

## The Role of Parent Involvement: Participative Management Practices in a Special Education School Context

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**ABSTRACT** Parents have an important role to play in school management practices in special education institutions. It is also highly important to use the available technology in an active and correct way as a contribution to the development of the children with disabilities. It is necessary to consider the needs and expectations of all stakeholders in order to increase quality in school management and establish a participative management understanding. The study adopted a qualitative research model with a case study approach. An in-depth interview technique was used in parallel to the research problem and aim of the study. Ten volunteering mothers, as representatives of the families, from a special education institution participated in the study and expressed their opinions regarding participative management, the use of technology and effects of technology in education. The results of the study showed that technology has made great contributions to management functions as well as families' involvement in both education and management.

### INTRODUCTION

People, culture and education are an integral whole. Education management approaches, which are shaped by the cultural structure of the society, thereby also appear as a case, which concern the anthropology. The reason for this, the moral values of the society and the role of the education in the gaining of personality are two facts, which are accepted by the societies. (Antropoloji Nedir 2016).

Similar to developing countries, the people are still faced with troubles in involving parents in management decisions, giving word to them in educational programs, as well as a school's management collaborating with parents as important components of increasing the quality of education in special needs education institutions in countries with a central governing system. This collaboration is significant in reintegrating these children into society and helping them grow as self-sufficient individuals. As the practices of the school management are bound to education ministries, the structuring of certain courses and practices needed by special needs children, and the necessary financial support, can be gained from the increased involvement of parents in parent-teacher associations, and getting the support of the environment. This

brings increased education quality practices of special needs educational institutions.

### Parents' Involvement in School Management Decisions

School is a general concept that is known by several names and forms the basic system of education (Basaran 2013). School is a social organization, as its input and output are people. It takes input from its environment and turns it into output after a specific education period, and gives it back to the environment. Thus, it has a strict relationship with the environment. In organizations with an effective form of this collaboration, the targets are achieved, while in organizations that cannot establish such collaboration, educational organizations cannot fully achieve its goals, and experiences problems (Sisman 2015).

Education organizations are expected to take the necessary steps and arrangements that will meet social demands. In order for schools to become an education center for its environment, take the responsibility for transforming social structure and be a center for everyone to get information about all aspects of life, they should have a healthy relationship with their environment and thus, the families. Such a healthy rela-

tionship will provide families with opportunities to gain knowledge of practical and intellectual information that they need, as well as offer social support for schools in terms of restructuring. Similar to all educational institutions, the efficiency of a school's management is more obvious in special needs educational organizations. One of the most important responsibilities of school management is to lead the establishment of a school culture based on sharing, along with a learning culture. It does not seem possible for families to take part in the solution of problems, as they have no part or support in the decision-making processes of instructional activities. The first condition for the democratic processing of a school organization is to involve all members. One of the indispensable parts of a school is the family. Hence, it is a necessity for families to be involved in the decision-making processes regarding school management (Aydin 2016). It is especially important for families to take part in school programs of special needs education organizations in order to fulfill the needs of the current system. The people are faced with the necessity of collaboration between schools and parents for the sake of preventing the exclusion of special needs children from society and letting them pursue a high quality of life. According to Aytac (2013), involvement of parents in schools increases public support. This, in turn, allows schools to be more efficient in meeting the needs of the society and its students. Parents' active involvement in schools increases the sense of ownership in schools. It is necessary for parents to be involved for the successful management of schools. The important point here is to determine to what extent parents will be given the right to take part in decision-making.

Parents, especially for the costs at school, can contribute to preparing and implementing the school's action plan and contributing to their child's education. As the involvement in decisions at school level will put forward the social status and experience of students' parents, they can have a more efficient contribution to school practices (Elliot and Reynolds 2014; Güçlü 2000). Because one sees the school as a system, parent-teacher association is one of the sub-systems of the school. The school's relationship with the parent-teacher association is very significant in generating a productive school system, and reaching its goals. School management

should create an environment for the works of the parent association, and members of the association should fulfil their duties accordingly. One of the most important subsystems that help schools to embrace the environment is parent-teacher association. Parents will be able to take on various roles in school processes and contribute to planning and development works (Lu et al. 2015).

School management and parents should always be in collaboration. The main finding to be concluded from the studies on school-parent relations is that it is necessary to have healthy communication and collaboration, especially on instructional matters. Taymaz (2011) explains the influence of parents within a quality education understanding as, "Schools need parents" involvement in order to be successful in education and not to be diverted from its goals (Wadesango 2010). For this, school management needs to motivate and encourage parents, and help them. School-parent collaboration enables increasing student success, participation, motivation, and self-confidence, and positively influences students' attitudes." One can see that various definitions have been made in the literature regarding special education. The interest of different fields in special education has given way to different definitions. One of these definitions is by Ataman (2003), who defined special education as, "The education that prevents deficiency from turning into handicap, and equips the disabled individual with skills that will help them become self-sufficient, integrate into society and become independent, productive individuals".

### **The Importance of Using Technology in Families with Disabled Children**

White emphasizes the functional aspect of the technology by saying that the technology is the main element, which determines the permanence of the sociocultural system. He also compares the functionalism to Molinowski, who indicated that the functional aspect of the culture is not based on to fulfill the individual needs, but to fulfill the vital needs to ensure the persistence of the group. In a word, all the organizational structures must be protected to fulfill the basic energy needs, because the permanence of the cultural evolution makes it mandatory. (Moore 2009: 183-186; Rosman et al. 2009: 17).

Therefore, in today's world human experiences are relatively affected by the rapid technological developments. As a matter of fact, this goes hand in hand with the area of cultural anthropology.

With the involvement of a disabled child into the parent, all parent member roles and responsibilities, starting from mothers and fathers, are heavily influenced due to this new situation. Although parents have equal responsibility in taking care of the disabled children, mothers have the dominant responsibility in this field, and it can be said that they need emotional, informational and common support in communicating with their children. One of the settings from which mothers can get this support is the Internet. The communication, research, and entertainment opportunities are helpful to mothers in this area. Indeed, Bylund (2005) stated that the basis for mothers sharing their birth stories is similar, and that they have the need to communicate with each other to reduce the effects of their experiences. Positive affirmation and opportunity to learn about others' parenting experiences are the other underlying reasons (Plantin and Danabeck 2009). Bernhart and Felter (2004), in their interviews with mothers, found that mothers mostly use online platforms to learn about health and child development issues. It has special importance for parents with disabled children to be in contact with individuals with similar experiences and get information. In fact, parents with disabled children expressed their satisfaction from the social and emotional support that they receive over the Internet (Fleismann 2005; Scharer 2005). Similarly, O'Connor and Madge (2004) emphasized that the Internet is very important for parents because it is a platform where they can share similar experiences, and it provides virtual social support. In this regard, it can be said that mothers with disabled children should increase their digital literacy skills that involve computer and Internet literacy in order to benefit from the opportunities provided by the Internet.

Digital literacy is an important and necessary skill for parents in order to use and assess technology because it is assumed that the widespread use of technology in one's daily lives will grow in the future. Digital literacy is not only an important skill for educators working with disabled children, but also for the parents of those children, because educators and parents should understand the importance of using technology in order to find information, communi-

cate, and prepare their children for future (National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) 2012). Increasing the digital literacy skills of mothers with disabled children can help them communicate with their environment and conduct research in the field that they need. Also, they can be partners in the online world of their children. Thus, they can simultaneously help their children gain computer and online security skills, digital citizenship skills, as well as improving their own digital literacy skills. Additionally, parents can guide their children in using tools, such as computers and the Internet, and be role models. Parents' lack of ability to use the Internet may cause children to approach this platform in a different way. In order to explain to children the details of the Internet, the benefits and limitations of the virtual platform, and guide them in the right way, firstly, parents should have sufficient information about the Internet, and after that, they can lead the growth of more healthy individuals (Kirik 2014). On the other hand, having digital literacy skills is important for mothers with disabled children, not only to meet their personal needs, but also to learn about the activities and practices done around the world for disabled children. The Internet, as one of the most influential tools of the information age, is affecting many fields from education to health and communication. The Internet, in its current state, plays a significant role in changing the social structure. The benefits of the capacity of the Internet, which is an information and communication resource, can only be appreciated if it is used at a healthy level (Odabasi and Sendag 2008). Parents, whose disabled children are being educated in special education facilities should benefit from this information and communication resource so that their children can grow to be self-sufficient individuals with a high quality of life. It should not be limited to the knowledge and skills gained at school for mentally handicapped children to live a quality life, because the lives of these children are divided into two, that is, time they spend in school, and the time they spend with their families at home. Therefore, it is an important factor that the families of today's digital world should also be able to use technology (computers and the Internet) in order to help their children, contribute to what they learn in schools and communicate with them more effectively. Based on the reasons stated above, this study is rooted in

two main foundations. The first aim is to investigate the extent of the importance of involving parents in school management decisions for increasing quality in special needs institutions. Secondly, the researchers aim to highlight the importance of using technology (computers, Internet) to reduce the communication breakdowns between schools and parents, to increase the quality of life for disabled children, and establish collaboration among parents and schools.

### Objectives

The aim of this study is based on gaining participative management practices in special education institutions' management, and the involvement of parents in this management process. Also, the ultimate aim of this study is to state that the use of technology is an important source of information for the families who have children in special education institutions.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study has a qualitative nature, which provides experiences and perceptions of the participants and gives meaning to the investigated issue or focus (Cohen et al. 2010). This study aims to investigate the involvement of parents in the decision-making process within the framework of participative management, with the support of digital literacy, to know more about social and academic development of students who have special education. Although literature pays attention to participative management in a school culture, enhancing parents' professional development in line with technology for special education schools can be miraculous for the education system. This study is significant and deals with equipping mothers of disabled children in TRNC with Internet literacy, and thus allowing the personal development of the mothers as well as their children. It can also help in their participation in planning activities at the school, which will in turn support the restructuring at special education schools which offer education to disabled children. The study was designed as a holistic multiple case study, which is a qualitative research method. According to Creswell (2007), researchers in case stud-

ies perform in-depth examinations of one or more situations restricted in time, with data collection tools (observations, interviews, audio-visuals, documents, reports) that include multiple resources, and define cases and related themes. In holistic multiple case studies, every case is examined in itself holistically, and then compared to each other (Yildirim and Simsek 2013). In this case study, as participants had disabled children at different ages and with different disabilities, as well as diverse backgrounds in terms of education levels, economic and social environments, they could not be accepted as a single case, and as a result, the mothers of each disabled child were accepted as a holistic case.

### Research Questions

The aim of this study is to help mothers with disabled children to gain digital literacy skills so that they can access resources related to the education of their children as well as their own personal development. Also, the study aims to enable parents to contribute to the development of their children by involving parents in school management decisions, and creating a more qualified school atmosphere. Answers to the following research questions have been sought in order to achieve these aims:

1. What are their thoughts regarding the current school climate?
2. What are their problems with, and expectations of the school management?
3. What are their opinions regarding being involved in management and collaborating with the management?
4. What are the benefits of technology in management involvement and child development?

### Participants, Research Context and Ethical Procedure

The ten volunteer mothers of the disabled learners were involved in this inductive research process. The reason for choosing those participants is that these people are the part of the parent unit of the school, which can diffuse new knowledge and practices with other families. They have a close relationship with school management, however they do not have enough knowledge and awareness of participative management, and the decision-making process. Furthermore, maximum diversity sampling method,

which is one of the purposeful sampling methods, was used in choosing participants (Yildirim and Simsek 2013). In this study, mothers who have a disabled child with different disabilities were chosen. Voluntarism was taken into consideration in determining the participants. This study was conducted at one of the special education schools, which is performing a learning process in different dimensions, such as supporting physical development, mental and social development of its students. The ethical procedure was implemented in a sensitive way, where participants' confidentiality and trustworthiness was guaranteed through obtaining permission from the school headmaster and the Ministry of Education. Furthermore, a consent form was used to ensure the willingness of the participants.

#### Data Collection Technique and Analysis

In-depth interviews were conducted as a data collection technique, with 55-minute conversations with the participants. The interviews were carried out with mothers in their homes according to their conditions and time schedule. The interviews provided information about the demographic information of the participants and their disabled children, their experience and knowledge of technology and Internet usage, their opinions and expectations of the school management, and their involvement in the decision-making process. The interview questions were reviewed by two experts to ensure the credibility of the questions (Denzin and Lincoln 2003). The analysis of the interviews was done based on content analysis, where themes were analyzed based on participative management, and the decision-making process and support of technology to child development and managerial practices.

Content analysis was used in analyzing the qualitative data obtained from the inductive process. The purpose of content analysis is to display and interpret the concepts that underline the findings obtained from the data described, and causal relations are explained through direct citations from the opinions of interviewees.

In this study, in-depth interview data in the form of voice files were first turned into written form by the researchers. The obtained texts were transferred to NVivo 10 software for analysis. The entire data was read, and themes were identified on the basis of questions. Then the ob-

tained data was transformed into "interview encoding key". After the encoding key was completed for every interviewee, the consistency of the encoding key was compared. The "*reliability = agreement / (agreement + disagreement)*" formula will be employed for reliability (Miles and Huberman 1994). Attention was paid to ensure that the reliability coefficient was higher than .70 as a minimum for each question.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study aims to explore the significance of participative management within a school culture in terms of quality improvements in special education schools, and shows how supporting technology may help the professional development of parents in their with the involvement decision-making process, and contributing to the social and academic development of children. The following findings and discussions underline that parents need to develop digital literacy to upgrade their knowledge about the expectations of their children through the Internet, and they also need training on participative management to become involved in the decision-making process to better understand and collaborate with school teachers for the social and academic development of the children.

### School Climate and Participative Management Practices

*a) Participants' opinions regarding the atmosphere established in school were reviewed, and it was found that parents with kids who do not have speech problems are satisfied with the setting, and that their kids love school and that they get bored during holidays, and mostly, miss school. Parents whose children have speech problems stated that they do not have any idea on this issue as their children have speech and hearing problems. With regard to this issue, Participant P said, "My kid loves school a lot. Once he gets home from school every day, he starts talking 'mom, we did this, we went to the cinema, we cooked, which shows that he loves school", and this shows that they are happy with the school climate established by the administration. Similarly, Participant Z said, "I'm very happy with the school climate. I'm very sad that this school will be over soon. My daughter is fifteen and she will leave this school*

when she reaches eighteen. There will be a different school, new teachers, and a new environment, and I don't know how she will react to that. The teachers in this school are more like fathers and mothers than us", and this proves that they are happy with the school climate.

**b) With regards to the views of children regarding the satisfaction level with the school climate**, it was found that they are generally happy. In relation to this issue, Participant H expressed his son's satisfaction level by saying, "My son is not constantly there, he is mentally challenged, and thus, he only goes to that school twice a week. However, he loves going to that school and he loves his friends too". Also, Participant N expresses his child's satisfaction with the following statement: "My son loves the school and leaves the school happy".

#### Decision-making Process

**a) When the views related to the program practices regarding child development are reviewed**, it was found that most of the families said that the programs contribute to the development of their child, and the children develop certain skills and are able to do some things they could not do before. Participant Z, on this issue, stated the specific importance of school programs for the motor skills of his child by saying, "My son couldn't set up logos before, but now he can differentiate colours. He wasn't able to hold a pencil but he can now, so his motor skills have developed". Again, on the development of motor skills, Participant F highlighted that the motor skills of their son are developing, and that they are able to do things they could not do before by the following statements: "School has a great role on the development of motor skills because my son wasn't able to use both his micro and macro motor skills. He has problems with his muscles, and so he had many problems with this. We have really noticed that he can use his hands after he started school because he wasn't able to turn on buttons before. My son is eight years old now and he just started using the buttons. I benefitted a lot from the school..."

**b) When the views on the newly implemented program were reviewed**, many families highlight the importance of the vocation workshop, which has been opened with a new practice.

They have stated that children become able to do certain things in the vocation workshop, and that this makes the children happy. With regards to this issue, Participant S stated that the vocation workshop helps the skill development of children in school as a program, and says the following: "That are many differences in my daughter now. For example, she wasn't able to do anything in the past, she couldn't hold her hands long, but now her muscles have developed a little and she can hold, write her own name, and say her name. She couldn't speak before but now she can and she has cooking skills now. She learned knitting in the workshop, and holding a needle which she couldn't do before". Similarly, Participant P emphasized the importance of launching the workshop with the following words: "The child learns to be self-sufficient and self-confident. Especially, it was very noticeable in recent days. These workshops have opened and children have gained motor skills, started producing things on their own, and they get to have their little fair where they can sell the goods that they have produced. They are very happy about this. He says, 'I did it'. Their confidence increases and they become capable to sustaining a normal life". This example shows that the need for adding physical education and sports practices as part of the programs is essential, and not only workshops, so the muscle skills develop, but also with the sense of sharing and being a part of 'us'.

**c) Views on participants regarding the opinions and expectations of the school management** showed that parents express that they have more expectations related to their children. Many parents stated that the school especially is lacking in language therapy, while others said that the school is lacking in playground and physical education areas, while others claimed that children are not categorized based on their age and disability conditions. The majority of them emphasized the important need for physical education and sports courses. Although these seem like demands from the school administration, one is faced with these problems as they root from the central school management in TRNC, because the staff arrangements for both special needs institutions and regular schools are done by the Ministry of National Education. Participant F, who stated that the school practices are not fully sufficient, said the following: "Age groups are not separate, although they

formed groups of 4-5 in classrooms, these children are in classes with others who are older or younger than them. So, sometimes they can get bored, I don't know..." Participant P, who expressed dissatisfaction related to language therapy, said the following: "Of course there are many things missing in school, but first and most important is language therapy. I think this is a great deficiency in Cyprus, in all special education institutions. If these children have communication breakdowns, this means they will be isolated from the society. If I can't understand my daughter, if she can't understand me and we can't communicate, this means she will not get anything and end up being isolated. Thus, language therapy is very important." Again, Participant F expresses the importance of language therapy in special needs institutions in terms of both socialization and psychological development through the following statements: "Language therapy is very important; the child needs to speak clearly in order to mingle in society. They have to learn to speak first, even for getting bread from a market. If they can't, they can't communicate and they will close themselves." At the end of the day, these children will not spend their whole lives in a special needs institution. Thus, such institutions should help improve language skills and support children to express themselves in society. Also, one sees that children who cannot express themselves show aggressive behavior, get depressed or close themselves. Participants with expectations of the physical education course and physiotherapy practice from the school administration show concerns as well. Children with different mental disabilities have muscle development and sharing problems. In order to have stronger muscles and a healthy body, such schools should offer physical activities as well. Hence, physical education courses should be added to the curriculum, and physiotherapy experts should be present in schools. A physical education course will contribute to the sense of sharing, and develop a sense of 'us' along with working the body and improving muscles. In regards to this issue, Participant S highlights the lack of a physical education course, trainer and opportunities of sports in the following words: "This is important for not only physical development, but also mental development of children, so a physical education course is needed, because, these children naturally experience problems

with coordination. Thus, I hope the problem of a lack of physical education course and a necessary teacher will soon be met."

### **The Support of Technology in Professional Development**

a) *Views of participants regarding the use of computer/Internet* showed that in general, parents acknowledge the inevitability of using technology in today's world, but they do not get the time due to their children's disability. However, whenever they get time, they use the Internet to find information on their children's disability, and this helps them a lot. Indeed, Participant P emphasizes the importance of technology especially for families with disabled children in the following words: "Computers and the Internet means information is always at the tip of your fingers, and this is a very good thing, specially if you have special needs kids. Sometimes, we face such a special situation that we don't know what to do or who to turn for help. Of course, you cannot run to the doctor or the psychologist every five minutes, so the Internet can offer a solution, or at least help you read about other people's similar experiences and get in touch with them which is an important type of support." Similarly, Participant A focuses on the importance of using the Internet in today's world and says the following: "I always use the Internet to do research on the disability of my child, how I can help him better, how we can manage certain situations, how we can fight it, or minimize such problems".

### **CONCLUSION**

According to sociocultural perspective of the society, the question of "Do we have to reintegrate these special children to the society in a useful way or they already lost inborn?" is also related to the cultural anthropology. Also the perspective of mentally handicapped children and the special education institutions that provide them training are intertwined with the sociocultural anthropology. Considering that the families of these children are the part of the community, depending on the cultural structure of the society, the participation of the families to the school's administrative is highly important with the support from the community.

The aim of this study is to reveal the importance of involving parents in school manage-

ment units in order to increase program quality in special needs education institutions. Additionally, the study aims to put forward the importance of technology (computer, Internet) as a source of information and a communication tool for the parents of children with disabilities in order to sustain their education. When the findings of this study, which was conducted in this regard, are reviewed, the current system of education in developing countries has central management understanding, and the inadequacies arising from resources and information sharing cause bigger problems for special needs education institutions. When the research findings are considered, it can be seen that parental involvement in school management at the decision-making stage is insufficient, and the workshop opportunities that will support the development of children are not at adequate levels due to financial problems.

Future studies can focus on developing actions plans for the use of technology and the betterment of management understanding through educational seminars as action research. Moreover, longitudinal studies can be conducted in order to investigate management functions and the influence of technology on guidance services. All these issues show that parental involvement in school management functions, and being in close contact with the digital world, are key issues in establishing better quality schools to meet the needs of special needs children through better quality education programs, and special children who were raised in the right way.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

It is necessary to involve parents in school management and organize education seminars within quality standards to help them get active roles in specific programs of the schools. Also, parents with disabled children should be aware of the importance of technology (computer, Internet) as an important source of information for them, and it is crucial to help them learn how to use technology in order to sustain the education of their children outside the school, and as guidance tool. One is faced with the fact that technology also has a role for parents in following the change and/or development of their children in today's digital world.

On the other hand, it can be recommended that parents with special needs children should

be involved in the decision-making process. A school, which has found the environmental and financial support with parental involvement, should take actions to meet the deficiencies in their institutions regarding language therapy, physiotherapy, and physical education teaching in exchange for certain expenses, and can involve parents in their practical courses. Similarly, they can also build playground and sports area facilities, which are currently deficient in their schools. In this digital world, one is faced with the importance of parents helping their disabled children, and being in contact with the school to help them with their education. In this regard, projects can be developed to help parents learn how to use computers and the Internet, and raise their awareness through courses and short trainings courses.

### FUTURE STUDIES

In future studies, action research can be conducted through a multimethod of data collection. Special needs education is important for acquiring participative management. Therefore, comparison of different contexts can be done through mixed research approaches.

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