

# A Home-School Liaison Project

Special education provision often isolates the teacher from the benefits of involvement at community level. To enable children to achieve their full potential, the teacher needs some awareness of their lives outside school.

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## The Problems

Working in a special school poses certain problems for parent-teacher contact which do not arise in the ordinary school setting.

Working in a local/parish school offers many opportunities for informal contact with parents. In my experience this contact is invaluable as it serves to build up a healthy, open relationship between parent and teacher. As a result of this, formal meetings become more relaxed and open. In a special school, opportunities for informal contact with parents are severely limited. Large general meetings and individual "confessional-style" meetings are often threatening to parents who have had no other contact with the school during the year. In a threatening situation, people tend to be less open, less cooperative. In this way such meetings tend to fall short of achieving their full potential.

Working in a local/parish school, offers the teachers many opportunities for community involvement. Being involved at community level, helps the teacher bridge the gap between home and school. Parents and children see the school and the teacher as an integral part of their community. Working this closely in a community gives the teacher an awareness of the problems, the needs and the resources of the families within that community. This results in more meaningful parent-teacher contact.

In the special school, the teacher does not have the same awareness of the communities in which the children live. The children in a special school come from a variety of social backgrounds with different problems and different needs. The teacher must attempt to answer these needs without the direct support and involvement of any particular community. This situation results in feelings of isolation for teachers and parents alike.

## The Needs

In a special school, where children already feel isolated from their families and their communities, it is particularly necessary that the teacher make every effort to bridge the gap between home and school.



Parents of children in special schools also suffer from feelings of isolation. They need a supportive educational system which helps them to understand and cope with their children's learning difficulties. They also need the support of other parents who share the same problems.

To enable children to achieve their full potential, the teacher needs some awareness of their lives outside school. She needs to know the problems they will meet to enable them to cope with them. She needs to know the opportunities they will have to enable them to avail of them.

### **The Project**

In an effort to build up a more meaningful contact with parents, I initiated the following project. My aims were:

- to increase parental awareness of the work of a special school
- to increase my own awareness of the needs of each child within a family/community context

The most effective way to increase parental awareness of the work of a special school is to actually get them involved in that work at a practical level. It is not only children who learn by doing! Following a general meeting of parents at which much interest was expressed in this particular theory, I succeeded in enrolling five "volunteers" who worked in the classroom, on a time-tabled basis from January to June. These parents worked with groups of children under my direction. They worked in all areas of the curriculum and gained valuable insight into the problems encountered by their own children and others. I, in turn, had a great deal to learn from their comments and observations. The ultimate gain, however, was the children's. All the children in the class benefited from the extra care and attention of these five new "teachers". The five children whose parents were involved in the project, benefited in a very special way. With a greater knowledge of the content of the curriculum, these parents were able to continue the formal work of the classroom in the informal setting of the home. One parent commented:

"Before I started going down, I would Ask Anne every evening what did she do at school. The answer was always, 'work', but never what kind of work. I know that now and it helps me to try and carry on with her when she comes home."

The most effective way to increase my own awareness of the needs of each child within a family/community context was to visit the families and communities concerned. The Board of Management granted me four days special leave to enable me to carry out this home-visitation. My objective in visiting the home was to discuss each child's educational progress and to give parents an opportunity to voice any anxieties which they may have had regarding that progress. Meeting parents on their own territory, I found them a lot more willing to discuss these anxieties. I also learnt a great deal about each child's social and emotional development within



his family and immediate community. This information proved an invaluable asset when planning learning programmes for individual children.

### Reactions

**PARENTS** – There was a new enthusiasm evident at parent-teacher meetings. Those parents who had been involved in the classroom encouraged others to visit more often. They were anxious to continue the project and spoke of plans to extend it. Reaction to the home visitation project was extremely positive. Parents felt that it was a very necessary form of parent-teacher contact, especially during the child's first year in a special school.

**CHILDREN**– All the children enjoyed the extra attention of those parents who worked in the classroom. The parents involved were a little worried that their own children might become more demanding when they were in the classroom. On the contrary, these children were anxious to share their mothers' obvious talents with their other classmates. Parents also commented that their children were now more willing to work with them at home. They had obviously been promoted to teacher status in the children's eyes! The children's reaction to the home visitation project was very amusing. When I arrived back in the classroom they were amazed at the information which I had about their homes and communities. Their eyes would light up if I mentioned their families, houses or neighbourhoods. They were so pleased that I had been to their house. I know that it gave them a greater sense of "belonging" in school, and it gave me more meaningful starting points for conversations and group discussions.

**TEACHER** – At first, having parents helping in the classroom did require more work and effort on my part. Anyone starting in a new job needs direction, support and encouragement. I felt the time taken to provide such direction and encouragement was very important. Otherwise, I ran the risk of losing my "volunteers" after their first visit. As time went on, however, and the parents become more familiar with the work of the classroom, the extra time and attention which the children received proved that the groundwork was very worthwhile. I enjoyed the home visitation project and gained valuable insight from it. One aspect of this project which particularly pleased me was that it involved *all* the children. Children can feel very isolated in a school situation where their parents find it difficult to make contact or are unwilling to do so. Home visitation is one solution to alleviating this problem.



## Recommendations

1. Parents want/need to know more about their child's classwork. I recommend that they be involved at a practical and meaningful level in the work of the school.
2. Home visitation is an important factor in home/school liaison. I recommend that parents of children, particularly in their first year in school, receive a visit from the class teacher.
3. Teachers should be more aware of the needs and resources of the communities in which the children live. I recommend that teachers base more relevant environmental awareness programmes in these communities.
4. Parents need the support of other parents. I recommend that teachers/school encourage those parents who are anxious and willing to set up support groups.

Meaningful parental involvement in education is a need and a right. We, the professionals, need to see parents less as a threat and more as a resource, for that is what they are – a resource which we have left untapped for far too long.