

New challenges for extra-familial care in Israel: Enhancing parental involvement in education

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Introduction

There is an increasing awareness among those who work in the field of residential child care that it is essential to change the character of relationships between residential staff and the families of children in residential group care (Grupper, 1998; Garfat & McElwee, 2004). This is particularly important when it comes to education. In order to obtain a real and meaningful change, it is essential that families are encouraged to take an active part in their children's lives while they are growing up in residential schools. By involving the parents in the life of the group home, it might provide opportunities for professional staff to empower the parents and help them rehabilitate the relationship between parent and child (Buhler-Niederberger, 1999).

This paper presents a study of a successful initiative by a voluntary non-profit organisation working with Israeli children in residential care programmes. A pilot project funded by Israel's Social Security Special Projects Fund has started operating in four residential schools for children at risk, removed from their families by the Social Welfare Services. The project ran for three years and one of its objectives was to increase the involvement of parents in their children's education, while the children were in residential care. As a result of this project, information about how such a change can be brought about, and how to work with parents, has been consolidated in a form that will be useful for the entire residential school and care system in Israel and, hopefully, elsewhere.

Theoretical framework

In Scotland, educational policy for children in care clearly states that parents must be involved in their children's education even when they are in care, and caregivers are obliged to work in collaboration with parents and encourage them to increase their involvement. A similar emphasis on parental involvement has happened recently in Israel. One official report regarding children's rights in extra-familial care states:

There is a wish for collaborative work between welfare authorities and the parents....The parents' participation is derived out of their responsibility, duty and rights as parents in order to guarantee the child's best interest....However, not all professionals are willing to adopt the attitude of partnership in their everyday practice. Therefore, the new law proposal is defining this responsibility very clearly, as a way to impose a full implementation of these principles (Rot Levy, 2003, p. 246.)

For many decades, it was largely accepted that residential programmes were perceived to 'save the children from their families' (Wiener, 1990). Wiener claims that this kind of policy was aimed at giving children a new chance in a place that both separated them from the 'negative' influence of their usual environment within the family and in the neighborhood, and also to expose them to a powerful and enriched learning environment in residential schools. However it is of utmost importance to bridge the gap between these two worlds: the world of home and the world of the residential school.

Positive attitudes toward working with parents in a 'partnership policy' can be difficult to establish. Garfat and McElwee (2004) claim it is easier to create an atmosphere of collaboration with parents when the staff members work in residential schools which do not have a 'negative' attitude towards parents. Research demonstrates that the process of changing the attitudes and habits of staff is a rather difficult and complicated one (Grupper and Mero-Jaffe, 2008). This is exactly the challenge of the project presented by this paper. The project set out to encourage new attitudes towards parents by experienced staff members in four treatment-orientated residential schools in Israel.

Assumptions behind the project

The operational phase of this project was based on the following assumptions:

- a. Residential staff have the capacity to empower parents if parents are invited to be actively involved in the education of their children while in care;
- b. Such activities might rehabilitate relationships between children and parents and improve educational outcomes for children in residential schools;
- c. Partnership adds an important dimension to the services offered to the child and his/her family by the residential school;
- d. A gap still exists between attitudes that professional staff express outwardly and the implementation of it in their daily practice.

Components of the partnership programme

In order to achieve these changes, three components were included in the pilot programme. These will now be described.

1. Bi-weekly visits of parents to the residential school

During each visit, parents participated actively in several activities organised by the staff. Every visit of the parents was composed of three parts: a structured dynamic group activity for parents among themselves (groups for mothers and groups for fathers). This activity was followed by structured group activities for parents together with their children. After that, parents had to choose their own activities with their children. It could be something inside the campus of the residential school, like having a quiet walk together, or it could be going out to buy an ice-cream in the close neighborhood. In order to facilitate participation by the parents, they were either supplied with transportation organised by the staff, or were reimbursed for the expenses of the transportation to and from the school.

2. Family days at the residential school

Family days were organised between three and four times during the year, to which all members of the child's family were invited. Parents received a well-designed invitation card with a detailed time-table of all activities. Children were highly involved in the preparation of family day activities. They prepared artistic shows like singing and dancing and also activities that were deliberately designed to involve activities by parents and their children. Such involvement in activity design encouraged children to use skills in communication and problem-solving which are central to educational achievement. Once again, transportation was organised for the parents by the staff.

3. Child-parent intensive summer camp

Summer camps were organised for mothers (5-6 days) or for fathers (3-4 days) together with their children. These activities included sleeping together in the same room, swimming, outings, and play activities that required active collaboration between parents and their children. Most important, it was a unique experience for the child to have the sole attention of his/her mother or father for an intensive period of several days. It also helped parents to be actively involved in enhancing the skills of their children.

The assumption was that an integration of all these three components simultaneously, increases the likelihood of significant positive results.

Evaluation and methodology

The pilot project ran three years. The evaluation covered the two first years of the pilot project. The evaluation research methodology was based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative research instruments. These included observations, semi-structured or open-ended interviews, documentary analysis and questionnaires completed by the group leaders, residential direct care workers (the educational staff), and staff supervisors. Data were generated using the following fieldwork activities:

Analysing Documents:

The kind of documents that were analysed were protocols of meetings, documents prepared by local staff members, letters written by children or parents, invitation cards to Family Day and the programme of activities for the summer camp.

Semi-structured Interviews:

These interviews included the directors of the four residential schools, the national coordinator of the programme and the local coordinator in all four residential schools. The 17 group leaders who were leading the group activities with parents were also interviewed. These interviews were carried out twice, at the beginning of every school year and at the end of the school year.

Occasional interviews:

These interviews were carried out throughout the evaluation period. Participants involved included the workers leading the group activities (before or immediately after a session), parents, children and direct care staff involved in the education of children in the residential school.

Observations:

Participant observations were made by the research team during group activities of parents with children and free activity of child-parent, on Family days, and in the different activities of the summer camps for parents and children.

Questionnaires:

In order to provide extra substantive information about the dynamic group activities, group leaders were asked to fill in a structured questionnaire after every group activity. The supervisors of these group leaders were also asked to fill questionnaires. The residential group care workers (the educational staff) were asked to fill questionnaires about the free activities of parents with their children in the dormitories.

Content analysis and analysis of questionnaire data included the use of four criteria:

- a. Parent shows interest in increasing her/his involvement in the activities of the residential school.
- b. Parent participates consistently in workshops.
- c. Parent increases her/his willingness to share problems with staff members.
- d. Parent expresses greater satisfaction about the residential school in general

Findings

Analysis revealed that group leaders thought that a very meaningful change had occurred in parents, while the residential group care workers (education staff) thought that only some changes had occurred in parent's functioning. Parents were the most positive of all, with strong indications that they felt much more engaged with their child's education and experiences within the school.

In terms of parent-child relationships, it was reported that group leaders, residential group care workers (education staff) and parents all felt that meaningful improvement was obtained. Once again, however, parents were those who thought the relationships between them and their children had strongly improved. While group leaders and education staff claimed it had improved, they did not feel that improvements were as great as the parents had suggested.

Concerning improvement of children's behavior due to their involvement in this programme, all three groups that were questioned about it were positive, but differed in what they thought was the extent of behavioural improvement. Here too, parents were those who scored the higher degree of improvement.

Some evidence from the observations and documentary material demonstrates how the different actors look at these issues. For example, one of the group leaders said in an interview:

There are children where the participation of their parents in the programme causes them to improve their behaviour, to work better in school and reduce violence

One of the children expressed his own opinion in a letter sent to his group care worker:

When parents are coming to visit more often, we have high motivation to study

and impress them by our achievements in school and share with them everything that is happening to us in the group home

Both staff members and parents identified an improvement in children's self-esteem. Good self-esteem often has an important bearing on educational outcomes. One of the group leaders said in an interview:

When mothers are here, their children behave with more confidence, they are proud in their mothers, and they enjoy having a joint activity with them in the workshop

A mother that was asked the same question said:

My son has completely changed... before, when I was coming to visit him he was nervous and wouldn't listen to me... nowadays, he is responsible, listens to me; he feels responsible for his younger sister and has much more confidence in himself

While analysing the attitudes of staff members to this issue, group leaders and residential direct care workers (education staff) were asked about improvement of children's self-esteem. Both were positive about it but group leaders scored it lower than direct care workers.

The last question to be examined for the purposes of this paper was the issue of staff attitudes and practices concerning parents. The results show that all three groups, namely group leaders, residential direct care workers (education staff) and parents share the same understanding that there was a positive shift in staff attitudes towards parents. Here too, parents considered the change of attitude much more deep and meaningful than the two other groups.

The overall findings of this evaluation research enable us to determine that most of the project goals were attained with a considerable rate of success.

1. The project succeeded in its goal of getting the parents to come with regularity to the residential school, and to maintain an ongoing participation in the workshops that were geared towards improving their relationship with their children and improving engagement with education.
2. The project succeeded in broadening the staff's professional activities. The residential school staff moved from an approach that was only child-centred, towards the additional dimension of intensive work with parents.
3. The project succeeded in improving the attitude of residential school staff towards parents, and in perceiving parents as partners in the education of their children.

4. The project provided some evidence that a focused effort on improving the relationship between parents, child and staff, has a significant positive impact on the functioning of the child in the residential school.

The findings, however, also revealed a number of flaws that prevented the pilot project from reaching its full potential. The project was supposed to make the entire staff of the residential school feel included. In reality, the general perception was that the group leaders that led the parent's group sessions were most important. These group leaders were all qualified social workers. The residential direct care workers (education staff) felt themselves quite alienated from it. This finding has had a negative influence on the depth of change that took place with regard to the willingness of the entire staff to involve parents in the education of their children.

Not enough effort was made to assure that the changes made by the programme would become permanent. During the period of the pilot project, the residential schools were guaranteed special budgetary supplements for parent transportation, workshop operation and staff training. The programme's goal was to take advantage of the pilot stage in order to introduce attitude change in all four group homes, in the hope that these important activities would be maintained after the special allocation was discontinued; however, this was not entirely successful.

The pilot project was meant to be a model whose ideas and activities would help other residential schools to encourage parents of children in residential care to engage with their education. We consider, however, that it could have achieved a much wider impact had the issue of dissemination been given greater weight during the course of the pilot project.

Discussion and recommendations

The results presented indicate clearly that the evaluation of the pilot programme is very positive. We feel confident in saying that the objectives were met to a large extent. The various activities, initiated as part of this new programme, had succeeded in reducing the feeling of 'torn loyalties' of children in the residential school. The increased presence of parents in the residential school and the improvement in the relationships between staff and parents contributed to change children's attitude towards education, and towards their being in care in general. Eisikovits and Guttman (1987) used the metaphor 'strangers on the road' for describing children's feelings while in residential care and education. We have clear evidence that the children in these four residential schools succeeded in decreasing the conflict between the two worlds, namely, the world of home and the world of the residential school.

Another objective of the project was geared at improving the relationships between parents and children, and between children and the staff of the residential school. The results of the evaluation would strongly suggest that there was a net improvement in both dimensions. Changing attitudes of residential staff, concerning parents and their role in the child's education were also noted. This was helped by involving staff in activities that empowered them and engaged them in dynamic group sessions with parents, something they never dared to try before. The attitude towards parents completely changed. This objective was achieved both for the group leaders and for the residential direct care workers (education staff).

Finally the objective of involving the parents with the aim of enhancing their engagement in the education of their children was met. Children used skills learned in activities with parents, parents encouraged the use of skills and children reported feeling valued by their parents when they engaged in school activities. They felt encouraged by parental involvement.

We feel it is of great importance that the methods used to run the programme and the findings of the evaluation should be disseminated. The fact that parental involvement in the education of their children in care can lead to better outcomes has repercussions not only for Israel but also for any service which offers residential care. This could lead to a 'learning culture' among the staff that might highly empower them as individuals and as a team.

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