

Let's Collaborate! Teacher-Parent collaboration, for an improved education for visually impaired children

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Abstract:

Visually impaired children can be just like other children if people work together as a team to meet their needs.

A good collaboration has a series of advantages on the process of the student's education. This team work has many positive effects in their behavior at school and at home.

This collaboration can be very effective, when it creates the right conditions for a higher involvement of the parents and for a timed intervention in all their problems.

The collaboration between the school and the families of the visually impaired children is an important factor in the progress and efficiency of the children's learning process starting in elementary school. A good collaboration has shown to create a strong team which in turn makes for a very good student who will take sure steps in his education and his life. A good and functional collaboration of parents and the staff of the school is the key of the child's progress and development.

The school and the family have the student as a mutual interest. The child is highly influenced by both parents and teachers, because of his dependence on both from early childhood. The collaboration between the parents and the school is necessary for the progress of the student, however it encounters many difficulties. Some important factors in creating a good partnership are: each party does not try to outshine the other party and it does not force its opinion on the other party. Dialogue and good will are key elements in building a

good partnership. The objective is not only the students' progress in the learning process but building a complete personality that later on can contribute in the society.

Key words: Collaboration, education, school staff, teacher, parent, child, student with visual impairment.

INTRODUCTION

The main factors that play a decisive role in the academic and social development of the visually impaired children are many but the most important are: high commitment of the parents and of the whole family, total commitment of the academic staff and a very good collaboration among them to form a strong team.

According to Bronfenbrenner's (1979-1986) model of ecosystem collaboration, the person is at the same time into different subsystems that have an impact on him, some at a higher level and some at a lower level.

Influenced by changes that are happening in society, schools are starting to look for a better communication with the micro systems that are around it and the most important of all is the family. Such relationships encourage the involvement of the parents in the educational process of the child, in and out of the school. These relationships have been growing considerably in other European countries, USA, etc. (George, 2000).

The school and the family belong to the micro system and for this reason play a decisive role in the child's development (Gkamari Panorea).

According to Armstrong (1996), a necessity for successful family-school staff collaboration is reciprocal respect and goodwill on the part of each to learn from one another.

Meanwhile Mirosevic found that the most important thing was cooperation by every side, but most especially the cooperation of the parents. (Mirosevic, 2007, p.11).

Thus, the family-school staff collaboration is a kind of microsystem, but of a high level and which plays a decisive role in general in a child's development, but it is even more necessary for the visually impaired child.

This cooperation however is not an easy thing. Numerous studies show that both parents and teachers often complain about problems that arise in their relationship. Their communication can easily create friction between them if certain expectations are not met.

Mitchell (2010) has also studied the key role of parents and found that they play a critical role in supporting the child's education. School and family have the student as a reference point and common interest. The child is strongly influenced by parents and teachers, and has a maximum dependence on both since early childhood. Over time the development and general interest for children are two issues that are addressed by parents and teachers. Many theories and models have been suggested for school-family relations.

Although parent-school collaboration is necessary for the progress of the students, it faces many difficulties. An important factor in the formation of a good collaboration from both sides is that each side should not cross the borders and at the same time try not to outshine the other side. Dialogue and goodwill are key elements in building a good cooperation. The objective is not only the student's good progress in terms of class, but also building a complete personality that later can contribute decisively to the progress and civilization of society as a whole.

The main advantages of collaboration between the school and the family

Every person growing up inherits the family's values, principals, ideas and perceptions about life influenced by the environment where they live. Later on with the help of the school, some characteristics change, the way of thinking and

perception. This change depends mainly on the harmony or lack of collaboration between the family and the school staff.

The development of a creative relationship, productive between the school and family through mutual work as a team can have qualitative results for a better education and formation of students with visual impairments.

The advantages of the parents' understanding collaboration with the school are indisputable because it is only through this collaboration that the child will feel good and will stride safer for his future once out of school desks.

This collaboration has as primary importance to enable the visually impaired student to adapt and integrate into society.

Other priorities are: collecting information that help in the best adaption of the program for the specific needs of students, access to a wider range of social stimuli provided by parents, increased opportunities to strengthen the proper conduct of the child inside and outside the school, as well as the assistance for the learning method of learning from parents themselves.

A good collaboration shows a series of advantages on the whole educational process. The collaboration as a team brings about positive effects in the student's learning process as well as in the behavior at school and at home.

According to Dardig & Rosser (1979) and Heward (1996) the main benefits that the teacher brings from his collaboration with the parents are in the greater understanding of children's needs, but also in terms of the needs and desires of parents.

There should necessarily be a close collaboration between teachers and parents of students who will join, in order to be provided better educational conditions for a general education which should be more qualitative day by day for visually impaired children. Importance should be given to the collaboration for the compilation of customized programs that

will accomplish the integration of visually impaired children in the usual educational system.

In recent legislative education acts, the necessity for parents to work as partners with the professional staff in evaluating the special educational needs of these children has been greatly emphasized.

Derrick Armstrong looks at the notion of partnership by drawing attention to the comments of those that are directly involved. He describes the process of evaluation by both parents and the professional point of view. (Power and partnership in Education, Derrick Armstrong, 1995).

A good collaboration shows a series of advantages on the whole educational process. Team work brings about positive effects in the student's learning process as well as in the behavior at school and at home.

This collaboration can be very useful and effective, when it creates conditions to increase parental involvement and intervention in problems at the right time that may relate to the child's learning, emotional state, or general behaviour.

The positive role of teachers and parents who have reached a consistent collaboration by defining a complete regulation for the good of students are decisive elements for the visually impaired students' progress and development.

Parent – teacher collaboration is the key to progress and general development of the child. Furthermore, the government with its legislation and funding plays an important role for the visually impaired children.

According to Derrick Armstrong 1995 the government in partnership with its citizens can and should work toward improving the living conditions especially for people with disabilities.

Obstacles in the school – family collaboration

Based on the international experience the collaboration between schools and families is particularly difficult and

problematic, especially in the case of children with disabilities. (ILEA, 1996, Lacey, 2001).

As mentioned above in the parent – teacher collaboration there is the need to look into the obstacles that make such collaboration difficult in order to understand the needs and the role of each party so as to facilitate the student's performance in the educational process.

Parent – teacher collaboration not always goes as it should. Often there are problems that in some cases are unbearable by the student. In effect, the one most damaged from this dysfunctional collaboration is the child. Parents and teachers who are responsible for the life of the child at home and at school should collaborate as a team in order to make these areas supportive and creative for the educational process of the child.

According to Leon (1996) parents from a low socio-economic background may feel inferior toward the teacher or may not give the proper importance to the child's education. Moreover, the limited academic knowledge in some poor families hinders them from helping the children with their homework.

On the other hand, according to Hill (2004), parents with a high socio-economic background usually show a higher disposition to take part in school activities; they contact the teacher and fully understand the importance of education. According to the teachers, mothers with a low educational level have a lower contact rate with the school than mothers with a higher level of education (Perendim & Noden, 1998).

However, research shows that parents with a high socio-economic background can underestimate the teacher not only because they are wealthier and have a higher social status but also because they have higher academic qualifications than teachers. (George, 2000, 177).

Another reason may be the parent's negative feelings toward the school's environment related to traumatic

experiences, such as failure at school, problematic behavior or abuses that parents may have from when they were students. Such feelings may arise by being once again involved in a school environment. Apart from this, the practice to invite the parents of children that have behavioral problems or bad results to school creates fear and anxiety to the parent. On the other hand a positive approach by the parents towards the child's education makes them more active in the child's school life and raises their sense of effectiveness as parents (Gronlick et al, 1997).

Families with low socio- economic status don't understand that a child needs a continuous and qualitative education. These families do not express their interest to know more about the school or do not inform the school about possible problems the child might have. This in turn may cause the teacher's to behave in such a way towards the students that creates obstacles in the parent-teacher collaboration. Therefore, the problems in the child's education and in a good parent – teacher collaboration lay in the family's social and educational background.

Lack of time is another obstacle in the active involvement of the family in the child's education. The increasing number of families with single parents, both parents working and with parents having more than one job, brings about a reduction in time dedicated to the child at home and to school obligations.

Some parents are not disposed to have a productive dialogue with the teacher because they unwillingly have made themselves deaf and blind to their child's behavioral or educational problems. These are the indifferent ones that become an obstacle for a constructive collaboration.

Another group of parents comes to school only to be informed about their child's progress, on scheduled parent – teacher meetings. They may also take part in the festive occasions, in a school play or show at the end of the academic

year. These parents are interested but are not involved actively in their child's educational progress.

Parent involvement is part of the family – school collaboration. This collaboration is not easy. Parents and teachers, as is often shown in research, are faced with different problems in their relationship. This communication can create confrontations if certain conditions and requests are not met.

Usually the approach of both family and school, takes the form of formal relations in the framework of the concrete obligations.

Some teachers and parents have embodied completely inappropriate and counterproductive attitudes for the development of qualitative collaboration between school and family.

Thus, parent-teacher collaboration faces significant barriers, but if there is good will on both sides, they can be overcome.

Parents' Involvement

Parents' involvement is largely dependent on teachers for those parents who for some reasons are restricted. There are parents who want to help their child, but are reluctant to cross the threshold of the school. Often these are poor families, illiterate parents, divorced or single mothers who struggle, despite the sufferings they have encountered, they try to maintain distance from school in order not to reveal their vulnerabilities. Furthermore the teacher's age and years of work play an important role in the relationship that the teacher develops with the parents.

Furthermore, the personality of the teacher and the principal, the school's requirements and regulations, student-teacher relation, school's size and overall climate appears to encourage or prevent parents' contact with the school.

For some parents, visiting the school can create anxiety. Others avoid asking what they want to know, because they are

afraid. Parents who feel guilty may explain the teacher's attitude as negative and his comments as critical. The smallest criticism or reproach can be interpreted as an accusation against the parent. (Gascoigne, 1995)

Recognizing the boundaries of responsibilities school – family

Knowing and recognizing the proper boundaries is necessary for collaboration. The school cannot replace the family and the family cannot replace the school.

A school that welcomes the parents increases the chances of having more active visitors. In general, recognition of the respective boundaries and roles results in the fact that the teachers do not feel threatened in their competences and the parents do not feel weak in front of the teachers but they benefit from these competences for the good of the child.

Parents have a very emotional connection with the child which is not the same for the teacher; as much as they care for the students. This is one of the biggest differences between parents and teachers and the latter should constantly remind themselves of this during the collaboration with the family.

The role of the teacher in the collaboration

Teachers should have the willingness to work closely with the others, especially with their colleagues and the parents in order to find solutions for the difficult problems they encounter. (Le Fanu, 2005).

The parents' behavior and interest impose the close collaboration with the teacher especially the homeroom teacher and the teachers' good behavior imposes a close collaboration with the parents. Nowadays this collaboration is considered a very important condition in the achievement of certain abilities by the visually impaired student. The special education teacher should give the family equal access and participation in the decision making process regarding the progress of the student.

He/she should encourage the family with different tools, such as a daily collaboration calendar, courses for the parents, support groups etc. This collaboration should start immediately and continue the entire period the child is part of the school and after. The school due to the traditional trust and the reputation it has in the society can and must play an important role in consulting the parents on everything that is unclear.

Teachers can effectively help the parents and other members of the family to deal with the psychological, social and economical problems created in families of a visually impaired child. The teachers are not psychologists or social workers but they can still counsel parents of visually impaired children.

The special education teacher should be conscious but not identify itself with the problem, he should be a good listener. His behavior secures the family's quality of life, creates a climate of acceptance, of security and trust in general. What is important in the collaboration with the parent of a child with visual impairment is finding common goals and objectives, understanding the positive and negative elements in certain situations. The teacher must know the cultural level in which the family lives and the moral values that distinguish it. The teacher should know the members of the family and their socio-economic level especially the caretaker of the visually impaired child.

It is preferable that the teachers are clearly understood in their communication with the families; invite both parents to collaborate in order to go further and most importantly to keep in mind that the family is a unique strong reference point.

Teachers are also suggested to try and understand the needs and wishes of the parents by having a sincere and open attitude to discuss any difficulties and trying to avoid labeling. They should not only discuss the problems but also the abilities of the child by encouraging dialogue and encouraging the parents to share information regarding their child's problems, interests and needs.

Teachers who adopt these attitudes recognize that the collaboration between school and family has not only an informative character, but parents may also make realistic assessments for their children and contribute with the information they master. Such an attitude of the teachers will definitely encourage parents' involvement in the school environment.

From research conducted on parents' opinions, the main problems related with the teachers' attitude toward them include in general, professional distance, unfamiliarity with the needs of parents, as well as discouraging attitudes.

Some parents talk about a cold and indifferent attitude of teachers and school staff toward them. Professional distance has usually been preserved by teachers who think that in this way they will preserve their authority. However, when parents perceive this as an indifferent attitude, it puts an end to the collaborative relations between teachers and them.

According to some teachers, the family is often responsible for the student's mistakes and bad behavior.

For a teacher to be able to play an effective role, she/he must be a loving person, positive, knowledgeable, trained and ready to hear the concerns and care for the student as well as for the cooperation with the parents. It is also important for the teacher to be aware of the stages that a parent has been through in relation to the child's disability, and to know the parent's current stage.

The role of the parents in the collaboration

The values of a society, which in fact are the values of the main social classes, do not have the same importance in all families.

This differentiation is due to the social involvement of the family and respective strategies. Although education is very important in our society the importance of education varies from family to family. Fifty years ago some families' objective

was for their child to finish elementary school, for other families to finish high school and others university.

Today education means going to university which will secure a proper job and often post university studies in the country or abroad.

Consequently, during the process of assessing the value of education, the purpose changes among social classes but the value of education remains an important value. This difference between families is not random but is determined by the family's involvement in society.

Coleman's study (1966) examines the influence of family environment in the outcome of their students. This study introduced the special importance of the family factor with the parents' active presence in the school.

The school – family relationship is mainly defined by: the scheduled monthly meetings or unscheduled ones; the telephone conversations between parents and teachers, different activities organized by the parents and caretakers association, different school activities for students and parents.

The parent – teacher meetings are based on the school's obligation for a regular and programmed communication between educators and parents. The strengthening of the parent – teacher relationship is achieved by helping all the parents in order to create a supportive learning environment at home. Parents will get regular information on the child's progress and school's activities.

The reforms in the curricula offer opportunities for a creative and successful parent-teacher collaboration. The teachers should learn not only new teaching methods recommended by the curricula in different subjects but also about the strategies and activities related to the school and families.

Most of the parents want more information from the teacher and more meetings because they believe that their child's education is a common responsibility and objective. At

the same time they admit that teachers support them in different ways. They should collaborate with the teachers to increase their progression.

A good parent – school collaboration has its advantages by encouraging the parents to have a better relationship and communication with their child. They can understand better their child's abilities and weaknesses.

Parent's contribution in the teaching process

Some of parents usually want a bigger involvement in class and during the lessons.

School generally treats parents as friends and collaborators in their children's education.

Most of the parents want to be involved in the child's learning process in the classroom and they agree that this will help their child to have a more effective learning process at home.

School practices and activities must create a friendly school for the families and to make possible that the involvement of the parents prevents possible problems at school.

Parent's participation in the school's decision making process

The parent – teacher collaboration should be present in the school's decision making process, with the participation of parents and teachers in committees, school board, syndicates and parent's associations.

The effective communication between parents and teachers means a different culture in the school and a total and essential involvement of the families in the school life of their children. In this aspect, the state can play a key role in an active involvement of the parents that will strengthen the parent teacher collaboration and offer technical support and the necessary funds for the implementation of such programs.

Also important are teacher training programs focused on developing their ability to collaborate with parents and students.

The involvement of the parents may start with a formal visit at the school as well as the parent-teacher meetings and later on with active participation in the educational process.

Guidelines for parents to support the child at home

Parents' participation in the learning process at home helps considerably with the child's performance at school. (George 2000, Papas 1994 Tzani 1998). It is also known that most of the teachers want the parents' involvement in the learning process. Another reason for the lack of parental guidance and assistance may be teachers' belief that this is not their responsibility but rather the school's.

Some parents complain that the attitude of the teachers is such as to encourage them to discuss their child's problem. Many parents fear that their suggestions and comments are interpreted as bad criticism for the school and will influence the teacher – student relationship and will make them change schools.

The responsible factors for such a situation is not only the teachers' attitude but also the behavior of some parents. (Paraskevopoulos 1985).

The teachers also know the psychology and special needs of the parents with visually impaired children. Of course parents do not belong to a group with similar characteristics that need the same treatment. (Papas 1994, Paraskevopoulos 1985).

Every day, parents should deal with the acquisition of the learning skills but also should focus in the learning of any other skill for their child. Training for the use of other senses can give students the ability to cope with the loss of all or part of the vision.

An important element is the assessment of the family. Despite the difficulties the existence of goodwill from the part of the parents will help to overcome any obstacle that a child with a visual impairment goes through.

The parent – teacher collaboration is necessary for the student's progress but this collaboration can be more productive if there is the help of specialized personnel for visually impaired children. The main focus of all the parties in this collaboration should be effective teaching of the student with visual impairment.

Other specialists that can work with the student with visual impairment

According to Foundation of Education / M. Cay Holbrook and Alan J. Koeing (p. 25-27), together with the teachers and parents there are other professionals that are part of the student's educational team.

Other specialists that may work with the student with visual impairment are:

The Orientation Specialist

This professional enables the student with visual impairment with the ability to travel safely by using a cane, a guide dog or other sophisticated electronic devices.

Physical education teacher

The physical education teacher has a special training for children that need individual lessons to improve and increase their posture.

Language and word therapist

A trained professional to evaluate the ability of the student to understand what the other people are saying (accepting) and to express what they want (expressing). This individual can have personalized programs to improve the communication of the student during a normal day and work with small groups of students to improve the communication strategies.

Professional therapist

This professional helps to increase the potential of the individual for a proper functional behavior through different activities. Professional therapists may work with blind or visually impaired students to help them carry out every day activities.

Low vision specialist

This professional develops programs to teach the students to use more effectively the abilities they have. After a medical assessment, the specialist will teach the students to use the proper optical devices where needed in order to maximize their vision and carry out their duties.

Preschool teacher

This individual works with the student with visual impairment. The activities carried out include preparing the Braille material, touchable and printed graphics. Preschool teacher can help the children with; movement orientation, ability to travel, self-care activities.

Case Leader

This appointed individual will take care of the educational, medical responsibilities and other important information in order to draft an educational program for the student.

This individual will help with many aspects of the case including meetings and serving as a mediator for the team members regarding the students' performance.

They work for a better collaborative environment and a better decision making process among the team members in order to meet most effectively the needs of the students.

This person may be the leader of the group or even a member of the group.

These specialists are not present in the Albanian teams to help the visually impaired children. The collaboration between these specialists is as important as the parent teacher collaboration for the development of visually impaired children.

In conclusion the development of the child with visual impairment does not succeed by having only one of these collaborations.

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