

## **Developing Positive Partnerships with Parents**

**Working in positive partnerships with parents is one of the keys to the educational success of children with special educational needs (SEN). While this is a worthy goal, negotiating positive partnerships may be elusive in many educational contexts. This paper discusses the key issues in working collaboratively with parents and outlines a workshop context in which participants were given opportunities to experience collaborative partnerships first hand.**

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*The closer the parent is to the education of the child, the greater the impact on child development and educational achievement.*

(Fullan, 1991, p. 227)

### **INTRODUCTION**

Inclusion is now at the heart of both educational and social policy. Thomas, Walker, and Webb (1998) argued that the 1990s saw society demand that schools find effective ways to include and to teach all children.

Educationally, the aim is that every child has access to all opportunities offered by the school system regardless of any special need. In the UK, Beveridge (1999) observed, "The current government has described the promotion of further inclusion as a cornerstone of its strategy for children with special educational needs" (p. 57). Including the children also means including their parents who need to be actively involved in collaborative partnerships that contribute to the success of the children in school. Pinkus (2003) stated, "There is agreement in political and academic circles that partnership between parents and professionals is critical to optimizing educational provision for children who have special needs" (p. 115).

### **PARENTS: COLLABORATORS OR COMPLIANT RECIPIENTS?**

These partnerships, however, must be based on mutual trust and understanding with a commitment that is in the best interests of the children concerned (Jordan, 1994). In the 1970s, parents were characterized as the 'recipients' of professional decisions rather than collaborators. (Turnbull and Turnbull, 1997). In the 1980s, parental involvement appeared to increase significantly mainly because parents saw it as essential in obtaining a good education for their children (Biklen, 1985). A number of studies in the 1990s, however, found that although parents were more involved in the overall process, when it came to planning individual programmes (IEPs), they continued to feel undervalued, intimidated, and powerless (Engel, 1993; Minke and Scott, 1993; McLaughlin, 1995). Engel (1993) suggested that teachers and other professionals were overly reliant on objective scientific data whilst diminishing parental contributions as less objective and somewhat emotional in nature.

### **PARTNERSHIP IN EMPOWERING PARENTS**

Engel also cited a number of examples of intimidation and exclusion in the 'stories' of parents of children with disabilities while noting the paradoxical situation of a system, largely dependent on parental involvement, in which parents felt intimidated by and excluded from the decision-making process. In 2003, Pinkus still found that parent-professional partnerships appeared to be "an elusive feature of current practice" (p. 115). The Code of Practice (DfE, 1994) stated, "Children's progress will be diminished if their parents are not seen as partners in the educational process with unique knowledge and information to impart" (Sec. 2.28). A strong partnership between school and parents then is critical if students with special needs are to be successful members of the school community. Teachers' beliefs and concomitant attitudes towards both parents and children greatly affect this partnership. Parents need to feel respected, and need to know that their perspective is acknowledged and valued by all parties within the school context.

*Parents of children with exceptional needs have a particularly great need for working relationships with teachers based on understanding and trust. (Mittler, 2000, p. 151)*

### **COLLABORATING WITH PARENTS: THE TEACHER'S ROLE**

Positive partnerships with parents are key to ensuring that students with different needs are successful educationally, socially, and emotionally. Stanovich (1996) recommended that, to be effective with students with special needs, educators "must be able to build bridges to all the people who either have a stake in, or can assist in, the education of those pupils" (p. 39). She suggested that these bridges "can be built most effectively through collaboration" (p. 39).

Mittler and Mittler (1995) indicated that mutual respect and a willingness to learn are at the core of true partnerships. Educators must, therefore, acknowledge the importance of the parental role. Jordan (1994) argued, "If one accepts that special needs can only be meaningfully interpreted in the context of children's total lives, then clearly parents are a

crucial component in ensuring children's educational and social success" (p. 72). This is not necessarily easy to achieve. Parent and teacher interactions can be difficult, stressful, and overwhelming for all parties. As Mittler (2000) suggested, "However hard teachers try to break down barriers, some parents will feel that the power relationship is loaded against them" (p. 159). Similarly, Jordan (1994) identified that "a considerable number of parents believe that schools exclude them from important decisions, while educators believe that they make great efforts to involve parents" (p. 73).

### **HOW CAN POSITIVE PARTNERSHIP BE ACHIEVED?**

According to Jordan, parents and teachers often are reluctant to enter into a working relationship that would benefit the child, and that both groups tend to be hesitant about interacting especially when children are experiencing difficulty. Jordan also found, "that parents and teachers might have differing opinions about their roles and responsibilities in relation to the child" (p. 72). Furthermore, Davies & Davies (1985) while concluding that these different perspectives might be a source of conflict, highlighted the fact that parents have information on the child that is not readily available to school personnel. In the IATSE Conference Keynote address (2002), Garry Hornby identified six models of parent-teacher interactions, the optimal model being one of 'partnership' in which there is mutual respect, a sharing of expertise, and joint decision-making based on open and transparent communication.

Given the nature of this discussion around parental involvement how can positive partnerships be achieved? There are two potential routes: one, through initial teacher education; the other, through continuing professional development.

### **INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION FOR PARENT PARTNERSHIP**

The preparation of teachers to work in collaboration with parents is a critical factor in developing positive partnerships. Freeman and Gray (1989) said, "If teachers are serious about children's learning then inevitably they must be prepared to work with parents" (p. 76). Becoming 'prepared' must start in initial teacher training.

Mittler (2000), however, found that in the UK "Most teachers insist that there was no reference to parents and families in their initial training and that there have been few opportunities to attend courses or training days since then" (p. 153). This may also reflect teacher training in other jurisdictions (see Lombardi and Hunka, 2001; Lesar et al 1997; Welch, 1996; Sindelar, 1995), and indeed may contribute to situations where some parents describe teachers as helpful, supportive, and flexible while other teachers are described as just the opposite (Waggoner and Wilgosh, 1990). Parents of students with special needs often report being "bombarded with negative information about their children...told what's wrong with their children...what their children need to do and what they as parents need to do" (Smith, 1998, p. 266). If students are to be successful in inclusive contexts, teachers must be given the opportunities to acquire the skills to develop positive partnerships.

## **BUILDING INCLUSION THROUGH PARENT RELATIONSHIPS**

The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (UNESCO, 1994) stated that inclusive schools are the most effective way of “building an inclusive society and achieving education for all...” (item 2). The Framework for Action identified appropriate preparation of all educational personnel as one of the key factors in achieving the aim of inclusive schools. The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), an international body, committed to quality education for all children and youth with exceptionalities, developed a set of standards for teachers in the field of special education. Since many children with special needs are now placed in mainstream classes, these standards are applicable for every teacher. The CEC Standards for the preparation and certification of special education teachers (1998) identified seven principles related to *Parent Relationships*. The Council stated that professionals should “seek to develop relationships with parents based on mutual respect for their roles in achieving benefits for the exceptional person” (p. 2). Each of the seven principles is expanded, and included are elements that encourage educators to:

- **use collaborative strategies**
- **develop effective communication with parents**
- **seek and use parents knowledge and expertise**
- **maintain communication**

## **KEY COMPETENCIES IN COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIPS**

The Council also identified a Common Core set of Knowledge and Skills for all beginning special educators but which, again, are applicable for every practising educator. Common Core 7, (pp. 26-27), entitled *Communication and Collaborative Partnerships*, identified the knowledge and skills necessary in developing positive partnerships. Lombardi and Hunka (2001) identified a set of competencies for teachers in inclusive classrooms. Included is “acquire knowledge of the principles related to development of collaborative relationships with colleagues and parents”(p. 195). They recommended that educators model communication, consultation, collaboration, and problem solving, participate as members of trans-disciplinary teams, and know how to encourage and assist parental participation. Given the apparent void in teacher training, a Professional Development workshop developed around these principles, skills and knowledge was presented at the conference.

## **PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: COLLABORATIVE STRATEGIES**

A workshop designed to help educators to explore ways of becoming more effective in their relationships with parents utilised a participant-observer model. Participants experienced collaboration for themselves, and reflected on the effectiveness of the process of shared responsibility, communication, problem-solving, and decision-making. The aims of the workshop were two-fold: first to encourage and assist individuals in

developing collaborative strategies. Second, to consider ways in which participants could use a similar approach for staff development in their respective educational contexts. The model allowed for a team approach to problem-solving that can build "productive alliances, or strengthen existing relationships, with parents..." (Davern, 1996, p. 179). This participative model appeared to have the potential to achieve an understanding of collaboration and communication, and to be a productive way of sharing information, problem-solving, and team building.

### **PLACE MAT: A PROCESS OF COLLABORATIVE GROUP WORK**

Place Mat is a small group instructional process that comes under the rubric of Cooperative Learning. It is built around the social theory of how groups function in relation to learning. The process incorporates 5 Basic Elements of Effective Group Work developed by Johnson, Johnson and Holubec (1988) and is fully described in Bennett and Rolheiser's *Beyond Monet* (2001). Briefly, these five elements are:

- ***Individual Accountability***, where individuals are responsible for their own learning and for supporting the learning of others.
- ***Face-to-Face Interaction***, where the group environment encourages interaction and dialogue.
- ***Collaborative Skills***, where social, communication, and critical thinking skills are needed to work effectively in the group.
- ***Processing***, where the group reflects and assesses its academic and collaborative interaction
- ***Positive Interdependence***, where individuals are responsible and accountable for working in mutually supportive ways.

Following some initial input on collaboration, participants, working in small groups, were presented with a typical scenario related to a child with special needs (e.g. You are getting a child with impaired vision into your class, what will you do?) Their task was to identify the issues involved, questions to be asked, sources of information, and collaboratively, to develop a detailed plan of action.

### **DEVELOPING RESPECTFUL CONSENSUS ROUND A PLAN OF ACTION**

To be ***Individually Accountable***, each group member identified the major issues emerging from the scenario and recorded these on the "place mat". Through ***Face-to-Face Interaction***, the place mat was rotated to share what each member had recorded, suggestions were added, issues were addressed, and a collective plan was developed. This constructive dialogue forced groups to utilize ***Collaborative Skills*** in order to work as effective problem-solvers. Groups then reflected on their ***Process*** of problem solving and collaborative interaction in developing a consensus around the plan of action. ***Positive Interdependence*** was structured by having each group responsible for an effective and viable solution. Each group member signed the final plan as an indication of individual accountability and agreement.

This interactive model involved an authentic, non-judgmental sharing of information and emphasized the importance of recognizing, understanding, and promoting perspective taking. The underlying premise is one of respect through the acceptance of the value of each individual's contribution. Sharing information in this manner furthers the collaborative process by eliciting new and pertinent questions that require attention. The approach shifts educators' thinking and attention away from immediate answers and instant judgements. Problem solving occurs through developing and asking critical and important questions, and from considering multiple perspectives. It encourages what Edward de Bono (1994) described as 'considering all factors' (p. 74), when making decisions, and planning actions. Participants reflect on and respond to questions throughout the activity, which provides a collaborative interaction similar to that required when working with parents and peers. It creates an experience of working together in mutually beneficial ways that can have significant positive outcomes for students.

### **OUTCOMES: ACTIVE PRACTICAL PARTNERSHIP BUILDING**

This workshop focused on skills related to positive partnerships where participants were able to work in groups toward a common goal (Friend and Cook, 2000). The interaction allowed them to understand the relevance of equal partnerships in problem solving. It empowered participants to create "effective forums for planning and problem-solving" (Davern, 1996, p. 181). Feedback from the activity indicated that participants began to understand why parents might be cautious in contexts where voicing their ideas and perspectives could lead to feelings of anxiety and vulnerability.

*I was hesitant at first...  
I thought everybody would know more than me...parents must  
feel like this  
It was easier when I could write down my ideas first.  
It was good to get other ideas...not to be totally responsible for the plan  
This would be hard for parents...ours are often afraid  
to contradict the school.*

Participants who felt that their input might be open to negative interpretation, hasty or biased judgement, or resistance, could further appreciate parental concern regarding information sharing. Establishing a dialogue in which every person feels valued and respected is critical.

*Everybody in our group contributed...we had to...  
nobody tried to take over.*

Participants were asked to indicate what aspects of the activity might be useful in their own practice.

*I could use Place Mat in a staff meeting to get them to*

*make some decisions...instead of always me...  
It helped me to think about other peoples' ideas as well as my own.  
I am a parent and I know what it feels like to be discounted when it comes to  
your own child...teachers need to think about this...more.  
The activity was great but we don't always have time to do it this way... it could  
help parents though...*

In closing the session, the focus returned to the theme of developing 'Positive Partnerships'. The general consensus was that a 'hands-on' approach was beneficial in building relationships.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Positive, collaborative partnerships are essential if children with special needs are to fulfill their potential in our schools. Many teachers, however, do not feel comfortable forming these partnerships; therefore, it must become integral part of all pre-service programmes. In the interim, as Stanovich (1996) suggested:

*Currently, practicing professionals could profit from professional development activities designed to assist them in developing the attitudes and skills needed for successfully implementing such an important model of change. (p. 41)*

In this workshop, participants were involved in active collaboration. It is recommended that this participative approach be considered in future professional development.

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