

Parent Partnership - Is it Happening?

Parental involvement is an issue for all schools. In special education the intensity and urgency of the need is however particularly pertinent. How can teachers facilitate purposeful co-operation and what are the implications for the future?

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Introduction

The role of parents in Special Education is an area of frequent discussion. Professionals realise the importance of the parental role in the child's education but is this role a subordinate one to that of the professionals? Are teachers prepared to involve parents more on equal terms in the education process? Do teachers consider parents as partners in the work of education.

Parents, according to our constitution are the primary educators of their children and yet to date have little say in objectives set for their children, the desired goals or the curriculum to be implemented. In Britain the Warnock report of 1978 recommended: ...that the successful education of children with special educational needs is dependent upon the full involvement of their parents: indeed, unless the parents are seen as equal partners in the educational process the purpose of our report will be frustrated. But the parents with whom we are at present concerned (mainly, though not exclusively, those of more severely handicapped children) have burdens to bear of which other people may have no conception. It is therefore an essential part of our thesis that parents must be advised, encouraged and supported so that they can in turn effectively help their children. (Warnock, 1978, p, 150).

The acceptance of such a viewpoint has a number of implications. We must think in terms of equality between parents and teachers. Parents will become involved in policy-making and decision-making. Parents too will then have an input in curriculum development. This is probably an ideal to which we can but aspire. The practicalities and problems of every day life both at home and at school scarcely allow this ideal fulfilment.

The Need For Dialogue

As a first step toward this ideal, increased dialogue with parents and an absence of the 'them and us' climate may be required. This can be achieved through a considerable broadening and implementation of the two-way communication system.

Barry and Tye (1972) in *Running a School* stress this point:

In the relationship between schools and parents the basic aim must be to

achieve genuine two-way communications. There is, first, an obligation upon the school to explain to them its aims, philosophy and methods, and to seek their advice when major changes of policy or practice are under discussion. But secondly, the school must use its best endeavours to stimulate and encourage parental response and initiative, in order to establish a genuine working partnership; this will involve the deliberate encouragement of parental assessment, particularly of their own children's work and progress but also, more widely, of the school's successes and failures (Barry & Tye, 1972 p, 214).

Teachers and other professionals in Special Education must be prepared to listen well to parental views. When one considers that only 13% of the pupil's time is spent in school, it is evident that parents observe their children much more than do teachers and may have information and perspectives on their development which teachers may not witness or appreciate. Such observations of the special school child are particularly important. An atmosphere where parents feel free to make suggestions and offer guidance is of paramount importance. There is a need for an atmosphere of openness, where parents feel at ease, are able to state their observations and discuss their problems. If teachers are approachable there will be greater involvement and we may be on the first rung of the ladder towards the ideal of partnership.

Establishing a worthwhile two-way communication system in Special Education can be difficult since some children may live a considerable distance from the school while others may be attending residential schooling. On the other hand because some parents may be geographically isolated there is a more pressing need for good communication channels between home and school. Staff in special schools need to use every means possible to further this contact - letter, phone, verbal message, visits by parents to the school, home visits, parent-teacher meetings, special occasions, parent associations and parental involvement on Boards of Management. This need for communication with the parents of children in special schools is well stated for us by Tony Bowers:

As educators, however, we must encourage an interest in our parents in what is happening in school. Despite our overtures, parental involvement and interest may, often by necessity, come rather low on the list of priorities for some of our families. nevertheless, they must be kept fully informed. For the parents of children with special needs there can never be too much information transmitted from school to home about what their child and his/her school is doing. It assures parents that we care about their child and we care that they are kept informed

(Bowers, 1984, p.133).

Contact with parents is most beneficial whether on the formal or informal plane. Often, the quick word at the door with a parent collecting his/her child can develop a healthy climate for the parent-teacher dialogue.

Of the many ways of communicating with parents, letter writing is probably the most used. It is convenient yet can be one-sided, authoritative and impersonal.

Enhancing Communication

The most beneficial means of communication is that of the parents' visit to school. In special education parental school visits are of the utmost importance and procedures for their implementation need to be well established. Ideally the school should have regular parental visits to the school but many constraints operate to frustrate this ideal. One must then capitalize on certain events, milestones and occasions in the child's life to develop dialogue with parents and further the communication process. The first and most important of these is the parents' initial visit to the school when seeking placement for their child. A warm cordial welcome can break down barriers of misgivings and apprehension. For many parents it will be their first visit to a special school. There is a fear of the unknown and of how they themselves will react to the environment, and events unfolding before them. It is a time when considerable compassion and understanding should be shown to the parents and the formalities approach minimized. A further meeting when the child has settled into school can be a valuable exercise, allowing for an exchange of views concerning progress and learning whether parents are pleased or otherwise with the placement.

Celebratory occasions provide another opportunity for parent contact. Chief among these are the times when children are being prepared for the sacraments. One will almost always get a response from parents to visit or attend meetings in connection with First Communion or Confirmation preparation. Such a visit can of course be made mandatory and the child's placement in the preparation class dependent on parental contact. Discussion with parents is crucial when transfer to another school or integration into a local school is considered.

When parents or teachers have problems, complaints or worries concerning a child, communication with the home usually follows. We tend to see parents at a time of crisis rather than as an ongoing process and procedure of the school. This situation needs change if greater parental involvement leading to parent-teacher partnership is to ensue.

Visits by teachers to the home of the disabled child is equally beneficial. It offers new insights for the teacher regarding how the child copes in the home environment and the problems faced by parents. If such home visits are to be encouraged allowance needs to be made for the matter in pupil/teacher ratios or ideally by additional appointments. It is difficult to envisage how special schools which are residential and where the children's homes may be very far away from the school can establish such visits.

To facilitate good communication channels and to be able to give parents full attention and all the time they need when coming to the school it is necessary that visiting be by appointment. An easy relaxed relationship is not cultivated if the teacher is under time pressure or being called away to attend other duties. When an appointment is made, arrangements can be within the school setting to facilitate the meeting. This cannot happen if parents simply 'drop in'. Similarly, parents calling to see a teacher who must still supervise a class is most unsatisfactory, a practice not to be recommended.

Possible Obstacles to Partnership

Involving parents in special education does present the school with some dilemmas even where schools acknowledge that 'co-operation with parents is an enduring professional necessity' (Hogan, 1987, p.113). First among the many obstacles is the reluctance of some parents to visit the school or become actively involved in their child's education. Often it is those parents, teachers most wish to see that they do not meet at all. Yet, parents have the right to remain passively involved. Some parents are happy to leave the schooling of their children to the school and not interfere. However this can be especially frustrating when it is realised that "the content of the teaching is frequently common to both home and school, particularly with regard to basic personal and social skills" (Barton & Tomlinson, 1981, p.135). For example progress with mentally handicapped children is often by overlearning and constant repetition and through the employment of similar procedures, (rules or reinforcement methods) in both the home and school. Co-operation between the home and the school in such matters is therefore vital.

Another dilemma for the school occurs when parents make their own decisions concerning their child without prior consultation with the school. Parents in special education may even transfer their child to another school setting without any reference to the school presently attended. This is regrettable since much advice and information, beneficial to the child's placement may be missed out on. Discussion and consultation with the school the child is transferring to is also absent. It may be the first time this school is to have a disabled child and advice and consultation with the special school may be particularly helpful.

Probably the greatest dilemma for both teachers and parents in the matter of home/school links is the amount of time available. Because issues to be discussed are complex, meetings tend to be long. In many special schools the principal has teaching duties. This classroom commitment leaves the principal less time to meet parents. There is also the added difficulty in releasing a class teacher for consultation with parents. Parents too, can find it difficult to arrange a time to visit school. The breadwinner may not be able to get time off work, there may be transport difficulties or other children to mind at home which might not allow both parents visit together. Time is a scarce commodity for parents too.

Widening the Scope for Partnership: a challenge

Parental involvement in assessment and curriculum development is often a matter of discussion. Even when teachers recognise the role of parents in special education and are open and approachable, acceptance of parental participation in assessment and programme planning remains a sensitive issue. Parents too, may be reluctant to become involved: they may feel unable to contribute. Yet Brennan (1985) points out that parents can be an important source of input to the development of curriculum. However there are difficulties.

Undertaking agreed delegated tasks is perhaps the easiest form of partnership. The most difficult is to accept a parental contribution to the

assessment of special educational needs and to the planning of programmes to meet them. This aspect of partnership depends on how parents are introduced to the fact that their child may have such needs, what help they get in understanding the nature of disabilities and difficulties, and how far they are prepared to accept that they exist (Fish, 1985, p. 104).

To accept parents in education at this level may be threatening to some teachers. Such ideas of partnership may seem radical and may be thought to be in conflict with professionalism. Both parents and teachers have much to ponder if parents are to contribute meaningfully to curriculum planning. It will take time. Quoting Mittler (1978) Barton and Tomlinson hold that:

....there are many schools where such a partnership has hardly begun, where parents have played no part in helping to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the child, far less been involved in the design and implementation of a teaching programme. There are children whose parents have no knowledge of the objectives set by teachers for their child, if indeed any objectives have been set at all, schools where there is no system of communication, such as home-school diaries, where there are no visits by teachers to the home and only yearly formal visits by parents to the school (Mittler, 1978, p.245).

If this indeed is the baseline of partnership one may assume that very few Irish schools in special education are affording a proper and fruitful role to parents. The role of parents in special education needs greater recognition and encouragement. It is not something to fear. Craig sums this up for us when stating that 'one of the nicest things about parental involvement is that it can be such fun' (Craig, 1987, p. 185).

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