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## **Partnerships For Positive Change In Special Education**

**This article discusses the importance of partnerships in the field of special education. It outlines various models of partnership and suggests that consultative collaboration is a key element in effective partnerships. It then provides suggestions for how teachers can enhance partnerships between children, parents, teachers, other professionals and academic researchers.**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The importance of partnerships between key people involved in the education of children with special needs cannot be overemphasised and is a key variable in the provision of effective special education. In this article the partnerships between key people involved are considered and suggestions made for how teachers can enhance each of these. The partnerships discussed are:

- Teachers and Parents
- Parents and Parents
- Parents and Children
- Teachers and Children
- Children and Children
- Teachers and Other Professionals
- Teachers and Researchers

First of all, several forms of partnership which are evident in special education are identified and consideration is given to just what 'partnership' actually means in practice.

### **MODELS OF PARTNERSHIP IN SPECIAL EDUCATION**

If relationships between parents and teachers in special education are considered as an example then there are at least six different forms which partnerships can take (Hornby, 2000). These are outlined below

#### **Protective model**

In this model teachers and parents view themselves as playing different but complementary roles in the education and care of children. Parents take care of children and get them to school fed and clothed while teachers educate them. Partners protect their own turf and resent interference from each other. This is the most limiting form of partnership but is also the most common form in education systems world-wide (Epstein, 2001).

#### **Expert model**

In this model teachers are seen as the experts or senior partners and maintain control over decisions while the parents' role is to receive information and instructions about their children.

### **Transmission model**

In this model teachers train parents to help in the education of their children. In this way some of the expertise of teachers is transmitted to parents. An example of this approach is seen in paired reading programmes line which parents are taught how to help their children with reading at home.

### **Enrichment model**

In this model parents are seen as having expertise which they can contribute within the school curriculum. For example, parents coming in to school to teach aspects of technology or foreign languages that the school is unable to offer.

### **Consumer model**

In this model parents are viewed as consumers of educational services. The teacher acts as a consultant but it is the parent who decides what action is to be taken. An example of this is in the SEN Code of Practice (DfES, 2001) where parents are the ones who decide whether their child with SEN will be included in a mainstream school or not.

### **Partnership model**

The most appropriate model for partnership between parents and teachers is considered to be one in which there is mutual respect and support, shared expertise, joint decision making and effective two-way communication. Teachers are seen as experts on education and parents as experts on their children. The partnership is thereby enhanced by the different strengths which parents and teachers bring to it. This kind of partnership involves consultative collaboration.

## **CONSULTATIVE COLLABORATION**

At the core of the partnership model described above is a process called consultative collaboration.

*Consultative collaboration is an interactive process that enables groups of people with diverse expertise to generate creative solutions to mutually defined problems (Idol, Nevin, & Paolucci-Whitcomb, 1994, p.13).*

Idol et al. (1994) and Hornby (2000) agree that, for effective collaboration, partners need certain knowledge, skills and attitudes. These include:

- relevant knowledge, for example, of child development and their role in facilitating it;
- a range of interpersonal communicative, interactive and problem-solving skills;
- appropriate attitudes, such as respect, empathy, genuineness, integrity, openness to new ideas and positive thinking.

## **FORMS OF COLLABORATION**

The practice of how to go about collaboration can be viewed in several different ways, as is outlined below.

### **Process**

Collaboration can be viewed as a process of exploration, understanding and action planning, which partners must go through to move towards their mutual goals. This process begins with exploration of concerns or ambitions and moves through the development of a broader understanding of the situation in order to provide a basis for planning the action to be undertaken (Egan, 2002).

### **Cycle**

One view of consultation sees it as involving a circular process, for example: identify concerns > assess situation > plan intervention > review progress > identify new concerns, etc. (Jordan, 1994).

### **Stages**

Another view of consultation suggests it involves a series of six stages: establish goals > identify problem > plan intervention > implement intervention > evaluate progress > conduct follow-up (Idol et al., 1994).

### **Continuum**

Forms of collaboration can be viewed as being on a continuum, from a supportive approach at one end of the continuum, through a facilitative style, to an informative approach, through to a prescriptive form of collaboration at the other end of the continuum (Pugach & Johnson, 1995).

## **TEACHERS AND PARENTS**

### **Theory and practice**

There is an extensive literature on partnership with parents in education. This includes theory and research which consistently report the positive effects of parental involvement on children's academic achievement, social competence and the quality of the education they receive. The findings of one extensive review of the literature reported that,

*When schools work together with families to support learning, children tend to succeed not just in school, but throughout adult life* (Henderson & Berla, 1994, cited in Webster-Stratton, 1999, p.6).

However, common practice of parental involvement in education does not appear to take account of such findings and there is a stark contrast between rhetoric and reality of partnership with parents, which is in fact an international phenomenon (Epstein, 2001). This surprising situation is highlighted in the following quotation,

*But despite the evidence of the positive effects of family involvement on a student's academic performance, its potential is still largely ignored in many schools* (Webster-Stratton, 1999, p.6).

### **SEN Code of Practice**

The new SEN Code of Practice (DfES, 2001) places even more emphasis on partnership with parents than the previous one. For example,

*Parents have a vital role to play in supporting their children's education (p.7).*

This quotation is one of the five fundamental principles of the Code and a whole chapter is devoted to '*Working in Partnership with Parents.*' However, despite the high profile given to parental involvement, there is minimal guidance in this chapter for teachers and other professionals on *how* to work effectively with parents.

### **Guidance for Schools/Teachers**

Epstein (2001) has emphasised the importance of providing training for teachers on working with parents and presents a model that includes six types of parental involvement. These are:

- parent education
- home-school communication
- parent volunteering in school
- parents supporting their children's learning at home
- parent involvement indecision making
- collaborating with the community

Hornby's (2000) model includes eight types of parental involvement:

- Policy: parents as governors, in PTAs, support groups, etc.
- Resource: classroom aides / supporting other parents
- Collaboration: home-school reading/behaviour programs
- Information: pupil's strengths, dislikes, medical details
- Communication: home-school books, phone, reports
- Liaison: home visits, parent-teacher meetings
- Education: individual guidance, parent workshops
- Support: individual counselling, support groups

This model is used to generate a checklist of questions that can be used to carry out an audit of a school's provision for parental involvement.

### **PARENTS AND PARENTS**

An important type of partnership, which teachers can help to bring about, is that between parents of children with SEN and other parents whose children have similar special needs. The benefits which parents get from sharing concerns and ideas with each other became apparent during a series of parent education workshops conducted with parents of children with various SEN. The workshops included input from professionals as well as opportunities for parents to talk with each other in small groups. It became clear from these workshops that parents got more out of interacting with each other than any other aspect of the workshops (Hornby & Murray, 1983).

This finding prompted the establishment of Parent to Parent schemes, initially in Auckland, then throughout New Zealand and later in parts of England and Ireland (Hornby, 1988). In these schemes parents are given training in order to provide support to other parents, typically organized through a phone-in system. In Auckland the scheme always involved parents of children with a variety of disabilities. The links formed across the disability groups led to the formation of powerful advocacy for children with SEN and more recently to the establishment of The Auckland Family Resource Centre which provides support and advocacy for parents of children with a wide variety of special needs.

## **PARENTS AND CHILDREN**

Teachers also have an important role to play in helping parents to develop facilitative partnerships with their children. A lot could be achieved if teachers can influence parents, through providing individual or group guidance, to interact with their children in more facilitative ways. This is illustrated by the findings of research which studied family practices of high achieving black pupils from poor families and identified those practices which were crucial in helping their children succeed while children from other poor families failed (Clark, 1983). The key family practices were found to be:

- valuing education & developing pride/self-reliance
- establishing routines, e.g. for homework & bedtime
- supervising use of children's time, e.g. TV viewing
- encouraging reading and talking with children
- visiting school and advocating for children
- playing games, taking them on visits/outings
- fostering hobbies, sporting or other activities

If teachers can influence more parents to carry out the above practices then more of their children will be successful in school. In order to achieve this, teachers need to use the range of parental involvement strategies discussed in the section on Parent-Teacher partnerships.

## **TEACHERS AND CHILDREN**

Another important partnership in special education is the one between teachers and their pupils. Teachers can make a tremendous difference in children's lives and this is no more the case than with children with SEN. The key to teachers establishing effective partnership with their pupils is the relationship teachers develop with their pupils. The concept of consultative collaboration, discussed above, provides a guide for this relationship. In recent years, there has been an international trend toward focusing on assessment and delivering a tightly prescribed curriculum in an attempt to improve academic achievement. Awareness is starting to dawn that this is too narrow a focus for the education of children and that there needs to be increased emphasis on social and emotional development (Webster-Stratton, 1999).

In order to achieve this, teachers need to develop their skills in counselling, promoting mental health in schools and in using a strengths based approach to intervention. A counselling model for teachers has been proposed which helps children to solve personal and social difficulties but goes beyond this to focus on empowering pupils to fulfil all their potential (Hornby, Hall & Hall, 2002). A model for mental health promotion in schools has been developed in order to provide guidance for teachers in identifying and preventing children's mental health problems (Atkinson & Hornby, 2002). Teachers also need to become familiar with recent developments in strengths-based approaches to children with SEN which are based on positive psychology (Seligman, 1991) and solution-focused counselling (Manthei, 1998).

## **CHILDREN AND CHILDREN**

There is now extensive evidence of the benefits of partnerships between pupils and their peers. It is therefore important for teachers to set up and support partnerships between

children in the school setting, both to improve academic standards and the social and emotional health of pupils. Three important types of such partnerships are: peer counselling; peer tutoring; and, cooperative learning.

### **Peer Counselling**

Although teachers are a key source of guidance and counselling for their pupils, it is often their friends and classmates to whom they first turn for help. This highlights the importance for schools of providing training and support for pupils so that they can effectively counsel their peers (Everts, in Hornby et al., 2002).

### **Peer Tutoring**

There is also extensive evidence of the positive effects of pupils tutoring each other in schools (Hornby et al., 1997). Benefits are typically found both for pupils being tutored and for those doing the tutoring. By participating in peer tutoring, pupils not only improve their academic achievement but also learn important social skills. It is therefore important for teachers to make full use of pupils to help each other and to promote each other's learning in this way.

### **Cooperative Learning**

In cooperative learning pupils work in small groups on activities designed to get them to collaborate effectively with each other. This facilitates the learning of each member of the group and improves academic achievement, as well as developing important social skills (Brown & Thomson, 2000). Many research studies have found that cooperative learning is more effective than traditional teaching methods. Cooperative learning works best with mixed ability groups and is therefore one of the most useful strategies for catering for pupils with SEN in mainstream classrooms.

## **TEACHERS AND OTHER PROFESSIONALS**

With the trend toward inclusion and the realization that the majority of children with SEN are already in mainstream schools, the importance of special education teachers developing productive partnerships with other teachers is paramount. Special education teachers need to work closely with mainstream teachers in order to provide optimum programs for children with SEN through sharing expertise, mentoring and supporting mainstream teachers (Hornby, Davies & Taylor, 1995; Stakes & Hornby, 2000).

Special education teachers also need to collaborate effectively with learning support assistants assigned to help pupils with SEN in mainstream schools (Lorenz, 1999). In addition, they need to work in partnership with a range of other professionals involved with children with SEN such as educational psychologists, social workers, and medical staff (Hornby, 1994; Lacey, 2001).

## **TEACHERS AND RESEARCHERS**

Special education is a relatively young profession and is still vulnerable to trendy diagnoses and fad treatments, many of which are not effective and some of which are capable of doing real harm to children with SEN and their families. Special education teachers therefore need an up-to-date knowledge of research findings relevant to the children whom they teach. Teachers need evidence of what works and what does not work in order that they, and the

parents of the children they teach, can avoid fad treatments (Hornby, Atkinson & Howard, 1997). So teachers need help in accessing the research literature in order to find evidence on effective and not so effective interventions. Partnerships with researchers based in colleges or universities can be very helpful in providing access to the information which teachers need.

Teachers can also benefit from partnership with researchers in order to conduct small-scale school-based studies, for example, to gain feedback on their interventions and thereby improve their teaching. There is an international trend towards basing educational practice on sound evidence of what works. Collaborating with researchers on studies conducted in classrooms will help teachers improve their skills of evaluating the effectiveness of the education they provide.

It is also important for teachers and researchers to collaborate on other studies relevant to their pupils, such as research to evaluate the outcomes of different educational programmes for children with SEN (Hornby & Kidd, 2001; Linehan & Birkbeck, 1998). Such studies provide valuable feedback on the key components of successful programmes for children with SEN.

## CONCLUSION

The development of effective partnerships between teachers, pupils, parents, other professionals and researchers is well within the capacity of teachers and is the key to bringing about positive change in the field of special education in the future. In order to develop these partnerships teachers need access to ongoing professional development activities; they need to develop support networks of partnerships with other teachers; and they need to constantly remind themselves of the life-changing impact they can have on the children with SEN whom they teach.

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