

Disability And Home-School Relations In Cyprus: Hope And Deception

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Based on the view that parental participation in the educational process enhances learning, school success and children prosperity, we conducted a preliminary exploratory research, so as to examine the current home-school relations in Cyprus regarding parents with disabled children. Data was collected from semi-structured interviews with six parents of disabled children. The interviewees revealed some gloomy aspects regarding the implementation of the special education law in Cyprus. In particular, the six parents reported that disabled children in Cyprus are often considered incapable of learning and unable to approach the prevalent normality. Such views seem to reflect the prevalence of prejudice and negative stereotypes, which often define home-school relations and teachers' expectations from disabled children in Cyprus. Secondly, the six parents discussed some segregation education practices, related to unequal power relations, which seem to hinder inclusion. In particular the parents referred to occasional verdicts against the parents' wishes, which, according to them, were harmful for their disabled children. Thirdly, the interviewees described their feelings regarding home-school relations. In general, the six parents confirmed that ineffective communication, teachers' attitudes towards disability and problematic home-school relations debar partnership working and result in the exclusion of disabled children.

Keywords: home-school relations, inclusive education, disabled students, parents with disabled children, teachers' attitudes, Cyprus

Introduction

Despite the complexity and contradiction evident in disability issues, attempts to realize inclusive education have been intensified during the last decades (Armstrong, 2005). Inclusion is about social justice, equity and citizenship (Barton, 2008); it is about the rights of all children to full participation in education, and to equal provision of opportunities, irrespective of ability and diversity, so as to reach their full potential (Symeonidou & Phtiaka, 2009). However, schooling was never intended for everyone (Slee, 2001); therefore the quest for implementing inclusive policy and practice is fundamentally a struggle to change the educational system (Liasidou, 2007). Yet, attempts for change seem to bump onto current ideologies and everyday educational practice, which render inclusive education a contentious area of public and education policy (Rogers, 2007). Nonetheless, because inclusion is a means of distributing social justice, discriminating and

exclusive factors cannot be trivialised; instead, they ought to be identified and critically examined. In this way essential and fundamental change may be facilitated (Liasidou, 2007).

Despite the complexity of the issues surrounding education and schooling, research has shown that parental involvement in education is of great importance for pupils' learning and well-being. However, relationships between home and school constitute a controversial issue: they have never been static across time and space and may range from hostility and open competition in the school arena to cooperation and partnership (Bæck, 2010; Beveridge, 2004). Yet, the initial aim of positive home-school relations policy and rhetoric was to make the system less adversarial and to reduce likely conflict and stress between home and school. Nonetheless, the unequal and ambivalent roles of parents and professionals in decision-making and home-school relations have rendered their relationships problematic. Evidently then, the complexity of the pursuit of home-school relations increases when the profound meaning of 'cooperation and partnership' as basic components of positive

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home-school relations is sought out (Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2008).

From the perspective of the school, cooperation usually implies that teachers decide and parents agree. To quote Phtiaka (2001, p. 144):

"Clearly the roots of the notion of cooperation between home and school were 'the school dictates, the home cooperates' – hardly a cooperation at all. 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 in its own terms. Parents have simply been expected to conform."

However attempts to control parents by transforming them into obedient and docile contemplators seem to have negative implications for children, especially when home-school relations involve disabled pupils (O'Connor, 2007). In fact, when parents are left out, children are usually treated rather as a sum of deficits and an amalgam of deviations from normality than as individuals. As research reveals, parents often feel that professional endeavour to identify likely syndromes is privileged, whereas their intimate knowledge of the child is devalued. As a result, the most difficult aspect of parenting a disabled child becomes working with professionals, within a context that sees disability as personal tragedy for the family and their 'poor' disabled child (Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2008; MacArthur, 2004).

In contrast, when teachers develop partnerships working with parents, then alliances for the benefit of the children are created (Russell, 2011; Vincent, 2000). Yet, as pointed out by Bæck (2010), it is the teachers who actually define the nature of the relation between home and school: "Teachers are in position to either destroy or maintain the traditional barrier that exists between home and school, and teachers' interest, attitudes and competence regarding home-school cooperation is crucial for its success" (p. 323). Since parent-professional partnerships and the consequent family satisfaction are considered as the bedrock of improving outcomes for children and as important markers for their longer-term development, the teachers' attitude towards partnership appear to play a significant role both in children and family well-being (Phtiaka, 2006; Russell, 2011; Ware, 1994).

Usually, a partnership suggests cooperation and sharing of ideas and influence. Moreover, it implies complementary expertise, critical friendships and willingness to learn from one another (Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2008; Vincent, 2000). Therefore, partnership is related to mutual respect and support, open and continuous negotiation, joint working, and shared decision-making. Moreover, real partners are listened to and properly informed through a continuous process of knowledge exchange (Angel, Stoner & Shelden, 2009; French & Swain, 2008; Todd, 2003). From the perspective of parents with disabled children, this is not an easy task. They seem to believe that professionals are reluctant to share information with them or listen to what they have to say, even though they may be called upon to assist professionals. Moreover, they argue that they often find themselves under pressure to conform to what professionals suggest, despite their likely disagreement (Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2008; Rogers, 2007). From their part, teachers believe that parents meddle too much in the things that go on in school and that they should support the mandate of the school (Bæck, 2010). Hence, in a battle for power, the development of positive home-school relations appears utopian (Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2008).

The problematic character of the relations between parents and teachers appears to be a usual phenomenon in Cyprus as well, where educational policy seems to create rather than dismantle barriers to inclusion (Angelides & Aravi, 2006; Mamas, 2013; Phtiaka, 2007). Whereas integration practices had been informally operating in Cyprus since the 80's, the rather new law 113(I) that legitimised attendance in mainstream schools for disabled children was passed only in 1999. Moreover, even though there were enormous changes in terminology and policy regarding special education in Cyprus during the last decades, there were only very slight changes in educational practice (Batsiou, Bebetos, Panteli & Antoniou, 2008; Koutrouba, Vamvakari & Steliou, 2006). Difficulties to realise inclusive practice in Cyprus education seem to be related to the attempt to cover the distance between complete segregation and inclusion in a very short space of time. Amongst a turmoil of political changes (i.e. from colonial rule to independence, and then to the Turkish invasion and the division of the island), personal ambitions, increased parental

demands and external pressure factors (e.g. 1993 and 1997 UNESCO reports), the state was forced to quickly replace exclusionary policy with inclusion, without the essential ideological backup having been digested by the stakeholders (Phtiaka, 2008; Symeonidou, 2002). In this way, whereas advocates of inclusion supported that disabled children had the right to quality education alongside their peers, in contrast its opponents believed that segregation and special schools were in the best interest of disabled children. In fact, this debate still goes on in Cyprus (Koutrouba et al., 2006; Phtiaka, 2007). As a result, the implementation of inclusion has remained incomplete, impinging on the prevalence of the charity and medical models, exemplified by philanthropic activities such as the Radio-marathon (Phtiaka, 1999). Within a competitive and individualistic education system then, charity and pity seem to constitute the driving force behind transactions and relationships with disabled children and their families (Angelides, 2004; Liasidou, 2008; Symeonidou & Phtiaka, 2009). Thus families with disabled children in Cyprus often face what Russell (2011, p. 106) names as 'associative disability discrimination', i.e. discrimination that stems from being associated with a disabled person.

The focus on child deficiency, and personal and family tragedy is reflected in the 47/1979 law, according to which the labelled as physically disabled, maladjusted, mentally retarded children, and slow learners should enrol in special schools, while parents did not have any access to decision-making regarding their child. In addition, even though the new legislation (law 113(I)/1999) entitled parents to participate in the assessment process and to challenge any decisions taken, the final word belongs to the Educational Committee (Angelides, 2004; Liasidou, 2008; Phtiaka, 2008). In particular, according to the new legislation, 'experts' firstly categorise disabled students, and then they decide where to place them according to their category and the assumed severity of their disability. In this way, those students labelled as severely disabled are placed in special schools or special classes within mainstream schools, and those labelled as students with mild disabilities are allowed to enrol in mainstream schools. The classroom teachers of the latter have to cooperate with special education teachers, while students are supported via adapted individual

lessons with the special teacher in special units. During this process, parents are usually absent or rarely asked about their children's needs (Angelides, 2004; Koutrouba et al., 2006; Phtiaka, 2006).

Declared as a caring process in the best interest of the child, decision making often takes the form of professional expertise, sometimes against the wishes of the parents or simply without their consent. Even when parents are asked to give information about their children, it is someone else –an expert– who decides upon the best course of action. As a result of the lack of legal and state support, powerless parents seem to have no other option than to follow the school verdicts and conform to what is decided by others for their own children (Batsiou et al., 2008; Phtiaka, 2001). However, disappointment, anger and mismatch of expectations between home and school may constitute a source of conflict (Phtiaka, 2006; Rogers, 2007). In fact, lack of positive home-school relations and school alienation from the family may have critical implications on addressing the children's real needs, as well as on the development of their full potential (Ware, 1994; 2002). Since parents are an important source of information on the working of the systems designed to meet their children's needs, keeping them out of the decision-making appears to be to the disadvantage of the children (Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2008; Leyser & Kirk, 2004).

Evidently then, being a parent of a disabled child in Cyprus is not easy. To make things worse, a large part of teachers in Cyprus, who actually have the power in the school setting, does not favour inclusion. Having received inadequate initial training and being not willing to engage with what is considered difficult work, they often indicate a negative attitude which constitutes an important barrier to developing cooperative relationships with the parents of disabled children (Angelides, Vrasidas & Charalambous, 2007; Batsiou et al., 2008; Koutrouba et al., 2006; Symeonidou, 2002). Yet, powerless people may not be able to readily express themselves and their feelings and thereby they are not likely to effect change (French & Swain, 2008). In this way, powerless parents of disabled children in Cyprus often blame their children for not managing to cope with the dominant education system and for having problems at school. At the same time, professionals continue to adopt the exclusive position of 'expert', a title that allows

them to remain powerful (Liasidou, 2011; Phtiaka, 2006; Symeou, 2007). According to Bæck (2010), threats to the teachers' monopoly, which stem from a larger political movement towards empowerment, force teachers to set strict boundaries to parents' involvement in school.

Based on the above, the following questions arise: what are the factors that still impede the creation of positive relationships between families with disabled children and school in contemporary Cyprus? Is there hope to develop a working partnership between teachers and parents of disabled children?

Methodology

In order to answer the research questions, we conducted a preliminary exploratory research. Our aim was to obtain a better understanding of contemporary home-school relations in Cyprus, related problems and contributing factors, so as to form the initial landscape and to identify likely future perspectives. Therefore, we chose to gather data through semi-structured interviews. The participants were interviewed two times for approximately one hour and a half each time. A third interview was conducted if further clarifications seemed essential. Our sample included six parents with disabled children. These children had learning difficulties but different ages that ranged from twelve to twenty five years of age. The parents and their disabled children are presented here with the following pseudonyms so as to retain anonymity and confidentiality: Maria and her son Andreas, Nikos, Yanna and their daughter Stavroula, Petros and his son Kyriakos, Anna and her daughter Artemis, and Vasilis and his son Dimitris. Data were analyzed with thematic analysis in order to detect patterns and recurring themes (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2008).

Participants' profiles

Maria is a secondary school graduate. She is married and she has three children, two girls and a boy. She lives in the suburbs of *Larnaca*. She is currently a housewife. Her son Andreas is fourteen years old. He is a student at the local secondary school, while at the same time he receives support from a special teacher for some hours every week in a special class for disabled children. Maria's husband is a manual labourer and he is away from home a lot. He is not

involved in the education of his children and he refused to participate in this research.

Nikos and Yanna are married to each other. They live in an urban area of Cyprus. Nikos is a bus driver and Yanna is a housewife. Nikos has graduated from elementary school and Yanna from secondary school. They have a grown up son who works as a nurse, and a twenty-five year old daughter, called Stavroula. Stavroula has attended the mainstream secondary school as a non evaluated student, before the passing of the law of 1999, with which inclusion was legitimized. Yanna still spends a lot of time taking care of her daughter, while Nikos plays a secondary role. Their experience with home-school relations refers to the turbulent period 1979-1999, just before the legitimization of inclusion.

Petros works in a bank and he is married with two sons. His youngest son Kyriakos is twelve years old and has just started lower secondary school. Petros is very interested in his son's school performance and he pays visits to school on a regular basis to discuss his son's progress with his teachers. Petros takes all the decisions about his sons' education, since his non-Cypriot wife has not adjusted to the Cypriot culture yet and prefers to remain in her husband's shadow.

Anna is employed in the public sector. She is married and she has adopted a baby girl from Rumania. Her name is Artemis and she is now fifteen years old. Artemis has enrolled in upper secondary school. She attends mainstream school for most of the day. However, she receives special support through individual lessons from teachers at school for six school periods every week. Moreover she has been excluded from foreign language and History lessons. Her father avoids being involved in Artemis' school life. In contrast, Anna tries to do her best for her daughter. However she is over-dependent on professionals.

Vasilis has a seventeen year old son, Dimitris. His wife has left him and their son as soon as she realized that her son has severe learning difficulties. Vasilis is currently unemployed. However, he tries to fulfill his son's wishes even when they are excessive. As a result of his generosity and unconditional offers, Dimitris appears to be spoiled. Dimitris had discipline problems in the mainstream school that have resulted to a series of expulsions and finally to abandoning school very early. Despite being still an adolescent, Dimitris has enrolled in an

evening school for adults. According to Cyprus educational law, the enrolment of adolescent students with 'severe personal' problems is allowed, exceptionally, into evening second chance schools for returning adults.

Results

The interviews with Maria, Nikos, Yanna, Petros, Anna and Vasilis revealed some gloomy aspects of the implementation of the 1999 law, which in their case seems to be far removed from inclusive practices. In particular, the interviewees postulated that the main factors debarring positive home-school relations are the prevalence of prejudice and stereotypes about disability and the segregation character of educational practice coupled with power relations. Moreover, the interviewees described unfruitful interactions with the professionals that caused bitter feelings and disappointment and rendered future positive perspectives less likely.

Factors that impede inclusion

Prejudice and stereotypes. All the participants noted that prejudice is still prevalent in Cyprus and defines people's attitudes towards disabled children. In fact, the participants believe that disabled children in Cyprus schools are considered passive, incompetent, pathetic and abnormal creatures. This view seems to reflect the prevalence of the medical and charity model, according to which the problem is situated in the person, while disability is considered as pathology and an incurable form of deviance (Zoniou-Sideri et al., 2006). Yanna says:

"After huge efforts and visits from office to office, she was accepted as a "listener"¹. However, nobody was paying attention to her or helping her. Since she was just a "listener" nobody cared. Imagine that she couldn't perform even a simple addition! When I went to the school and told them to teach her at least this, they told me not to worry

because she would learn this later with money."

Nikos adds indignantly:

"They never believed that she could learn. That's why she hasn't learnt. She was nothing for them. The child has high perception though, she knows when people deride and mock her."

In consistence with other research findings (e.g. Hodge&Runswick-Cole, 2008), Maria describes how teachers' low expectations from disabled students and lack of cooperation with the parents result to school failure and low grades:

"No, the teacher never asked me what she could do with my baby. The child has difficulties, but when he thinks about a question, ultimately he has an answer. The truth is that the teacher assigns to him work that has been designed for younger children. He is a weak student, but he understands everything you say. He always manages to move to the next level, but always as a low-performing student. He has never been like the others."

According to existing literature, the construction of disability is founded on prejudice. Moreover, it is enhanced and accelerated by everyday school practice, which reflects the prevalent social attitudes towards disability and craftily reproduces power relations. Thereby, disabled people become condemned and marginalized (Abrams&Gibbs, 2002). Confirming these findings Vasilis says:

"The teachers never believed that he could learn. They never paid attention to his needs. All the time they were punishing him for being 'naughty'. Even now that he is seventeen and he is a student at a school for adults and early school-leavers, they let him go out of the class whenever he wants and they don't care if he stays out of the classroom for the whole period. They use him as the 'boy for all jobs'. He

¹A "listener" is allowed to attend classes but he/she is a non evaluated student. This is not supported by the 113(I)/99 legislation, but it was immediately adopted as an approved Department of Secondary Education practice.

makes photocopies and carries books for them."

Segregation educational practice and power relations. A common belief in Cyprus alleges that disabled children with intellectual disabilities ought to be placed in special schools and special classrooms, even though such a practice promotes segregation and isolation. Moreover, even when disabled children are allowed to go to the mainstream school, they occasionally have to leave the classroom and their fellow students, in order to attend separate special lessons. This creates barriers to inclusion, while the distance between disabled and non-disabled students increases. During this process, parents' wishes are usually not considered (Angelides&Michailidou, 2007; Nicolaidou, Sophocleous&Phtiaka, 2006; Phtiaka, 2007). Yet, this attitude seems to reflect the power relations and the hierarchical organization of schooling, which result in empowering the teachers and ignoring the parents (Abrams&Gibbs, 2002; Ware, 1994). In consistence with these findings Maria mentions:

"They have a girl who gives lessons for children with learning difficulties twice a week. Every other day she goes to some other school. I don't like this arrangement, because they take him out of the classroom while he is learning Greek. Hence he misses what the other children do and therefore he falls behind. The same goes on for Math or other lessons. I believe that this practice is wrong. The worst part is that he is excluded from relations with his peers and he is always placed outside the group."

Vasilis adds:

"My son is not part of the group and has no friends. The other students just laugh at him and make jokes with him."

Nikos is more assertive:

"I told them that I didn't want my daughter to be a 'listener'. I asked for normal enrolment in the general

secondary school because when she was a normal student at the elementary school she had friends. On the contrary, nobody wanted to hang out with her in secondary school. They used to tease her and she used to come home crying. At school she had only one friend, a girl who was a 'listener' as well. Nobody else. She was stigmatized."

On the other hand, Yanna explains that being a 'listener' at secondary school was the only option that was given to their daughter in 1988. Before the legislation 113(I)/99, specialists had all the power and the authority to decide where to place Stavroula. Being a regular student was not an option then. However, according to literature, such practice impedes partnership between parents and teachers and has negative implications on children (Hodge &Runswick-Cole, 2008; Rogers, 2007). In this way, Yanna describes:

"After a lot of discussions and pressure and quarrels, they agreed to allow her to attend secondary school as a 'listener'. They wouldn't let her go to secondary school. The principal refused to accept her, the teachers, nobody wanted her."

The monopoly of the specialists in deciding about disabled children and the belief that they are always right is usually solidified and recycled through the behaviour of parents who never disagree (French & Swain, 2008; Phtiaka, 2006). This is the case of Maria:

"I haven't done much research on my own because they are the specialists and they know better than me what is best for my child. Hence, I did what they told me to do."

Anna reveals her over-dependence on the specialists as well:

"No, I never thought that I should do something else. I never questioned the specialists. They told me that my daughter is not capable of learning foreign languages or theoretical lessons like History and they decided

to exclude her from these lessons. I agreed with them because they are professionals and they know what they are doing."

Home-school relations and future prospects

Even though partnerships between parents and teachers have positive results regarding disabled children (Beveridge, 2004), in contrast disputes, suspiciousness, distrust and lack of respect may militate against creating partnerships and satisfying the child's real needs (Abrams&Gibbs, 2002). In a vivid manner and in consistence with the above findings, Maria describes her pain and frustration when the specialists and the system as a whole appeared hostile and aggressive towards her and far away from partnership:

"I was invited to go to the school – it was the special teacher, the headmistress and some people from the Ministry. There was a sociologist and a psychologist I think as well. They told me that I should put some restrictions on my son. I had told them that he plays football and he is very good at it, and that he likes football and he is one of the best players. And I had told them that he was learning to play the guitar the previous summer, and he likes it, and he sings, and he is good at it. And they told me that, when he gets involved in fights at school, I ought to forbid him to play football or guitar. And I tell them 'but this is the only thing he likes and he is good at! I can't do this! When I forbid football and guitar what is left for him??' And they tell me 'you are wrong in trying to defend your child'. And I tell them 'look' and I was crying 'you act like my baby is the worst person on earth. I will not accept this attitude!' And they said 'Lady, we know better than you, and you ought to listen to us'."

Yanna also describes her humiliation and her alienation every time she went to the secondary school:

"I used to go to ask the teachers about my child and they always told

me to let her stay at home so as to learn how to do chores. And they were saying that I was torturing her by sending her at school implying that I sent her to school because I wanted to have free time for coffee with my friends. And nobody ever asked me how I felt with this situation, since I knew that my baby was sitting alone in school and crying."

Nikos confesses that he was patient up to a certain point. However as soon as he realized that partnership was not even an option, he felt angry and he started shouting and threatening the school staff:

"I went to school and I was shouting and I told them that I would go and break everything if they continued letting other students tease my girl. I still don't believe it! Can you imagine that there are such horrible people who allowed (the other children) treating a child as the school clown and did nothing about it!?"

According to Hodge and Runswick-Cole (2008), poor home-school relations and weak partnerships result in incapacity to service the child's needs, which has negative implications for the long-term development of the child. Yanna confirms the above finding when she denounces:

"Eventually school harmed her. Even though she learnt reading and writing, she developed a lot of psychological problems because of the rejection she felt and because of her teacher's negligence. She still remembers what her peers did to her. She hasn't been able to overcome it yet."

Petros adds:

"Because he is diagnosed with dyslexia, the Ministry of Education gave him the right for oral examinations. However he was given a paper to answer. He failed. When I went to school to discuss this with

his teachers they told me that they didn't have either the time or the personnel to prepare a separate oral exam and that he should study more and stop finding excuses."

As research has shown, lack of respect towards parents and disputes with the teachers and the system in general result to developing negative feelings, which include disappointment, frustration and exhaustion (Rogers, 2007). In consistence with these findings Yanna admits:

"I feel extremely tired all these years. And disappointed. I was expecting something else from school and I got something totally different. I had to struggle at home, and struggle even more at school. And I had no support, from nobody. Nobody understood me and nobody listened to me."

Vasilis continues:

"I have gone to school so many times and tried to explain the situation. I feel that nobody listens to me."

Maria adds:

"There are twenty-three children in his class. And there are three or four more children who have serious difficulties. The teacher can't cope with them – she forgets about them and she continues with the good ones. The other children are left alone. This is what teachers do. And they don't care if you complain. How many times more to go there, I am fed up..."

Discussion

According to existing literature, home-school relations appear to play a very important role in the future and development of pupils. In fact, promotion of the child's progress appears to be largely dependent on parents being engaged in schooling activities and playing a key-role in the design and subsequent roll-out of interventions. Hence, education should be a shared

responsibility between parents and school (Rogers, 2007; Russell, 2011; Symeou, 2007). However, the realization of positive and meaningful home-school relations and the possibility of the families to collaborate with the school in Cyprus, in the best interest of disabled children, are both impeded by severe barriers (Koutrouba et al., 2006; Phtiaka, 2007). As the participants pointed out, teachers remain stuck with stereotypes and continue to locate deficits within the child rather than focusing on the removal of barriers through improved home-school relations and partnership goals. In addition, in consistence with existing literature (e.g. Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2013), the participants believe that lack of communication, weak cooperation and disagreements between parents and school, stemming from an inflexible education system and prejudiced teachers, have led them to frustration, anxiety and problematic relations with the school. The bitter words of Nikos and Yanna when they described their struggle to have their daughter Stavroula accepted in the secondary school seem to confirm Ware (1994; 2002) that the segregation practice and the specialists' omnipotence distort home-school relations.

As Phtiaka (2001) explains, when the law 113(I)/1999 was passed, Cyprus schools were not adequately prepared to work in partnership with parents to the advantage of disabled children. In addition, existing differences between teachers and parents regarding what is considered important and what is interpreted as correct within the frames of the new legislation, resulted in their alienation from each other (Batsiou et al., 2008; Koutrouba et al., 2006; Phtiaka, 2006). As a result, schools seem to deny parents the right to make decisions about their disabled children or even to speak freely, fearing that the real issue is about who has the power (Symeou, 2007). Therefore, it is not surprising that Maria, Vasilis and Anna conformed to the specialists' suggestions. In a similar way, even though Yanna, Nikos and Petros tried to fight the system, they ultimately surrendered.

However, inclusive education is not about making adaptations to fit disabled children into schooling. It is about restructuring the system to service the children's and their families' needs and to provide education that welcomes difference as a source of learning (Mamas, 2013; Symeonidou, 2002; Vincent, 2000). Moreover, truly inclusive schools listen to the students and their families and take

their voice into account during decision-making (French and Swain, 2008; Todd, 2003), a practice that none of the participants experienced. Thus, the starting point to formulate a framework for monitoring change is to create a family-friendly school. This type of school will allow parental involvement and will provide the foundations for developing partnerships (Symeou, 2007). To this end, it is essential that teachers will be informed and educated about inclusion (Connell, 2002; Symeonidou & Phtiaka, 2012). Furthermore, poor professional practice ought to be open to critique, while exclusionary practices, such as those mentioned by the participants, need to be identified and eradicated. In addition, deep changes in policy and practice will be needed, if improvement in the relationships between parents and teachers is the goal (MacArthur, 2004).

Suggestions

In summary, it seems that home and school relations are not trouble-free (Barton, 2008). However examples of partnerships are not unknown and whenever we find them we can marvel at the benefits the children seem to enjoy (Leyser & Kirk, 2004). We therefore know that strong relationships between teachers and parents with emphasis on common goals and exchange of ideas may result in successful inclusion and effective education of disabled

children (Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2008; Rogers, 2007). In fact, if professionals become more interested in the children as persons than in finding a label to attach, then positive experiences and meaningful relationships between parents and teachers will be more likely to arise (Gilman, 2007). From their part, parents may offer valuable insight and detailed information regarding their children and their needs (Phtiaka, 1999; Todd, 2003). On the other hand, professionals may enable access to resources and educational and psychological support. Thus children may have advocates working in partnership, in both a social and a professional setting (Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2008). It is necessary though to recognize that change is not an easy task, nor it is straightforward. Since inclusion is a continuous process, the development of meaningful home-school relations and partnerships is a non-stop process (Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2013; Liasidou, 2007; Phtiaka, 2007). Thus, it is crucial to listen to parents, facilitate their actions and empower their voice, so as to promote a better future in a fairer education system, which will respect and value disabled children and their families, and will combat social exclusion through partnership (Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2013). In this way, we hope that our paper will contribute in a discussion towards active listening and home-school partnership.

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