

## Parents' Perspectives of Children's Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties

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### Abstract

*There has been widespread concern about children's emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD) within mainstream schools in Libya. Parents' accounts of children experiencing EBD are underrepresented in the literature, effectively giving prominence to the views and interpretations of professionals. This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews with 30 parents representing two different Libyan educational authority; this was with the intention of exploring children's EBD and the contributing factors. Although the results echoed the generally accepted tropes, parents were not often ready to accept that their children have EBD, nor willing to attribute children's EBD to solely individual or psychological inner conflicts. Instead, they referred children's difficulties to a wider context in which schools and teachers contribute significantly. They maintained that mainstream schools in Libya failed to address children's specific learning needs, reflecting deficiencies within the school system. In addition, traditional factors were found to obstruct parents from making practical contributions to children's education, thus creating more tension and conflicts between home and school rather than solving those which already exist. The implications of this study on the attributions of EBD underline the role and responsibility of teachers leading to EBD and consequently preparing the ground for exclusion.*

### Keywords

Parents; children; emotional and behavioural difficulties; special educational needs



## I. Introduction

Recently the number of children excluded from mainstream schools due to their behaviour each year is alarming (UNICEF Annual Educational Report, 2010), but there are likely to be various overlooked factors contributing to children's EBD, including within schools, parents' status and attitude, and within children themselves. Currently teachers find it increasingly difficult to teach children with EBD. Although children's EBD manifested in a variety of different forms and severities according to the literature (Cooper, 1999; Croll and Moses, 1985; Furtwengler, 1990; Royer, 1999), it should be noted that it is the opinion of professionals of EBD e.g. teachers dominated the literature compared with that of children and parents. Indeed, parents' opinions and perceptions of the emotional and behavioural difficulties of their children are underrepresented by researchers and academics. A review of the literature suggested that there is a lack of parents' accounts of

children's pain, discomfort, and how they feel about the way teachers and other school professionals treat them (Al-Shapani's, 2001). A great number of Educational Reports, Committees and Acts acknowledge the significance of parents' views of their own children and, in particular, with regard to those who encounter learning, emotional and behavioural difficulties (Armstrong, 2011). The People's Committee for Education and Scientific Research (PCESR) cited in The National Report for Development of Education (2008) argues for the rights of Libyan parents to participate fully with teachers and school in educating their children; while the Libyan Crime Act (1999) deems parents responsible for children's offensive behaviour. Interestingly, neither of these Ministerial documents considers parents' opinions and views of this legislation. In spite of PCESR's advocacy of the role of parents in disciplining their children, it stresses the notion of "expert" when children's special educational needs are assessed. Moreover, this report associates children's lack of academic achievement at school with parental socio-economical circumstances. In a similar way, Al-Tabib (1997) attributed children's lack of school attainments to parents' social/economical factors; he referred children's academic failure to the pressure of life, which requires children to spend long time working after school hours in order to support their families. Although Abu-Thena (1992) expressed similar concern about children, she attributed their difficulties to parents' lack of cooperation with the school. Abuforwa and El-Twokally (1994) appeared to make a general distinction in respect of parents' involvement and cooperation with the school. They claimed that while the majority of parents do not come to school unless they are requested to do so, a few, mainly well educated parents, would intentionally come by themselves to follow the academic progress of their children in school. These views echo the general opinion held by professionals in Libya (UNICEF Annual Educational Report in Libya, 2010).

Over the years there has been theoretical discussion in the UK literature about the validity of parents' perceptions. As a result, they have increasingly become a desirable source of information, not only because they have been for many years the less popular voice (see for instance, Armstrong, 2011; Ward, 1997; Davie and Galloway, 1996), but also because they are the most familiar with the motives that are likely to trigger children's emotional and behavioural difficulties. The relationship between parents and professionals in the United Kingdom has been influenced by many reports which have drawn attention to the potential of collaboration for encouraging children's learning and development. In fact, the concept of partnership between teachers and parents has crept into the literature from many reports (Warnock Report, 1978) and Education Acts (1981 and 1993), as a central theme, which was restated in the Code of Practice in the mid nineties on the identification and assessment of special educational needs (DfEE, 1994a). Since then, the principle of parental right to participate in educational decision-making processes has been identified by academics and researchers as an essential element of partnership. However, despite the imbalance in prominence between parents and professionals in the literature, there has been an increasing move towards the acknowledgement of the rights of parents to be involved more in the process of decision-making concerning their children's needs. This does not necessarily mean that parents are treated on an equal basis with professionals in practice, but rather that parents are invited to take part in the assessment process of their children to legitimise professionals' decisions or secure extra resources for the schools.

It is widely acknowledged that parents can provide vital information and can be highly effective teachers of their own children. They can also detect, appreciate and gain from a purposeful contact between themselves and their children's teachers (Hamilton, 1987). In fact, these were the objectives of the 1981 and 1993 Acts, the Warnock Report

(1978) and a series of other reports from government. Pugh (1989) noticed that very little information was provided regarding the actual practice of involvement. Pugh argues that, despite the intentions of the Warnock Report and 1981 Act and the official endorsement of “parents as partners” in many other government circulars, parents lack of background knowledge and awareness of their children’s situation conflict with the notion of partnership. Yet professionals cannot see parents as true partners due to their lack of cognitive framework which is needed to understand the children’s situation, thus disallowing parents from being full partners in the procedure of assessment (Boreham et al, 1995). Tomlinson (1981) suggests that even though parents still complain about the fact that they are not getting enough information regarding their children’s emotional and behavioural difficulties and rather feel “pushed out” by a complex system, professionals see them as less competent and not real partners. In fact, school professionals tend to attribute children’s emotional and behavioural difficulties to factors within home and parents’ circumstances (Armstrong, 2011; Bennett, 2000; Cooper, 1999; Jones and Charlton, 1996). In contrast with children in Libya, it could be argued that children in the United Kingdom appear to enjoy a higher level of parental involvement with the school, and hence parents in the UK demand more attention, and have greater understanding of the rules and regulations of the school. However, this is not to say that all parents and schools in the UK are in broad agreement about the way their children’s special educational needs (SEN) are addressed.

The Educational Act (1988) stated that parents should be present and participate in the assessment of their children as well as be allowed to appeal against the decision. In a similar way, the Educational Act (1993) underlined the role of parents in the identification and assessment of children’s special educational needs (SEN) which later became the Code of Practice regulating this process. Thus, a coordinator responsible for special educational needs was appointed to ensure that parents are informed and consulted about their children’s SEN. However, even though the current position towards parents in the UK seems to take parents’ accounts of their children’s SEN on board, there is as yet a large proportion of parents who do not appear to recognise these rights. Armstrong (2011) stressed that parents’ views of their children in the UK are far from being accepted by professionals and this is often beyond professionals’ control, reflecting wider political and economic constraints. Likewise, the position of parents in Libya is not dissimilar to that in the UK, and yet parents’ opinions are subordinated, and professionals remain in control of the assessment procedures articulating the needs of children. It is therefore the aim of this study to voice the opinion of parents and listen to their account of what construes children’s emotional and behavioural difficulties and the responsible factors.

## II. Research Methods

The parents of thirty-four children (age 7-11) experiencing EBD within mainstream schools from two different educational authorities in Libya were invited to participate in this study. These parents were selected as their children were identified by teachers as having EBD and often than not referred to the school psychosocial services. Although the sample of this study is small, it is envisaged that due to the very similar traditional and cultural backgrounds of the Libyans and the fact that all children in mainstream primary schools follow the same national curriculum, it would seem unlikely that parents in other cities would express alternative views substantially different from those voiced in this study. Consequently, the sample may be considered representative and parents’ accounts of

the factors responsible for children's emotional and behavioural difficulties could possibly be generalised with some degree of confidence.

All parents involved in this study were informed about the overall aim of the research and the purpose of the interview. Confidentiality was assured and each individual parent was given the choice to take part in this study or not. None of the parents refused to pass on information about their children's lives, however interviewing them was far from an easy task. In four cases parents could not be traced for the interview and therefore they were excluded from the research. Due to cultural constraints, it was not possible to interview mothers except in eight cases. Only in five cases were both parents interviewed together making the total number of interviews with parents thirty. The time and place for interviews were left to the parents to decide. All the interviews with parents were tape recorded, transcribed, translated into English language, and later analysed. The interview questions were drawn from the findings of previous research concerning Libyan teachers' views and opinions of children's EBD; these were with the following main questions:

- What were the parents' perceptions of their children's emotional and behavioural difficulties?
- What were the major factors that contributed to the children's emotional and behavioural difficulties?
- What were the parents' attitudes towards teachers and the support available at school?

### III. Results and Discussion

The results of the interviews with parents highlighted the complexity of defining EBD, and as such parents appeared more ready to talk about the shortcomings within mainstream schools causing children's EBD rather than about what EBD actually is. However, in general parents used various words such as: withdrawn, anxious, doubtful, indifferent, feel bored, experiencing learning difficulties and being slow in learning to describe children's EBD. There was also a tendency among parents to attribute the causes of EBD to complicated factors that often caused conflicts between themselves and schools. In relation to these conflicts, they underlined teachers' lack of experience and inability to manage classroom activities, while others used cultural issues regarding gender, as reasons for their lack of communication with teachers of the opposite sex when assessing children's EBD. In spite of this, parents appeared more conscious of their duties toward their children's schooling life than was anticipated. Yet, in a few cases parents revealed a lack of interest in their children's education because of life pressure or being discouraged by the level of support available at school. While four parents attributed their children's difficulties to their own negligence, particularly during the first three years of primary school, they referred their lack of interest in children's education to the current scarcity of textbooks. In line with this, parents made reference to teachers' scribbled writing on children's exercise books, which they found neither clear nor encouraging to address children's learning mistakes at home. Other parents went too far describing the way in which the schools and the local educational authorities (LEAs) are running as "appalling and unspeakable". This was due to the abuse of resources allocated by the ministry of education to schools and LEAs, they reported. In actual fact, this has emerged from the interviews with parents as a frequent theme which is perceived by almost all the participants as alarming. Generally parents appeared aware of what their children were lacking at schools, but they claimed in many occasions that they could not help children. There was also evidence from this study confirming the common conception in that



children are supported more by educated parents compared with those whose parents are less or uneducated.

Moreover, parents appeared to draw attention to a general decline in morals and principles in the wider society, which influenced their children's behaviour and attitudes toward learning. In this respect, they saw schools as not excepted from this current deterioration, and as such children appear to present teachers with challenging behaviour within classroom. Yet, parents appeared reluctant to associate their children with deviant or disruptive behaviour. Instead, they described children's EBD at school as merely childish acts of indifference to learning and disobedience, which were caused by factors beyond their control. Although parents perceived this problem as overwhelming, they reported, once more, that they could do little to change the situation.

Indeed, identifying children's EBD and what may have contributed to them remain a complex process for all the participants. In four cases parents attempted to explain children's behaviour by drawing attention to unexplained intrinsic factors within children. Occasionally parents draw the attention to their own inability to support children with school work, and consequently identify this as a contributing factor to children's learning difficulties. In this respect, they revealed a sense of dissatisfaction with their own failure to meet children's specific educational needs. In three cases, parents held their manipulative attempt to register their children before the school age accountable for later academic failure at school where they found it increasingly hard to cope with the tasks given. In a similar number of cases, parents explained children's EBD in relation to the influence of the culture concerned. Certain children's behaviour e.g. retaliating for themselves was advocated by parents regardless of the impact of such behaviour on other children and the ethos of the school. Three parents also suggested that they were not often able to help their children nor make them listen due to children's lack of competence or indifferent attitudes toward academic work. On reflection, these factors appeared to cost children dearly, and as a consequence they were held back from promotion to next year in school, though in most cases parents believed that their children could do much better with a more effective teachers. In line with this, most parents made no secret of the shortcomings within the schools and the system in which they operate. More than two third of the participants referred children's academic failure to weak foundations where less experienced teachers are mainly appointed to teach at this stage of the basic educational level. In this respect, parents held teachers' lack of use of appropriate methods of teaching responsible for children's indifferent attitude to learning. Equally all parents in the interviews question the responsibility of schools and its teachers toward children's behaviour. They underlined teachers' lack of classroom management skills. In line with this, they highlighted the growing need for more competent and experienced teachers to teach at the first stage of the basic educational level. Moreover the results revealed that parents often receive more letters and notes from teachers in connection with children's acting out behaviour compared with those who experience learning difficulties and withdrawn behaviour. In fact, parents stressed all along that the actual reasons behind children's main difficulties at school as learning based as opposed to EBD. Thus, all participants agreed that education should not be led by patronising forms of academic assessment, where young children are put under tremendous pressure from an early age in order to pass rigid school exams in order to be promoted to the next year or else they will be held back or even excluded.

### **3.1 Obstacles for Communication: Home and School**

The relationship between home and school has been perceived by at least half of the participants as not without problems. The assessment of children's learning and behaviour

remains an area of conflict between parents and teachers. Although parents appeared from this study to be conscious of the benefit of having face-to-face contact with classroom teachers in order to respond effectively to children's educational needs, they claimed that they were not often able to maintain this liaison with teachers. There were occasions when fathers, in particular, drew the attention to cultural barriers preventing them from taking part in the school activities. In this regard, they highlighted the course of interaction with female teachers as not straightforward. In fact, it was not uncommon to see fathers avoiding arguing with female teachers about any issues related to their own children, though they would disagree with teachers. As a consequence of this complex relationship between male and female in general in Libya, most of the fathers interviewed suggested that they would rather send their wives to deal with female teachers instead of going themselves, reflecting the sensitivity of communicating with these teachers face to face. In relation to the disadvantage of dealing with female teachers in the assessment of EBD children, fathers highlighted that the demands imposed upon parents by teachers meant that their wives had been exploited by inexperienced teachers and had become full time teachers at home to respond to teachers' comments. Nevertheless, it should be noted that even though the issue of gender emerged from this study to hinder fathers involvement with teachers in schools, none of the fathers felt less valued or excluded from taking part in school activities. In actual fact, fathers related their problems with female teachers to cultural constraints, which in their opinions are beyond the capacity of home and school boundaries to overcome.

### **3.2 Partnership with school Teachers**

Partnership was perceived by parents as merely to solve schools' and teachers' problems, instead of really empowering parents in the decision making process. In fact, parents reported on many occasions that it is unlikely schools would call them to see the teachers or ask for their help in the assessment of their children. Similarly, parents suggested that there was not an open-door policy towards parents where they could come and discuss children's difficulties freely with teachers. However, even though the majority of parents appeared to struggle to build relationship with teachers, they stressed the importance of having interpersonal relationship with teachers for successful collaboration. This appeared clearly from the majority of fathers, whose views of partnership are not positive, and as a consequence partnership, for them, is not conceivable within the Libyan schools culture.

The majority of parents portrayed themselves as participant supporters of their children rather than actually as a real partners treated on equal basis with teachers. While the reasons accounting for this seemed to vary from one parent to another, parents appeared in general to give themselves less privilege to construe children's learning and behaviour difficulties compared with school professionals. In a similar way, parents stressed that they were not trained as teachers, nor can they posse the great academic knowledge that is necessary for effective teaching. In all but five cases, parents regarded their involvement in educating their children as less influential compared to that of the teachers. In this regard, they admitted that they could not replace the teachers' function, nor could they convey the school's message properly. Moreover, they highlighted that taking their own initiative with their children often resulted in failure and this was responsible for creating tension between them and their children. In relation to this, they attributed their lack of self-belief to their own shortage of knowledge of child development, which in turn led them to be impatient with their children.

Indeed, the striking consistency of views expressed by the majority of parents in this study suggested that they wish they could work together with school teachers in a supportive partnership rather than belittle each other efforts. Parents found themselves equally discouraged by teachers' remarks in their children's exercises books. In fact, it is not uncommon to see parents in the interviews describing teachers' notes and letters concerning children's learning and behaviour difficulties as embarrassing and more often than not regard them as disturbing. As this appeared a constant message from almost all the interview with parents, it does certainly put parents off from taking full part in teachers' intervention programmes with their children.

### 3.3 Discussion

The purpose of this study was to give parents a voice to construe children's emotional and behavioural difficulties and the experience of having to put up with such behaviour. The growing concern over the shortage of research in Libya involving parents, particularly with regard to issues that closely pertain to their interests and that of their children, has been well documented in the literature (Al-Shapani, 2000; Al-Tabib, 1997; Abuforwa and El-Twokally, 1994; The United Nations Report, 1998). In a similar way, researchers in the United Kingdom have underlined the scarcity of research involving parents' voices - for a long time there has been much concern with the opinions and views of professionals as opposed to these of the children and parents (Armstrong, 2011; Shakespeare and Watson, 1998). Hence the aim of this study was to hear directly from parents about their children's EBD. In line with Armstrong (2017) parents appeared from this study to possess considerable information about how their children are likely to behave in certain situations, but this does not necessarily inform them of how they can deal with them. Generally parents were willing to talk about the factors responsible for children's EBD rather than what EBD actually mean. The results of this study confirm that EBD remains a term which is widely used and poorly defined. A great deal of what parents reported about their children's EBD fits very well with the common views in the literature (e.g. Al-Shapani, 2001; Armstrong, 2011; Bennett, 2000; Cooper, 1993; Farrell, 1995; Galloway et al, 1987; Jones and Charlton, 1996; Moses and Croll, 1985) suggesting that home and parental circumstances affect EBD as well as factors within the children are responsible for their EBD, yet a significant proportion of children's EBD has been attributed to deficiencies within schools and teachers. Thus, in contrast with previous studies, the majority of parents referred children's EBD to teachers' lack of teaching experience at the first stage of basic educational level, as well as lack of classroom management skills to handle children's learning and behaviour difficulties. This, on the other hand, underlines the Libyan educational system's failure to provide new teachers with proper training to manage classroom behaviour. This seems to contradict the opinion expressed by The People's Committee for Education and Scientific Research who appear to place children's EBD beyond the mainstream school's boundaries e.g. within children's factors and parent's circumstances (see The National Report for Development of Education, 2008). In fact, Libyan children were ready to attribute their emotional and behavioural difficulties to factors within themselves, though they may feel disadvantaged by the lack of school resources, inexperienced teachers, their living standards, low parental income, illiterate and depressive parents. In line with the findings of this study, Armstrong (1994) found the majority of children and parents in the UK were prepared to attribute their difficulties to factors within school, and very few made significant reference to family backgrounds. Despite the differences between the Libyan and UK cultures, not least in childcare practices, up bringing and the emphasis of educational policies, parents in both

countries revealed similar concerns with regard to EBD and the contributing factors. As for this study, parents appear to draw conclusions about their children's individual behaviour in relation to the wider context instead of being specific with regard to their children's behaviour. Indeed, the complexity of defining a behaviour as a problem stemmed from the difficulty of where to draw the lines with respect to children's EBD. This was a problem that frequently arose from the discussion on EBD. In fact, the results demonstrate a complex interaction between the lack of support for behaviour and learning difficulties in schools. Hence, parents in this study found it extremely difficult to talk about EBD in isolation from children's learning difficulties and what might have contributed to them.

Moreover the emphasis on school related factors within this study could be interpreted as a natural consequence of the growing educational pressures in conjunction with teachers' casual attitudes and an inflexible National Curriculum. All in all, the results of this study suggest that there is an urgent need for Libyan teachers in mainstream schools to function within clear literacy and behaviour frameworks. Certainly in the UK teachers seem to have certain procedures in place to deal with learning and behavioural difficulties. Hence teachers' disciplinary actions can be held to account by parents and Local Educational Authorities. Yet, this should not by any means suggest that mainstream schools in the UK are adequately sufficient in meeting the educational needs of EBD children – they too seem to have encountered difficulties in putting into action school policies and procedures concerning children with EBD (see Armstrong, 1995). Thus, it seems that the failings of the Libyan educational system, helps teachers and schools alike to escape their responsibilities to address the educational needs of children and lack of classroom management. These remain major factors for the Libyan LEAs to address if the education and well being of children is to flourish.

There are also traditional factors which appear from this study to influence the relationship between home and school in general and consequently have an impact on children's behaviour one way or another. Parents, particularly fathers, appear reluctant to communicate with female teachers concerning their children, though they held inexperienced female teachers responsible for children's EBD. The lack of interaction between fathers and female teachers can be traced to traditional constraints which discourage personal contact between male and female in general (see for example Attir, 1982). The findings suggested that parents, particularly mothers are often challenged by children's behaviour and puzzled by their emotional temperaments. Whilst this may suggest that Libyan fathers are less troubled by children's behaviour, it should be noted that Libyan fathers are very much less involved in children's education compared with mothers.

Moreover, the majority of parents expressed concerns with the wide spread anti-social behaviour due to the social changes that is currently taking place in Libya, and worry that their children may be influenced by this. They equally drew attention to the overwhelming pressure of life today reflecting low incomes and living standards, which seem to affect the development of children's well-being directly by limiting the opportunities available to them, and indirectly by their effect on parents. In a similar way, Cooper (1993) found an association of EBD with social disadvantages, i.e., poor quality of housing, low incomes and low levels of parents' education. Even though this may suggest that EBD is merely a reaction against significance of status within lower class parents in the community, there are indeed other interrelated factors which contribute to children's EBD too. Farrell (1995) underlined the difficulties of attributing EBD to one particular factor. This may reflect the growing need for better living standards, facilities and school resources in order for children to progress academically as well as personally and socially. Overall the results suggest that parents could do little on their own to change children's



EBD, since most of this behaviour takes place outside of the home. They underlined the importance of managing children's EBD within the context in which such behaviour occurs, instead of being ready to label children and subsequently remove them from the main setting. Thus, unless this issue is being addressed within mainstream schools, more and more children with EBD are likely to be removed from the classroom and eventually excluded.

#### IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, there was a general consensus among parents in this study that children's achievement and behaviour at school have declined over the last decade or so. Whilst they saw children's behaviour as merely a reflection of reciprocal interactions between children and their controlling conditions, schools continue to be the place where children experience difficulties. They claimed that there was little they could do as parents to change children's behaviour at school. In a similar way, parents were not always ready to accept that their children have EBD, nor were they willing to accept that they are the sole cause of such difficulties. Instead, they attributed children's difficulties to a wider context in which the school and teachers contribute significantly. They maintained that the school failed to make education an enjoyable experience for children. The use of inappropriate methods of teaching, penalties and also the demoralising of parents' efforts were apparent from this study, reflecting deficiencies within the school system. Equally an association of EBD with parents' indifferent attitudes, level of education and socio-economical reasons has also been found. This is in addition to traditional factors obstructing parents from making practical contributions to children's education, and subsequently creating more tension and conflicts between home and school rather than resolving those which already exist. The implications of this study highlight the importance of listening to the voice of parents concerning the learning and behaviour difficulties encountered by their children. This raises a number of issues concerning Libyan mainstream schools' and teachers' role and responsibility toward children's special educational needs in general. Indeed, teachers need to find how best to manage children's EBD within classroom. This in turn necessitates schools knowing and attempting to appreciate the individual children with whom they are working as well as their parents. Furthermore, mainstream schools would need to have a very definite policy and clear procedures with regard to children's literacy and behaviour difficulties. There is also a need for further teacher training in the area of special education and classroom management. Certainly the complexity of the problem encountered highlights the need for more parents' involvement in their children's education and a multidisciplinary approach to behaviour and learning difficulties. This reflects the need for true partnership between school and home in order to create proper ways in which parents can be meaningfully involved and become better partners to teachers using collaborative methods to address children's EBD.

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