

THE RATIONALE UPON THE CONCEPT OF PARTNERSHIP WITH PARENTS AND THE CHALLENGES THIS CONCEPT POSES FOR TEACHERS OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

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Abstract

It is becoming more widely agreed that the involvement of parents in their children's education, and consequently gaining more understanding of what is happening in the schools is of much importance for their children's learning process. These days, parents are getting more and more convinced of the idea of playing an effective role in their children's education, but some parents are still not convinced or do not have the confidence to form such a relationship. On the other hand, teachers are aware of what is called "partnership" with parents and its importance, but at the same time some are afraid of the challenges they have to deal with while dealing with their students' parents. Standing in between are the policy makers, where they always try to support both sides to cooperate effectively with each other.

Keywords: *Special Educational Needs (SEN), Partnership.*

Introduction

The importance of the partnership of school and parents has been discussed by many researchers. As noted in a report published in 1997 by OCED (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) under the title of "Parents as Partners in Schooling" researchers found that parents in nine countries (USA, Canada, Denmark, England, France, Germany, Ireland, Spain and Japan) consider the partnership with school as one of their first priorities.

The relationship between families and schools or between parents, children and teachers is an important issue in the educational field. Its importance comes from its fundamental contribution to the children's education and in forming their future. Improving this relationship is the job of all, including: parents, teachers, administrations, therapists, and policy makers. This relationship involves conflicts and tension as well as cooperation and opportunities. So in order for parents and teachers to be able to form an effective relationship, they have to be aware and at the same

time convinced of the reasons behind this relationship. Moreover they should bear in mind that challenges are always there, especially when dealing with children with special educational needs.

This article aims to evaluate the rationale upon which the concept of partnership with parents is based. Having good and reliable reasons is fundamental for any relationship to succeed. Also it will discuss the challenges this concept poses for teachers of children with special educational needs in order to understand them and then try to overcome these challenges for better implementation.

1. Partnership with Parents: What does it Mean?

When we talk about parents and their partnership with school, we normally think only about the father and the mother. If we look up at the word parent in the dictionary we find that it means a father or mother or the adopter of the child. In terms of the relationship with school I believe that the word parent is more general. It can extend to include siblings, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. It can also include the environment where the child lives. From my experience as a teacher in Omani schools, we tend to use the term “parent” when we talk about its relation with school to refer to the people who are related to the child and whose co operation with the school can empower the child learning. In many cases the child’s father and mother are not capable of dealing with this issue for various reasons (very poor education, their work etc...) so other people from the family such as brother, uncle or grandfather play this role.

Different societies have different perspectives about this issue. For instance, in some societies they always deal with mothers. In others they deal with father, and so on. In the Omani context, most families are extended, and very united: in the same house or very near, you can find the grandparents, uncles, aunts, older brothers and sisters who can form this relationship. I believe that the word parent when we talk about dealing with school means any person who is capable of and authorised to co operate fully with the child’s school to the advantage of the learning process.

The word “partnership” means a relationship in which two or more people or groups operate together as partners, respecting each other and valuing what each partner is able to do to the advantage of this relation. Macbeth and Ravn (1994), cited in CERI (1997), indicate that the clarity is important in the relationship between school and parent, because the power in this relationship is rarely equal. This relationship should be based on clear and fair rules. Macbeth and Ravn (1994) raised some interesting questions such as: “should teachers educate children while parents humbly support the schools? Or could it be the other way around? Are parents the main educators of their child, while the child’s school supplements home-learning with specialist expertise?” I agree that it is difficult to achieve an equal power between parents and teachers. Many factors interfere in term who is more involved such as: the parents’ level of education, teachers and school situation, and policies, but the most important thing here is the existence of this relationship and the positive cooperation between them to the advantage of the child’s learning. Pugh (1989), cited in CERI (1997:53), defines it as “a working relationship that is characterised by a shared sense of purpose, mutual respect and the willingness to negotiate. This implies the sharing of information, responsibilities, skills, decision-making and accountability.” Also Peter & Mittler (1983) define the partnership between parents and teachers as a relation which involves a two-way process of joint assessment and making decision about the child's education from the beginning. It involves a complete sharing of knowledge, experience and skills in order to learn from each other and help the child progresses.

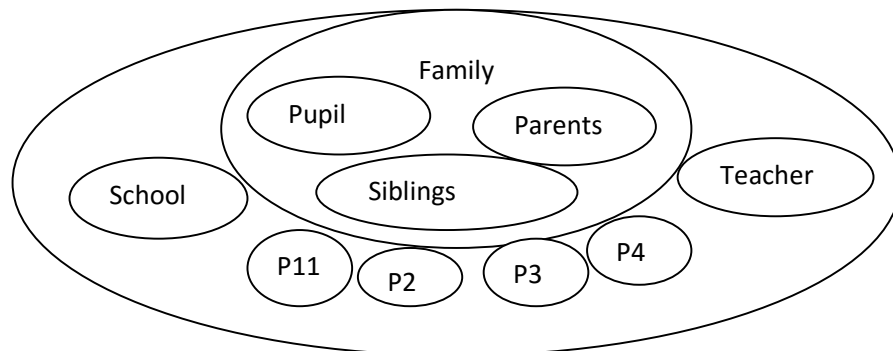
Altogether, parents should be considered by professionals as a very important element in the learning process. The parents’ role should include more than the regular duties such as: helping in homework and providing the basic materials to full cooperation with schools. They are asked to work alongside teachers. Both sides should consider it as a duty without any consideration as to who should be more involved or powerful than who. They should exchange information and experience about the child’s performance and behaviour, which definitely leads to better understanding of the child's strengths and weaknesses by teachers and parents.

2. The Rational for Partnership with parents

Education is an ongoing partnership between teachers, students and parents. Parents are logically the first educators of their child. The ecosystemic perspective in describing children's behaviour,

assumes that every child is a system and at the same time a member in other systems (family, school, parents, siblings, teacher etc....). Anything that happens to a part of the system affects all the parts, as shown in the following figure which is taken from McManus lecture on the 28th September, 2006

Figure 1



How systems overlap

“The ecosystemic approach is based on the idea that human interaction structures such as families, schools and other organization are self-regulating systems, which function in a way which is analogous to the natural ecosystem Changes in any point of the ecosystem have the result of changing the whole ecosystem.” Cooper & Upton (1991:23), cited in Wearmouth et al (2004:9). This approach reflects the crucial role of the family and its relationship with the other systems such as school and teachers in the children’s education. Also it represents the value of children’s participation in this relationship. They are the core element and their voice should be considered. “There is a growing evidence that children do better personally, socially and academically when they are encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning” (Beveridge, 2005:3). The parental partnership does not only involve teachers and parents but it also involves children as well. The better the interaction between these three elements the better is the partnership. The contemporary educational system and policy promotes inclusive education, where schools are opened to all and the idea of exclusion does not exist. Gibson (2006) believes that in order to achieve the purpose of inclusion there should be an “open” and “free” dialogue between all the educational operators including teachers, parents and students.

When teachers and parents work in partnership, each side has their own aims that they want to achieve through this cooperation. Armstrong (1995) assumes that when professionals interview or meet parents they seek information in order to help them in decision-making. Teachers seek to collect as much information as they can about their students in order to be able to do their job probably. Moreover, they are keen to help parents to enable them to reinforce the work done by the teachers in the classes. Parents, on the other hand are seeking more information about their children's education. Also they are keen to gain knowledge and techniques to help their children in their studies at home.

Here I can give an example from my experience as a teacher to show how teachers and parents are in need of such relationship. I was the senior English teacher in my school in Oman last academic year (2005/2006). We noticed that students did not get any help at home. In the parents meeting we asked the parents about the reasons behind this situation. It was not a surprise that they all agreed that they did not know how to provide this help in English. We decided to organise a workshop for them (see Appendix 1). After that workshop they all asked me to organise more workshops throughout the academic year. Both English teachers and parents found that very useful.

Generally the ultimate goal of both sides is to help the child to achieve better, so it is more likely to build up a constructive relationship, simply because they have the same aim. Heward, Darding, & Rossett (1979:6) state that "researchers show that handicapped children progress much faster in all areas when their home environment supports and extends school programming. Parents can be instrumental in teaching their handicapped child many academic, social, self-help, communicational and vocational skills." Also Dowling and Pound (1994) argue that children always need to see their teachers and parents in cooperation with each other, as they need their father and mother cooperate. Schools and families cannot operate separately otherwise they will negatively effect the children's education.

It is emotionally difficult for parents to adapt and accept that their child is with SENs. It is a very distressing event for parents whenever it happens. Russel (1983) reports that an investigation done by Gaith (1978) of families with Down's Syndrome-children found mothers suffer from

clinical depression in the first 18 months and both fathers and mothers suffer from emotional and sexual problems. Also an observation done by Leiderman (1976) noted that there is an increase in the rate of divorce among families with special needs children. The same problem is noted by Wilkin (1979) in his study. He concluded that these families have very limit of free time at the weekends, a reduction in social and leisure experience comparing with other families with ordinary children. Even when parents get used to that over time, in some points their feeling comes back to the surface. Some parents tend to accept that and deal with it, but others can not.

I do believe that everything which has been mentioned previously provides a very logical reason for educators and especially teachers to view having a child with SENs in their classes as meaning having a very special case which requires a lot of effort on their side to help this child develop progress and achieve. Helping the child to succeed means helping his/her family to overcome their difficulties. On the other hand, parents should bear in mind that forming a real partnership with schools is the most successful way to support their child's education.

Hornby (1995) suggests a model for partnership with parents of students with SENs. His model focuses on what parents can add to their children's education and parents' needs to be able to form an effective partnership. Hornby's model is also very helpful for teachers. It gives them a framework to ensure that parents' needs are being met and their knowledge is being used to their children's advantage. It consists of two pyramids: one presents the parents' needs according to their importance. Firstly, the need for communication, where all parents should be able to access the school and get an adequate idea about its programs and method of work with their children. Moreover it is important to provide parents with clear idea about their rights and responsibilities. Secondly, the need for regular contact, so parents are kept informed of their children's achievement and needs. Thirdly, the need for education to help parents by conducting workshops and special programs deal with their children's special needs. Finally, they need for counselling, either individually or in groups about their concerns.

The other pyramid presents the strengths, or what parents can offer in term of partnership. Firstly, the information about their child needs, strengths, difficulties, health situation, and what he/she likes and dislikes. Secondly, the support those parents can offer by reinforcing the work

done in the school, helping the teacher in the classroom, and taking part in designing their children's learning program. Thirdly, parents are an important source by helping teachers in preparing teaching materials and delivering workshops for teachers and other parents. Finally, they can play the role of leadership by giving courses where they talk about their experiences. Actually what I like more about Hornby's model is the emphasis on the parents' contribution, which is more important than counselling them. They always have something to contribute if professionals give them the chance to do so. Also it is quite simple and it presents the partnership between parents and teachers as a 2-way process. The only missing part in this model is children, who are the core element of this relationship. I think it would be better if they were included in such a model. All what has been written in this paragraph presents one fact; that schools and families are the most effective elements in the children's lives and bringing these two elements together and making them act in partnership will definitely help a lot in solving our students' problems.

Dale (1996) argues that, partnership with parents operates on the following levels: the first level is the personal level, when both teachers and parents understand each others' needs and attitudes and act upon them; the second level is the interpersonal level, where both sides extend their communication skills not only in giving information, but also in listening, anticipating, interpreting, and considering; the third level is the organisational one, when schools and homes facilitate this relation to make it more likely to success; the forth level is the positional level or the agreement between teachers and parents in term of roles and power to avoid tension; finally, the ideological level, when both sides respect each others' ideas and contributions.

To sum up briefly, there is an agreement that a strong school-parents' partnership is very advantageous for all the elements (teachers, parents, students). To start with teachers, it provides them with understanding of the needs and desires of their students and the parents as well. Furthermore, this relationship enables teachers to get feedback from parents to improve their implemented programs. Secondly in such a strong relationship, the parents may be provided with more understanding of their children's needs, information about their rights and responsibilities, specific information about their children's learning programs, and techniques to be used at home in dealing with their children's special needs. And finally the cornerstone of all

this relationship is the child who will get more and more support, and consequently their chance to learn and achieve increases.

It is generally agreed that partnership between parents and schools is a very important aspect in the educational field. It has a great positive impact on the educational process. However, it is the nature of the life that there are always difficulties in any relationship and in order to succeed in any work we have to identify these difficulties and try to find solutions.

3. Hindrances to Partnership with Parents

This section discusses the demands faced by teachers of children with special educational needs specially while also dealing with the concept of partnership with parents generally. Parents usually do not share the same interests about their children's way of education. That is due to the differences in level of education, ethnic groups, social classes and beliefs. Some may not accept their children getting involved in the co-curricular activities such as scouts, and some may not want their children to be taught in a particular way. Some parents of children with SENs would like to have their children taught in inclusive schools and some may prefer them to be educated separately, while parents of outstanding children prefer not to have students with SENs included in their children classes. Also in countries where they categorise students according to their level, and others where they categorise them according to their gender, parents have different views and beliefs. "One characteristic parents share, to be sure is that virtually all of them want the best of their individual children, but they may not agree on what "the best" is, and their views will probably change as their children grow" (OECD, 1997:16).

Gascoigne (1996) classified parents according to their methods in approaching the idea of partnership with schools into seven types. For teachers it is important to understand these seven types in order to be able to identify the type of parent and demands they are dealing with and then use the correct method in their attempt to construct a positive and effective relationship, especially with parents of children with SENs.

➤ **The articulate, assertive, educated parents:**

These parents show good understanding of what is done in the school. They are able to give their opinions clearly and in a polite way. Usually their discussion is purposeful. They are very aware of their rights and principles.

➤ **The angry, knowledgeable parents:**

They have the same belief as the first group. They believe that with appropriate work their children will achieve well. They have good understanding of the educational system. They are capable of supporting and defending their point of views and show anger if the others disagree with their views.

➤ **Submissive parents:**

These parents take everything said by teachers for granted. They do not question or suggest anything. Although that they have the knowledge to break into a conversation with teachers, they prefer not to do so, due to the lack of confidence they have. They leave the whole thing for teachers to decide what is correct.

➤ **The uncaring parents:**

Such parents are poorly educated. They have low expectations about their child's learning. They tend to put the burden on the teachers. They believe that this is their job and they should do it. Generally these parents show no interest in helping their children in their special needs.

➤ **The angry ill-informed parents:**

This group of parents is very difficult to deal with. They are very desperate about their children's situation. They can not accept that their children are special educational needs' students. Moreover, they do not have knowledge about how to take action regarding their children's education. They argue and usually get angry.

➤ **The fighting parents:**

These parents usually have a good idea about the system and the educational policies. They tend to concentrate on rules and legislation rather than their children's needs. They show considerable interest in their children's special needs but they mostly concentrate on the mistakes and shortages caused by the teacher.

➤ **The special needs parents:**

These parents themselves suffer from the same problems their children suffer from. They are not able to convey their ideas and needs, and in some cases they may be misunderstood by teachers.

They usually have their own views but they are not capable of expressing them in an appropriate and understandable way.

This variety in parents' beliefs and attitudes makes teachers' work more and more demanding. These demands have necessitated better communication skills for teachers. Their capability in dealing with all mentioned types of parents challenges their communication skills. Also it is important not to classify them simply from the first impression or from the first meeting. Deeper understanding of their personalities gives us a better chance to form more successful relationships.

Besides this variation in terms of parents' beliefs and attitudes there are other difficulties that I noticed in my experience as an English teacher in Oman for more than ten years and from my reading about the difficulties faced by teachers in other countries. These difficulties are:

- Some parents are overcritical. Their way of criticising teachers and the work done in the classroom may damage their relations with teachers. Teachers tend to be unwilling to cooperate with such parents. Some parents may use their own ideas of teaching and learning as a basis to identify "ineffective teachers" from their point of view and then criticize and report them to the authorities. They assume that this is part of their duties towards the school and their children. It is right that some teachers' performance might be weak, but dealing with them is the responsibility of the senior teacher and inspectors who are more capable to evaluate such teachers and then help to reduce or remedy their weaknesses.
- Lack of communication between teachers and parents is one of the major problems in developing an effective parental partnership. Parents sometimes come to the school and talk with their children's teachers. They explain their concerns and ideas and expect that teachers will act upon their concerns and ideas directly. But unfortunately some teachers have heavy teaching loads as well as a lot of administrative duties and consequently they may forget or neglect to act upon these comments. When these parents come back to school they discover that what has been discussed in the previous visit was not implemented at all. Some parents may report that to the administrative office in the region and others may start a heated

argument, which extends the gap between parents and teachers. I believe that it not only teachers who may be blamed for such consequences, but all the professionals including policy makers who prevent teachers from doing their jobs probably by overloading them with a lot of responsibilities. For instance a teacher in Oman often has to teach around 25 lessons weekly in classes of 30 to 37 students beside the many administrative responsibilities such as duty-day, extra curricula activities, class duty, and clearance competence and so on. In such a situation, teachers are unlikely to cooperate fully with parents.

- The economic status also has its impact on the effectiveness of the relation between school and parents. I mean here the economic status of teachers, parents, and the ministry or the school budget as here in the UK. Although the relationship between parental partnership and the economic status is not direct, I believe that to some extent it matters. Parents who spend a long time working far away from their families, will not have the time to visit the school. In developed and rich countries they carry out research and develop new policies and programs in order to involve parents in their children's education. These programs and research need a lot of money to be carried out, while some countries are not able to provide the basic needs for schools such as books, chairs and tables. Furthermore, teachers who enjoy high income which enables them to live in a very comfortable way are more likely to deal effectively with parents. On the other hand, teachers in poor countries face a lot of difficulties in providing the basics for their families and consequently they are not interested in dealing with such issue and in solving other's problems.
- Different nations with different cultures have different views about the importance of the relationship between school and parents and how to form such relationship. For example, in developed societies and where most of the parents are educated, they consider this relationship as a priority in order to help their children in their education. They are capable of being supportive of their children's educational system, while in other societies, parents think that it is the school job to teach and fulfil their children's needs. They assume that they are incapable to help teachers in their jobs. I presume that dealing with such parents means more burden is added to the teachers' jobs. They have to find a way to involve such parents in their children's education.

- In some educational systems there is a lack within which, all teachers and parents can work together. As a result some teachers and parents lose this important chance to learn from each other, which negatively affect the way of teaching and the child educational level as well. Many parents will not take the first step and come to school unless they are invited several times. Their lack of educational knowledge and confidence work as barriers. The teachers' role here is to initiate and break down these barriers. It is a tough work but it should be done by teachers, so as to help to deal with their students' special needs.
- There are teachers who prefer not to put themselves at risk and open their doors to parents. They think that, parents just come to school to criticize and complain. They do not have enough time to sit with parents due to the many responsibilities they have to care about. Their own knowledge and skills qualify them to attend to their students' needs without the need to be counselled by others, whose ideas may not suit their situations and plans. It seems that such teachers are not trained well in coping with others' ideas. Their communication skills are not good enough to foster such a relationship. It is their role to empower these skills, simply because forming a partnership with parents is a necessity, especially for student with SENs.

Overall what has been discussed in this section does not give a complete picture of the difficulties faced by teachers when dealing with parents as to the differences in their level of education, beliefs, aims and cultures. The bright side of this relationship for teachers is that it helps them to accomplish their job probably and helps students with SENs to overcome the difficulties they face. When a child has a problem and then he/she is considered as a student with SENs, it is logical for those who are in charge (parents & teachers) to feel in some way responsible. It is there responsibility to help them. The situation gets worse when teachers and parents start blaming each other. Parents say that teachers are not doing their job probably and teachers say that parents are not capable and not helpful in dealing with their children;s special needs. All that increases the gap between parents and teachers, with the result that, those children's needs will not be satisfied. A constructive discussion between parents and teachers could allow them to operate as a group with the child to help him/her to succeed.

4. Partnership with Parents in Oman

At the beginning of each academic year all schools start forming the teachers-parents councils. A circular is sent to all schools from the ministry informing them when and how to form these councils. Each school forms its own council. In boys' school it is called the teachers-fathers' council and in girls school it is called the teachers-mothers' council. Also there is a council for each educational region; its members are selected from the schools' councils. The members of school councils are chosen by election. All parents have the right to join it. The elections are held every two academic years. Their main work is to work alongside the school administration and teachers to form better and positive relation between schools and the community, seeking better education for their children. Looking at such kind of organisation gives a good surface impression of the relationship between schools and parents, but the question is 'How effective are these councils in forming a school-parents partnership?' Frankly, from my experience as a teacher in Omani schools and a member of such councils for two years, I dare say that most of these councils just exist only on official paper. These councils usually consist of 12 members. These members may visit the school from time to time to attend a meeting or to ask about their children, but what about the other parents? They sometimes do not know in which school or stage their child is. Once, a parent came to my school. I was sitting in the students' advisor's office. He asked him about his child. We tried to find his name in the school records but we could not. Finally we discovered that his child was in another nearby school (secondary one). I think such problems are there because these parents have more than five -sometimes eight-children in schools. Also some have no idea about the school system.

From the school's perspective, schools' administrations and teachers have a lot of work to do and forming a partnership with parents is actually not one of their priorities. They just do it on paper at the beginning of the academic year to satisfy the people in the administrative office. To be fair this is not the case in all schools. Some schools have very effective teacher-parents councils. They play an effective role in helping teachers and other parents to work together in partnership. Moreover, starting from the academic year 2004/2005 they started requiring 'student portfolios' (for more information see Appendix 3). These portfolios provide a great chance for teachers and parents to follow up their children work and to identify their strength and weaknesses and then to discuss that together to support the strong points and find solutions for the weak ones.

Forming a real partnership between teachers and parents in Oman faces problems such as:

- Regarding teachers, some teachers, from the first contact with parents of children with special educational needs, start complaining and showing their pessimism about the child's achievement. They give parents the impression that their child's case is a hopeless one. They do not try to suggest solutions. Teachers should give parents the impression that they are trying to help them to make their house more pleasant by helping their child to learn and improve. This can be done by a real cooperation between the three main elements in such a relationship (teacher, parent, & child). In this case, parents are more likely to get involved in their child's education.
- As regards as parents' capability to deal with the educational issues, a quite large proportion of parents are not well educated. Some of them are illiterate. They do not have the ability to help their children in their study. Furthermore, most of the fathers have jobs far away from their families. They just spend the weekend with their families and consequently have no time to foster such a relationship with schools. The mother can not play the role of her husband for many reasons, such as poor education and the difficulties in dealing with boys' schools due to gender traditions in society.
- As for the information provided for parents, schools usually ask a parent to visit the school only if his/her child only makes a problem or has some kind of learning difficulties (see appendix 4). Unfortunately, this attitude also exists in the outside community. Parents think that they are not asked to visit their children's schools unless there is some kind of problem with their education. Such a link between the school's invitation and children's difficulties builds up a bad feeling about school visits. I think it would be a good idea if parents are informed about the positive points about their children's education as well as the negative points.
- In regard to means of communication, parents face difficulties when visiting schools in making contact with the person who is in charge of their child. They feel that they are not welcome and the school staff are not happy to spend their time with them discussing their children educational progress and problems.

- To consider the techniques used in dealing with such important relationship, some parents prefer not to visit the school, although they may have the time to do so. They are afraid of being told off by the head-teachers or the teacher about their child's progress or behaviour. Some have a negative experience about the school visit. They may have visited the school in the past and did not like its atmosphere, so they do not like to go through this experience again.

Finally, it is difficult to generalize what has been discussed in this section about how Omani schools and teachers deal with the concept of partnership with parents in Oman. I have just presented my point of view depending on my experience. Such an issue needs a lot of research to be able to identify the difficulties and their extent, and then to suggest solutions for better implementation. I am quite sure that there are schools and parents in the Omani context who are able to effectively implement this very important link in the educational field.

Conclusion

As it is stated previously in the introduction, the aim of this assignment is to evaluate the rationale upon which the concept of partnership with parents is based and to discuss the difficulties this concept poses for teachers, especially those who teach students with special educational needs. The assignment started by clarifying the meaning of the issue of partnership with parents. First I discussed the meaning of parents when dealing with the issue of partnership with schools. I argued that the word parents here can be extended to mean any person from the child's family who is capable and authorised to cooperate with the school on the advantage of the child's education. At the end of this section I concluded that the concept of partnership with parents means the effective and the positive cooperation between parents and teachers so as to empower the child's education.

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