

‘The school I’d like my child to attend, the world I’d like my child to live in...’ : parental perspectives on ‘special education’ in Cyprus

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Introduction

When we examine the relationship between home and school in the case of families with children with special needs from a parental perspective, we are still concerned with the same questions we always are when we examine home school relationships. Such¹ questions are:

1. What do parents want from school?
2. What do they get?
3. How can we improve communication between the two so that they get what they and their children² want and need?

In this case however, new dimensions of the problem, for the most part invisible in the case of home-school relations which do not involve special needs, appear. First, communication between home and school here is not simply advisable or even important. It is a *sine qua non*. No child with special needs has the slightest possibility of surviving in the mainstream system under current conditions if an excellent communication is not established between home and school. Moreover, due to the long separatist tradition in the education of children with special needs throughout Europe, it is necessary here to argue for the need to include children with special needs in the mainstream classroom which in turn creates an increased need for communication between home and school. This is necessary in order to achieve the desired level of communication between home and school, but also in order to alleviate possible grievances of

other parents for the existence of such children in the class. That is to say, the inclusion of children with special needs in the mainstream classroom is possibly the only case where a need for the facilitation of communication between different groups of parents may be necessary. New questions therefore arise here such as:

1. Why is it important to include children with special needs in mainstream schools?
2. Why is it even more important now than it has ever been in the past?

The text which follows attempts to address these questions.

Going to school. A happy experience?

Your first day in school. Do you remember it?
Your child’s first day in school. Do you fear it?
Your child’s with special needs first day in school. Do you dread it?

Children are the most important investment we make in this world. The most precious and the most important by far. And thankfully we (still) cannot get the children we want. When I was pregnant for the first time I was dreaming of a beautiful baby girl with red hair and green eyes which would have the rosy complexion needed to be named Arothaphnousa, an old Cypriot name which brings to mind the long series of rhododendrons that beautify the long, hot and dry Cyprus summers. Instead I was lucky enough to get a beautiful baby boy with brown-blond hair

and a wheat complexion that grows darker in the sun. He was called Demetris -my father's name.

Do I love Demetris as much as I would have loved Arothaphnousa? Of course I do! Would I have loved Arothaphnousa as much as I love Demetris? Who knows? The children we bear (or those we chose to adopt) are our most real creations, little images of ourselves, and the truest heritage we leave behind on departure for greener pastures. We accept them for what they are, we love them, we want the best for them.

Do we always? Well, sometimes this is more difficult than others. My friend Betty used to say jokingly for her daughter Catherine, my Goddaughter: *'Damaged goods! You should be allowed to return them!'*. Catherine was born lovely and healthy and in three months of life developed an unknown, undiagnosed, unclassified syndrome that rendered her severely mentally retarded, deprived her of movement, speech and any other apparent form of communication with the world around her. Do her parents love her? Of course they do! Do they want the best for her? They are doing everything in their power to secure an education that will guarantee a better future for her. Do they accept her? After the first - understandable- shocked reaction to the unexpected, the answer here is also emphatically yes. Note here the words of another 'special'³ mother, the mother of Maria⁴:

Maria was a shock for us at birth. Suddenly the moment I gave birth my husband and I saw a very lively baby but also a baby who looked like a little monster. Her head was badly distorted, her fingers and toes stuck together, six a piece. mother of Maria, a girl with multiple handicaps

Children who are different from those we are expecting still command a great deal of our love, and our pain. We still want the best for them; the best school, the best world. In order to get the first, we need the second. In order to get the second, we have to create the first.

Let us listen to *parents* themselves *talking* about their expectations. Here is Michalis' mother⁵:

'It is natural for parents to expect the school environment to be hospitable, well equipped and of course well staffed. To have a programme that adapts to the needs of the child and does not force the child to adapt to needs and conditions that are beyond his/her needs and interests. How everything is different, most of the time, for parents of children with special needs!'
mother of Michalis, an autistic boy

The natural anticipation for the beginning of a child's school career often becomes an immense source of stress for the parents of a child with special needs. Zenon's mother indicates this:

From the year before (the beginning of Zenon's primary school attendance) I visited the head of the school and I informed him that next year he would have a child with special gifts studying in his school. I explained that Zenon retained very good communication with his environment, possessed a well developed vocabulary, and had not faced any difficulties in his integration in the nursery school. We began to worry as the year was approaching. I personally felt as if I were walking on a tight rope.
mother of Zenon, a deaf boy

The first experience of school is also often extremely disappointing as the same mother indicates:

Unfortunately the class teacher had some difficult previous experience from the past, from the integration of a child with special needs (not deaf), and she was very skeptical, right down to hostile some times. Maybe I had contributed to this myself due to the enormous stress I was under.
mother of Zenon, a deaf boy

Quite obviously, in the case of a child with special needs and his/her family the odds for a positive, happy start in school are severely

reduced. Yet we know that the first impressions from school are often the longer lasting ones and they prepare the ground accordingly for the interactions to follow. As I have indicated in previous work (Phtiaka 2001) a bad start in school might create a bad climate between home and school that is very difficult to overcome later. Clearly such a start has to be avoided at all costs.

Why so many difficulties?

Why is there an increased chance for a family of a child with special needs to start off badly in school? It seems to me that there are four main factors which contribute to this effect:

- I. Increased Parental anxiety
- II. Increased School anxiety
- III. Increased practical difficulties
- IV. Separatist culture

As the quotations used above and elsewhere (Phtiaka 2001) have indicated, parents are particularly anxious as the time approaches for them to send their child to school, especially the primary school where there may be little room for negotiations over the curriculum or the teaching and/or assessment methods for instance. This anxiety often distorts their first contact with school and gives the wrong message to teachers as it makes them appear aggressive or demanding or even angry when they are just insecure and afraid.

Increased anxiety may quite possibly exist also in school as soon as the message arrives that there is a child with special needs ready to be admitted, or as a result of a first meeting with anxious parents. Such anxiety exhibited on behalf of the school may also be misconstrued by receiving parents as a suspicion or even as a rejection.

The 'meeting' of two anxieties construed along these lines can be a disaster as the parents 'read' the school saying: 'we don't want such troubles in our hands', and the school 'reads' the parents saying: 'we shall be watching you and expose you

at the first mistake'. If such a bad start is established, one can expect that every decision taken regarding the child from then on can easily be misinterpreted and lead to further misunderstandings.

Added to the natural anxiety of parents and school, if and how they are going to cope with each other, is more often than not the reality of an increased need for material or human support (special equipment, extra teaching support, specific staff expertise, extended working hours) which often goes unnoticed by the administration responsible. Schools or teachers may be required to put in that extra effort without the extra support needed. This may well lead to resentment, lack of cooperation or rejection.

The three factors mentioned above are all real, and present teachers, parents and pupils with special needs with problems over and above the regular communication difficulties usually identified between home and school. Suggestions as to how such problems can be handled in practice have been offered elsewhere (Thompson and Arora, 1996) I wish however to argue that the main reason for the increased difficulties often faced by families and schools in their communication over children with special needs, is the fourth factor stated above: the separatist culture. The anxiety families and schools feel in their 'first meeting' as well as the apparent (and the real) shortages in support regarding the education of a child with special needs, are all derivatives of the separatist culture. The separatist culture is the cause, and these are the effects; the separatist culture is the reason, and these are the pretexts; the separatist culture is the motive and these are the excuses. They exist only because the separatist culture exists and is predominant in European education and society for hundreds of years now.

Let us see how this cause and effect manifests itself.

Separatist culture

Able-bodiedness has for a very long time in European history been the measure by which everything is judged (Hevey 1993). In Classical Greece, the cultural ancestor of Modern Europe, bodily beauty has long been coupled with health and able-bodiedness as well as virtue and goodness. Physical or mental deviations from the norm have been interpreted as punishment from the Gods (Tiresias, Hercules) or even self inflicted punishment still originating from the Gods (Oedeipus). Disability is undesirable and hidden even among Gods. Hephaestus, God of Fire, one of the 12 Gods of mount Olympus and married to the Goddess of Beauty Aphrodite, is lame and considered ugly and bad tempered to an extent that almost justifies Aphrodite's love affair with Aris, the God of war, aggressive, able bodied and handsome. Eros, the little God of love in a fruit of this union and not the union of Aphrodite with her lawful lame husband. The husband spends most of his time hidden away in his workshop working, while illegitimate but able-bodied and beautiful Eros is shamelessly flying around playing games at the expense of Gods and mortals and so is the illegal couple.

As Education becomes obligatory in one European country after another, the laws which enforce it exempt children with physical and other problems from the obligation (Phtiaka 1997). For some of them, those who are considered capable of receiving education, special schools/institutions appear to offer education and training alternatives for a respectable life away from begging. Others are not so lucky. What we have come to call special education develops as a system completely independently and separately from what we have come to call mainstream education and always in a way that the former covers the latter's needs (Tomlinson 1982, Slee 1998). It is as late as the late twentieth century that most European countries begin to consider the special education system alongside the mainstream as two poles of one and the same system, the education system.

The integration movement, fruit of this parallel process, and therefore a direct descendant of the separatist tradition, ripens in Europe in the nineteen eighties, only to prove inadequate to solve the problem of education of children with special needs. It is this failure, heavily due to the separatist heritage integration carries with it, which calls for the appearance of a new, totally different movement, quite mistakenly often confused with the integration movement, that of inclusion. The inclusion movement however does not share the same history with the integration movement. It is instead a natural outcome of a disability discourse which is based on human rights (Phtiaka 2001a). For the inclusion movement, the whole discussion on the pros and cons of the integration of children with special needs in mainstream education settings is irrelevant. We no longer -in the 21st century- discuss the pros and cons of compulsory education. In contemporary Europe education is, for all its drawbacks, a well established basic human right for all children (Fragoudaki 1985). Nothing more and nothing less than that.

The discussion therefore is no longer *if* we shall educate children with special needs alongside children without special needs, but rather *how* shall we educate all children according to their needs in a very limited, very unsuitable, highly competitive educational system like that of most European countries today all this in an increasingly complex, market-led globalized context (Barton 1999).

Oliver (2000), based on Kuhn's analysis, argues that what has happened to us is a shift of paradigm. From the paradigm of special education we have moved on to that of inclusion. We have indeed. The paradigm of special education, even in its most sophisticated metamorphosis, integration, has proved inadequate to cope with contemporary complex needs and realities (Vlachou, 1997). It has therefore been replaced by a new one, that of inclusion. The paradigm of inclusion indicates

that all children have a right to be educated in the school of their neighborhood regardless of their particular needs. The specific arrangements necessary to cater for their need are just a matter of logistics that has to be taken care of..

My account so far has shown, I trust, 'why is it important to include children with special needs in mainstream schools'. We have, to stress it once more, that on the basis of a human rights model of education there is no other option in this space and time, but co-education of children with and without special needs or disabilities, as there is no other option but co-education of boys and girls, black and white, ethnic minority and majority students, etc. etc..

For children with any disability of mind or body, lack of the opportunity to be educated alongside their peers and acquire the benefits of this natural closeness, needs to be considered as an unacceptable form of discrimination. The voice of disabled adults who have themselves been subjected to various forms of 'special education' while in school (Barnes, 1992; Oliver, 2000) verifies this.

The future - bright and beautiful?

I would now like to indicate why -in my view- inclusion of all children in one classroom is now much more important than it has even been before in human history.

Boundaries placed by geography, time, distance, communication problems, language, national borders, religion, culture, etc. etc. used to be a very useful way to classify the world around us.

They used to function very effectively as guardians of our differences and our mistakes. This can no longer be! The barriers that used to separate and protect us as distinct nations, cultures and philosophies, in Europe and elsewhere are being forcibly removed. We, as citizens appear to have almost no choice in the matter, unless we consider Geneva an alternative. We are thrust, willingly or otherwise, in the same 'classroom' regardless of our expertise, our preferences, our skills, our talents, our abilities. We have to work together. We have to live together. For good or for bad. For better or for worse.

Under the circumstances, tolerance of each other's strengths and weaknesses, idiosyncracies and specialties is the only option we have if we are to continue to (co-) exist. Inclusion is *par excellence* the educational practice on a tolerant philosophy and is the only way ahead. The alternative is more twin towers which lead to more bombings, which bring about new twin towers, which lead to more bombings, and so on and so forth until the end of the world, which will not be very far if we continue at this jolly pace.

Conclusion

Communication between home and school, but also between home and home and school and school is essential in the case of children with special needs. Contrary to traditional views which consider special education a minority interest, its natural successor, inclusive education, is a global interest in every sense. Communication is therefore also necessary between discourses in the relevant fields.

Notes

- 1 Clearly there are a number of questions raised here. I choose to concentrate on just three of them in order to make my material manageable.
- 2 There are often differences between what parents and children want or what the first think and the second really need. For the purposes of this exercise we shall assume that parents act as advocates for their children.
- 3 The term is -of course- used ironically to criticize the way mothers of children with special needs are perceived.
- 4 The extract, translated from greek, comes from a presentation Maria's mother gave at a special education seminar series at the University of Cyprus on September 16th 1996.
- 5 Psychology seminar, University of Cyprus, November 6th 1996.

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