

First steps in parental involvement in primary education

Geraldine Taylor

“The benefits of parental involvement in primary education are well known and documented in terms of both skills and attitudes”

In the UK, the benefits of parental involvement in primary education are well known and documented in terms of both skills and attitudes. Moreover, parental involvement in learning is encouraged in the home-school agreements now issued by each school. This encouragement to participate was not always the case. I have been called one of the mothers of parental involvement because I have been associated with this movement since 1984 when the idea of parents as partners was virtually unheard of. Since that time, I have worked with thousands of parents and dozens of heads of primary schools, nurseries and with pre-school groups, working out practical first steps, seeing those steps through, evaluating what is going on and planning for the future. In this first article, I would like to look in detail at taking those first steps within a primary school setting. These are the steps which invariably feel the most vulnerable to those of us in the profession.

In the beginning ...

- Perhaps the most productive and democratic way to begin is to hold a teachers' meeting, specifically to look at the issue of involvement and to hear how each teacher feels about it. It's very important to hear and value these feelings, even if reservation and anxiety are expressed. No-one should feel forced into parental involvement, and knowing that anxieties can be raised safely is often a powerful way to dispel them.

- Discuss or brainstorm what you hope to gain from parental involvement. This can valuably be a mixture of the general: to get across a welcome to parents, the more specific: to get parents to help with reading at home and the particular: to make sure children know their alphabet names and sounds.

- Would you prefer the parents to help you in the school itself - or would you prefer the help to be at home - or both?

- Establishing parental involvement takes time. Do not feel rushed into arranging meetings and workshops. If you would prefer parents' involvement to be outside school, then there are very valuable ways to achieve this. In any case, it's wise to take time to lay the ground by special letters and newsletters. I have found that this is one of the most productive ways to develop links - and can often have a more lasting and widespread effect than a

sudden invitation to come to a meeting, or to help out in the classroom. Parents are more likely to respond to an invitation to a meeting if they understand what you are trying to do.

- Is there one member of staff who would like to be responsible for home-school links or should there be a small committee of say three or four. How will they keep everyone informed? How will they elicit ideas? Would further planning meetings be helpful?

I would like to look next at some of the reactions which inhibit parental involvement. I find that these perfectly understandable reactions are still widespread in the profession.

If we hold a meeting, we will only get the parents we always see...

This may be true at the beginning but surely many good causes begin by preaching to the converted? These same parents may be the very parents who could valuably learn from a discussion of the effects of pressure on children's learning. Moreover, you could enlist their help to spread the word.

If you show yourself open to parent participation in children's learning, then little by little, parents will come. I have held school-based meetings with as few as two and as many as 204! Value the parents you always see. These are your anchor people and your beginning.

What happens if we arrange a meeting and nobody comes?

If only one or two people come to what you have arranged, carry on anyway but in a very informal way, and ask these parents how they think you can best work together to encourage children's learning. What would they like to know - what kind of information would be most helpful for them. Try not to evaluate your first steps in terms of the number of people who respond by attending a meeting. If nobody comes, use the free time to discuss and plan your next approach. The important thing is that you have taken the first step.



GERALDINE TAYLOR is Educational Consultant to Ladybird Books Ltd. She holds a BA and an MA from Bristol University and a Diploma in Special Education from the University of the West of England. She has led workshops on children's learning for thousands of parents in the UK and has lectured on parental involvement at the Bristol University Department of Education.



If we ask parents to get involved, they will encourage their children

This could be an excellent opportunity to explain what pressure is and show children how best to avoid it! About this see: "The Motivated Child" in *Education 2000* No 4: 1998.

Some of our parents are not literate themselves

All parents can learn the skill of effective encouragement. They can learn other skills, too. For example, the most valuable way to talk about pictures in books is to encourage early reading as a skill and one the profession could share with parents. In the long term, too, what you arrange as parental involvement could have a positive impact on these parents' literacy itself.

That would not work here...

Sometimes circumstances may seem to be against parental involvement but that does not mean it is not worth trying - and it is certainly worth sharing experiences and pooling expertise with other schools.

Faculty of Education Research Seminars

It is often the case that we who labour in the field of education are very much perceived to be action people with limited opportunities for reflection. There are so many practical considerations to be seen to that oftentimes when we meet, it is to discuss policy and to decide on possible ways of action. It is as if we cannot afford the luxury to stop and reflect on the thinking which guides our practice. With this in mind and to provide an opportunity for local educational researchers to share their work with the educational community, the Faculty of Education has embarked on a series of research seminars.

The first research seminar which was a huge success was held on Wednesday, 10 November. It was very well-attended by colleagues from the Faculty, Education Division officials, post-graduate students, school-based colleagues and others from different spheres of life, like industry, etc.

On Wednesday 10 November, Dr Grace Grima, who lectures at the Faculty of Education, gave a presentation on: Group Assessment in Education: An International Perspective, based on her recent doctoral work in New Zealand. Her multi-media presentation was followed by a discussion on: The Role of Group Assessment in the Maltese Curriculum. Some very important points were made by Ms Mary Vella, director for Curriculum of the Education Division who has chaired the Committee which drafted the new National Minimum Curriculum for Maltese schools.

Dr Grace Grima has recently returned from New Zealand, having completed her doctoral studies at the University of Otago as a Commonwealth scholar. Her placement at the Educational Assessment Research Unit of the University of Otago allowed her to conduct a probe study within the National Educational Monitoring Project, a project with a four year cycle, contracted by the Ministry of Education, to monitor children at different stages of their formal education. Her specialisation in group assessment has presented her with opportunities to publish her ideas as well as to present her work at several educational conferences in New Zealand, North America and Australia.

The second Faculty of Education Research Seminar will be held on Wednesday, 12th January, 2000 from

6.00 - 8.00 pm in the Faculty of Education Board Room, Old Humanities Building, Room 326. The speaker will be Dr Paul A. Bartolo of the Department of Psychology of the Faculty of Education. His presentation will deal with decision-making frameworks in the assessment of the educational needs of children with developmental disability.

Educators, other professionals and parents are constantly faced with making decisions about the best ways of meeting the developmental and learning needs of the children they serve. How do they make their judgements and decisions? What influences their decision making?

As Dr Bartolo's presentation will show these questions were explored through a qualitative analysis of multiprofessional discussions among psychologists, a psychotherapist, a paediatrician, speech therapists, teachers and heads of school and parents in two agencies in London: one based in a hospital and one in a school.

Dr Paul Bartolo is an educational psychologist and full-time lecturer in the Department of Psychology of the Faculty of Education. He is co-ordinator of the educational psychology stream of the M.Psy professional training course for psychologists recently offered by the University of Malta. He has conducted wide-ranging teaching and professional work as a school psychologist in state schools and with the EDEN Foundation. He holds a PGCE and MA from the University of Malta, an M.Ed in Educational Psychology from Toronto, and an M.Sc in psychology professional training from Manchester. He has recently completed his Ph.D at the University of London.

For further information about Faculty of Education Research seminars please contact Dr Charles Mifsud on 3290 2039 or cmif2@educ.um.edu.mt.

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