the author concentrated on three categories of communication namely face-to-face, written and telephone communication. This included face-to-face contact in the form of curriculum meetings with parents, home visits and workshops as well as written communication in the form of class communication books and monthly class newsletters. Phone calls were also used. When planning to initiate greater parental involvement, it

may be helpful to ask parents to complete a questionnaire to establish which type of communication they prefer to become more involved in the education of their children (Appendix A).

### **Face-to-Face Contact**

Swap (1993) cited in Hornby (1995) mentions specifications for successful personal contact with parents. Parents should receive individually addressed invitations and should be given at least two weeks' notice of events and reminder notes should also be sent out two days before the event. Providing assistance with transportation and childcare and scheduling events in the evening or at weekends might get more parents involved. Parents should feel welcome at all times and a good idea is to make the foyer or entrance of the school building as welcoming as possible. Parents should be greeted at their first arrival and clear directions to where the event will take place should be signposted. Inviting parents to give feedback and to evaluate activities will ensure the improvement of future events (Swap, 1993 cited in Hornby, 1995).

### *Curriculum Meetings*

A curriculum is the totality of learning opportunities, which students can acquire through experience with peers, the environment and others involved (Carpenter, 1997). Evidence has been collected in recent years that most parents are interested in what their children are being taught in school and in ways they can assist them with their learning (Atkin, Bastani and Goode, 1988). Atkin et al. warn that parents bring established concepts about learning and teaching based on their own experiences of schooling to these meetings, which strongly influence their attitudes towards what happens in a school situation. It is therefore wise to inform at a basic level and to arrange more than one curriculum meeting. Some parents of students with PMLD in the class were concerned about the curriculum area of History. Only after I explained how this area was implemented, were parents able to see the objectives behind the practice. Lewis and Norwich (2005) underline the importance to conceptualise curriculum subjects for students with severe and profound learning disabilities (SPLD) in such a way that they will make a difference to the lives of these children.

### *Home Visits*

Home visits are appreciated by many parents and enable teachers to see for themselves the circumstances in which the family are living (Hornby, 1995). When I paid a visit to a family of a student in my class I discovered that the student not only shared a room with her mother, but also a sister who was studying for her Junior Certificate exams. This student was usually very tired during the day, but by gaining insight into her circumstances I understood how the home situation affected her. Hornby (1995) notes that home visits always should be pre-arranged. It is also important to keep the school policy in mind before arranging a home visit. Carpenter (1997) emphasizes that home visits give the family an opportunity to tell educators about their children.

### *Workshops*

Parents work effectively with their children at home if they have appropriate materials and proper directions for using them (Dardig, 2005). By attending a "make it take it" workshop, parents may be more likely to become involved in the education of their children, because they have experienced a pleasant event in a non-threatening environment (Dardig, 2005, p. 49). Dardig also advises teachers to write an invitation to

the workshop and to include the date, time, title and purpose.

Items the parents are asked to bring in as well as a way for parents to confirm whether they will attend or not should also be included in the invitation. An example of a workshop for parents of students with PMLD can be one where a multi-sensory story to be used at home is created. Parents are encouraged to bring in the materials needed to create the story. The teacher should also prepare handouts that include a sketch of the items, their purposes and clear instructions of procedures as well as extra materials parents may not have available (Appendix B).

### **Written Communication**

#### *Class Communication Books*

In special schools the home-school book is a significant form of written communication between parents and teachers (Beveridge, 2004). Parents of students with PMLD need information about their children on a daily basis that parents of other students without the same difficulties might not require. Medical information, feeding difficulties and sleeping patterns during the day are aspects of information parents of students with PMLD need to know. Parents and teachers can communicate through these books in a quick and efficient way. A good idea is to write a welcoming note on the first page of the book, when the child starts the year, to assure parents of the commitment the teacher has towards the child. A contact number, the purpose of the communication book and when the teacher can be contacted should be included in the note. Also, a positive attitude and a tone of excitement in the letter will encourage parents to look forward to collaboration.

#### *Monthly Class Newsletter*

Dardig (2005) promotes the idea of a monthly class newsletter and notes that parents welcome information not only about their own child, but also about their child's class. Dardig mentions important points when designing a class newsletter. Use any word processing program to create a one-page newsletter to be sent home to parents each month (Appendix C). The title of the newsletter, the teacher's name, class, school, school phone number and date of issue should be included. The newsletter should contain articles about class activities, including a future plan and activities of the past. One section should contain an educational activity the class is working on. Another article highlights good news about individuals in the class. The newsletter may also inform parents of interesting resources. Requests for items or materials the class needs can be included and the format should be attractive. In my experience the response from parents to class newsletters is very positive. A request for empty shampoo bottles to make musical shakers evoked an overwhelming reaction from parents. Not only did parents send in the bottles, but also dried beans to fill them with. Parents got more involved with one another, because they received news on birthdays, the arrival of a new baby brother or sister and good performances of classmates.

### **Telephone Contact**

#### *Teachers Phoning Parents*

To phone parents at home pays high dividends in maintaining productive collaboration with parents (Hornby, 1995). It might be easier to reach working parents during the evenings at home. Some teachers may, however, prefer to phone parents from school during the day. Turnbull and Turnbull (1986) cited in Hornby (1995) suggest that teachers should identify themselves when parents first answer. Also, ask if the time is

convenient to talk; be concise and to the point; give the parent time to ask questions and always remind the parent that they can contact the teacher any time they have a concern.

#### *Parents Phoning Teachers*

Many parents appreciate the opportunity of being able to phone teachers at home or at school (Hornby, 1995). Hornby highlights difficulties with both options. If parents phone teachers at school the teacher might not be in a position to leave the classroom and some teachers might not feel comfortable with the idea of allowing parents to phone them at home. The best solution is to set a specific time when the teacher will be available to take calls. When questioned by me, parents mentioned that they would phone only for valid reasons. What they found very reassuring was the fact that I was available for their children.

### **CONCLUSION**

Effective collaboration between parents and teachers can be achieved if the partnership model based on mutual respect and the willingness to acquire skills to develop positive relationships are followed. All students need parents and educators to make responsible, well-considered decisions about their education. This is even more important in the case of students with PMLD, since parents and professionals may assume an essential advocacy role on their behalf. When the strategies of intervention mentioned in this project were practised, the active involvement of parents was enhanced and supported. The outcome proved to be positive, with parents feeling included and expressing their satisfaction in being part of the education of their children. By demonstrating practical ways to communicate with parents the hope is cherished that educators will consider these approaches in order to involve parents of students with PMLD effectively in the education of their children.

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### Appendix A: Parent Questionnaire

**What do you consider important about school contacts?**

**Please circle the number to the right of the phrase to show how important each type of contact is to you?**

	NA	not at all				extremely	RANK	COMMENTS
1. Class communication books	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	_____
2. Class Newsletters	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	_____
3. Workshops	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	_____
4. Curriculum meetings	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	_____
5. Home visits	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	_____
6. Telephone contacts	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	_____
7. Other, please specify	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	_____

**Using the above list, place the numbers 1, 2 or 3 next to the three most important ways of communicating between you and your child's teacher.**

**A. How much contact do you want to have with your child's teacher?**

\_\_\_\_\_Daily                      \_\_\_\_\_Once a week                      \_\_\_\_\_Once a month

\_\_\_\_\_Once a term                      \_\_\_\_\_Other (specify)

**B. Would you prefer**

\_\_\_\_\_to initiate most of the contacts with your child's teacher?

\_\_\_\_\_the teacher to initiate contacts with you?

\_\_\_\_\_or both?

**Adapted from Rainforth and York-Barr (1997, p. 318).**

### **Appendix B: Workshop Handout (Koller, 2007)**

**Materials:** cotton wool, glue, cardboard paper, scissors, a cassette to record sounds on, perfume, torch with new batteries, spray bottle with water.

#### **Instructions:**

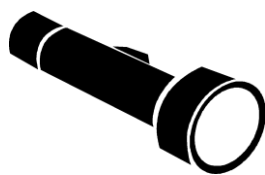
- Glue cotton wool balls onto a piece of cardboard paper in the shape of flowers.
- Record birds' songs on a clean cassette.
- Make sure the torchlight contains new batteries.
- Fill the spray bottle with clean, luke warm water.
- Enjoy the story with your child. The more you tell the story the more the child will respond and anticipate what will follow next in the story.

#### **Multi-Sensory Story – Out in the Garden**



1. What a lovely day it is! Let's go out to the garden and smell the flowers. (Parent sprays the cotton wool flowers with perfume and the child smells and touches the flowers).

2. Listen to the birds singing!  
(Parent switches on the tape recorder and the child listens to the birds' songs).



3. The sun shines brightly on my skin. Look at all the shadows!  
(Parent shines the light of the torch on the child's hand and the child feels the heat on his/her skin. The parent moves the light slowly around the floor and/or the ceiling and the child follows the light with his/her eyes).



4. What happened to the sun?  
It started to rain! (Parent switches off the torchlight and sprays the child gently on his/her arm with water).

### **Appendix C: Class Newsletter**

**Tracey Black \* Class Teacher \* Special Class 1 \* Old Mill School**

**Ph. (021)7654321**



#### **Special Class 1 Termly Newsletter**

Issue 1  
January 200\_

#### **Class News**

What good weather we have lately! To make the most of it we went outside for our art lesson. We collected stones and then we sat in a circle in our wheel chairs on the grass. Staff helped us hand over hand to paint the stones. We enjoyed our break from the classroom to experience the nice sunshine. In the next art lesson my stone will become a doorstep!

#### **Our Trip**

We are going on a trip to the zoo on Monday the 14th of February. Please remember to bring sun block along! We are still in need of one parent to push a wheelchair on our trip. Please call me if you can serve.

#### **Class Activities**

We have ordered and received a new "switch it" computer game for the class. By using switches we built animals and when the body of the animal is completed the animal makes an animal sound. Can't wait to go on our trip to see how the real animals are like!

#### **Classroom Request**

Any donations of empty cereal boxes will be appreciated. We will use them for art work.

### **Students in the News**

Congratulations go to Joan Noone for her new baby sister. Joan is very excited about her baby sister and looks forward to see her in the evenings.

Happy birthday to Shauna Moore! Shauna turns 9 on the 27<sup>th</sup> of February.

Classroom assistant Tanya Reilly got engaged. Congratulations!

**Adapted from Dardig (2005). Pseudonyms are used in the newsletter.**