Parental Involvement in Individual Education Planning for Students with Mental Disabilities: A Lithuanian Experience

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Abstract

This article explores Lithuanian research on parental involvement in the education of their children with mental disabilities through individual education planning. The authors also more generally discuss parental involvement in child education issues in Lithuania. Individual education planning is described as a means for developing parental involvement in their children's education and for creating equal cooperation of all participants. The Bientraitance concept (Detraux, 2002; Detraux & Di Duca, 2006) is introduced to conceptualize the research intervention in a special education school. Participatory action research was carried out with the aim of constructing coherence between parents and professionals through confrontation and negotiation of different needs and interests, identification and exploitation of different resources to enable achievement of the negotiated objectives, elaboration of an action plan, and implementation of that plan. The research results show that individual education planning enables all participants to create common understanding of the objectives, develop mutual cognition, actualize internal resources, create new institutional culture, legitimate parental expectations, and open up parents and educators to new challenges.

Introduction

Lithuanian laws on education and the social integration of people with disabilities define an individual education plan as one that sets out general guidelines for the child's social, emotional, intellectual, and physical development. The law prescribes that an individual program is intended both to develop the person's individual abilities and to meet special educational needs. The law also envisages that parents should play an active role in the education of their child. However, in practice, collaboration between the school and parents is very formal. Miltenienė (2005), after surveying 600 Lithuanian mainstream school teachers and 489 parents whose children had special educational needs, found that collaboration was limited to informing the parents about the child's achievements during parent–teacher meetings or through entries in the child's record book. An unequal and school-dominated relationship is viewed as natural. Teachers are considered to be child education experts and are in positions of power, while parents and children have little influence on the education process. However, parents are often blamed if the child fails to achieve, and parents' competencies are often devalued.

The different participants in education processes may have different priorities regarding the education of pupils with special educational needs or disabilities. Research shows (Ambrukaitis & Ruškus, 2002) that teachers often consider the interests and expectations of parents of a child with a disability ill-informed or unrealistic; therefore, the parents' desires and concerns remain unheard by teachers and are not integrated into the education process. In Lithuanian education practice, it is accepted that specialists will review the situation of any students with special education needs; this can, in some instances, lead to an inherent imbalance in the professional–parent power relationship. Even though research has been undertaken in Lithuania to understand and develop methods and models through which children with disabilities, their parents, and specialists may work for the benefit of the student through greater collaboration (Ališauskienė & Miltenienė, 2004), social integration takes place mainly at the

legal and institutional level, not through empowerment of the actual participant (Ruškus, Ališauskas, & Šapelytė, 2006).

The conclusions of a research report commissioned by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Lithuania, carried out by Bagdonas (2003), maintained that participants in the education process saw parents as active participants; however, it noted that their activity manifests itself only when the teacher has the leading role. The report produced by the Lithuanian Parliament, on "The Situation and Problems of Children with Disability in Lithuania" (Ministry of Education and Science, 2007), states that special education institutions make an effort to include parents in the activities of the institution: parents are invited to participate in various events, they take part in designing education plans, and so on. However, many institutions pointed out that parents either participate very little or do not participate at all in the process of education (especially in rural areas). Thus, as is shown by various research studies in Lithuania, the involvement of parents in the educational process is endorsed but difficult to achieve in practice, either in mainstream or special schools.

Individual Education Planning

How can we best involve persons with disability and their families in addressing their special educational needs? How do we create a cooperative system in which all interested parties are active participants, making their own specific contribution to the education of the child with special needs? Our assumption as researchers was that parents would become fully involved in their child's education process if they participated in construction of the child's individual education plan. However, in making this assumption we did not limit individual education planning to the process in the official definition established by Lithuanian law. Although this law acknowledges the importance of parental involvement, in reality parents' participation in individual education plan design is token: they simply sign a document created by the teacher. Throughout this research, we interpreted *individual education planning* as a construction of a more informal, situational project, foreseeing equal involvement by teachers, parents, and children.

The individual education planning we are presupposing includes: (a) coordination of all participants' (child, parents, teachers) expectations, interests, and needs related to the situation; (b) agreement on the purpose and aim of the child's individual education plans; (c) sharing of responsibilities and obligations by all participants in striving to meet the child's educational aims; (d) application of all participants' internal (competencies) and external (environmental) resources; and (e) evaluation of and reflection on the experience of developing the child's individual education plan, undertaken both individually and collectively. Effective individual planning helps children to acquire new knowledge and to recognize the environment, and encourages them to undertake concrete activities. Given these terms, individual planning is clearly related to a system of progressive education in which the construction of the child's development plan creates preconditions for implementation of the educational content, and in which the teaching and learning processes are based on personal experience, encouraging pupils to formulate their own views according to a real-life situation.

Individual education planning is related to the social participation concept (Myrick, John, & Williams, 1994; Ebersold 2004). Individual planning, as a partnership tool in the education of persons with disability, also highlights the inclusion concept (Booth, Ainscow, Black-Hawkins, Shaw, & Vaughan, 2000). The child's individual development and education plan is intended as a support, but it also guarantees the dissemination of information about the education situation and focuses on meeting the individual learner's special education needs. Of necessity, it promotes cooperation among the pupil, parents, and teachers

or other specialists, and in some cases the plan also focuses on evaluation. To ensure the formulation of an effective plan, it is essential that there be a continuous effort to align the participants' attitudes, needs, and opportunities and focus attention on strengthening of opportunities for mobilization of internal and external resources. Parental involvement requires the establishment of two-way communication, which enables families to play an important role in their child's learning processes and encourages parental participation in school and community life (Epstein, 2001; Russell, 2004). Several researchers have emphasized the importance of trust in parent–school collaboration (Domingue, Cutler, & McTarnaghan, 2000; Stoner & Angell, 2006). According to Ebersold (2003), the coherence of mainstream education processes presupposes strategies through which equal cooperation systems, which take into account inter-individual dynamics as well as organizational logic, can be created. Ebersold and Detraux (2003) see the project as a means of empowerment, based on the idea of cooperation among parent, child, and teacher discourses and construction of new knowledge.

The research described in this article aimed to frame a model for parental involvement in the child's education process in a special school, grounded on construction of the child's individual education plan. Grounded theory and an open coding technique with regard to interviews were employed as the method of data collection and analysis. For the purposes of this project, open coding was seen as part of an analytical process concerned with identifying, naming, categorizing, and describing phenomena. *Open coding* describes the initial stages of data analysis in "breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 61) from each interview. A category conceptually defines the process that participants seek to resolve. Coding procedures and categorizations were applied in the pilot study in order to discover the parents' and teachers' perceptions of the experience of parental involvement in the school for mentally disabled children. Coding procedures and categorization were also performed at the end of the research by the participant reflection group, with the aim of identifying action research outcomes.

Participatory Action Research

The primary research methodology used in this study was action research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). *Action research* is a collaborative approach to applied research that provides people with the means to take systematic action to resolve specific problems (Stringer, 1999). Armstrong and Moore (2004) define action research as a cyclical process consisting of observation, reflection, planning, and action. It stresses participative inquiry; that is, communication and collaboration with community group participants throughout the course of a research study.

Action research relies on the conjunction of three elements: research, action, and participation. The core characteristics of participatory action research include:

(a) it is context bound and addresses real-life problems, which originate within the community or workplace itself;

(b) the research goal is fundamentally to improve the lives of those involved, through structural transformation;

(c) it is inquiry through which participants and researchers co-generate knowledge, using collaborative communicative processes in which all participants' contributions are taken seriously; and

(d) it treats the diversity of experience and capacities within the local group as an opportunity for enrichment of the research action process (Greenwood & Levin, 1998).

We based our participatory action research on the principles of the *Bientraitance* model proposed by Belgian colleagues Detraux and Di Duca (2006). Detraux and Di Duca base their model on the concepts of resilience, empowerment, and sense of coherence, which allow a better understanding of actions taken to cope with difficulties, and aim to have parents, teachers, and child become full (complete) participants in the life project of a child with disability (Detraux, 2002). *Bientraitance* is a generic concept. It can be considered as providing an anatomy of disability within a social and relational dimension. *Bientraitance* is a corollary of the relational context in which we see the interaction of three dimensions: (a) a project, foreseeing a more or less explicit confrontation of the needs and interests of the participants in a concrete situation; (b) exploitation of identified resources depending on the representation of their roles and functions (resources include social network, the competences of each participant, and the knowledge circulating among them); and (c) explicit concrete actions of every participant, which qualify existing interactions. These three dimensions interact and constitute the time-space of the "*traitance.*" Recognition of these three dimensions leads to an understanding that there is no single "right" solution, but rather that there are many possible solutions.

Sample

Members of the community of one Lithuanian special school participated in the research. At the time of the research, the school consisted of 31 staff members (including teachers, class teachers, and administrators) and 90 children with mental disability (12 were resident at home, 13 came from children's homes). Two samples were selected: separate groups of respondents and research participants took part in the experimental study. In the pilot study, nonstructured interviews were used to identify the distinctive characteristics of involvement in the child's education process in a special school. In total, we interviewed 18 parents (about 18 hours were spent interviewing and discussing with the students' parents) and 11 teachers (8.5 hours were allocated to the teacher interviews). Another 2.5 hours were spent in a group discussion with the teachers during attendance at a meeting. In addition, teachers who did practical work were asked to write up both typical and atypical situations in which the students with mental disability participated. These descriptions (though not individual interviews) were based on nonstandardized observation and were used as a substitute for interviews with students; this enabled the researchers to gain information that would have proven difficult and time-consuming to gather by interviewing students who presented with major communication difficulties.

Five separate groups of participants from Šiauliai City's J. Laužikas Special School agreed to take part in the action research on the principle of voluntary participation. Each group consisted of a (a) a student with mental disability (two students with autism syndrome, one with Down syndrome and moderate developmental disabilities, and two other students with developmental disability), (2) the mother of each student, (3) a teacher, and (4) a researcher. Later, depending on the situation and the context, other participants joined, including special education and social education students from Šiauliai University, and the leader of the Art Club of the Šiauliai Pupils' House.

Results

Pilot Study

Stage one consisted of a pilot study to identify the current state of parental involvement in the education of children with mental disability. Specifically, the pilot study identified the distinctive characteristics of parental involvement in the child's education process in a special

school. After analysis of the interviews with parents and teachers, several suppositional categories were formed.

A priori delegation of education initiatives in the school: Silent and active discourses

The completed pilot research indicated that the teachers' discourse is prevalent in the school, whereas the parents' discourse is less apparent. Parents usually take a passive role in the child's teaching and learning processes, and the reins of the education process are handed over to the teacher as the only expert. The dominant discourse is pervasive, whereas the parents' discourse, which also exists and is individual and unique, tends to be repressed.

From the interview with school administration:

Our wish is to involve parents into the life of school community in all possible means. So it begins at first—pupils' parents must participate in school council activity … but. And at once but! Participating in school council activity, parents' participation I would say in this case is rather formal, but not helping to solve some occurring problems. Because in fact there are such questions that are very distant for parents—let us say education plans, when it is necessary to approve school education plans.

One teacher stated that "Mother gives a child to school, to us, during the classes it is teachers who are responsible for a child." During the interview, a mother expressed a typical parental opinion: "Yes, I do not get all I want at school. Isn't it possible to do anything?"

Closed safety or challenges for openness? Enlargement of the school–family chain.

A clear tendency is for students at the special school to live in a relatively closed system. Their activities are limited to the "school–family" chain.

One father: So, this is our situation: How should my wife go to work, when it is necessary to bring and pick up a child? It would be really difficult. We do not have anything like rest at home. So that we could relax completely …

Researcher: Maybe you belong to some community? Where you could leave the child, and the child is looked after and parents could have a rest …

Father: No, we do not belong anywhere. But we simply … The child is very attached … . He stays normally at school. But it is not clear if he could stay with other people. We have not considered such a possibility to leave him anywhere so that my wife could work … . The child gets disability allowance; the resources are not so big, but … but … This is, so to say, sacrifice.

All the activities in which the children participate are within the environs of the school or family; there are limited opportunities for their involvement in any other social or educational space.

Limitations on the coherence of the participants' interests.

The communication and cooperation offered by the school are usually limited to two forms, the first being the general parents' and teachers' meetings, during which information is shared with parents. They are *informed* about their child's education performance, about the organization of school activities, and so on. One mother's statement illustrates the situation at school:

We communicate at school but only … like this. We tried to say something [to teachers], but not now … . So during the meeting it is said, so-and-so did something, so-and-so did another thing …

Researcher: So do these meetings take place in your class? What do you discuss during them? When do you communicate with the teacher? Parents with each other?

Mother: We do, we do. On Christmas, for example … . Maybe there are too few meetings, I do not know …

Researcher: What do you discuss, do?

Mother: So teacher speaks, who coloured what, about crafts, exercise-books, how they write, how the child's mood change.

In addition, educational sessions are organized for parents. During the interview with one mother, she said: "There were such sessions. Let us say, crafts teacher thought of teaching parents how to make souvenirs. Such kind of seminar. It was twice."

The other form is informal communication, which takes place when the child is brought to the class or when parents come to pick up the child from school. From the report of the interview with a teacher:

I am trying—when parents come to pick up a child I try to enumerate good works. So parents leave shining. But what I noticed from these lectures, that they are lost, that the parents are in a structured time. They dedicate certain number of minutes—"I have ten minutes, while the child dresses up I will talk with a teacher"—and walk out the door.

Another teacher expressed:

Among all there are certain women who do not work, they bring children, and they, of course, pick them up in closing time. They themselves have much free time. So, these women like to talk. They talk not about children, they talk about life, about hard destiny, complain about husbands. Like this for example, that husbands are bad or the husband left her with such a child. They tend to talk about such subjects. But there are few who talk. Everything is going on very quickly, in several minutes.

From recognition of the different competencies of all participants toward the utilization of these competencies.

It became apparent from the data that some of the education planning participants

a priori recognize the competencies of other participants. The parents indicated an unconditional trust in the teachers' competence. The teachers recognize that the parents have parenting competencies. The children's competencies are often assessed by professionals on the basis of a limited understanding of what the children are capable of and what they have learned. Consequently, there is a background of common understanding and recognition of competencies. However, we also observed a divergence of understanding regarding certain competencies, as exemplified by the following from a teacher: "We discuss various questions, and parents themselves suggest what they can do. For example, one mother translated a booklet about school into English." Speaking about the use of parents' competencies, she said that "when we start telling stories parents just listen, listen, and just sign everywhere where it is necessary."

One of the parents' opinions reflects many parents' views:

I would like to exchange information. Maybe to know how it takes place in other towns. Teachers have more experience, knowledge and I would like them to share it with parents. For parents it is difficult to bring up even healthy children. And our children have disabilities. I think there is too little knowledge. I think it will be very good if some meetings took place every month. I guess parents would attend them. At least I would like to.

<u>Need for cooperative and creative problem-solving methodology and skills.</u>

Critical thinking, collective reflection, and collective/collaborative solutions to problems and conflicts in general are seen as beneficial. These are analogical forms of activities, but because of the sociocultural legacy they have not yet become the usual practice for organizations in Lithuania. In fact, in the majority of organizations in Lithuania, critical thinking, creative and group problem-solving traditions have not yet been established. In other words, there

has not yet been a transition to the tradition of addressing problematic issues by creative discussion that takes into account diverse attitudes, opinions, and beliefs, and coordinates them to produce common ideas.

Researcher: And how did you make the decision related to such upbringing of the child?

Mother: Teachers saw, advised. And no one from the authorities sees or advises. The teachers themselves say, we feel sorry for this child, do something. We said we would change a school so the vice-principal herself told us to come. But in general … I cannot say anything very good. For example, after the classes everyone does whatever they want, no activities …

Researcher: How did you look for solutions? How did you do something, did you speak to administration?

Mother: We spoke to administration, but what is the use? If you say that we will change the school then they react. We asked for several times to move to another class, but the authorities do not say anything, do not react. Only when it was understood that we would change the school, then they reacted … . So that pupil's "basket" would not run away … . Some other time you speak to the vice-principal and the principal, but there is no reaction, they little react.

Transition from an individual action model to a community model

In terms of people's attitudes, even a limited number of actions creates excellent preconditions for establishing a community organization action model, such as the collective behavior model for the establishment and continuation of cooperation on common pragmatic projects. If theoretical evaluation is undertaken when pragmatically based (comprehensively worthwhile) projects are created, then cooperative relationships, trust, creativity, sharing of experiences, and so on begin dominating within the organization. Within

the investigated school, we noticed that individualized and collective action models are prevalent.

A typical statement by one mother is revealing: "I could engage into some activity. For example, to go somewhere to the nature so that children could communicate with animals. For example, to organize an excursion to country side. So, parents could communicate with each other, too. To communicate with teachers maybe it is not very real …."

An administration representative, speaking about creating community at school, said: "Some more energetic parents appeared—class teachers tell me—so we gathered a kind of parents' committee. And such active mothers seemed to be: they also care for their children, and how to organize excursions … what else? Festivals, afternoons, joint events … They wanted to talk, to participate, to have tea. To communicate with teachers like this."

Project-based activities as a conceived, but not developed or implemented, mission.

The school's activities program emphasizes that program- and project-based activities are one of the development priorities. It is significant that this priority is described as one of the principal directions in terms of work with parents. The school documents describe one objective as development of parents' "supportive hands," which foresees the fostering of material support from parents as well as friendly cooperation. Within the school, project-based activities are regarded as activities that by nature are interinstitutional and formally funded, rather than being established by cooperation through everyday activities. As one mother said about the opportunities of the project activities: "Perhaps it would be possible to improve the situation arranging various projects … . I am thinking about the centre of autism with five children (they need communication) and two teachers. There could be a swimming-pool as children like

water very much. I have heard that horses, riding influence the vestibular apparatus. I know that something like this is being organized."

Participatory action research

Research was conducted on the basis of the following individual education plan construction principles:

Voluntary participation (all participants, including the child). According to Wehmeyer, Agran, and Hughes (1998), voluntary participation occurs when all persons feel that they are in control of their own lives and fate. These feelings are essential for voluntary self-determination in any type of activity. The individual planning principle is harmonized with the principles and pedagogical didactics of progressivism, which states that the student's voluntary self-determination and striving to participate in learning, decisionmaking, and so on are essential. In this way, responsibility for one's actions and behavior is achieved.

Individual participation and participation in interactions with others. Both the *Bientraitance* model (Detraux, 2002), and action research methodology are meant to stimulate change and to alter situations; they emphasize interaction among participants. A person's individual participation is an important condition and an activating factor in seeking involvement in the education processes. According to Ališauskas (2002), children can objectively put their opportunities into effect only by functioning (studying, playing, experimenting, and so on). In action research theory and practice (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003), there is an established principle that research participants interact with each other while acting cooperatively and striving for common aims. The pluralism of the discourses of the participants and their striving for equality are treated as activation of these interactions.

Actualization of one's internal resources and competencies. It is essential

that recognition of subjectivity and personal experiences be achieved (i.e., each participant is capable, can, knows how, realizes, understands how she or he feels). Psychological concepts linked with the *Bientraitance* model—empowerment, resilience, internal coherence—emphasize the importance of internal resources and competencies if people are to renew their powers after stressful occurrences. In undertaking the action research, greater weight was assigned not to disclosure of the individual's psychological characteristics, but rather to the educational process, participants' awareness, initiation and creation of new situations, educational expediency, and educational changes.

Support, identification, and utilization of resources. *Resources* refers to supplies that are available to be used as compensatory tools should the need arise. In each community there exist various opportunities (Dunst, 1995). These include the actual family, immediate relatives, and friends; the family's social network; legal and voluntary resources that are accessible to all; self-help groups; special legislation; and voluntary sources to which people may be referred.

Agreement on common aims and objectives. The *Bientraitance* model and social participation (Ebersold, 2003) principles imply that the interests of the process participants will be harmonized. This does not mean that, in planning the child's individual development or education, the child's records, specialists' findings, or formal teaching plans and educational content are not important. However, it is difficult to believe in the effectiveness of an individual education plan if the interests of the teachers, parents, and the child are not coherent; if parents, the teacher, and the child each have different expectations of the educational process; or if the interests of one participant dominate and belittle the interests of others.

Construction of parental involvement strategies and methods. This principle

emphasizes the measures that can be used purposefully and collaboratively (Berry, 2006). According to Kemshall and Littlechild (2000), there is no predetermined, *a priori* decisionmaking method; rather, numerous possible decisionmaking methods exist. The model is characterized by the fact that it establishes general principles and a certain framework for actions, though it also recognizes that each situation is individual and unique and allows enough space for the actual participants to look for opportunities and solutions.

Distribution of roles and functions among participants. The progressivist education concept (Westbrook, 1993) suggests reference to the family principle, which is understood as parents' direct participation in the education process. Parents together with teachers strive to address educational questions. Parental involvement is not possible if parents do not take on responsibilities for participation and the sharing of tasks, whereby each research participant feels responsible for certain functions and for identified spheres of work or decisions. Distribution of functions also implies the defining of competencies of the participating persons (Stancliffe, Hayden, & Lakin, 1999), as well as their potential contribution to the common task. Parental involvement implies establishing roles and functions and the application or fulfillment of those roles in joint activities.

Animation and mediation.

The authors of this article took on the role of animating and mediating the action research activities. The mediation function regarding parental involvement in the education process of the child with a disability was implemented by targeting coherence of all participants' expectations, needs, and interests; exchange of competencies and powers; search for resources and their utilization; and establishment and maintenance of a network. This process is also meant to provide opportunities and space for persons to function when initiative and participation

in activities (which presuppose an "open structure") are encouraged (Spiers, 2003). The mediators, taking into account the situation and common interests, encouraged people to take personal responsibility. The aim is to assist people in cooperation, both in planning and in implementing activities.

Stages and course.

In all small groups, the meetings of the research participants took place between October 2005 and June 2006. In all five research groups, the course of the first meetings was very similar. The aim of the first meeting was to express needs, expectations, and interests; share knowledge about the child, the educational situation, and the educational experience; and reach understanding of the situations of individual participants. We discussed the idea of the experiment and its aims, stages, and purpose of the meetings, in addition to basic rules. It was agreed that the participants would build a child's individual education plan, the implementation of which would involve all persons related to the child's education.

Presentation of the Structure and Content of One Case Meeting

The first three meetings (first stage) were devoted to speaking by the research participants (the child himself, his mother, the class teacher) related to the child's education, as well as to the revelation of problematic situations.

During the meeting, a representative mother identified the following problem: "You can't leave the child alone at home even for a short time. He is always with me and I cannot leave him alone."

The class teacher raised the following difficulties related to education: "Before starting the work it is necessary to tell him what and how much he has to do. He works independently but you have to keep your eyes on him. He wants you to watch what he is doing. … It is difficult to involve Marius in the activities. It is necessary to teach the

child to work on his own … in order not to stand beside him and watch how he is writing during the lessons."

The child's competencies were also identified during the meeting. A mother said, "The child is not strongly affected by autism. He normally reacts to the environment. He is also very intelligent. He himself dresses and undresses, he can go along the street alone. I am glad that Marius wants to go to school very much. He starts to feel the group. Previously he was naughty."

The teacher presented the child's good features: "Marius's learning results were satisfactory in the fourth form. He has changed a lot this year: he became calmer, more focused. He works willingly. His work is structured. Marius does the work in a scrupulous, thorough and good way. His favourite lessons are Art and Technology. The child is very kind, polite, neat. The boy's behaviour has improved highly during this school year."

During the discussions, all the participants presented their needs related to the quality of the child's education. One mother expressed the following wishes:

"I would like the child to attend the drama group together with other children: listen to music, dance, involve in the common activities. Communication takes place through song, dance, music."

"I would like the child to participate in more out-of-school activities."

"I wish to meet the associate professor working in the university who would give me advice on the child's education, specifically, on the use of the computer at home."

"I once went to the cultural house and asked to admit the child to any group. But when they heard the word 'autism' … they said that they have problems with healthy children, so—no no … ."

The class teacher, in turn, stated: "The compatibility of class and home activities would be an advantage, that is, the mother works a lot with the child at home, after school, but does not always do the same activities he performs at school."

Through this kind of discussion, the participants achieved agreement on the main needs. Both the child's mother and his teacher emphasized independence.

Mother: It is very important for Marius to be more independent. The best decision is to learn it in some kind of out-of-school activities.

Teacher: It is essential to seek independence through out-of-school activities.

The aim of the next stage (fourth and fifth meetings) was to reveal the content of the main needs (i.e., the child's independence) as it is understood by the mother and the teacher. Moreover, it was important to find the resources that would help to satisfy the child's educational needs. The mother was concerned about being able to "leave Marius alone at home even for a short time and go to the market to shop. The child's independence is very important for me."

The teacher's opinion was that "the education of independence is through significant out-of-school activities. When the child is involved in various activities, he becomes more independent."

During the fifth meeting, it was decided that the teacher would encourage the child to participate in out-of-school activities as well as in the drama group. The researcher, together with the mother, would visit Pupils' House of Šiauliai to find out what opportunities exist for the boy to be involved in the self-expression group and other out-of-school activities. Both Marius himself and his mother desired that. It was decided that the boy would attend the art group in Pupils' House until the end of the school year.

During the research, it was important to get agreement from all participants regarding the decision. The mother summed up the decision points:

"We have decided that Marius will participate in out-of-school activities at school or outside it. In such a way he will become independent."

"Drama group or other out-of-school activities that encourage the child's creativity would be significant. Either [attendance at] the drama group at school or the art group."

"What concerns the use of the computer in order to educate the child, I would like to meet the specialist of autism in the university and ask her for advice."

The teacher expressed similar thoughts:

"Marius's participation and his support in the drama group at school. Or it is important to find the proper activities outside the school (e.g., the development of art in Pupils' House of Šiauliai)."

"In the process of the development of independence not only the result (what the child will paint, etc.) but [also the] influence of these activities are important: the mother knows why her child is engaged in extra activities outside the school, in what way these activities are or will be beneficial for the child, how will they fit with his class activities."

Both the child and his mother, having visited the city Pupils' House, liked the leader of the group, the atmosphere, and the idea that the child would stay alone, without his mother (i.e., the child's creative skills and his independence would be developed).

Marius was offered the chance to become involved in the activities of the art and self-expression groups in Pupils' House. His mother, together with the vice-principal and the leader of the art group of Pupils' House, agreed that the mother would bring her boy to the art group, which is visited by several primary-class pupils from various schools within the city. The leader of the art group showed Marius and his mother several works created by other children. During the next meeting, the leader assisted Marius in trying to paint. (Marius had been attending the art group of Pupils' House since November.)

Other meetings (sixth and seventh) were devoted to the implementation of new activities; each participant of the group was obliged to perform particular activities or actions. The mother took responsibility for bringing her child to the art group:

Mother: I will bring Marius to the art group once a week and walk around the city while waiting for him.

Class teacher: I will talk to the leader of the school drama group that it is important for Marius to participate in the collective activities. I will encourage Marius to attend various groups: to arrange the exhibition of works, etc.

The child: [Marius agreed to participate in the drama group, to watch how other children play; and to try to paint by himself.]

Because the space of the child's education had expanded, one more meeting (the seventh) was arranged in which the mother, child, teacher, and leader of the art group of Pupils' House participated. The primary aim of the meeting was to discuss the process of Marius's education. The leader of the Pupils' House art group noted that "I apply the principle of the individual approach to Marius in the group activities. I will inform Marius's teacher about the activities performed in the group.

"Marius works as [does] the rest of the group. He does not show that he is different. He does everything thoroughly. He likes to colour the objects. When you invite me, I will come to school and share my work experience."

The last two meetings took place

separately with the mother and the teacher. Thereafter, a common meeting took place that all the research participants (five cases) attended. It was the last stage of reflection and evaluation.

The mother, talking about the process of the work, changes, and prospects, emphasized the increase in the child's attention: "I have thought about it for a long time, I always think. We have done very little. I can't say that we have done anything, no! And we need much much time to start … It is an advantage—when we participate in this project. Marius gets more attention: the teacher shows Marius's work … . The group he attends is very good. I like this communication."

Class teacher: We have socialized with parents. They appeared to be happy about everything that takes place at school. Marius attends the art group in Pupils' House. During the lessons he started to work for a longer time.

Child [he cannot talk about his experience but when his mother asks, he says]: I like it very much.

After sharing the individual participants' reflections and evaluations, the reflection group discussed their assessments of the experience, results, process, changes, and prospects (see section on "Outcomes").

In all five cases, the meetings were very similar, in that the discussions and negotiations regarding interests were highly motivated and cooperative. Obviously, the parents and teachers were already prepared and motivated to build such cooperative relationships. The atmosphere of cooperation and motivation was initiated and ensured by the researcher's emphatic, purposeful, methodologically defined moderation of the discussion. The participants' cooperation and motivation demonstrated that there was a huge preexisting need for interaction that was based on equality and pragmatic interests. Participants generally expressed satisfaction with the discussions that had taken place and the general solutions for the child's education problems.

It was interesting that parents and teachers managed not only to present their own understanding of the child's situation, but also to hear other people's ideas and interests. Accordingly, the need to recognize and accept existing and potentially necessary competencies was met. The teacher felt the need to delve even deeper into pedagogical literature regarding the question of independence. While recognizing the importance of educational experiences, the mother felt the need for purposeful development of independence at home and in domestic situations. These actual competency needs initiated the search for external resources, during which the researcher and the mother contacted specialists in developing independence and attention.

Model

The experiences of each research group are unique and very individualized (reflecting the concrete individual context). Nevertheless, we found common, repetitive elements in each case, which form the somewhat peculiar structure of individual education planning principles. On the basis of our qualitative data analysis, we constructed a model for parental involvement in a child's education in a special school (see Figure 1).
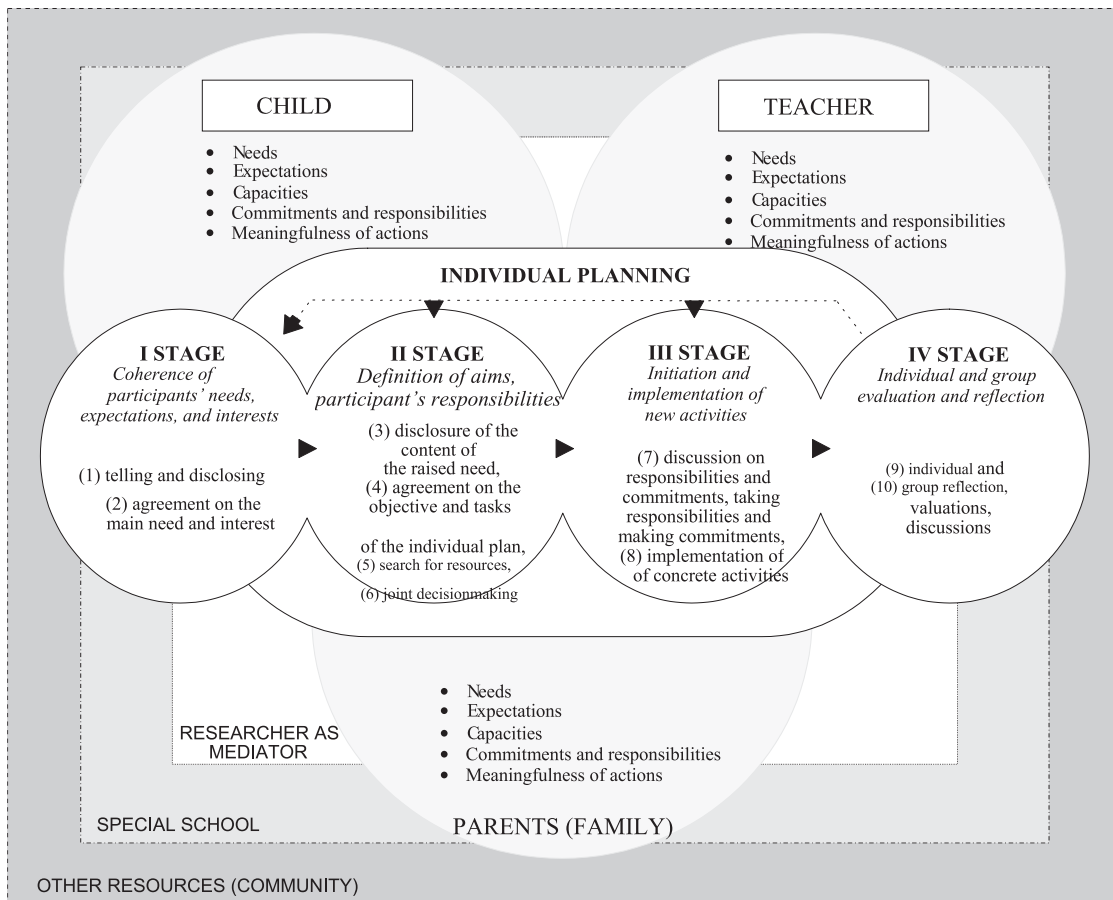
Figure 1. Model for parental involvement in individual education planning for child with mental disabilities

Outcomes

A common reflection group consisting of all the participants—children, parents, professionals—from all five action research groups took place at the special education school. The main aim of this group was to reflect on and evaluate the outcomes of the decisions and actions taken in the research groups. First, the moderator-researcher asked participants to retrace the entire research process, to refresh and recall the experiences and understandings acquired during the individual education planning. The participants' statements were recorded on the board using a video projector. The recordings were depersonalized; only the role (parent, teacher, staff representative) of the statement author has been noted. Seventy statements of parental involvement in the child's individual education planning

were named. All statements were printed and each participant individually evaluated all statements. The evaluation scale was from 1 (indicator is completely irrelevant for a participant) to 4 (indicator is particularly relevant for a participant).

On the day after the reflection group met, the researchers categorized all 70 statements, grouping them into 9 categories depending on semantic similarity. Eight reflection-group participants and seven outside experts who were not involved in the experimental study (university teachers with practical experience in education of children with mental disability) were invited to independently validate and label the categories. All 15 experts agreed about the grouping and labeling of the statements about the experiment. The evaluation scores were computed using an arithmetical mean

(M) method. Standard deviation (SD) is the measure of the variability or spread of evaluations.

The category having the highest score, which was "The individual planning as the construction of common meanings and purposes" (M = 3,48, SD = 0,62), groups six statements, such as *It's vital to find one direction (one well-defined and concrete objective)*; *The dialog between the participants or planning is essential*, and so on.

The next category in the rating, "Cognition of each other better through dialogue" (M = 3,42, SD = 0,74), groups seven statements, such as *Learning to discuss, to listen and hear each other*; *Because of communication with parents teacher has a chance to know the child better*; *Dialogue with parents led to assured continuity of education at home*, and so on.

The category "Opportunity to see at least a minimum result" (M = 3,38, SD = 0,67) groups three statements, such as *One small step is important*, and so on.

Another category, "Actualization of the child's internal resources (motivation, abilities, capacities)" (M = 3,36, SD = 0,70), groups 16 statements, such as *Child has responsibilities*; *It's important to recognize child's vein*; *New interests of child are arriving [arising]*, and so on.

The category "Priority of the development of child independent/ living skills" (M = 3,33, SD = 0,77) groups six statements, such as C*hild involvement (negotiating between parents and professionals) into social skills training activities; Exercises are presented as play (they are transferred to home environment)*, and so on.

Another category, "Institutional changes such as new culture of educational planning" (M = 3,26, SD = 0,71), groups two statements, such as *New level quality of the relation between school and family* and *Individual educational planning is inscribed to the program of school activities*.

The category "Validation and legitimation of parents' expectations" (M = 3,06, SD = 0,94) groups five statements, such as *Teacher recognizes the child per parents; The possibility to have a voice*, and so on. One negative statement was presented in this category by an administration representative, who stressed that administrative staff often do not understand parental needs and expectations.

The category "Opening up to new environments and new experiences" (M = 3,04, SD = 0,93) groups 15 statements, such as *Child has experiences with new people; Child now is more open, he begins to communicate with others; New circle of people*, and so on.

The last category, "Experimentation as an innovation and challenge" (M = 2,80, SD = 0,86), grouped 10 statements, such as *New ways to approach child are being looked for; It's interesting for parents and children to try to do something new; At the beginning there were some worries because of the lack of experience*, and so on.

Conclusions and Discussion

The study results demonstrate that parental involvement in education of children with mental disabilities is constrained by some limits rooted in the complexity of the relationship. Parents understandably tend to believe that their child's educational initiatives are the school's responsibility; their discourse concerning their child's education remains silent when the school's discourse appears active. Communication between parents and teachers is narrow in two ways: One concerns the information that teachers give to parents, which is well determined; another denotes the dialogues between parents and teachers about children's education, which is not determined.

The social circulation of children with mental disability is very limited; generally, they go from home to school and back from school to home. There is a real but implicit need for the family to transcend

these habits of "closed safety," and to work toward openness by enlarging the social participation of the family and especially the child. In addition, all participants realized the need to recognize and use the participants' different competencies in the educational, cooperative, and creative problem-solving methodology; and the development of project-based activities.

These trends, discovered during individual discussions with the parents of a child with mental disability and the child's teachers, created a conceptual framework for changes in a special education school. Teachers, parents, and children, together with the researcher, began to work on future individual education planning for the child, in which the negotiated needs and educational objectives are the core of parental involvement in the child's educational process, rather than the child himself or herself. Ways to create equal participation and involvement of parent, teacher, and child in the child's educational process include explicit confrontation and negotiation of different needs and interests in a concrete problem situation; identification and use of various resources to achieve the objectives that have been negotiated; and elaboration and implementation of an action plan. Individual planning of the educational processes for a child with a mental disability provides opportunities for teachers and parents to cooperate and encourages parents to participate directly in decision making related to their child's education. Only at this point does the construction of the individual education plan become both a tool for parental involvement in the child's education process and a tool for parents' social participation.

This kind of relation between school and family could be seen, according to Ebersold (2004), as an opportunity to reduce stigmatizing distinctions between disability and normality, to recognize the rights of a person and his or her family to experiment in situations that reinforce the possibilities of choice, and to express and emphasize the person's rights and desires.

This is accomplished by assigning the right to a family to influence the support they are receiving.

Parental involvement and participation in such individual planning can be challenging. Teachers must assume that working with parents will be supplemental or extra work over and above their ordinary teaching activities. The demands coming from parents can be very varied and individualized. Thus, the teacher must constantly change educational patterns, according to parents' expectations and children's needs, which are new and unique each time. In turn, parents often have difficulties in making the time for the negotiation process, given their long work days.

Another great challenge for teacher and parent is discarding or overcoming a negative attitude toward the child who has a mental disability, and instead adopting a strengths perspective. The participatory action research described in this article indicates that such challenges can be overcome when all persons involved in the educational process act together to achieve negotiated objectives for the child's education. Once parents become involved in the child's educational processes, unique and excellent results are often achieved in the class, school, and community.

We must stress the follow-up done in the course of this research. The research results have been discussed with all participants, and the research report has been delivered to the school community. It was collectively decided that for the next school year, parents and teachers themselves would initiate and manage local activities to make individual education plans using the constructed methodology. However, no initiatives were in fact undertaken, because parents and teachers had some doubts about their ability to use the methodology by themselves. Only one year later, teachers and parents recognized again how rich and rewarding the experience of action research in constructing individual education plans had

been, for each participant individually and for the school as an institution. Motivated by this recollection, teachers and parents themselves, without any intervention by researchers, organized and implemented individual education planning groups. Later, in informal discussions with the research-group participants, both parents and teachers stressed the sense of fulfillment gained from success in the follow-up implementation of the methodology. A new culture of negotiation and knowledge generation has thus been rooted at the school because of the research.

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