

CYPRUS: SPECIAL EDUCATION AND HOME SCHOOL 'PARTNERSHIP'

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Abstract – *Using a case study approach, the paper attempts to draw a picture of the educational turmoils faced by a child with special needs in Cyprus at the end of the 20th century. The case study focuses on a 'failure' of the system rather than a 'success story' in an effort to highlight the problems faced by children, parents and professionals in a situation where the State does not provide adequate support for the needs of children like Chris and his family. Assumptions about existing 'partnership' schemes between home and school are challenged in the process, and issues of the unequal power relationship between parents and professionals are raised. All this is placed against a background sketching the development of compulsory education, in an attempt to probe questions about how children of all abilities and all kinds of background came to attend school and how their parents found themselves obliged to 'co-operate' with the school.*

Introduction

In 1999 the Cypriot State celebrated 70 years of special education in Cyprus in a rather appropriate way: it introduced a brand new legislation legitimising – at last – general school attendance for children with special needs as the main educational policy for such children (CME&C, 1999). In practice, this was nothing new. Integration practices had been operating on the island since the 80's, but the legislative framework has – for a number of reasons – taken some years to materialise (Phtiaka, 2000). From 1929 we have come a very long way in a very short space of time: from the establishment of the School for the Blind, to official integration of all children with special needs in the general school; from colonial rule, to self administration; from a multinational community to a country divided by occupation; from segregationist institutions run by select Boards of Governors, to a State educational policy; from a charity discourse to an educational discourse; from a philanthropic model to a human rights one (Phtiaka, 2001).

Needless to say, such a multitude of changes cannot easily be digested in such a short time (Phtiaka, 2000). Changes in Cypriot special education have often been in rhetoric rather than in policy and practice. Foreign ideas have on occasion been copied rather than national needs assessed. Terminology has changed from special needs, to integration, to inclusion without adequate understanding, and policy has

moved fast from complete segregation to majority integration (inclusion is still a dream of the future) without the necessary support.

We are facing the 21st century with hope, anticipation and fear all mingled up as the Regulations supporting the new legislation have passed through Parliament, and September 2001 will bring the first official State attempt to implement a legally backed up integration. Parental groups who fought for a number of years to take the Law through Parliament are eagerly watching, and a State apparently able and willing is put to the test: Will it all come together this Autumn, two years after the passing of the new law (1999), forty-one years after the establishment of the Republic of Cyprus (1960), twenty-seven years after the Turkish invasion (1974) and a whole 2000 years after the establishment of a religion that claims equality for all? Is the education system ready to host? Is the State ready to support? Is social opinion ready to accept? Are we ready to embrace the right of children with special needs to be educated alongside their peers? Are schools and parents ready to work in partnership to the advantage of the children?

A paper of the future will have to answer these questions and evaluate whether we were indeed ready or not. Only the past and present are open to us now for critical appraisal. We can take stock and learn from our mistakes, making sure that we shall never repeat them. A story of a series of such mistakes follows, in an attempt to exorcise the past and to inform the future. It is a story of a home-school relationship that did not exist and the consequences this had for the boy trapped between the two.

Compulsory education and home-school partnership

The international scene

In the light of a growing international interest in parental involvement in education (Cairney *et al.*, 1995; Davis, 1991; Deem & Brehony, 1993; Epstein, 1992; Macbeath & Turner, 1990; Merttens *et al.*, 1993; Phtiaka, 1996a; 1998; Vella *et al.*, 1997), and the education of children with special needs in particular (Phtiaka, 1997b; 1997c; Riddell & Brown, 1994; Riddell, Brown & Duffield, 1994; Vincent & Evans, 1997; Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997) research in the area (Toomey, 1996; Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997) has indicated that relationships between home and school have always been a controversial issue. Inevitably presented from the perspective of the school in the past (Phtiaka, 1996a), these relationships have not always been seen as being of the desired standard, intensity or appropriate quality. In fact, if we go far enough in history, we shall meet home and school as open competitors for the child's time and potential. This is

particularly true in the developed industrial societies of the West, as a quick comparison can indicate that such state control is not yet exercised in many developing countries. With regard to the UK, which can be used here as a case in point, Carlen *et al.* (1992) state:

'Compulsory school attendance by law has (...) always been of historical interest for the ways in which the state secured economic access to the family, principally by protecting children from economic exploitation by their parents. In this respect nineteenth-century education and factory legislation were significant in altering the traditional 'property rights' of parents over their children, in favour of closer state surveillance, monitoring and control.' (Carlen *et al.*, 1992, p. 20)

Evidently, the conflict of interests between home and school was so apparent in the early days of compulsory education, that legislation, as well as ideology, were used in order to force parents to part company with their children and send them to school. Indeed for this to be achieved 'parents (...) had to conform to certain standards of child-rearing practice which could be inspected, and were held accountable if need be in law' (Carlen *et al.*, 1992, p. 21). It is very important to clarify here that these were not randomly chosen standards. They were mainly middle class standards aimed mostly at working class families in an effort to control and shape them to the market's needs. If Connell (quoted in Cairney & Ruge, 1996) is correct in stating that there is an in-built class history within school curricula which privileges the 'ruling class' over the 'working class' (Cairney & Ruge 1996, p. 104), then we should expect problems in the development of home-school relationships and in parental response to school.

In their analysis Carlen *et al.* (1992) indicate that change of working class practices towards school could not be achieved by legislation alone and without some form or degree of parental consent, and therefore mothers were targeted as a group for ideological brain washing. The effect was that school non-attendance came to equal bad mothering (Carlen *et al.*, 1992) initiating a long tradition of maternal involvement (David, 1993) and guilt exploitation (Phtiaka, 1996a; Maclachlan, 1996) from school. While trying to achieve its own goals and satisfy its own needs, the school was not particularly sensitive to the needs of the families¹. This is evident in that the law, while forcing children to attend and parents to send them to school, 'fails to provide independent support mechanisms for families 'in trouble' to ensure effectively their children's education or school attendance' (Carlen *et al.*, 1992, p. 26). Allow me to interpret this in the following fashion. Regarding schooling, the state regulates for the family in such a way that

the family is obliged to serve/support the state but the state is not obliged to serve/support the family. Under these circumstances some child-rearing practices are considered valid and others are not. Those that are considered valid are middle class practices facilitated by middle class stability of income and residence. With relevance to their behaviour and attitude towards school some parents are seen as ideal – they are considered to be succeeding – and others as deficient – they are considered to be failing. Thus is created the myth of problem and non-problem families which allows for professional interference not only at school level, but increasingly at family level as well (Carlen *et al.*, 1992).

Clearly the roots of the notion of cooperation between home and school were 'the school dictates, the home cooperates' – hardly a cooperation at all. As has been indicated elsewhere (Phtiaka, 1996a; Paige Smith, 1997; Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997) what schools have for a long time called partnership or even cooperation, is nothing but regulation of family life and a 'relationship' dictated by the school on its own terms. Parents have simply been expected to conform.

What is true for mainstream education is true a hundred fold in the case of special education (Paige Smith, 1997; Martin, 2000; Simmons, 2000). The notion of family pathology is intensified here through the idea of 'not healthy not normal child' (Carlen *et al.*, 1992, p.24). Professional interference, 'ostensibly a supportive, caring and educative process' (Carlen *et al.*, 1992, p.24) takes the form of crucial decision-making for the future of the child – and the family – not only without the slightest form of consultation, but often against the declared wishes of the parents (Tomlinson, 1982). Not only were parents obliged to send their children to school as all other parents were, but they were for a long time forced to send them to a school which was not of their own choice, or even a school that was directly opposed to their desires and stated wishes; quite possibly a school that they considered as a stigma for the child and the family as a whole (Beveridge, 1997; Paige-Smith, 1997; Vlachou, 1997). Indeed there have been cases where parents have been punished for failing to conform to the professionals' choice of school (Mason, 1998 quoted in Simmons, 2000).

The notion of partnership between parents and professionals in mainstream and special schools is relatively new and needs to be questioned. It possibly stems from a coincidence of interest between parental pressure groups and governmental concern about the amount of responsibility which has in the space of 100 years been transferred from the home to the school. This is all backed up by research worldwide (Epstein 1992; Cairney *et al.*, 1995; MacBeath, 1996; Bastiani & Wolfendale, 1996) indicating how effective school learning is with family support (with zero expense for the State) and how true stands the opposite. However the viability of an equal relationship to support a partnership between home and school has often been questioned in the literature (Phtiaka, 1996a; Paige Smith,

1997; Beveridge, 1997). In their analysis Vincent & Tomlinson (1997) compare it to the notion of citizen participation which appeared as 'a good thing' in the seventies. They indicate that – for Britain – this notion was related to the rise of the ideal of 'education as a private interest' as that was developed in the 80's repositioning parents as consumers of education services. Martin (2000) follows a similar argument, while Riddell *et al.* (1994) suggest that for Scotland 'parental power is regarded as the engine for the introduction of market-place disciplines into the public sector' (p. 328).

Whatever the case, the notion of partnership between home and school appears to be a product of the last 25 years or so (Toomey, 1996; Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997; Martin, 2000). In the UK the need for parents to be seen and treated as partners in special education dates back to 1978 as it appears to have its roots in the Warnock Report (Beveridge, 1997; Mallett, 1997; Paige-Smith, 1997) and is first adopted in the educational legislation of 1981. However despite the good intentions of the Report and the legislation that followed, 'parents were not given any 'rights' to challenge the decisions made by LEAs in the 1981 Education Act' (Paige-Smith, 1997, p. 43). The partnership notion did not therefore fully materialise until the Education Act of 1993 came to being, and indeed not until the publication of the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs in 1994 (DfE, 1994). Up to that point, and quite often after that too, professional attitude towards parents was characterised as 'parentitis' (Russell, 1997), and was not very helpful.

Cyprus

For Cyprus the special education legislation which is currently in existence² (N. 47/1979) makes no mention of parents at all – a similar situation to that observed in mainstream education (Kyriakides, 1999). This piece of legislation, the first ever regarding special education, combines some interesting features. Passed through Parliament nineteen years after the declaration of the independent Republic of Cyprus in 1960 and two years after the death of Archbishop Macarios in 1977, the 1979 legislation principally aimed at tying the loose ends in Cypriot Special Education and providing the legal framework for the function of a number of special schools that had been operating on the island since 1929. The law, voted in the aftermath of the Warnock Report in the UK (1978), retains nevertheless a separatist philosophy and emphasises the role of the special school in the education of children with special needs. It offers a common policy for the operation of all special schools established up to 1979 and it outlines the State responsibilities towards four categories of children with special needs: the physically disabled (including sensory disabilities) the maladjusted, the mentally

handicapped and the slow learners³. These are all the categories of special needs defined by, and therefore catered for, the 1979 law. Parents are not mentioned in the legislation and they have no access to decision-making regarding their child. They have the right to be informed of the final outcome but they have no official means of challenging it.

On the 28th July 1999 a new legislation regarding special education was passed through the Cypriot Parliament. This was the outcome of a gestating period of seven years, dating back to the publication of the Constandinides (Constandinides, 1992) Report, a Cypriot version of the Warnock Report which did for Cyprus what the latter did for the UK, namely it introduced the notion of integration of children with special needs in the mainstream school, adopting a heavily critical stance towards existing legislation i.e. N.47/1979. The new piece of legislation allowed the State a space of two years to prepare for integration – which is its main philosophy. Under the new Law (N. 113(1)/1999) parents have a right to have their views heard at various points during the assessment process, they can veto the placement chosen and they are offered the option of making alternative educational arrangements for their child if they so wish. It is quite indicative that although the word ‘parent’ is never mentioned in the legislation of 1979, it is mentioned no fewer than 21 times in the new legislation. The parent has the right to bring into the assessment process an advocate (professional) of his/her own choice and to provide any information that pertains to the case. The decision is then taken by the Educational Committee and the parent is informed. The decision is not final, parents have the right to challenge it, but the Committee does have the final word and the parent who does not wish to comply is left with the sole option of opting out of the State Education system.

As it has already been pointed out, it is a research project of the future to see how parents, who were instrumental in the enforcement of the 1999 Special Education Law, respond to the new legislation, and to what extent they become involved in the decision-making process. What we shall concern ourselves with at this point in time is how home and school (mainstream or special, state or private) used to relate to each other under the old legislation (and still do in the transition stage), and what the outcomes of this relationship were for the child concerned.

The study

In order to answer these questions and illustrate the point more clearly, I have chosen to focus on a case study of a young boy with special needs (Chris for the purposes of this paper), seen from three perspectives: those of his mother, his school head teacher, and his home tutor. In an effort to give a coherent picture of

the situation, the paper skits across areas covering Chris' history from pregnancy until data collection time.

In the context of a broader study which examined home-school relations, Chris was *observed* in school (a private special school which he was then attending) and chatted to at school and at home. *Interviews* were held with his mother (at home in the presence of Chris and his younger brother and temporarily the father), with his special school head-teacher (at school on the day of the observation) and his home tutor (in my office). All three women were tape-recorded for convenience and accuracy. The fieldwork was completed in the space of two months. All interviews were carried out in Greek and have been translated from me.

Student profile

It is, I believe, pertinent to begin with a description of the boy's profile. It is already indicative of the perceptual differences between home and school to try and do that from a school and a home viewpoint. Seen from a professional's point of view Chris would look something like that:

Chris:

- born 1983
- father: civil servant - University Education
- mother: civil servant - Secondary School Education
- second of three boys
- attends special school in private sector
- problem: learning difficulties with autistic features; unidentified cause

This, on the other hand, is how his mother sees him:

Mother: Everything was normal, natural birth, he weighed 4 kgs, he was breastfed, all normal... He said all these words that small children say: agou, mama, papa, normally; he was quieter than my first boy, but my first born was such a naughty child that I thought there was something wrong with him. I thought Chris was normal. He was a cheerful baby, used to be obedient, used to listen to me, used to eat all his food...

What would be described as a problem child by a professional, was in fact a dream child for his mother, an opinion that will only be disputed by those of us who are not mothers and/or have never attempted to feed a child or get him to cooperate. The mother is passionate (and why should she not be?) in her

description of this beautiful and pleasant child who, on growing, becomes increasingly a great source of concern. Her emphatic declarations on how normal everything was (she uses the word three times and a number of synonyms too) is only the source of shattered expectations. Chris, the subject of such pride and joy, will prove to be 'not normal' devastating his mother's heart. The mother watches closely the child's development and begins to feel that something is wrong. The father, whom she confides in, does not see, or does not wish to see, any differences between his first and second sons. All hopes and fears of the mother centre in school because she feels that schooling will be the ultimate test.

On school entry her worst fears are confirmed. Chris is proven to be what teachers would call 'a problem child'. This is not how his mother sees the situation as the first unhappy days of primary school begin.

The mainstream experience

Mother: ...Unfortunately he did not find a good teacher as we expected. She was a problem teacher. As soon as she saw him, she saw him in a negative way... From the very first day... I went with him and I waited in the court for them to come out for break. As soon as they came out I asked: 'what is happening with Chris?' and immediately she took a hostile attitude towards me. 'I did not manage to communicate with him' she said. (...) The teacher did not want the child at all. She never tried to help him. She did not accept him. She never loved him at all. She used to throw him out of the class. He used to try to get in and she used to make other children push him out... The child was very unhappy. The head teacher used to stand up for her. He used to say that she was a good teacher. Good, but...

This is obviously a disappointing school start whose negative effects last throughout school as there is a collision between school professionals, or so the mother experiences it. In her brief summary of Chris' five long years of mainstream school experience, she recalls the class teachers – the first one in particular – as unhelpful and unloving, and the school head as uncooperative. There are in the home-school literature plenty of examples on how a positive school experience can help a child forward. Let us follow here the trail of a negative one that takes the child backwards diminishing its existing skills, destroying its self-confidence and – most importantly – making it thoroughly unhappy:

(...) We could see he was getting worse in school. He suffered a lot. He withdrew within himself. He did not speak at all for some time. He did not speak at all. He wanted water, he would show it to me. He wanted water, he showed me the water. He stopped talking. He was in a bad state. He... I did not know what to do... And so I said: 'let's take him to a special school', even though it was very difficult for me to take my kid to a special school. I could not imagine it. But we were forced, seeing how the child suffered. I would see him every morning dragging his feet to school, pale... He used to get so upset he went pale.

Without help, support and understanding the parents continue the battle with the primary school for a long number of years, which turn out to be completely and irreversibly wasted for Chris. Paige-Smith (1997, p.47) argues that parents of children with special needs are faced with all the prejudice which anybody with a disability is faced with, and so appears to be the case with Chris' mother. Yet, she insists on keeping her child in the mainstream school convinced that this is the best option for him and scared to move him to a special school as the head teacher suggests. An older student with learning difficulties suggests (see Peters, 1999, p.114) that 'labelling makes you one of two things: weak or strong'. Chris' mother indicates this, showing also that – as Paige-Smith (1997) suggests – she has no means of combating the prejudice that hurts her other than rejecting it.

Mallett (1997, p. 34) a parent herself, suggests that 'parental perspective is significantly informed by early experiences of dealing with professionals' and 'bad practice is remembered'. Along these lines, Chris' mother develops at the same time a mistrust in professionals, a stubborn attitude towards them, and a deep anxiety regarding their decision-making which influences her child's and her own life. Mallett (1997, p. 35) reckons that in such circumstances a parent can react in one of two ways: 'we can experience an isolation that renders us so anxious and disempowered that we either become the aggressive warrior (fighting all the way) or passive and defenceless against any bad practice'. Is it possible to do both at the same time? Chris' mother is obviously very tender and hurting while appearing uncompromising and uncooperative with professionals.

Lack of information, guidance and support is added to the insult she experiences and makes it even more difficult for her to accept the need for transfer to a special school. She opposes what she considers a stigmatised form of schooling (Beveridge, 1997; Vlachou, 1997) not least because of the father's denial to accept there is any need for Chris to attend a special school. Riddell *et al.* (1994) and Paige-Smith (1997) among others have argued that acceptance of special needs is occasionally harder for middle class parents who consider it as a

threat to their middle class status and social standing, and this could be true for Chris' family. His father's resistance could however also be interpreted as a gender issue which would need to be further researched. It has been indicated (David, 1993; Maclachlan, 1996; West *et al.*, 1998) that mothers are those who undertake all the hard work that is often associated with school negotiations and support of children's progress. It is also true, however, that fathers are all those who fill the positions of power in governing and other bodies associated with schools while mothers claim they have too much to do at home (actually supporting the child's learning) to be able to participate in decision-making (Phtiaka, 1998).

What happens in special education? The same division of labour appears to be taking place there, with mothers doing all the 'dirty' work and fathers taking all the credit. At the same time something very interesting occurs. Fathers appear to have much greater difficulty accepting the child's special need, as if this were a blow to their own masculine ego, and they seem to either completely disassociate themselves from the child's education or over-compensate for the deviance by building an activist career in parental pressure groups. More research along these lines can help us answer these questions more fully. What is important to note here is that such seeds of disagreement within the family leave the mother trapped between competing pressures and unable to decide, as well as powerless. In Chris' case all this deliberation caused an incredible amount of delay in developmentally crucial years. He was transferred to the special school while in the fifth year of his education as the interview with the head teacher indicates:

Helen: Chris has been here for some time... Which year was he at school when he came?

Head teacher: (...) He came from the 6th year in the state school (names school) in 1994.

Helen: 6th? I don't think he had gone that far...

Head teacher: (checking the file) 5th year...

Helen: 5th? I thought he was in the 3rd year

Head teacher: 5th year. This is the father's handwriting...

The home tutor who is employed much later to assist him at home can give us an idea of how important those lost years were for Chris' life.

Helen: What were you told that the child had?

Tutor: Autism

Helen: What do you think he has?

Tutor: It is a case of mild mental retardation with autistic features. (...) He is not an autistic child... No, no, It is mental retardation with autistic features (...) It is very mild, it is not serious at all, but he is having difficulties due to these autistic features...

Helen: Did he always have them?

Tutor: Yes, he did but they did not pay any attention then (when he was a small child). They did not know enough to spot them. (...) They were increasing as time passed... were getting worse. At the age he is now it is not possible for them to be reduced... (...) some have been reduced, some bad habits he had...

Helen: From the little I saw Chris, and I am not in the business of making a diagnosis, I got the impression that his retardation is very mild, and I wonder if he could not have achieved a lot more by now... if he could not be an independent individual...

Tutor: Yes, he could, yes! (...) but as the mother has told me they had nobody to help them in the primary school. The head teacher did not care. Chris was for him a problem, a nuisance, just one more trouble. He was looking for ways to get rid of him. (...) He lost a lot of valuable time in his childhood.

In the light of parental and professional worries regarding the delay of one or two years in assessment (Riddell *et al.*, 1994), five wasted years is an enormous amount of time.

Change of heart

In 1994, when Chris was already 11 years old, his parents began to appreciate that his schooling was having a very negative impact on him (instead of helping him develop and maximise his potential, which is presumably what school needs to be doing). They decided to take him to a private special school. Perhaps not surprisingly it was not the head teacher of the mainstream school who finally persuaded them to do this, despite his efforts for years, but rather the head teacher of a special school. There is possibly nothing wrong with this. However, this was a private special school which had recently started to function (1992) and it is reasonable to expect that the head teacher was doing some serious recruiting – after all a private school is a business. Perhaps nothing wrong again. Parents are allowed to make alternative or private arrangements for their own children and they do (Phtiaka, 1996a; Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997). But should they have to? A parent, quoted in Riddell *et al.* (1994), disagrees: ‘You should not have to fight to have your children properly educated

and look at private education to achieve this!' (p. 336). I do not therefore wish to dispute the parental right to choose alternative options. I rather wish to indicate that lack of support from the state system leaves the parent with no other option but private education. It also leaves him or her very vulnerable to anyone who appears to be sympathetic and offering a listening ear, regardless of his or her qualifications and – of course – at a price. In Chris' case bad communication with and lack of support from the State system led to the build up of mistrust and suspicion. His parents (also in Mallett, 1997 and Paige Smith, 1997) were then open to other apparently friendlier voices:

Helen: It is interesting that it was a woman outside the education system that persuaded you to take the child to a special school, while no one in school managed to do so.

Mother: Yes, they didn't because we could see that they were not really interested, they didn't care... They just wanted a trouble out of their hands. They did not love the child (...) The head teacher would tell us but we could not be persuaded. We insisted that Chris had to stay in the mainstream school.

Helen: Why did you not believe him? Did you not trust him?

Mother: Yes! We did not see them love the child and want the best for him. We didn't get that feeling. And the word 'special school' was too distant for us. We could not accept it. Now... now the word special is part of our life, but back then... we could not accept it then at all...

We can see in the mother's words the big disappointment parents felt with the school and we can deduce from that what an easy prey such disappointed parents must have been in the hands of anyone wanting to promote his or her personal interests. So Chris was transferred to the private special school.

The special school

For a number of reasons the transfer to the special school did not turn out to be an ideal solution. The child, after an initial happy spell, came to crave for attention once again. Was it because the number of children grew and he was no longer getting enough attention in class? Was it because this place, despite the better marketing devices, was equally unsuitable and/or uncaring for Chris? And how are these two reasons related to the fact that the school is a private business? Is it possible that the recruiting was done on false promises? This is the explanation Chris' mother has to offer:

Helen: How did he get on in the special school?

Mother: Psychologically he felt better. He no longer had that stress that he had in the primary school, but as far as learning goes, not very well. (...) We took the child there thinking that she (the head teacher) would look after him personally. I think she is good in this area (...) but she is the head teacher. And I have been meaning to change his school a couple of years now seeing that she, the woman we believed in, could not help.

Helen: The teachers?

Mother: They are nice girls, but they do not know how to help... They are nursery teachers and such like... They have five⁴ children in the class and I can say that they have really not bothered much about Chris...

To complement his mother's assessment, it is quite plain from the head teacher's own words that Chris' emotional needs were not addressed:

Helen: Can you tell me a little about Chris? When, how, why he came, where he is at, where he is going...

Head teacher: Chris could simply write two-syllable words without being able to put them in sentences. He could copy, but his letters were not readable. He could not read complexes of two consonants at the beginning of the words. He could use art materials, paints, crayons, colour pencils but without any creative result, and that under instruction. He could not draw straight lines...

In reply to a very broad question regarding Chris, the head-teacher addresses simply the question of skills, which was not even the most important reason for his transfer to her school. She seems to have no interest (or to be in no position) to describe Chris' emotional development in the last few years. Clearly, Chris' needs are once again not addressed properly. Thankfully for Chris, the home tutor's approach, when she comes to help, is quite different:

Tutor: We started off... I had to see where he was at as far as education was concerned...(...) But what I found was a problem, was that he could not write his name... He could just copy...

Helen: What was your first priority when you saw him?

Tutor: It was for him to learn the basic stuff. How to behave, to reduce some of his autistic features, to start showing an interest

in school and classes again, to stop being negative, to be more cooperative with his parents as far as studying went... social goals mostly because as far as education goes he is stabilizing now, not much we can do.

It is quite clear that the happy educational interlude in the special school lasted for a very short time. What was the school's contribution? Did it succeed where the mainstream school had failed? There are three points we can make here. They are all related to traditional myths associated with special schools and often used as arguments in their favour.

1. In the special school there no longer existed the immense curriculum pressure that exists in the mainstream. So Chris was relieved of all that stress.

This is hardly an achievement. It is quite obvious that the mainstream curriculum was inappropriate for Chris and other children like him, and appropriate arrangements should therefore had taken place in the mainstream school. Moreover, curriculum changes of this magnitude are always done at an enormous cost, and a stress-free schooling is the least benefit expected.

2. In the special school the class was smaller, so Chris was getting much more attention than before.

This is what happened originally, but as we can see this was probably due to the small number of children attending the school. When the numbers rose, the class grew in size (although the numbers were still considerably smaller than those in the mainstream class) and – more importantly – in breadth of age and needs. The new constitution of the class was clearly not addressing Chris' needs and what was gained from smaller numbers was lost from greater needs.

3. The special school possessed expertise not available in the mainstream.

This seems to be disputed by the mother in her assessment of Chris' progress, and indeed it is not reflected in his development. It is also not backed up by observation data. Interview data is unclear on that as the head teacher was elusive and fuzzy when asked about staff qualifications. The staff spoke about broad educational qualifications, but nothing in the way of special education training and experience. Given that the information collected in school is insufficient to lead to a satisfactory conclusion, suffices here to say that if – contrary to all evidence – such expertise existed, it was not utilised properly.

It appears therefore that the new school, although special (as opposed to the first mainstream school) and private (as opposed to the first State school) did not produce a significantly improved outcome. On the contrary! After an initial happy spell, Chris was once again frustrated and unhappy.

Two years later

Two years after his admission to the special school, Chris was at a turning point again. His behaviour reverted to what it had been in the state school, and he became frustrated, irritable and very difficult to handle at home. The school head teacher seems to have not even noticed the problems faced by Chris and his family, and is rather inclined to put the blame at home for any 'irregularities' that might be occurring when the possibility of a problem is suggested to her.

Head teacher: He has not had any particular behaviour problems, although his father has mentioned problems at home and stereotypical forms of behaviour that he does not exhibit here.

Two years of dissatisfaction in the special school are enough for parents to employ a home tutor. It appears that once again they are faced with no other option but more private education. The mother's description leaves us in no doubt about the severity of the problem:

Mother: His behaviour started deteriorating in this school too... And there I was again, not knowing what to do... He started withdrawing. He felt isolated and marginalised, he felt that they were not interested in him...

As the tutor also describes, the boy was in a very bad state indeed, particularly in relation to school, and it is therefore quite striking that the school was so unaware of the problem.

Tutor: When I started out with Chris, it was at the time when he did not want to go to school, he did not want to write, he did not want to read, he just did not want... If he managed to take the pencil, he used to press it so hard that he used to rip the page. He was at that point. He was in a bad state as far as school was concerned. Just as far as the school was concerned... At home he was just fine! But he refused to do his homework, even with his mother...

Helen: Why did the parents ask for help? What was their problem?

Tutor: He could not go ahead in school. It was impossible. With all the refusal he could not get anywhere. He could not go ahead.

Helen: What did he do in school?

Tutor: He was negative there too. He was not cooperative. He was O.K. in the beginning, but then... The parents were complaining that he was not receiving enough attention because the woman who had the school took on more students and did not pay as much attention to him, and maybe did not have the right (qualified) staff... This is what they still believe... Seeing that he was not receiving enough attention, Chris reacted in this way. He was negative about everything.

What happened? It appears that the special school failed to address the child's needs. The failure was such that Chris indicated the same symptoms he had indicated while in the mainstream school. Yet the school seems to be quite unaware of the problem and the mother is once again left without support. On top of the school fee she now has to pay a home tutor to help Chris out with his homework. This is a double irony! In the State mainstream sector parents often need to employ such tutors to help their child cope with the mainstream curriculum. In the mainstream private sector this is unheard of! This is exactly what parents pay the school fee for! It is also unheard of in the special mainstream sector because supposedly a special school is there to address educational and emotional needs that the mainstream school has failed to address! Yet it might be the case that parents in special education are often obliged to employ home tutors (we know that they often employ other professionals such as speech-therapists or physiotherapists) too to see their children through the school years. We evidently need more data in this area in order to verify if parents are in effect doubly cheated by the school system. For Chris and his parents this is exactly what happened. Thankfully this was – at last – the solution.

Now

Two years on from the employment of the home tutor (and four years after his registration in the special school) Chris seems to be back on his feet and happy. The school seems to claim all success for itself.

Helen: Tell me first what were your goals for Chris.

Head teacher: Well, all those things that I told you he could not do, recognition of all the numbers without confusing them, we managed to do that. At this point in time, in his last report, just for

you to see, he can add and subtract up to 100 with some help, he can read independently texts at year two level, he can solve problems, he reads faster and comprehends more the text, he uses the full stop, he can take part satisfactorily in group discussions...

The mother seems to believe that the home tutor's presence has worked out miracles. It is useful to add here that the home tutor is a trained special educator with a lot of teaching experience.

Mother: He likes cycling very much! He came first in the European championships. He got gold medals in cycling! (...) We brought a special teacher at home and she helps him with his homework. He has done a lot of progress with that little help, twice a week for an hour each time (...) she has helped him a lot. He has found his self-confidence again. He gets lots of praise in his book, he made no mistakes in his dictation. He did all his work, his books are full of 'bravo' and little stars. Last year – the first year we had the teacher at home – he got a school prize, the prize for best effort. This year too, they are very happy with him, with his efforts...

The home tutor seems to be quite realistic about Chris' successes and failures and about his future prospects.

Tutor: He does not improve much educationally now because he is already fifteen and so we have reached a level where his abilities stabilise. (...) He now writes words. They are completely misspelled, but I don't have a problem with that. So, if he writes EINAI as INE, I think whoever reads is, still reads 'ine', can still understand (...) the text. I take it for granted that he cannot learn all these 'i's and 'e's. And I sort of think that, O.K. in Chris' case it's not the end of the world if he does not learn them, and I no longer insist on such matters. But he has improved enough. He is not... He knows as much as he needs to know as far as language goes. In Maths he is still at addition and subtraction level with difficulty. We need to have an abacus in front of us. (...) But we learned our name (laughs). I insisted a lot on that, learning to write his name by heart, both Chris and Christopher... We improved a little generally...

Evidently, Chris is a much happier young man now than he was two years ago, he is more self-confident and achieving a lot both in academic and other areas. He

can now show his true capabilities and his mother can be proud of him. He can also be proud of himself. It took however nine years of education to reach this point. He does not have many more years of education left, and, as the home tutor points out, this is a time when it becomes increasingly difficult for him to learn new skills.

Expectations

In trying to untangle what went wrong in Chris' education, it seems to me appropriate to start by comparing parental and school expectations (also Kyriakides, 1999). The special school seems to be quite unaware of parental dissatisfaction and rather complacent in its approach.

Helen: Do you receive any feedback from parents? Is it possible for parents who were once interested to be so no longer because they are disappointed or tired in relation to the school? Maybe they expected more...

Head teacher: ...To be so disappointed with the school... I don't think so... When they bring the children we tell them what our goals are this term for each child...

The home seems to be quite disappointed in their expectations from school. This is hardly surprising as we have followed Chris' progress – or lack of it – in school and the school's lack of sensitivity to the child's problems.

Mother: Well, they don't offer anything. We were asking for more. We were expecting much more... I had to employ a special teacher at home to help him become accepted, to feel that he loves them and is loved back... Before that he was withdrawn... Now he is O.K. with this teacher's help. He feels that he makes progress, he is learning, and he has taken courage, and so the others have accepted him too. Earlier he had completely lost his self confidence...

Mismatch of expectations between home and school is obviously a source of conflict. Parents feel betrayed in their expectations from school (a fee paying school let me point out again) and the school feels let down (as we shall see) by the parents.

Cooperation

A second point of discussion needs to be the issue of co-operation between home and school. In Chris' case, cooperation between home and school is simply non-existent:

Mother: We thought he would have more attention, more care in the private sector, but I cannot say this is true. The state (special) school is the same. I went and saw it...

Helen: Are you thinking of taking him there?

Mother: Yes, yes...I went last year, and I wrote a letter asking for him to be transferred to the state sector...

The school is very unhappy with the parents' lack of cooperation and has no explanation for it apart from parental lack of interest in the child's progress. This is a regular school complaint regarding parents, and it is both very common and quite mistaken as indicated by relevant research (Phtiaka, 1996a, 1998). In Chris' case where we have followed the child's misfortunes in school, this is quite an ironic statement coming from a school that obviously had too little interest in the child's progress to notice the turmoil he was going through:

Helen: Whom do you have a closer cooperation with? The father or the mother?

Head teacher: (remains silent)

Helen: Well, you need to tell me. This is the main point of our discussion.

Head teacher: (nods negatively)

Helen: Neither? You never had or has it deteriorated? Is it one of the cases you described earlier who start off enthusiastically and later lose interest?

Head teacher: Well, I don't think we ever had...

Helen: Don't they ever come now?

Head teacher: Well, we communicate by phone.

Helen: Who initiates this communication?

Head teacher: Either the class teacher or we (the head) for information.

Helen: I found it particularly interesting that Chris' diary⁵ was the only one that had no parental signatures...

Head teacher: Yes...

Helen: Did this start recently or has it always been like that?

Head teacher: Well, some times they sign but not very often.

Helen: Do they see it and not sign or do they just not see it?

Head teacher: If a parent saw it, they would sign.

The implication in the head teacher's words is that the parents are not interested in the child's progress. This is quite preposterous given the efforts the family has made to keep Chris happy in school, and yet this is the most common view schools have of families when something goes wrong. The research literature is full of head teachers and teachers in mainstream and special schools telling us that the problem lies with the family.

They usually have some indication for this, like the one offered here. They usually are wrong (Phtiaka, 1996a, 1998). In this case we are fortunate enough to have the opportunity to cross-check their views. We also have the benefit of the home tutor's insight. She seems to have a much more plausible explanation:

Tutor: You know there was a little misunderstanding... Some time ago the teacher wrote in his diary that they should come and talk about Chris' hygiene, and the parents did not like that, they thought that it was meant negatively for them and so they stopped signing the diary.

Evidently a very interesting case: the school (is it only this school?) has reached such a point of alienation from the family and the child that it has developed the view that:

1. it meets the child's needs;
2. the child has no problems in school -- what problems there are at home are the home's business;
3. the child's progress is a credit to the school;
4. the child's problems is a debit to its family;
5. and to cap it all the family does not care enough for the child!

Well, it simply is not true! We know that in this case it is the school that has shown a unique lack of sensitivity to the problems of the child and those of the parents. We also know from other research (Phtiaka, 1996a, 1998) that whenever we examine the home and the school in parallel, school claims about parental lack of interest in children's education are mistaken. Indeed, they are insulting as they often stem from lack of enough interest on the school's part to find out what is really going on at home. And yet, the deficit model of parenting has so dominated the field of home-school relations that parents have very rarely been given the benefit of the doubt.

So, can we at least claim that this is all a big misunderstanding due to lack of effective communication?

Communication

We could argue that lack of effective communication results in a lack of understanding between home and school. They ignore each other's needs, they are unaware of each other's efforts, and consequently they tend to blame each other for any problems arising. Let us examine this premise.

In theory, both professionals involved in this study are very supportive of the idea of communication between home and school. Both of them agree a good cooperation between home and school will lead to a better future for Chris. In their own words:

Head teacher: I believe that the biggest percentage of the child's improvement in every level, not only academic, but social and other, does not depend on school but on the parents. The information must be flowing between home and school in the interest of the best development of such children.

Tutor: I think that there must be a very good relationship. The professional spends half of the day with the child, and the other half is spent by the parent. It is not a good idea to have one do 'X' work in the morning and the other one to do something else, or not to continue the same. I mean, they must help each other, there must be a relationship of mutual support, mutual help...

In practice – as we have seen – there is no cooperation at all between home and school neither in the first nor in the second school. Here is the mother's description:

Helen: (...) I don't suppose you had this kind of conversations in the primary school...

Mother: In the primary school? No, no...

Helen: They just asked you to go and be informed about the problems I expect...

Mother: Yes, yes...

Helen: Didn't they ever invite you to ask for your help, your cooperation at home, to see what you can do...

Mother: No, just when he had problems they used to tell us about his problems...

Helen: And did they not suggest solutions... things that could be done to help solve the problem?

Mother: No. In the first few years they did not suggest anything, they just used to tell us, and then they were telling us about sending him to a special school.

Helen: So that was the only solution suggested...

Mother: Yes, yes, yes...

Helen: They never said that if you too help at home a bit, things may improve...

Mother: No, the did not say anything...

Helen: Did you never have the feeling that your help could make a difference?

Mother: We used to oppress him, we used to oppress him and he used to react in a very negative way. He used to withdraw within himself.

Helen: Didn't the school try to show you how to help?

Mother: No.

Helen: And neither did the special school...

Mother: No, no...

Helen: So you just entrusted him in their hands when he went there...

Mother: Yes, yes... I just thought that the head teacher would help...

Evidently there is no cooperation at all between home and school and no support from one to the other. Interestingly, as indicated in the quotation that follows, the parents are by now quite clear about their own failings. They have learned that they can expect nothing from school, so they seek alternative ways of solving school problems:

Helen: Doesn't the school involve you at all, ask you or inform you so that you can help the children at home?

Mother: Because Chris does not want at all to be helped, I haven't asked... They have a diary and they write daily what they have done, and they also write the homework he has to do. This is the information we get.

Helen: The home tutor looks at that I expect... What did you do before she came?

Mother: I used to try and help him, he did not accept, and so he used to go to school unprepared... Maybe that's why he fell behind.

Helen: Don't you have cooperation with the special school? To go regularly...

Mother: Only when they invited us. We did not go on our own accord.

Helen: Does Chris have an individualised programme of learning? Do you know?

Mother: I don't know, no...

Helen: (...) How do you get on with the teachers in school?

Mother: O.K.

Helen: You communicate well with them...

Mother: Well, we do, they don't offer anything. We were asking for more. We were expecting much more...

It is fascinating to see on the other hand that the school is once again completely unaware of the parents' position and of its own responsibilities in the situation that has arisen. It is in fact quite arrogant in its approach suggesting that the staff have done everything in their power to keep the communication channels with the family open, while it is quite clear even from the statement offered that such channels are quite deaf to parental pleas:

Helen: Is it possible to have good will on all sides and be troubled by bad communication? For the school to have the good will to cooperate, the parents the same, and you are just simply not communicating this to each other?

Head teacher: Bad communication? No, because if they cannot communicate with the teacher, they can try the head. They can even take their problem to the Parents' Association. If they are not successful there their last choice is the Board of Governors. So, I think that there are many choices. We cannot say that they have no choice.

To parental quests for care and support the school juxtaposes procedures. To hurt parental feelings the school recommends quasi-legal measures. This is a private special school – by any definition a school created for – and paid for – caring.⁶ What can we expect of schools that are not tailored to care? Is this a unique case? I think not! (Phtiaka, 1996a, 1998). Is this an uncaring society? This is a society where children never leave home – and of course they definitely don't at eighteen – where three generations of family gather round Sunday lunch, where any child is everyone's child and never the question – whose child is this – a

rises when cookies are passed around. This is a Mediterranean society where the industrial revolution -- and the alienation that followed -- never took place, where post-modern financial transactions co-exist with almost pre-modern societal structures.

So, where is the problem?

Conclusions

We have to conclude -- it seems -- that the problem lies with the model employed by the school to interpret its relationship with the family. It is a deficit model used to everyone's detriment. This is not an exceptional case (Scott & Morrison, 1994). What is happening here is cross-checked in many schools, in many countries in the mainstream and the special sectors in the State and the Private spheres. Schools all over the world, even schools that are especially designed to care⁷, appear to have a very particular way of looking at things. They are far more interested in control and procedure than they ever are in children, and yet they often are arrogant enough to claim that they are more interested in children than their own parents are. This is because they do not understand their parents' viewpoint and possibly because they do not care enough to discover it. If the analysis offered by Vlachou (1997) is correct, then the problem intensifies in special education. The deficit model used here is entrenched in the widely held deficit view of disability. That in turn is based on the medical model assumption which: 'treats disability as a defect of the individual, and his/her symptoms as the signs of an underlying cause of disability' (p.153).

Parents in most cases -- in special education in particular -- have few means to defend themselves and their children.⁸ Occasionally, as the case is here, they have the money to provide alternative and/or supplementary education, but this is not very common and we need not rely on it. Research in this area has a duty to bring out the parents' voice not simply because this is fair, nor in order to redress the balance and show what has been constructed as individual despair for the social disadvantage it often is (Armstrong, 1995). Not even just because lack of criticism serves to reproduce current practice (Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997). We, with the help of the parents (Martin, 2000), need to bring out the parents' voice simply in order to make our schools more humane.

For it is to be expected that humane schools will in the long term create a more humane society for all of us. It is simply a matter of survival of the species.

Notes

1. Vincent & Tomlinson (1997) develop a similar argument regarding home-school contracts which is a phenomenon of the nineties. It is quite interesting that the dynamics between home and school remain basically the same in a long space of time.
2. The new legislation comes in force on July 27th 2001.
3. The terms are translated from the Greek as closely as possible
4. There were many more than five. I counted nine during observation (including the absentees) aged between 7 and 20.
5. The school used the system of a home-school diary where the class teacher comments on the child's doings during the day and parents sign it to show they have been informed.
6. The school brochure cover proudly states: the human relationship!
7. Even though Vincent & Tomlinson (1997) warn us that special education professionals are no more likely than others to involve parents.
8. It is accepted here that parents have different needs (Toomey, 1996; Russell, 1997; Phtiaka, 1998) and also different means of influencing policy (Riddell *et al.*, 1994; Paige-Smith, 1997; Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997). The statement made however on the whole still holds true.

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