

Mutual support for school and parents (from parents' and tutors' points of view)



**MARIE-THERESE
GIBSON**

Abstract: Personalised education schools recognise that parents are the primary or first educators of their children. A human person is individual and social by nature. As such, we need the help of others to reach our full potential as human beings. Parents seek the assistance of others, and schools especially, to assist them in their task of educating their children. When they do this in Personalised Education Schools they enter into a partnership with the school. Parents and the School, through the person of the tutor, mutually support one another to help their children to be the best person they can be. This mutual support presupposes a common vision about the nature of education, a similar world view and a unity of purpose: the character development of the children.

1. Overview

Personalised Education is the education of the whole person: to assist each child to be the best he/she can be: to be a person of good character. In Australia there is much talk of personalised education. This however is almost always in the context of academic outcomes (Keamy, Nicholas, 2007). It focuses on "developing organisational and teaching strategies to ensure every child's education is tailored to their needs so as to support higher levels of student engagement and attainment" (Ibidem, p.3). Personalised education understood in this paper, and in schools with this specific philosophy, focuses on the development of the whole child as a person. Given the confusion in the meaning of the terminology it needs to be clarified periodically with both parents and teachers.

Parents and teachers, and in the case of personalised education schools, the tutors, are all major players in the education of the child. The tutor is a staff member, almost always a teacher, who is designated to work with a child and her family. She is the main link between the parents and the school and is normally the first "port

of call" for the parents at the school. It is essential that there be unity of purpose and mutual support between parents and the school, and the tutor in particular, in the education of the child as a person.

Those involved in the task of personalised education: the parents, teachers/tutors and students are challenged to be better persons. In fact, if those responsible for the education of the child are not engaged in being the best persons they can be, in acquiring virtue themselves, then the education of the child cannot be truly successful. Children learn by word and example. Teachers teach "who they are." Parents pass on their values and ways of being to their children almost by osmosis through their every word and action.

Much of what is written in this paper is based on the experiences at Tangara School for Girls, Sydney, Australia. Tangara is a School of the PARED (Parents for Education) Foundation.

2. The nature of mutual support and its foundation

Mutual support is founded on the very nature of the human person. As human beings we are individual and social by nature (De Torre, 1980, p.196. 199). We do not exist in isolation. Maritain (1942, p.11) says: "The person is a whole, not however in a closed sense, since he must be open. The person is not a small god without doors or windows like Leibniz's monad, or an idol that does not see, nor hear, nor speak. The person tends by nature to social life and communion". We need the support of others to acquire our full development as persons.

Parents are the primary educators, or first educators of their children. It is parents' essential responsibility to provide for the education of their children (Paul VI, 1965, 3). Families do not exist in a vacuum. Parents need support in their task from extended family, schools, the broader community, and from all who come in contact with their children (Australian Government, 2008).

Children do not "belong" to the State or to the government. They are naturally born of parents in the first instance. The State is responsible for ensuring that quality education is delivered in schools and that children are in a safe and nurturing environment (Ibidem).

Government and schools, rather than taking over the role of the parents (a trend in Australia at the present time), should be supporting them (O'Keefe, 2011). This is the principle of subsidiarity (John Paul II, 1991, 48). A child belongs naturally in the family. Government and schools should not do what parents can and should do for their children.

The school exists to support parents in their primary role as the educators of their children. This support is obvious, for the delivery of a specialised curriculum with

specialist facilities, for example, science laboratories, visual arts studios, technology areas and libraries. Schools are also able to offer a rounded social education, with the variety of individuals and situations provided by the school environment. There is however something more essential: the support given to parents in the character development of their children within the context of the broader education that a school with our philosophical approach provides.

3. The role of the parents and the role of the tutor

Parents exercise their prior right to choose a school for their child. This is based on natural law and is upheld in United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (Article 26). Prior to making this choice, we see at Tangara School for Girls that responsible parents want to establish the philosophical foundations of the school and to discern if these are in keeping with their own worldview. They want to know how the philosophy is woven into the fabric of everyday school life. They are also very interested to know how they, as parents, can work with the school.

During the whole process of selection: parents selecting the school, and in personalised education schools, the school selecting the parents, it is only normal that the respective roles are clarified and that there is a mutual agreement and understanding between both parties. Having the match however is just the beginning. There is ongoing growth needed on the part of the parents to fully understand their role.

The working relationship between parents and a personalized education school is that of a partnership. The parents, the first educators, are the senior partners as they are the primary educators. The School is a junior partner with the authority of the school being a delegated authority given by the parents. The nature of partnership demands mutual support.

New parents attend an "orientation" run primarily by parents experienced in personalized education. This helps them to better understand their role more. It is with time and experience that parents understand with clarity just how pivotal their role is, and how much the efficacy of the education of their child depends on the partnership with the school and the inherent mutual support.

The Parental role is to give guidance and support to their children in all areas of their development, and especially in that of character development. Parents need to provide a home environment which allows the children to flourish as persons: good example, adequate nourishment, shelter, love, affectionate demand, an environment where the children can play, study, learn to do tasks for themselves and become responsible persons. In a way, the School helps each child, but more importantly, it supports the parents, helping them also to grow to become the best parents they can be.

Parents' role is to communicate effectively with the school, and in most cases this is done through the tutor.

We see in our School that parents expect to find in the tutor a person who will support their values and *modus operandi* as parents. They expect the tutor to be professional in honouring her commitments, to be a person of integrity, to hold the same core values and to give good example to their child in word and in deed. They expect that the tutor will love their child and come to know her/him well, a prerequisite to be able to truly educate.

Parents want the tutor to understand and appreciate the dynamics of their family life as this is the most important influence on the life of the child. Parents want the tutor to be there for their child, and for them, through the vicissitudes of life. They want emotional support and encouragement. They want a loyal family friend in the tutor. This is what I have gleaned from my own personal experience and conversations with parents over the past 19 years.

The School is personified in a special way in the tutor. She is required to understand how to best support the parents. She has to understand the needs of the parents and that of the child. As children grow their needs also differ: the needs of a 5 year-old are very different to those of a 14 year-old. The nature of peer influences on a 5 year old are very different to those of a 14 year-old. The tutor needs to understand that the parents are more tired when their eldest is 14, than when their eldest is 5. There are changes in family circumstances, such as sickness of a parent or other family member, loss of a job, marital tensions... This requires fine-tuning in the way the support is given.

The tutor expects the parents to uphold the values of the School, and to foster the growth of virtue in their children too by word and example. It is only natural that there is this mutual expectation as parents have willingly chosen the school to work with them in the education of the child. The School has selected the parents on the basis that it considers that it can work with them for the good of their children. The tutor expects that there be mutual trust and loyalty as the basis for an efficacious supportive working relationship.

The role of the tutor is to support the parents primarily in the character development of the child. The tutor aims to truly love and understand the child. She endeavours to enter the world of the child so as to work with her/him to help her/him to be the best person she/he can be, to help her/him grow as a person through all the experiences and challenges which school and life provide. An important area is to help the student be a person of integrity: to live a unity of life.

The tutor also fosters unity between the child and her/his parents, encouraging the child to be open with her/his parents and to appreciate the love and sacrifices of her parents (this can be more difficult during the adolescent years). The tutor will also

encourage the parents to be open with the child. The tutor helps the child understand that her "professional work" as a school student is to apply herself to her academic work and study. Thus many of the virtues are acquired in this context. The tutor works with the child to establish realistic goals for personal improvement in all aspects of life: academic, spiritual, social, sporting and cultural; thus leading to a growth in virtue.

4. How mutual support is played out

There are several mechanisms in place in personalised education schools that facilitate mutual support. The commitment to these is essential for both parties and in some schools, such as the Pared Schools in Australia, parents commit themselves to this in a contract as part of the enrolment process.

The Parent-Tutor Meeting each term (in Australia there are four meetings each year). Both parents are expected to attend these meetings. They are organised at a time mutually agreed upon by parents and tutor. If a parent is not able to attend due to illness or some other pressing need, the tutor will ordinarily reschedule the meeting. Parents show their support for the School, and their understanding of the teamwork and partnership, through their attendance and preparedness for these meetings. They are held in an atmosphere of trust and cordiality/friendship. The keyword here is *trust*. There can be no meeting of hearts and minds without trust; trust of parents in the school and tutor, and the trust of the tutor in the parents.

Trust is built up through time, good will, openness, the honouring of commitments and a true willingness to understand each other: personality, cultural and family situations. Parents' trust grows, through the professional way in which the tutor conducts herself: regularity of tutorials with the child; the tutor's tangible love for and interest in their child; promptness to address matters regarding the child and school which have been raised in the interview or in a telephone conversation or email; preparedness of the tutor for the parent-tutor meetings (obtaining feedback from class teachers and respective subject teachers as well as reviewing school reports); and the ability to provide timely and relevant feedback to parents about how the growth of the child with the different demands of school life: academic, spiritual, social, sporting and cultural.

The tutor's trust is a given, but is also enhanced when parents are open about difficulties they may be experiencing and when they follow through with mutually agreed strategies at home which could benefit the development of the child.

It is important that both parties establish at the initial interview how they are going to work together: the preferred method of communication in-between meetings; and the different areas they will focus on, depending on the age and circumstances of the

child and the family situation. It is also important that parents understand the need for confidentiality between the child and the tutor. The tutor cannot support the parents if the child does not trust the tutor. In extreme circumstances for example, threats of suicide, information would need to be passed on to the parents.

The parent-tutor meetings are an ideal forum for the tutor to help parents understand their role, particularly when they are new to the school. It is not the role of the parents to be criticising teachers or to be interfering in the delivery of the curriculum. It is their role however to give positive suggestions where appropriate, and to alert the School about anything which they see may be eroding the values the School professes in terms of teacher attitudes, the selection of material such as books, websites and DVD's. This is a real way in which parents give mutual and invaluable support to the School.

When misunderstandings arise between parents and the School, the tutor endeavours to establish the "facts" of a situation and clarifies the matter with the parents.

There are some underlying virtues needed by both the parents and the tutor for the partnership and mutual support to work. These are humility, openness, and docility. Parents and tutors come to the partnership wanting to learn and understand so that they can truly have a shared vision and purpose regarding the education of the child.

There needs to be courage and honesty on the part of both the parents and the tutor to tackle more sensitive issues: how the child relates to the parents at home; how the child relates to the tutor. As well as commenting on the positive aspects of the child's character, tutors need to be sincere with parents regarding areas in which the child needs to improve. If they do not do this they are not supporting the parents as they are not passing on crucial insights which can be of help to them. This should be done clearly and with affection, and without fear of hurting or embarrassing them.

There are also other important matters which need to be discussed so that parents and tutor can support one another: use of technology; iphones and social networking sites in particular; the use of television; family time; education in human love (sex education); the practice of the faith; jobs at home, diet, sleep and physical exercise.

Ongoing Communication: as communication is key to mutual support, this is not just reserved for the parent-tutor meetings. Parents need to inform the tutor about home or family circumstances which may be affecting the child. The tutor too should be informed by the respective person at school if there is an issue regarding the child at school. If parents find out about things through other members of staff this may erode confidence in the tutor. Communication about the child by email, phone or the diary in-between meetings shows that the tutor takes a real interest in the child and this instils confidence.

Regarding disciplinary matters, it is best that the tutor have input on how best to deal with the situation. She has a deeper knowledge of the child and the family. Whilst things have to be seen as fair, "one size does not fit all" in a personalised philosophy school.

Professional Development Sessions for Parents: in Australia this is in the form of what are called Key Parent Functions or Parenting Courses. There are other means in which this mutual support is operative. These also form part of the commitment parents make when they enrol their children in the Pared Schools in Australia. The School undertakes to organise these to support parents in their role as primary educators of their children. These sessions or courses are "tailor-made" according to the stage of development of their children. Parents need to know some detail about the academic programme that the School delivers to their children. They also need to know about the academic expectations. This enables them to take an interest in this aspect of their child's life and follow through, providing encouragement and the proper environment for homework and study. Parents need support and encouragement to deal with the natural challenges of the growth of their child, the increasing challenges presented through peer-group pressure, fuelled by the rise in the misuse of technology, and the attack on the notion of family and natural parental rights.

As part of its *raison d'être* to support parents, the School needs to honour its commitment to provide timely and professional input for parents. It needs to be aware of parents' concerns and the areas in which they want and need help.

It is often in the parent-tutor meetings that suggestions are given by parents about what would be worthwhile input for parents. It is also the place where parents can give input about how to improve the quality of what has been offered, or of the relevance of the key parent function, if they have not had the opportunity to submit a written evaluation. Time is precious and it is important that what is offered is of a high calibre and is of true benefit to parents.

Tutors are important in encouraging the parents to fulfil their part of the partnership by attending these functions. A timely reminder by the tutor, as a follow up to the information already provided by the School, can ensure that the parents get what they need and are able to improve their parenting for the benefit of the children. If parents do not attend, it is important that the tutor also follows through to see what happened to prevent this attendance, and to provide the notes/DVD of the session. This helps parents understand the importance of their commitment, and it allows the tutor to provide supplementary support.

The Tutorial: within this forum the tutor exercises support for the parents in her relationship with the child. She knows that she can never replace the parent. She will encourage the child to be open with her parents. Whilst listening to, responding, and endeavouring to understand the child, the tutor will always be supportive

of the parents. If there is a situation in which the tutor, given what she is lead to understand, thinks that something is not right, she will ask the child if she can raise the matter with her parents, or someone else in authority, in order to clarify things or to take some action. The tutor has to take the utmost care not to undermine parental authority, or to break the trust of the child. Confidentiality is key, information only being passed on with the child's permission. Prudence and wisdom are of the essence in these situations.

Norms of Behaviour: As well as these specific "mechanisms" which provide a forum for this working relationship of mutual support, there are norms of behaviour which are intrinsic to the parent-school relationship. Word and body language should reflect the parent-school partnership and as such the mutual respect and support. "A teacher should never criticise a parent, let alone ridicule a parent's opinion, above all in front of that parent's child" (Mullins, p. 136). This is even more so if that teacher is a tutor having a tutorial with a child. The same can be said of parents with respect to teachers, and the tutor especially: "Unchecked backseat conversations making fun of anyone are out of place, let alone conversations which target the adults to whom the parents have entrusted their very children" (Ibid).

5. Challenges and suggested solutions

There are various challenges which can jeopardise the parent-school relationship and thus the mutual support. This is not an exhaustive list but some areas we have been working on with parents at Tangara School for Girls.

Firstly, we can identify a loss of focus and/or a lack of deep understanding of the main educational goals: Parents can at times get caught up with academic success and thus lose sight of the importance of character development. As a consequence much of the time of a parent-tutor meeting can be absorbed with grades. It is important when this happens that the tutor gives a timely reminder about what is core. The focus has to be on the child's application to study and her attitude. Of course, if there are objective difficulties these need to be faced and a remedy found. On the other hand some parents may be attracted to personalised education schools that teach the Catholic for the sole reason that the faith is taught and lived well. Such parents can have the tendency not to focus on the academics at all. The tutor again needs to reiterate that virtue supports the practice of the faith. Without application to her studies (this draws on the four cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance) the child will not be the best person she/he can be. The parent-school partnership and mutual support only works when there is a shared vision and a unity of purpose.

Parental Naivety can also be a challenge: Parents at times can idealise their children and can lose objectivity thinking that their children can do no wrong. Sometimes what underlines this is a fear that if something is wrong in the child they will be seen as failures as parents. When this situation occurs it is a recipe for clashes with the School and a breakdown in mutual support. This has to be handled well by the tutor, allaying parental fears, and helping them to understand that no-one is perfect. When parents are naïve they can sometimes have unrealistic expectations of their children which can cause a real breakdown in unity of life in their children, leading the child to become voluntaristic and perfectionist to please the parents. The children will tell the parents and the tutor what they think they want to hear. There is no real trust on the part of the child. Again, much work has to be done by the tutor, and if necessary seeking the help of other trusted parents, to assist these parents to live in the "real" world.

A third area is Consumer Mentality: this is very much part of the fabric of so many societies. When this is practiced with the parent-school partnership it is very hard for it to endure. Human relationships which are at the heart of all schools, and particularly those founded on personalised education, are based on generous self-giving and good will. Whilst the School has to deliver on its promises, and the parents make sacrifices to pay for this type of education, people are not commodities. A consumer mentality takes and does not give wholeheartedly. This eats away at the very fabric of the educational process, destroys the partnership and hence eliminates any mutual support. Timely reminders about the *raison d'être* of the School are invaluable: in editorial comments in the School Newsletter; in addresses to parents and in parent-tutor meetings.

Fourth, is the Time factor: everyone is time poor given the pace of life and people's commitments. Priorities need to be re-established with great frequency. Parents are encouraged to step back and recognise that the character development of their children is their greatest priority as parents. This calls for using the means which personalised education schools offer. Time invested in the Parent-Tutor meetings and attendance at Parent Functions is time well spent. James Stenson (1996), a well-known educator says: "There seems to be a kind of economic law in child-raising. You either pay now or pay later. If you struggle to surpass yourself, to direct all your powers toward developing the character... of your children... then later you will reap the rewards" (Stenson, 1996, p. 9). The effort parents put in now will reap great dividends in the lives of their children.

Tutors need to ensure that "tutoring" is a priority for them. No-one can replace the relationship a tutor has with a child and with the child's parents. School management needs to recognise in adequate budgetary allowances that this is core business for the school as on this rests the delivery of "personalised education" and it underpins the partnership and mutual support with the parents.

Different cultural backgrounds: in a multicultural society can also be challenging. In many countries, and especially in Australia, schools are like the "United Nations". Different cultural expectations can cause tensions. These need to be understood and addressed in an ongoing way. If not, misunderstandings can occur and people can be at cross-purposes. For example, some Asian background families might want their children to be excelling in everything all the time even to the detriment of sleep. Unrealistic expectations on the child and the school can cause a fracture in the partnership and mutual support. The tutor is in the position to remind parents about the priorities: their choice of school was based on the education of the child as a person. The interest is in personal excellence, not a cupboard full of trophies.

The sixth challenge is caused by the Technology factor: this requires a very sincere and united front on the part of parents and the tutor. Vigilance and guidance are of the essence, as well as personal example. If parents are slaves to television and all that PC's, iphones, ipads and whatever the newest device offers, then it will be difficult for their children to be "masters of themselves": to be in a position to use these means of communication, education and entertainment in a responsible way. The new technology is fertile ground for greater peer pressure, and not necessarily positive. Tutors and parents are called upon to talk frankly and to have a united front in this regard. The School, through targeted sessions for parents, can help equip them to face the challenges of new technology so that they are up to date, not letting the technology replace them as parents. Technology needs to be in its rightful place: facilitating and humanising work and communication. Parents need to support school initiatives regarding such things as the use of iphones at school, and help their children to face the consequences of irresponsible use of technology at school and at home.

Finally, the sexualisation of children: this is a reality which again needs to be faced by parents and the school in an assertive and effective way. Parents and tutors need to talk about the issues and come up with solutions which will help the children grow into fine young men and women who refuse to be "used". Things have to be well thought through. "Knee-jerk" reactions are counterproductive. Parents lead by example: in how they present themselves. They also need to be firm in what they allow in the home in the form of print and digital media. It is a real challenge which can be turned around very successfully when there is a united front: parents and school/tutor working together and giving clear messages and mutual support.

6. Conclusion

The mutual support between parents and school based on a true partnership is fundamental to the educational efficacy of a child in a Personalised Education School. Parents as the primary educators of their children establish and choose

schools which will work with them in the education of their children. In doing this they are exercising a fundamental right. These schools have the intrinsic means to support this working relationship. Both parents and tutors need to use the means well, and to have the necessary dispositions: openness, humility and docility as well as a shared vision and unity of purpose. Parents need to fulfill their responsibilities lovingly as parents and give wholehearted support to the school in all aspects of the education of the child for the support to be a reality. The tutor, who acts on behalf of the school, is called upon to work lovingly and in a most professional way to support the parents as the first educators of their children. This mutual support, founded on trust, is a most efficacious means of helping each child's character development: to be the best person he or she can be.

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Marie-Thérèse Gibson is in her seventeenth year as Principal of Tangara School for Girls, Sydney. Tangara is a School of the PARED Foundation (Parents for Education) which was established in 1981. Before being appointed Principal she was on the Executive of the Board of PARED for 3 years. Previous to this she was the Principal of Creston College, a women's university college associated with the University of New South Wales, a position she held for a period of 9 years. She is a member of AHGS (Association of Heads of Independent Girls Schools) and has served as a member of the Executive for 4.5 years. She has a BA, MA, and Dip Ed from the University of Sydney, and a PhD in Educational Sciences from the University of Navarre, Spain. She is convinced that Personalized Education is delivered in an efficacious way when there is a true partnership between parents and the School. The tutor, working with the parents, child and the other teachers is the conduit. She has specialized in Philosophical Anthropology and has given many courses in this over the years. She also has a particular interest in brain research and the implications of this for the education of both girls and boys.