Working with challenging parents within the framework of inclusive education

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'Regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building and inclusive society and achieving education for all; moreover, they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system.'
(Article 2, Salamanca Statement)

The movement toward total inclusion of special needs children into regular classrooms will require teachers to cope with increasingly diverse groups of students and parents. As the diversity (and severity) of student characteristics increase, it can be expected that the frequency and intensity of student-teacher en of parent-teacher incompatibility will also increase. It is important to provide a method for quantifying the compatibility or incompatibility between teacher, parent and child, as well as to develop some practical ideas to cope with challenging parents of children with special educational needs.
In this article we firstly consider the concepts of inclusion and integration. Further we discuss the Salamanca-statement and some recommendable policies regarding inclusion. Then we take a look at some results from studies on teacher problems and stress in teachers, related to 'difficult children' and their parents. We finish by analyzing some school-family-interaction problems and by giving some recommendations for working with challenging parents.

Inclusion versus integration
Inclusion as a concept is fairly new. Its origins lie in its use approximately a decade ago in the USA. (Ferguson, 1997). Since then it has become one of the key features of discussion in the literature of Special Needs Education. Sebba & Sachdev (1997) make distinctions between inclusive and integrative education.

> Inclusive education describes the process by which a school attempts to respond to all pupils as individuals by reconsidering and restructuring its curricular organization and provision and allocating resources to enhance equality of opportunity. Through this process, the school builds its capacity to accept all pupils from the local community who wish to attend and, in so doing, reduces the need to exclude pupils.

This stresses the whole-school nature of the concept and the demands of reconfiguring regular schooling. The building of an inclusive school community is to reconstruct whole-school provision, not the provision for special needs students only.

Integration, on the other hand, is usually applied to groups of students with exceptional needs having access and placement in a mainstream or regular school setting. This does not emphasize the restructuring of the

whole teaching/learning and other processes; rather it recognizes the need for individual programmes for these students. As Sebba and Sachdev (1999) note:

> The organization and curricular provision for the rest of the school population remains essentially the same as it was prior to the 'integrated' pupils arrival.

Salamanca

Salamanca and governmental initiatives
In 1994 representatives of 88 national governments and 25 international organizations concerned with education met in Salamanca, Spain, under the auspices of UNESCO. In the Salamanca Statement and Framework on Special Needs Education (Porter, 1997) five principles of children's rights are mentioned:
'We believe and proclaim that:
- every child has a fundamental right to education, and must be given the opportunity to achieve and maintain an acceptable level of learning;
- every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs;
- education systems should be designed and educational programmes implemented to take into account the wide diversity of these characteristics and needs;
- those with special educational needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within a child centered pedagogy capable of meeting these needs (..)'.

Governments were advised to:
- give the highest policy and budgetary priority to improve their education systems to enable them to include all children regardless of individual differences or difficulties;
- adopt as a matter of law or policy the principle of inclusive education, enrolling all children in regular schools, unless there are compelling reasons for doing otherwise;

- develop demonstration projects and encourage exchanges with countries having experience with inclusive schools;
- establish decentralized and participatory mechanisms for planning, monitoring and evaluating educational provision for children and adults with special education needs;
- encourage and facilitate t he participation of parents, communities and organization of persons with disabilities in the planning and decision making processes concerning provision for special educational needs;
- invest greater effort in early identification and intervention strategies, as well as in vocational aspects of inclusive education;
- ensure that, in the context of a systemic change, teacher education programmes, both pre-service and in-service, address the provision of special needs education in inclusive schools.

The accompanying 'framework for action' noticed that realizing the goal of successful education of children with special educational needs (SEN) is not the task of Ministries of Education alone. It requires the co-operation of families, and the mobilization of the community as a whole, and voluntary organizations.
So, the 'Salamanca-framework' observes that the education of children with special educational needs is a shared task of parents and professionals. A positive attitude on the part of parents favors school and social integration. Parents need support in order to assume the role of a parent of a child with special needs.
A co-operative, supportive partnership between school administrators, teachers and parents should be developed and parents regarded as active partners in decision-making. Parents should be encouraged to participate in educational activities at home and at school (where they could observe effective techniques and learn how to organize extra-curricular activities), as well as in the supervision and support of their children's learning.

Barriers to collaboration

Educators, parents, policy-makers and researchers generally agree that parent involvement is very important. However, according to Henderson, Marburger, & Ooms (1986), there are several barriers that limit a fruitful cooperation. Parents believe that teachers teach too much by rote, parent-teacher conferences are routine and unproductive, teachers send home only bad news, teachers do not follow through on what they say they will do, they do not welcome interactions with parents, and they care more about discipline than about teaching. Teachers, on the other side, believe that parents are not interested in school, they do not show up when asked, they promise but do not follow through, they only pretend to understand what teachers are trying to accomplish, and they worry too much about how other kids are doing.

The diverse and sometimes contradictory demands placed upon teachers, over extended periods of time, lead to *stress in teachers*. Teachers are often confronted with high demands and low rewards. Each day brings its quota of problems, from students who lack the motivation for learning to parents who are critical. In an extensive piece of research conducted by Brown & Ralph (1992) the findings indicated that the relationship with parents and the wider community emerged as an important work-related stress-factor. The aspects named were as follows:

- parental pressure to achieve good results
- anxiety over test and examination results
- the threat of performance management systems
- additional work demands outside the normal school hours, which could lead to conflict with family and friends
- poor status and pay
- biased media coverage
- being obliged to accommodate unrealistic expectations

- general societal cynicism about the role of teachers

Interactional problems with students and parents have been shown to be significant and universal teaching stressors. The Index of Teaching Stress (Greene, Abidin & Kmetz, 1997) was developed under the assumption that that the level of a teacher's distress regarding the specific behaviors of a given student is not merely a reflection of the frequency of the behaviors.

In their study each teacher was asked to respond to the items twice: once for a current student of their choosing with 'behavioral or emotional problems' (i.e., 'behaviorally challenging students') and once for the seventh student on their class roster (referred to hereafter as 'comparison students').

In part A (Teacher Response to Student Behaviors) teachers rated (on a 5-point Likert-scale) the degree to which they found 47 problematic behaviors to be stressful or frustrating as applied to each student being rated. In responding to each item, the teachers were asked to degree to which the behaviors were felt to be stressful or frustrating in interactions with each student.

In part B (Teacher Perceptions of Interactions/Self-Efficacy), teachers were asked to rate 43 statements (on a 5-point Likert scale), which explored (a) their perceptions of the impact of the student upon the teacher and the teaching process, (b) their sense of efficacy and satisfaction in working with the student, and (c) the nature of their interactions with other adults involved with the student (e.g., the *student's parents*).

This part of the questionnaire, it was theorized, would tap teachers' perceptions of the effect of the student on the teaching process, learning environment, and the teachers' sense of satisfaction and efficacy.

Replicating the Greene, Abidin & Kmetz-research, after translating the items into Dutch, we asked 60 Amsterdam-teachers to fill in the questionnaire. They were primarily employed in elementary school settings with children from low income groups.

Here we present the results regarding the 'frustration with parents'-scale.

Figure 1 - 'Frustration with parents'
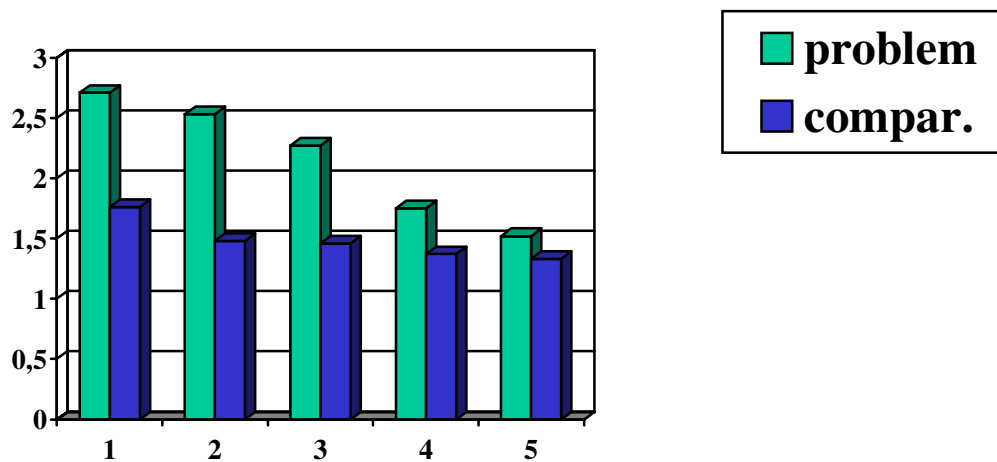
1 = parents do not seem concerned by child's behavior
2 = unable to agree with parents re: handling child
3 = interacting with parents is frustrating
4 = I feel harassed by parents of child
5 = Parents call to tell me they are unhappy

In the pilot-study[i] we found that 'frustration with parents' foremost is influenced by factors like lack of concern on the part of the parents, not getting agreement re handling the child and a frustrating interaction with the parents. Obviously, it is not very common that parents call the school to complain. Teachers don't often feel harassed by parents.
This part of the research focuses on the impact of parents of 'problem-students' on the teaching process and teachers' self-efficacy, perceptions of support, and satisfaction from teaching. The information obtained via this approach permits examination of the degree to which the style of behaving of parents is incompatible with the expectations, demands and other characteristics of a given teacher. Working with challenging parents
By focusing on aspects of the teaching process that are distressing to teachers-in this part of our study, the relation with parents-this kind of research may prove useful as a gauge of student-parent-teacher compatibility. But there are other salient results.
Seligman (2000) concluded that teachers view parents more negatively than parents perceive

teachers. He therefore emphasizes that 'problem parents' can also take a 'problem-position' because of a conflicting interaction between the two parties (teacher and parent), caused by impropriate and unprofessional teacher behavior.

However, he gives some interesting ideas with respect to working with challenging parents. Seligman distinguishes 11 types of troublesome parent behavior. He describes some indicators, backgrounds and relevant teacher-reactions. We here summarize his analyses and recommendations.

1. Hostile parents
   - have angry feelings towards the teacher, the school, or the curriculum
   - accuse teacher of failing to cope with or teach the child
   - (sometimes) have negative experiences with other professionals

   Advisable teacher behavior/attitudes
   - avoid responding in a hostile or defensive way
   - the skill of listening is a powerful and positive response
   - understand that parent behavior reflects both anger and hurt
   - give your observations in an objective, noncontentious way

2. Uncooperative parents
   - parents are preoccupied with family or work-related problems
   - avoidance may be the parent's way to keep anxiety about the problems the child has at a manageable level
   - are emotionally challenged or otherwise impaired
   - are still denying or having difficulty coming to terms with their child's disability
   - because of their modest education some parents are concerned to contact school

   - perceive that teachers consider them to be a burden and as a consequence avoid school

   Advisable teacher behavior/attitudes
   - attract and welcome parents, don't frighten them
   - remain optimistic and realistic
   - don't try to thrust reality to parents when they are not prepared to accept it
   - make the parents feel welcome
   - understand, not challenge, the fact that parents are very preoccupied with demanding jobs, etc.
   - don't pressure parents to have more frequent contacts with the school
   - write a conveying interest in meeting with the parent
   - occasionally phone the parents
   - keep trying to get contact!

3. Perfectionistic (or excessively worried) parents
   - are overly involved with the development of the child
   - express dismay to the child and the teacher when tasks are accomplished in a less than perfect way
   - the child develops a negative attitude toward schoolwork because of the criticism he receives whenever his performance falls below his parents' standard

   Advisable teacher behavior/attitudes
   - don't try (in advance) to work toward a relaxation of the parents' unrealistically high standard
   - describe in clear and understandable terms the nature of the child's learning problem, his limitations, and his potential
   - explain that children react differently to pressure
   - mention that praise and support is potent source of motivation

- avoid to indicate that the parent is at fault for the child's performance

4. Professional parents
   - consciously or unconsciously use their knowledge in a controlling or condescending way
   - are sophisticated at manipulating the system
   - sometimes annoy teachers by letting them feel that their knowledge about school, teaching, or educating children with disabilities give them license to be very critical to the teacher and the curriculum

   Advisable teacher behavior/attitudes
   - when receiving unsolicited advice from professional parents weigh the advice to determine its merit and don't cast it automatically aside
   - involve the parent in your classroom if you believe that the parent can function collaboratively
   - try to continue the dialogue so that feelings and perceptions of both parties become clear
   - remember always that you are a trained specialist in teaching children, whereas the
     parent may be a specialist in another field.

5. Dependent parents
   - ask questions about virtually every aspect of the child' s life and enlist the help of the teacher in both minor and major matters
   - will solicit the teacher's opinions instead of risking her own; they rarely take the opportunity to engage in independent thinking and subsequent responsibility
   - generally cooperate with the teacher, although only when the teacher assumes

responsibilities for decisions and course of action

Advisable teacher behavior/attitudes
- excessively dependent parents are frightened; don't heighten their anxiety by turning   away from them, gradually wean them away from their dependency
- reinforce their decisions and actions
- be careful, you can easily be seduced into a relationship with someone who has strong dependency needs.

6. Overly helpful parents
   - excessively helpful parents are motivated by their need to be useful - a need that may be developed in their past
   - parents may have developed over functioning tendencies because of, for instance, chronic illness in the family or an parent who was demanding.

   Advisable teacher behavior/attitudes
   - communicate, in a sensitive and positive way, that only a limited amount of assistance is needed
   - try to reduce the amount of time spent by the parent

7. Overprotective parents
   - anxious about their child's welfare (academic progress, concerns around protection against physical and psychological harm)
   - fearful attitude about most things
   - due to feelings of guilt (because of the disability of the child), overprotecting the child

   Advisable teacher behavior/attitudes
   - suggest more realistic, growth promoting practices
   - reinforce child initiated independent actions

- suggest activities that facilitate independent thinking and living

8. Neglectful parents
   - are preoccupied with other family members or problems
   - (sometimes) rejecting the child because of the disability or because he is not wanted
   - neglect may be the consequence of a lifestyle (e.g., alcoholism, drugs abuse)
   - mistakenly equate neglect with independence
   - compound lack of cooperation with the school by not providing the child with the essential emotional ingredients
   - (sometimes) lack of parental skills, combined with immaturity

   Advisable teacher behavior/attitudes
   - (in severe cases) inform the school social worker or principal
   - demonstrate concern with the child both verbally, and (when appropriate) physically (a hug or pat on the back)
   - set up situations in the classroom in which the child is included in group activities and sometimes assumes a position of leadership
   - continue attempts to engage the parents
   - avoid blaming the parent for the child's problem
   - (in case of withholding of food, adequate shelter, clothes) use a more direct approach
   - (if possible) let parents benefit from training and education in parenting skills

9. Parents as clients
   - seek help for themselves from their child's teacher, because she is physically available
   - are confused by the array of titles of professional assistants (psychologist, psychiatrist, social worker, etc.)

- don't seek professional help because of the stigma attached to doing so.

Advisable teacher behavior/attitudes
- know your professional limitations, but show concern about the parents
- make a distinction about whether the parent needs someone to be supportive, or someone who is trained to provide psychotherapy
- make the parents aware that their problems appear to need psychological attention and that you are not professionally prepared to be of assistance
- if a referral is indicated, don't make personal recommendations other than an agency, hospital or professional society.

10. Fighting parents
    - argue with each other during conferences
    - the arguments may be the consequence of having partial information or information that is perceived differently

    Advisable teacher behavior/attitudes
    - void taking sites
    - don't act like a marriage counselor
    - try not get involved in heated arguments
    - try to discriminate between expression of major problems, minor disagreements, and diverse styles of interpersonal interactions

11. Involved-uninvolved parents
    - fail to carry out agreed-upon courses of action
    - want to be helpful and cooperative, but they find it difficult to initiate action decided upon
    - actually feel that home activities fall within the scope of the classroom
    - parents think that they cannot adequately perform the tasks agreed upon

Advisable teacher behavior/attitudes
- be sure that that own frustration and anger not become an impediment to effective communication
- don't blame the parents for the slow development of the child
- don't point out the discrepancy between what parents said they would do and what they actually do
- explain how additional help at home is particularly important for children with disabilities
- never pressure parents to work with their child at home.

Epilogue

Inclusivity concerns not only visions of a technical and social nature, but also a balance between demands of individual children's and parents' needs and teachers' and school-quality. In this chapter we discuss the inclusion-movement, highly influenced by the 1994 Salamanca-conference, and related policy-recommendations.

Inclusion of special needs children into regular classrooms will require teachers to cope with increasingly diverse groups of students and parents.

We discuss several factors that challenge teacher functioning and effective home-school relations in inclusive schools. Further, we give some results of a pilot-study aimed at quantifying and understanding teacher stress and problems in teacher-student-parent-interactions. We finish by giving some recommendations for working with so called 'problem-parents'.

Though we should be careful not characterizing parents of SEN-children with negative labels, it can be helpful to describe 'good practice' in working with parents of 'problem children'. It is important to be aware of causal factors that influence teacher's perceptions, '..because only through such understanding will teachers be in a better position to appraise parents' behavior accurately' (Seligman, 2000, p. 227). Both parents and teachers may need support and encouragement in learning to work together as equal partners.

Note

1 Data collection carried out by my student Monique Brown.

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