

TEACHER-PARENT COLLABORATION IN THE PLANNING OF ACTIVITIES FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION INTEGRATED PROGRAM: APPLICATION OF EPSTEIN'S FRAMEWORK

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Teacher-Parent Collaboration (TPC) is an important factor in developing children with special needs (CSN). TPC plays a major role in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025. Previous studies have looked at specific issues such as teacher and parental involvement in developing the Individualized Education Programme (IEP) and how parents are involved in the schools of their CSN. This article approaches the TPC issue based on how the TPC activities were planned by the teachers to involve the parents and to what extent the framework advocated by Epstein involving elements such as parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making and community collaboration was incorporated. The study used the qualitative case study methodology, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis. The participants of the study comprised two administrators, four teachers and four parents of CSN in Special Education Integrated Program (SEIP) in Malaysia. The findings revealed that teachers played a major role in determining and planning the activities for the academic year. The activities planned focused on education authority requirements, the needs of CSN and the needs of parents which teachers gathered through feedback during formal and informal interactions with parents. For trustworthiness of data, prolonged engagement, member checks and audit trail were used. The planning stage of the TPC involved the teachers teaching in SEIP and the teacher aides. The teachers planned activities with reference to the calendar set by the District Special Education Unit (DSEU). The activity planning was based on the administrative portfolios, namely curriculum, co-curriculum and student affairs. When the activities planned were scrutinised, elements of Epstein's framework were evident. The religious and cultural elements were emphasized in the local Malaysian context. The planning stage is very crucial as it needs to accommodate the schedules set by the DSEU and the mainstream schools. Then parents need to be informed so they can schedule their programme such that teacher-parent collaboration in school activities will ensure quality education for children as envisioned in the Malaysia Education Blueprint.

Keywords: Teacher-parent collaboration, children with special needs, Epstein’s framework, Malaysia Education Blueprint

Malaysia’s move to achieve universal primary education saw the implementation of compulsory education in 2003, beginning at primary level. This move led to enhanced school enrolment (Malaysia: MDGs, 2010). The latest Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025, which promises “Three Waves of Changes” focused on five system aspirations namely, “access, quality, equity, efficiency and unity” in providing education. In line with these aspirations, special needs education is also emphasized. With the focus to improve the quality of special education, the Education Blueprint 2013-2025 supports the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994) which states that CSN must have access to mainstream schools with inclusive orientation. The Blueprint also supports Article 28 of Malaysia’s Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 advocating that CSN should be given the necessary support to facilitate their “full and equal participation in education” (Education Blueprint 2013-2025).

The government’s current focus is to raise awareness among parents and the community regarding their role in their children’s education by adopting “system learning” in the Education Blueprint 2013-2025. The learning system acknowledges that learning happens beyond the school environment and can happen at home and even in the community. It advocates the school-parent collaboration and shared responsibility between parents and teachers to ensure quality education for children. Good school - community collaboration can create a range of services beneficial for children in the school.

Previous studies on teacher-parent collaboration in education showed that the authorities’ focused on teacher-parent collaboration was limited and parents in Malaysia left all instructional responsibilities to teachers (Che Noraini Naima, 2006). Research states that parents play an essential role and are closely linked to children’s academic, social and emotional development; hence developing teacher-parent collaboration is an apt approach in promoting children’s universal success (Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). This study documents how SEIP teachers planned the teacher-parental collaboration and how the parents perceived the activities planned. The question this article aims at answering is, “To what extent does teacher-parental collaboration happen during the planning of activities in the special education integrated programme in the primary school?”

In this case study, we hope to demonstrate that careful selection and planning of activities in the school will encourage parents to collaborate with teachers in schools. The focus of the study is on the opinions of the teachers and parents involved in the study.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In Malaysia, school is viewed as a medium where efforts to instil positive values to produce a holistic future generation that is intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically are moulded in line with the National Philosophy of Education (Ministry of Education, 1988). This noble effort needs the cooperation of various stakeholders in education, with parents playing the key role.

Public schools had shown clear divisions in the roles played by the teachers and the parents. While the school focused on academic teachings, it was stressed that parents guided their children in social and spiritual aspects at home (Hill & Taylor, 2004). Previous research had indicated that good collaboration between schools and homes can help to build successful schools. Ramaiah (1990) stressed that schools cannot function in isolation but need support and cooperation from various parties, especially parents. Frank (2007) noted that schools had moved from the initial detached approach from the community to form a close meaningful collaboration. This importance saw an enactment being enforced in Malaysia, with the introduction of Parent Teacher Association (1996) which provided a platform for discussion on progress in schools, assist learners in meeting their needs and exchange views and opinions on educational issues among others. Parental involvement in schools manifested as a show of interest in children's education and efforts to understand, participate and attend school programmes, a role that is greatly required (Aziah & Abdul Ghani Kanesan, 2013). Thus, the roles of parents were crucial in accelerating excellence in children and in the school's achievement (Mohammed et al., 2005; Othman & Normalina, 2011). Despite its importance, parental involvement in schools is limited in Malaysia for it is only seen through sports day, PTA involvement through financial and physical contribution and discussion on academic progress. But these roles need to be expanded further by parental involvement in the classrooms and at school level (Fatin, Mohd Noorazam, & Nor Hashima, 2010). The present authors agree with Fatin et al. that there were limited studies on practices to involve parents in Malaysian schools.

Parental involvement is significantly important because many noted researchers such as Hallahan, Kauffman, and Lloyd (1985) have clarified that academic performance of special children depends on family support and involvement. Likewise, Epstein (1987) advocated the theory of overlapping spheres of influence, where the three circles symbolized the school, family and community, the three main entities that take responsibility to support, guide and nurture, inspire and finally develop a child who takes the centre stage in the model. Epstein stressed that the span of time spent by the family and the school and the philosophy practiced determined the closeness of a child to his/her parent thus increasing the extent of overlapping of spheres. It is undeniable that children are "the main actors in their education, development and in school" (Epstein, 2009, p. 10). To Epstein, the school, home and community collaboration as an entity cannot "produce" successful children but this can only arise by

designing effective collaboration activities, “to engage, guide, energize and motivate children to produce their own successes” (2009, p. 10).

The concepts of involvement and collaboration have resulted in different perceptions. Involvement, according to Pugh (1987) refers more to the participation of parents with the guidance of teachers while collaboration or partnership in education is the link between the school and the family where there is mutual understanding, respect and support in their children’s learning (Epstein, 1992) thus, a feeling of equality and sharing of roles.

Various types of models have been planned by researchers in their study of school-family partnerships such as the expert model, the transplant model and the consumer model by Cunningham and Davis (1985) and Dale (1996) but the most important one is that introduced by Epstein. Epstein’s (1987, 1992a) model of parental involvement toward partnerships, had a six faceted typology of involvement related to: (1) parenting; (2) home-school communications (3) volunteering; (4) learning at home; (5) decision-making; and (6) collaborating with the community. To encourage parent participation in their children’s education, the presence of these six types of involvement in school activities is important (Epstein, 1992a). This model shows comprehensiveness as it defines several types of activities in which parents can be involved to augment their children’s education at home or in school (Epstein, 1995, 1998). Epstein (2003) opined that schools that cater for children with special needs to organize comprehensive activities for the students and their families and thus most of the organizational structure and the processes are similar to that found in general education.

Cunningham and Davis (1985) and Dale (1996) have listed three models namely the expert model, the transplant model and the consumer model. Unlike Epstein, these models stated that teachers viewed themselves as experts and they had the power in taking total control and making all the decisions. They select and elicit the information that they think is relevant for the parents. This shows that teachers do not elicit the full potential of the parents but placed them in the role of “passive observers” or helpers. Since parental views and feelings are given low priority, parents are reluctant to question professionals. The teachers moved away from viewing parents as passive observers to recognizing the parents’ potentials with resources to recognize the roles of parents in supporting their CSN needs (Mittler & McConachie, 1983).

Review of Special Education in Malaysia

Unlike the special education system in the United States and Japan, in Malaysia, it is not mandatory for teachers and the parents of CSN to collaborate in the school programs. This is because the special education implemented in Malaysia does not comply with the Article 12 of the Federal Constitution which states the rights of individuals in terms of education but it is only introduced to individuals

with special needs who can be “educable” as stated in Section 3(1) Education Act (Special Education) Regulations 1997 (Appendix E) (The Malaysia Bar, 1999).

Shift 9 of the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025) states “Partner with parents, community and private sector at scale”. This has been stressed as the Blueprint has quoted that the international experience makes it clear that learning takes place beyond the school walls and can occur at home and in the community. A quarter of a child’s time is spent at home or in the community and therefore it has been stressed that children will experience “system learning” where parents and the community will play a part in the learning, rather than merely “school learning”. In preparation to face the system set in the blueprint, this study will provide a guideline on how teachers and parents can collaborate to plan and implement activities in the SEIP, as Special Needs Education is also stressed in the blueprint.

The teacher and parental collaboration (TPC) is a major issue in many countries. Traditionally, it has been noted that there was a need for a close interaction with parents in the Malaysian context when Sharifah and Wee (2001) highlighted in their research that teachers took a prominent place in a child’s education with less emphasis on parents, who took submissive or passive roles where they were mere volunteers or fundraisers. Therefore, it has been deemed vital for teachers and parents to cooperate and collaborate to create an effective learning environment for their children (Nora, Azlina, & Yeo, 2008).

As education is now focused on the 21st century, many studies were carried out to identify the impact of parental roles on education. Studies carried out looked at areas such as effect of parents’ education level, parental involvement in building IEPs and even in other content subject areas such as mathematics, literacy, science and attendance among many others. Bearing these topics in mind, there was a gap as the big picture was absent in the previous studies. So, this study looked at how the teachers and parents involved in the collaboration planned TPC activities in the schools.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Qualitative case study was employed in carrying out this study as it is the best method to explore deeper into issues studied and report the findings as it entailed describing and explaining (Merriam, 2001). This approach allowed the researcher, “to view the case from the inside out, to see it from the perspective of those involved” in the teacher-parental collaboration in the SEIP (Gillham, 2000, p. 11). This research design allowed an in-depth description of how the teacher-parental collaboration was implemented and enabled better understanding of the experiences of teachers and parents involved. Pseudonyms were given to the schools and the participants in the study.

Participants

The participants within the cases were selected based on the purposeful sampling method. The two groups of participants in the study were the teachers and the parents. The teachers comprised an administrator and two teachers from each school with the SEIP unit. The administrators selected were the senior assistants in charge of the special education units and they were responsible for making decisions pertaining to TPC in their schools with the approval of the school head. They were experienced and confident administrators with wide knowledge in special education needs besides being the key informants in the data collection.

The teachers were qualified special education teachers and they were responsible for a specific class of CSN in the school. These teachers had more than five years of teaching experience and they were familiar with the CSN and their parents. These teachers played a crucial role in training the CSN for various programs in the school.

In each school the researcher selected two parents of CSN. The parent participants were committed and were actively involved in the TPC activities. They were selected also for their willingness to provide necessary information related to the TPC. All participants were given pseudonyms in the research report.

Setting

Two schools with SEIP were selected as cases in this study to represent how teacher-parental collaboration was planned. The first school, Megah Primary School (MPS), a prominent SEIP in the district was awarded the Certificate of Excellence in Co- curriculum at the national level and was also the winner in the Best Management of Program in Special Education Competition organized by the District Education Office. The performance of its CSN was also commendable. The second school, Linang Primary School (LPS) has a strategic location and this could possibly account for its big student enrolment. It is a popular vernacular school among parents. The schools were also selected based on the presence of teacher-parental collaboration practices. Besides, the schools had high student enrolment and allowed the researcher to select a set of parents who were actively committed in their children's school, and the researcher had the belief that the parents had a role to play which enabled them to excel in the activities they joined.

Data Collection Techniques

Different data collection techniques were used in this study such as semi-structured interviews, observations and document review to obtain an in-depth understanding of how the TPC activities were planned in the two cases (Creswell, 2012). Consent forms were signed by the participants before their involvement

in the study. The data were collected through 35 interview sessions with the 10 participants. Each participant was interviewed at least three times and each interview lasted about thirty to forty-five minutes. The researcher was in the sites for the whole academic year whenever the activities were carried out. Interviews were administered at home or at the site (Berg, 2001; Darlington & Scott, 2002), depending on participant availability. The teachers preferred to be interviewed at the site after school while the parents were interviewed at their homes according to their preferred time, which was usually in the evenings or late afternoons. Two sets of interview protocols were used to conduct semi-structured interviews with the teachers and the parents. The interview protocol had open-ended questions concerning the TPC and how it is planned in the school. After every interview, the audio recordings were transcribed and verbatim transcription was done for data analysis.

Observations, both formal and informal, allowed for a detailed description of the first-hand encounter of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). Through observations, the researcher obtained direct and immediate information of how the collaboration was planned as well as how the teachers and the parents reacted and collaborated in the activities planned. Besides, it provided the researcher with a better understanding of the participants' behavior (Morse & Richards, 2002) as the researcher was able to witness and audio-record the interactions between the teachers and the parents during planning of activities. The observation protocol was a guide and pertinent checklist for the TPC observations. Besides, the protocol was handy for making field notes when TPC practices were carried out. The researcher was able to jot down the details of settings, reactions and the participant feedback in the field notes. The observations carried out at the venues were coded as S1/OBS/1. S1 referred to MPS and S2 referred to LPS. OBS referred to the mode used for collecting data which is observation and '1' referred to the first observation done in the school.

The relevant records pertaining to TPC activities carried out over the years were scrutinized to draw out relevant data for the study. Documents such as Ministry of Education circulars, school reports, strategic plans, working papers and log books were reviewed to obtain further details on the TPC.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was done concurrently with the data collection at the two SEIP. This data analysis started after the first interview with the parents and the teachers, after observations were carried out and also when the documents were reviewed. The data in the form of interview transcripts, field notes and documents were studied in-depth to understand the underlying meaning and the concepts which provided information related to TPC activities in the selected schools. The initial codes were derived from the reading and re-reading of the transcripts and observation notes. The data were coded and categorized for easy comparison between the two cases. The data collected from the teachers and

the parents were then compared and contrasted as stated by Strauss and Corbin (1990) to identify similarities and differences between the participants within and across the cases. The common codes evident in the cases provided a general view of how the TPC was planned in the two schools. The findings are discussed based the themes and categories that emerged. For trustworthiness in this study, the researcher considered the triangulation, member checks, and peer review and audit trail. These strategies were undertaken so that data obtained were valid and reliable. In the study, the name of all participants had been changed to keep their anonymity.

RESULTS

The Planning of Teacher and Parental Collaboration

The teachers in schools carried out interactions with parents and also had in-depth discussions with administrators to decide on relevant school based activities before planning with responsible members in the school. The teachers in both the schools looked into various strategies before determining the roles of parents in their activities.

Planning for the Academic Year

The planning of the academic calendar was a routine process and it was mandatory in MPS and in LPS. In both schools, the senior assistants, the teachers and the teacher assistants had meetings at the end of the academic year to identify activities, to prepare the strategic plan for the coming academic year. The district activities were decided by the District Special Education Unit (DSEU). The school based activities were formulated with reference to the activities planned at the district level for the new academic year. As stated by Risha, the senior assistant of MPS:

“.....we have to adhere to the activities decided by the DSEU but for school activities the teachers and I planned activities with some variations every year. We focused on what our CSN need, and we try to plan activities based on the current needs, such as therapy or academic needs”.

The reference to the calendar set by the DSEU was necessary to avoid clashes in the dates and the type of activities planned in the school (S1/S2/GPK/INT3). Document review showed that the senior assistants and teachers in MPS and LPS selected school based activities that were holistic and which focused on the general developmental needs of the CSN. Tanya, the senior assistant of LPS, stated:

“... our main aim while planning the activities was to solve the specific problems identified in the CSN, then we emphasized on the curriculum and co-curriculum targets and finally to fulfill the needs of the parents.”

The reviewed document showed that both Special Education Integrated Program (SEIP) schools had a number of activities that differed every year.

Interactions

In the planning stage, the parents were not included in the meetings. The teachers of both the schools felt that the frequent ongoing, informal and the occasional formal parent-teacher interactions were sufficient to gather relevant information for planning activities. The informal meetings were when the parents came to the school to send their CSN and to fetch the CSN home and formal meetings were during Parent Teacher Association meetings, Individualized Education Plan meetings and other formal school functions. Tanya said:

“... my CSN have critical special needs, so their parents or guardians of CSN who lived in homes send them to school, so we have communication”.

During these formal and informal interactions, the teachers discussed with the parents (or caregivers) their needs, issues faced, and also gathered the parents’ feedback, views and suggestions for possible activities that the school could organize. In the process, the parents also stated their strengths, the resources they had and how they could contribute to the school activities. Shasha, a senior teacher in LPS expressed:

“...the activities planned were to improve the academic level of the CSN and also to forge a close relationship with parents. Risha and Tanya also expressed, “... we always considered the parents’ suggestions in our planning and we teachers too believed in having a range of activities to avoid monotony.”

Types of Activities

The administrators of the SEIP units in MPS and in LPS planned three main types of activities for every academic calendar. They stated:

“... the activities we plan were divided into . . . curriculum, co-curriculum, and student affairs because we have the three main administrative portfolios in our school.”

Curriculum

Curriculum was the main program in the school as the focus was the academic performance of the CSN. Therefore, the emphasis was on classroom teaching and learning. The curriculum set by the Ministry of Education was taught to the CSN. The classroom instruction is the main activity in the curriculum program so that the CSN gained knowledge and the purpose of education was achieved. The classroom instruction given was based on the curriculum specification determined for each level of students. The classroom instruction was based on the levels of the CSN and the levels were determined collectively by the teachers and the parents, when they discussed development of the IEP for each CSN.

During the researcher's informal (unplanned) interactions with the teachers, they explained that the curriculum program activities were routine as they were repeated every year, although their implementation varied at times to meet the needs of every CSN. The teachers also discussed and selected specific activities to suit the level of the CSN; these activities were not carried out yearly but only when needed to overcome the specific needs or problems encountered by the CSN.

Therapies for self-management and behavior management were other developmental activities planned in the curriculum. These activities were carried out so that the CSN were instilled with positive values for their general development. Rashim, the teacher from MPS, stressed how a CSN's problem was addressed:

"... the teachers determined the crucial need of a CSN and the IEP was drawn based on it, and if we teachers felt that the CSN's discipline posed a problem in his or her general development, then we rectified that problem first and we explained to the parents."

Co-curriculum

Co-curriculum programs were carried out in MPS and LPS. Co-curriculum is a compulsory program in the school as the CSN had to participate in the various co-curriculum activities organized at the school and district level. The activities included sports, scouts movement, co-academic competitions and culture based activities. Misha said:

"...the CSN in MPS were given the opportunities to participate in sports, co-academic competitions, cultural celebrations and community based programs just like mainstream students and every Wednesday morning we involve the CSN in 1 Student 1 Sports program."

These had been routine programs with some variations in both the schools. In LPS, it was difficult to involve all the students in co-curriculum because of the severity of their disability so the teachers only selected CSN who can participate in all the co-curriculum activities planned by the DSEU and even in the annual Semarak Islam program, in creative writing.

Student Affairs

The type of activity selected under student affairs was more “to improve the discipline of the CSN, to develop their social skills, transition programs and also to develop a close rapport with the CSN and their family members, teachers and also among the fellow parents” (S1/T1/INT2). The selected activities were within the regulations of the special education system. Shoba, the teacher from LPS, stressed:

“... CSN need to overcome different problems such as, emotional and behavioral so we teachers need to plan activities through therapies and classroom instructions to overcome the issues”.

Shoba further explained that the CSN need to be prepared for the transition program and the teachers organized activities to expose the students and their parents to the different skill training centers available for CSN training. Risha and Tanya said that the activities carried out incurred expenses and they were subsidized by the budget allocated to the SEIP unit from the ministry. However, the budget for major activities involving family members required contributions from parents, individual sponsors, or from the CSN’s allowances.

Strategic Plan

The strategic plan in MPS displayed all the activities based on the different portfolios of the administrators, namely curriculum, co-curriculum and student affairs in the school.

Activities listed in the strategic plan were carried out every year; the plan was also known as a routine program and some of the planned activities that varied every year were known as developmental programs. The routines activities carried out yearly were important as they provided input into developing the CSN physically and mentally while developmental activities catered to the current or immediate needs of the CSN (S1/S2/GPK/INT3).

The routine program included activities related to classroom instructions, assessments, developing IEP, competitions and extra-curricular activities. The developmental programs included activities such as excursions, community programs, therapies and character building. The curriculum activities were important according to Tanya (S2/GPK/INT2) who expressed that certain skills had to be instilled in the CSN and therefore had to be repeated.

The strategic plan displayed an overview of a tentative schedule of the activities that the teachers had planned to carry out in the school, and also a plan to participate at the district level. Risha said "...the schedule was tentative as we had to make adjustments to any ad hoc programs that may be scheduled by the district, state and even the mainstream school as the academic year progressed" (S2/GPK/INT2). The school based activities in MPS differed from that listed in the strategic plan prepared by the DSEU, because the teachers in MPS considered the specific needs of their CSN. However, the senior assistant in LPS stated that in their strategic plan, they highlighted the developmental activities planned by the DSEU in which their CSN were able to participate.

Any new activities suggested by the DSEU were listed under the developmental program. The TPC activities carried out in the schools were listed as in Table 1.

Table 1
Activities Listed in the Strategic Plan in MPS and LPS

Curriculum	Co-curriculum	Student Affairs
Briefing the parents	Family Day	Therapies
Convocation Day	Scouts Movement	Healthy Eating Program
Homework	1 Student 1 Sports	Discipline Management
Handicraft Assessment	Sports	Health Program
Holiday homework	Competitions	Parent Teacher Association meeting
Open Day	Excursion	Community Links
Developing IEP	Cultural Program	Birthday celebration
Convocation	Outreach Program	Festival celebrations
Open Day	Back to school program	Special Education Parent Teacher Association (SEPTA) council

Information Disseminated to Parents

The activities in the strategic plan are then made known to the parents of the CSN in a school meeting. How the information was disseminated varied in the two schools. In MPS, Rashim said:

"...the SEPTA was formed in 2012 and was the brainchild of Madame Risha, our senior assistant. It had parents of CSN in the committee. The office bearers were selected among the parents through votes. The chairperson with his committee was the representative of the parents to attend meetings before any activity involving parents was organized"

(S1/T1/INT1)

Risha said that in MPS, SEPTA was used as a platform to inform the parents about the activities planned for each academic year and also to disseminate any latest information concerning the CSN. It is also a platform for parents to discuss matters with the teachers and to volunteer their services based on their strengths. Based on the researcher's observation, LPS, unlike MPS, did not have a committee; instead the vital information was disseminated when the teachers met the parents in the first formal meeting, held at the beginning of the school term. The headmistress of LPS attended this meeting and welcomed the parents while the briefing was presented by Tanya, the Senior Assistant in charge of Special Education (S2/ OBS3).

Rita, the parent participant expressed her satisfaction with the information given during the meeting:

"... the teacher talked about the program in the school, we were given a calendar so it is easy. We can plan and attend the activity accordingly"

(S2/P1/INT1)

Form of Communication

The teachers in both the schools set the date, time and venue for the meetings and communicated to the parents through letters from the school administrator, a week before the scheduled meeting. The teachers from both schools also reminded the parents, during the informal face to face communication they had, when parents came to school to send and fetch their CSN. The teachers in MPS also contacted the parents through telephone calls and text messages (S1/T1/INT2) while in LPS, they tried sending messages through the CSN's communication logbook about activities, meetings and the CSN's involvement in various activities (S2/GPK/INT4). The efforts taken by the teachers were worthwhile as the document review showed that the majority of the parents attended all the meetings.

During the SEPTA meeting, the teachers in MPS presented the strategic plan to the parents and the teachers-in-charge of each activity explained the activities to the parents as well as the nature of manpower required from the parents. The parents of CSN made suggestions in terms of the dates and venues of the activities planned (S1/OBS1).

Observation of the first SEPTA meeting showed that the information was accepted by the parents as they did not disagree with the activities planned; nor did they suggest any new activities. Their nods signified that they were in agreement with what was planned and disseminated by the teachers. Thus communication carried out needs to be positive, understandable and respectful among teachers and parents (Banning, Summers, Frankland, & Beegle, 2004).

Close Rapport

Generally, the parents agreed with what was decided by the teachers and they felt that the activities were well selected. The parents were of the opinion that the teachers knew best. The parents were happy to work along with the teachers as Miha, the parent participant from MPS stated: “SEIP teachers are like a family, we have good rapport, and we have a sense of belonging toward the school and specifically in our CSN education” (S1/P1/INT2). Miha further expressed that the teachers have forged a good relationship with the parents and that they invited the parents for family activities, such as weddings. Another parent participant from MPS, Mimi, said she was glad that the teachers had given the parents a medium to express their views and that she felt confident to present her views through the SEPTA platform for there was a close rapport between the teachers and fellow parents. She further expressed that she had brought the contact to the teachers about a dental health program that her dentist friend from the health clinic wanted to carry out in a SEIP. Mimi said the teachers had taken the offer to discuss further at their level.

In LPS, Reha was noted to be very popular among the administrators of the mainstream school and the parents of other CSN (S2/OBS2). During informal meetings with the teachers, they expressed that Reha was an active parent in LPS. Reha, a bubbly character expressed:

“... teachers all good and friendly. I like to come to school and help. I like the activities. My son likes this school.”

Volunteers

The teachers motivated the parents to participate in the school activities and encouraged them to contribute in any form (S1/OBS1). In MPS, Risha gave the parents the opportunity to discuss with their spouses and then to volunteer in activities that are of interest to them.

During the SEPTA meeting, some parents readily volunteered to be involved in the activities based on their capacities and abilities to contribute (S1/OBS1). However, in LPS the teachers did not select the parent committee, nor did the parents volunteer. While talking with Tanya after her briefing, she said:

“... we decide on the parent committee when we plan for the program, but sometimes the parents do come forward to volunteer”.

Generally, the researcher observed a lot of interest, excitement and eagerness among the parents to be part of the committee and the activities planned during the meeting. The parent participants were glad that the schools had prepared a very good calendar, with activities conducive for CSN development; and also

were happy the school made an effort to actively involve them. Some parents felt that the pre-planned schedule allowed them to plan their leave at their workplace and attend all activities in school and even volunteer wherever possible, while others were seen encouraging fellow parents to volunteer for the same activities. However, there was a parent participant who had not attended any briefings before as she thought she had a language barrier, but she was glad that the teacher translated what was delivered in English. The planning of the activities can be mapped as in the following Figure 1.

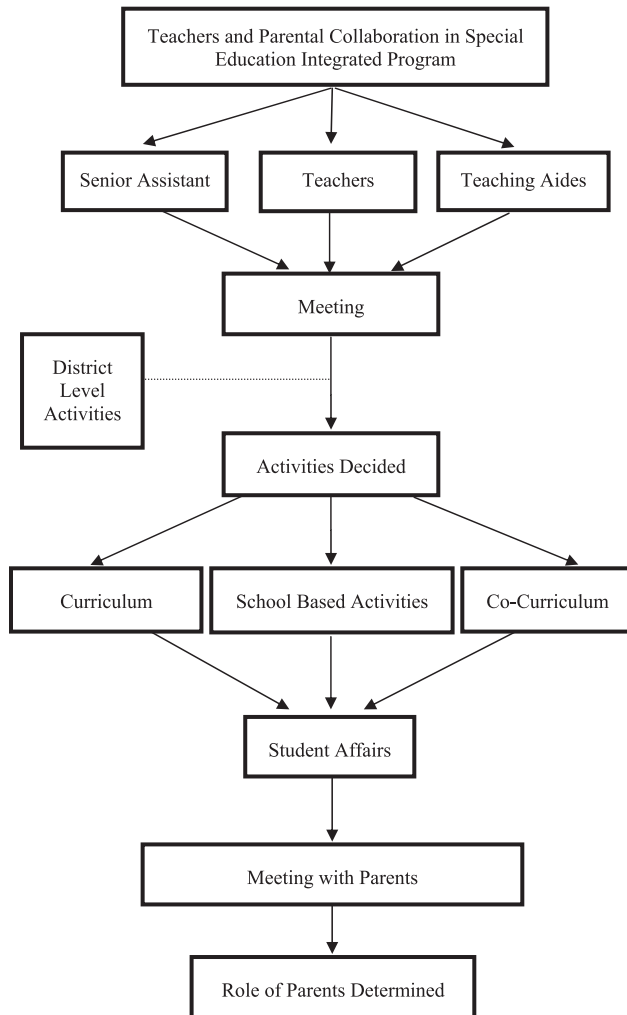


Figure 1. Process involved in planning activities

DISCUSSION

Lack of Specific Guidelines

The findings revealed that there were lack of specific guidelines for teachers to use as a guide to plan TPC activities in both the schools. MPS, unlike LPS had received a letter from the Ministry of Education (MOE) in the middle of the academic year, stating that school administrators should involve parents in the school so that the children with special needs (CSN) could improve their academic performance. However, both the schools had planned their TPC activities, even before receiving the letter, on the initiative of the senior assistant in charge of special education.

Epstein's Framework in the Malaysian Context

In the Malaysian context, the presence of Epstein's framework was evident although with some variations. Epstein's framework advocated an action team for partnerships with 6-12 professionals from various disciplines, who planned, implemented, coordinated, monitored, publicised and reported the activities but in the local context, the organisation chart consisted of administrators and the teachers and they were responsible for the planning. The teachers interacted with the parents frequently and through these interactions they collected information on the parents' abilities, needs and their desires. They also referred to other sources, the mainstream school planner and the District Special Education Unit (DSEU) planner to decide and plan the TPC activities, and to develop a school strategic plan for the academic year. Therefore, the information they collected became a necessary tool when the teachers discussed, planned and prepared the strategic plan in the SEIP, for their own academic calendar. The study also provided an in -depth understanding of how the teachers tried to link their own ideas and knowledge to develop the teacher-parental collaboration through school activities. The teachers planned activities based on the three portfolios. The literature based information pertaining to teachers and parental collaboration in various aspects of children's development and learning were stressed in frameworks with almost similar scope of involvement (Epstein, 2009; Henderson & Berla, 1994).

The roles of the other professionals were evident in the local context, as the teachers had planned activities involving medical personnel, social workers and bankers among others. The six types of involvement, namely parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making and collaborating with the community advocated by Epstein were evident in the two schools but were placed in the umbrella term of the administrative portfolios, namely curriculum, student affairs and co-curriculum that are evident in the education system in Malaysia. For example, the curriculum portfolio had the teachers briefing the parents as an activity. This activity can be linked with the Type 1

Parenting and Type 2 Communication in Epstein's framework as Epstein (2009) had stressed that the different types of involvement may have an interlink between one another. This is because every activity planned had to undergo a series of communications before a decision is made. Likewise, the activities planned in the local context can be grouped into the different types of involvement and the same activities can have more than one type of involvement. Another activity, developing the IEP in the curriculum portfolio involved the elements of parenting, communicating, learning at home, and decision making to a certain extent.

The Type 3 Volunteering and Type 5 Decision Making advocated by Epstein played a minor role at most times in the schools. It was noted that very rarely do Malaysian parents volunteer to make contributions in terms of manpower, unless the teachers made a personal request. The study also revealed that decision making was rare as the parents had the preconceived notion that decisions related to learning are decided by the school. This scenario existed because teachers preferred to keep parents outside the classroom and decision making was left to the teachers and the administrators. Studies by Seeley (1989) Swap (1990) and Zuria, Norshidah, and Zalizan (2002) showed that teachers considered the classroom as their territory and parents did not have direct involvement. Furthermore, the administrative hierarchy system too hindered parents from voicing their views.

Suggested Malaysian Framework

Analysis of teacher-parental collaboration planning carried out in the two schools showed that the teachers in the SEIP had a set format based on the administrative portfolios. The study revealed that teachers planned the activities based on the administrative capacity of each portfolio. It showed that the planning was comprehensive as the administrative portfolios covered all aspects of learner development. The activities planned under each portfolio could be linked to the different types of involvement advocated by Epstein.

The Epstein Six Types of Involvement stated how parents can be encouraged to be involved in the school. Henderson and Mapp (2002) had discussed the positive academic outcomes stemming from parental involvement. The need to involve the parents, as stated in the Individualised Education Plan (IEP) document, had been done to a certain extent in both the schools. Without specific guidelines on how to involve parents, the teachers at the individual schools discussed and planned the activities based on their children with special needs (CSN). However, some activities were common to both the schools, as both schools undertook most of the activities also carried out at district level. In the local context, the religious and cultural element plays an important part in the school activities. This could be added to the Malaysian Framework as its seventh type of involvement.

However, some differences were evident in the activity planning in the two schools. MPS had a council where teachers had meetings with the committee members before the information was disseminated to other parents. In LPS, the teachers interacted only with parents whom they have decided to involve in the activities.

Generally, it was noted that the teachers had considered parents while planning their activities. Parental involvement depended on the parents themselves and the essence of collaboration was evident in certain activities. This opinion was formed based on the definition stated by Cook and Friend (1991), where collaboration involves direct interaction between at least two co-equal parties, voluntarily engaged in shared decision making, as they work toward a common goal.

CONCLUSION

Several suggestions for further research are offered in this section. This includes a comparative study of TPC practices in other SEIP in mainstream schools in the local context. A TPC framework advocated by Epstein should be implemented in the Malaysian schools with formal guidelines. The TPC is in action but what is seen is that teachers planned and developed the activities based on their current needs with the parent role being pre-determined. An in-depth research could also be carried out to identify how school administrators can promote a more comprehensive TPC model to be used in the schools.

Another area of research deemed very crucial is a toolkit for teachers to use as a guide when involving parents. This study should be taken up soon as the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025) states that it hopes to develop a toolkit for teachers so that a comprehensive approach can be undertaken.

The Ministry of Education should instruct the Special Education unit to instil the importance on the importance of a circular on teacher-parent collaboration so that a standard programme could be planned.

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