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Parental involvement in schools: The perspectives of Cypriot principals

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This paper presents the findings of a survey study conducted in Cyprus primary state schools, which aimed at outlining principals' perspectives concerning parental involvement in school life. The research involved a representative sample of principals of the schools concerned. The analysis and interpretation of the data indicated that current home-school links are extremely limited. It was also found that even though the principals express a need to modify their schools' relationships with the pupils' parents, their suggestions still imply mild modes of family involvement, and not broader levels of participation. These views were found to relate to certain personal characteristics of the principals and a number of external variables. The findings are discussed within the current context of vivid surge within the Cyprus educational system for the introduction of relevant innovation and change.

Key words: Parental involvement, principals, Cyprus, survey.

INTRODUCTION

A child's in-school attainment is likely to depend more than anything else, on the social, cultural, and learning experiences, attitudes and aspirations of the child's home background (Bernstein, 1975; Marjoribanks, 1979; Bloom, 1982; Lareau, 1987; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Coleman, 1990; Davis, 1991), what was called, the 'curriculum of the home' (Kellaghan, 1994; Coleman, 1998). Schooling is thus viewed as providing educational opportunities and achieving its aims only in so far as what it offers builds on, and directly engages with, the fundamental education and 'curriculum' which the child experiences at home. Thus, currently theorists, researchers and practitioners assert the value of school and pupils' families establishing strong, positive, communicative relationships in order to collaborate.

Theory as well as research and program development have offered many suggestions of ways families and schools can engage. Epstein (1987a, b, 1995) and her colleagues (Connors and Epstein, 1995; Epstein and Becker, 1982; Epstein and Dauber, 1991) suggest six forms of family involvement in schools. The six types place emphasis on parental duties, communication between the family and the school, family's voluntary labour in the school, family's contribution to homework, family's

participation in school management, and cooperation between school, family, and the community. Epstein's typology is the one adopted by most researchers when a coherent definition of parental involvement is pursued.

The notions 'parental involvement' and 'parental participation' at school have both been used to the extreme in international bibliography in an effort to describe a range of practices, which aim at bringing home and school closer together. Despite the fact that these notions have been used alternatively, they nevertheless entail two different ideas. The notion of 'parental involvement' refers to procedures which allow parents to be involved in what is happening at school, but only in the form and the extent determined by the school personnel. In such cases, the role of parents is confined, as a rule, to that of a spectator of activities or events set up for them by the school (Davies and Johnson, 1996; Tomlinson, 1991), or to activities that can be described as 'parental duties' (Vining, 1997) or 'voluntary labour' (Reeve, 1993). These activities are more likely to concern mainly the interest of each parent's child individually (Munn, 1993). The notion of 'parental participation' is marked by a move towards a wider and different range of relations and activities, both in their content and intent, so that both 'sides' share res-

possibilities and authority. This is the reason why the determination and definition of both 'sides' rights and roles is demanded, as is the negotiation of the procedures, common accountabilities and policies which will ensure the active and complete participation of the parents in the administration and decision-making (Soliman, 1995; Stapes and Morris 1993). This move may most likely presuppose up to a certain point the official readjustment of the management and function of the school or education system. In such an event, parents are clearly interested, according to Munn (1993) in the best benefit for the school and its overall pupil population.

When home-school relationships reach the level of participation, we could refer to 'cooperation' or 'partnership'. Martin et al. (1997) suggest a four-stage development model of bonds between home and school, which makes provision for an exhaustive description of how 'involvement' can evolve to an interactive 'cooperation'. The first stage is the stage of 'dependence' in the relationship between them. Parents, at this phase, are passive and differential towards the professional expertise of teachers. The second stage is the stage of 'membership', when teachers start seeking the advice of families who have children at school about changes, and start espousing parents' views. At the third stage, 'interaction', the parents' active engagement in school life is expected and encouraged, while parents are valued as co-educators. The last and highest stage is 'cooperation' and 'partnership', where School Board members, families and teachers enter into a public partnership, which holds them jointly responsible for the governance and development of the school. Macbeth (1989) had earlier called schools of the first stage as 'self-contained' schools, those of the second as schools under 'professional uncertainty' as regards their relationships with the parents of the children, those of the third as schools of 'growing confidence', whereas schools at the last stage as schools having 'a concordat' of mutual commitment with parents.

In the case of Cyprus, there is evidence that relationships between home and school are restricted (Georgiou, 1996; Phtiaka, 1996; Symeou, 2001, 2008). The range and nature of such bonds in Cyprus seem to depend on how open the schools are towards parents and from the initiative exhibited by the parents as individuals. In addition, due to the existing attitude of the involved stakeholders and the specific educational context, very few research efforts have been reported aiming at examining the implementation of relevant innovations (Georgiou, 1998; Kyriakides, 1999; Symeou, 2002a).

The present paper records the most important findings of a state-wide survey, which aimed at examining the home-school relationship in primary education. More specifically, this research aimed at examining the form and range of these links as they are described by the principals of the state primary schools in Cyprus and review

the views of the particular group of educators as regards whether, and if so how, these liaisons need to be transformed in the immediate future. In addition, the research aimed at reaching conclusions in relation to differences in the current content and extent of these relationships in different school contexts and between different sub-groups. Finally, by incorporating their general suggestions, ideas, needs, and reservations, the paper tries to propose a framework for future innovations in the field of home-school liaisons in Cyprus.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Sample

In order to investigate the research questions, a questionnaire survey was conducted among a representative random sample of the principals' population posted at state primary schools in Cyprus. The selection of the sample was based on a proportionate stratified process. State primary schools were randomly selected among the strata created by the classification of the schools according to the area where the schools were situated (urban, semi-urban and rural schools) and their size (small size schools, as those schools with 80 or less pupils, average size schools, those with 81-200 pupils, and large size schools, those with more than 201 pupils). The questionnaire was sent to 152 from a sum total of 302 (50.33%) acting principals that constituted the population.

The response rate was 75%. From those who replied to the questionnaire, 78 (54.81%) were posted in rural schools and 65 (45.5%) in urban or sub-urban schools. As far as the size of the school was concerned, 22.2% were posted at small schools, 33.6% at average size schools and 41% at large schools. Table 1 demonstrates other demographic characteristics of the principals that responded to the questionnaire.

The research device and procedures

For the attainment of the research goals and in order to answer the research questions, the method used was a mail questionnaire. For the questionnaires' construction, other questionnaires used in similar international studies were consulted, accompanied by pilot interviews with a sample of principals who offered more context-specific information regarding the issue in investigation. The initial version of the questionnaire was pre-tested in order to isolate problems of design, test its efficiency in giving the expected information, and introduce improvements to the enquiry. Additionally, before the actual survey took place, the questionnaire was piloted with an analogous sample to the main survey's sample to try out its various features and gather information about the characteristics of the non-response stratum in order to improve the response rate during the actual survey.

The first part of the questionnaire enquired information from the respondents regarding their demographic characteristics. The second part set out 17 practices that have been cited by international and Cypriot bibliography and/or indicated by the piloting phase that could link the school with the pupils' families. The catalogue of the practices was presented under an introductory question inquiring from the respondents to state the frequency in which their respective schools employed each practice in the specific school year. Each statement was followed by a structured four-level ordinal scale as follows: 'Never', 'Once or Twice', 'Sometimes', 'Very often'. Internal reliability of the 17-item list was assessed using the Cronbach alpha technique. This produced an alpha of .81.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample.

Personal characteristics	Demographic groups	%
Gender	Male	68.4
	Female	31.6
Professional Experience (In Education)	Up to 30 years	10.5
	31-35 years	27.2
	36 years or more	62.3
Management Experience	Up to 2 years	49.5
	3-4 years	20.4
	5 years or more	30.1
Educational Background (Academic Qualification)	Pedagogical Academy (3-year) degree	48.2
	University (4-year) degree	43.0
	Postgraduate degree	8.8

The last part of the questionnaire investigated the intention of the respondents to modify their school's current practices by stating at each of a series of 22 similar practices whether they would desire their school to pursue them to a greater or lesser extent during the following school year compared to the ongoing year. In this case, each practice was presented in the structured ordinal coding 'More than this year', 'as this year', 'Less than this year', 'Not at all', while respondents were also providing the option of 'No opinion'. The Cronbach alpha measure of this part of the questionnaire was .83. Both the second and third part of the questionnaire provided space for respondents to add their own practices, experiences or thoughts regarding the respective introductory question.

For the analysis of the gathered data, which involved both descriptive and inferential analysis, the statistical package SPSS was employed.

RESULTS

Current realities

Initially there was an examination of the principals' statements on the question by which they were asked to indicate the frequency with which their schools make use of specific practices aiming at enhancing home-school links. In order to determine categories of practices employed, these statements underwent factor analysis. For the extraction of the factors, the rotated varimax analysis was employed.

The factor analysis extracted five groups of practices, which seem to typify the current type of practices that link the home and the school. The statements which were considered as defining effectively a factor and were eventually retained was those that received an over .40 loading. The five factors explained accumulatively the 58.2% of the variance. As a measure of reliability for each category of practices the reliability coefficient Cronbach alpha was used. Finally, a mean score for each factor was calculated so as to understand more the current priorities at schools. Table 2 presents analytically the composition of these five groups of practices as they derived from the loadings received by each practice of this part of the

questionnaire. It also presents the variance explained by each factor, the mean scores for each factor, and the respective Cronbach alpha reliability measure.

As shown by the Table, the group of practices, which appear to be more frequently employed by schools, are practices which aim at presenting to parents the work done at the school, what could be called practices of 'Projection of school work'. Such practices are sending informative letters to parents, inviting parents to watch a lesson in their children's class, and organising feasts and events addressed to parents. The remaining groups of practices do not appear often in the overall duration of the school year. More specifically, practices which aim at educating parents in pedagogical and educational subjects, what was called 'Parental training' practices are rarely practised. Similarly, practices, like inviting parents to organised class or school activities and events where the assumption is that parents could offer their insight and expertise or that parents should be allowed to share with the educationalists some school instances, what were described as practices of acquiring a 'Primary parental membership', were found to be rarely established. Even more rarely seems that the schools ask for parents' 'Voluntary labour' at school and scarcely do they ask for their 'assistance' through processes that seek directly their insights, views and advice, what were labelled as 'Higher parental membership' practices.

In order to investigate the existence of differences in the way schools of different demographic characteristics have established their current links with the parents of their pupils, a series of One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were conducted between the groups of practices presented above and the specific characteristics of the schools. For the post hoc pairwise comparisons the Scheffe test was employed in all cases. This analysis indicated the absence of statistically significant differences as regards the frequency in which the specific group of practices appeared in schools with different demographic characteristics. To be specific, homogeneity was identi-

Table 2. Composition of groups of current practices linking home and schools^a.

Statement	Group of practices				
My school during the current school year 1999-2000...	Primary Parental Membership	Projection of Schoolwork	Parental Training	Higher Parental Membership	Parental Voluntary Labour
5. Invited parents to talk to the pupils on an issue relevant to their lessons	.67				
4. Organised a lesson in which parents also participated (e.g. the parents helped with group work, heard the pupils read)	.66				
6. Organised a morning class event or meeting to which the pupils' parents were invited	.60				
7. Organised a morning school event or meeting to which the pupils' parents were invited	.54				
Sent information bulletins to parents		.65			
3. Organised lessons which were attended by parents in their children's class		.63			
10. Organised an event or a meeting at school in the afternoon or evening to which the parents were invited		.59			
8. Organised a workshop/seminar addressed to parents on a topic relevant to how parents must support their children's school life			.75		
9. Organised a workshop/seminar addressed to parents on a topic relevant to their education as parents			.50		
15. Asked from parents to participate in committees for issues concerning the school				.74	
17. Asked parents to inform the school about their children's needs				.61	
16. Conducted a survey of the views of the parents about the school				.49	
11. Asked parents to help with the maintenance or embellishment of the school					.79
12. Asked parents to help with monitoring the pupils during an excursion, an event or sports meeting					.68
Mean ^b	.96	1.79	.96	.66	.82
Standard Deviation	.63	.51	.63	.53	.61
Reliability Alpha	.63	.53	.69	.47	.52
% of variance	27.03	8.93	8.32	7.10	6.87

^a KMO= .71 BTS=439.76.

^bScale: 0=Never, 1=Once or Twice, 2=Sometimes, 3=Very often.

tified between the current practices of the schools compared to the area they were located, the schools' size according to the number of their pupils, the composition of the school staff according to their teaching experience and the socioeconomic background of the pupils' families.

Future pursuits

The principals' statements on the question, which asked them to state whether they would desire that certain practices would be pursued more or less by their schools in the immediate future, underwent also a factor analysis.

Once again, for the extraction of the factors, the rotated varimax analysis was used and a mean score for each factor was calculated in order to understand more respondents' priorities for future changes.

The rotated varimax factor analysis of teachers' responses extracted five factors, explaining 57.9% of the variance. Table 3 presents the constitution of the five factors and the loadings received by each practice. It also presents the variance explained by each factor, the mean scores for each factor, and the respective Cronbach alpha reliability measure.

The study of the Table clearly indicates that primary schools' principals express the readiness to pursue more in relation with their schools' current practices the organisation of activities aiming at 'Parental training'. Thus, while it was revealed that practices endeavouring at training parents on general pedagogical and educational issues are currently restricted, the principals declare the readiness and will to further pursue it in the immediate future. Similarly, they appear to promote their schools' more frequent 'Parents' verbal informing' as regards topics related with children's academic attainment and schoolwork. In addition, there is evidence of certain predisposition that their schools should address the pupils' families by seeking 'Formal-like parental membership', namely practices which seek the opinions and advice of the parents via formal procedures. Nonetheless, it is evident that the principals consider that there is no need for further employing 'Informal-like parental membership' practices which consist of practices that demand the physical presence of the parents at schools and the close parent-teacher contact, despite the fact that they stated that such practices do not often appear at their annual school agenda. Finally, principals consider that neither the further establishment of a 'Direct contact line' with the parents of the pupils is an immediate priority.

Differences in principals' future pursuits according to their personal characteristics

The inferential statistical analysis attempted indicated that specific personal characteristics of the principals might signify statistically significant differences as regards their attitudes towards the above grouping of practices. These variables are the principals' gender, their overall professional experience in education as this is described in number of years in civil service, and their management experience as described by the number of years at the post of head of the school. The findings are presented on Table 4.

Specifically, when an independent-samples *t* test was conducted to evaluate the hypotheses that male and female principals differ significantly in their attitudes to further pursuing the five groups of practices, it was found

that male principals state greater desire ($\bar{X}=1.36$, $SD=.35$) than their female counterparts ($\bar{X}=1.13$, $SD=.21$) for their school to establish more a 'Direct contact line' with the parents of their pupils ($t=4.16$, $df=112$, $p=.000$).

The independent-sample *t* test conducted to test whether respondents differed in their statements as regards the five groups of practices according to their overall professional experience in education revealed that principals with a total sum of years of service up to 35 years- This is a relatively small number for the case of the Cyprus educational context. Hence, this group were much less than those with more than 35 years of service (and correspondingly younger in age) tend to aspire more than their colleagues with more years of service a number of group of practices. More specifically, the former were found to appear to support more practices which presuppose both a primary 'Parental Membership' ($t=3.14$, $df=112$, $p=.002$) that demands close parent-teacher contact ($\bar{X}=1.38$, $SD=.51$) and a more advanced type of membership ($t=2.40$, $df=112$, $p=.018$) that seeks the advice of the parents through mutual exchange of useful information between home and school ($\bar{X}=1.55$, $SD=.50$), than the latter ($\bar{X}=1.08$, $SD=.46$ and $\bar{X}=1.31$, $SD=.52$, respectively). The former were also found to wish more for their school ($\bar{X}=1.62$, $SD=.35$) than the latter ($\bar{X}=1.46$, $SD=.37$) to further pursue the verbal briefing of parents about their children ($t=2.38$, $df=112$, $p=.019$).

Finally, the *t* test analysis which intended at checking whether respondents with different management experience differed significantly in their attitude to the five group of practices indicated that principals who are at their first years at the post have a greater wish to enhance verbal briefing of parents about their children at their school ($\bar{X}=1.58$, $SD=.36$) than those who had five or more years of school managerial experience ($\bar{X}=1.39$, $SD=.36$) ($t=2.55$, $df=111$, $p=.012$). Similarly the former group of principals exhibited greater will to pursue more in the near future 'Parental training' practices at their schools ($\bar{X}=1.68$, $SD=.43$) than the latter ($\bar{X}=1.48$, $SD=.46$) ($t=2.17$, $df=111$, $p=.031$).

The variable of the principals educational background as this was described by their academic qualifications, as well as the demographic characteristics of the school in which they were posted did not seem to differentiate their views.

DISCUSSION

The above findings indicate that the current practices employed by primary schools in view of involving the pa-

Table 3. Composition of groups of practices of future pursuits in linking home and schools^a

Statement	Group of practices				
	Informal-like Parental Membership	Parental Training	Direct Contact Line	Formal-like Parental Membership	Parents' Verbal Informing
I would desire my school to promote during the following school year 1999-2000 the practices of...					
14. Inviting parents to help with the maintenance or upkeep of the classroom/school	.80				
10. Inviting parents to attend morning class activities	.79				
8. Organising classes in which parents participate	.75				
7. Organising classes to be attended by the parents	.67				
9. Organising parents to present to children topics related to lessons	.62				
15. Inviting parents to assist with monitoring pupils at an excursion, celebration or sport event	.56				
18. Visits by teachers to the pupils' homes	.47				
13. Organising afternoon/evening events or meetings especially for parents	.46				
12. Organising workshops/seminars for the parents on the topic of their education as parents		.82			
11. Organising workshops/seminars for the parents on topics relevant to how to help their children with their school life		.75			
4. Briefing parents about the conduct of their children at school			.76		
19. Telephone contacts of teachers with the parents of the pupils			.67		
17. Arranging individual meetings between the teachers and the parents to discuss issues relevant to the pupils			.57		
16. Asking parents to inform the school about the needs of their children				.80	
5. Sending reports to the parents informing them about the performance and the needs of pupils				.54	
2. Verbal information to parents on how the pupils should study at home					.85
1. Verbal information on how the pupils should work at school					.60
3. Verbal information for the school performance of the pupils					.51
Mean ^b	1.19	1.62	1.29	1.40	1.52
Standard Deviation	.50	.45	.33	.53	.37
Reliability Alpha	.81	.59	.45	.45	.58
% of variance	28.37	10.82	8.18	6.67	5.79

^aKMO= .71 BTS=439.76^bScale: 0=Never, 1=Once or Twice, 2=Sometimes, 3=Very often

Table 4. Statistical significant differences of principals/ future pursuits.

Grouping of practices	Personal Characteristics	Demographic Groups	F	\bar{X}	SD	t	df	p
Direct Contact Line	Gender	Male	78	1.36	.35	4.16	112	.000
		Female	36	1.13	.21			
Informal-like Membership	Parental			1.38	.51	3.14		.002
				1.08	.46			
Formal-like Parental Membership	Professional Experience (In Education)	Up to 35 years	43	1.55	.50	2.40	112	.018
		36 years or more	71	1.31	.52			
Parents' Verbal Informing				1.62	.35	2.38		.019
				1.46	.37			
Parental Training	Management	Up to 4 years		1.68	.43	2.17	111	.031
				1.48	.46			
Parents' Verbal Informing	Experience	5 years or more	34	1.58	.36	2.55		.012

rents of the pupils in their school life are focused on projecting to parents the work done at the school. All other practices are rarely established. In conclusion, the current relevant experimentation at state primary schools of Cyprus seems to still belong to the first stage of the four-stage developmental model of home-school relationships as this was proposed by Martin et al. (1997), namely the 'dependence' stage, where the families of the pupils are kept passive towards all that the school plans. Thus, most schools appear as 'cut off' from the parents or as Macbeth (1988) would suggest, as 'self-contained', while possibly very few might have proceeded to the second stage of 'membership', where families start to be invited to express opinions for changes and to be granted their wishes.

It is worth pointing out that schools appear to be presenting, according to the principals, a striking similarity in their current priorities by being particularly homogenous in their current approaches. This is a finding which does not correspond to relevant findings of the international research bibliography where there are references to different priorities in different school environments (Epstein, 1987; Epstein and Dauber, 1991), in particular if this relates with the school families' backgrounds (Lareau, 2000; Reay, 1998; Vincent, 1996).

The interpretation of the findings also indicates that primary school principals believe that what is mostly needed to be pursued in order to achieve a successful involvement of the parents in their children's school life is the planning of activities for the parents aiming at informing them on general issues of education of pupils and their more frequent verbal briefing on topics related with their children's school activity. Furthermore, they present a tendency of the schools to seeking the families' views and advice through formal procedures. At the same time nonetheless, they appear reluctant to enhance in their school activities which demand the more informal contact between parents and teachers and parental presence at

schools. These views are presented to differentiate according to some of the principals personal characteristics, and more specifically both their overall years in service and in the post of principals, and their gender. It appears that principals with more years in service and in the post, as well as females, might be less willing to pursue some types of practices than their colleagues.

It can therefore be concluded that despite the relevant tendency to further seek parental assistance, the priorities of the principals continue to focus on practices of first-level involvement of parents in school, of practices which render them mere spectators and receivers of whatever the school decides to offer them. The essential goal and underpinning assumption of these practices is for the parents to be transmitted specific information and promoted specific skills and attitudes which would help them 'align' their efforts at home for school success of their child with the respective ones at school. The principals through these perspectives project a clear orientation towards practices of parental 'involvement', and not 'participation' as these were described by Tomlinson (1991) and Munn (1993).

If the pursuit of the state primary schools of Cyprus is the support of home-school relationship and a more active engagement of the pupils' parents in their school life, with eventual goal the development of 'cooperation' and 'partnership' in the effort to educate our children, then what is required is change and modification of the current views and expectations both of the home and the school. This research examined the content and range of existing links between primary schools and home as described by the principals of the schools, and outlined the attitudes of the latter towards modifications of these links. It is an essential prerequisite for any relevant change to identify the attitudes of the educationalists, especially to identify the attitudes of this specific group of educationalists, due to the immense role they have in establishing the framework and content of the links bet-

ween pupils' homes and their school.

The readiness of the schools' principals for further exploiting of specific practices could constitute the starting point for certain formal or informal innovative efforts at the micro-level or macro-level of the state educational system. Such practices could be, as indicated by the survey, the more briefing of parents on topics related with the children's school activities, the recruitment of procedures that would identify the parents' views regarding the school, and above all, parental training on educational and pedagogical subjects, for which there is accruing evidence that there is a similar demand by both the parents and the teachers (Symeou, 2001).

In the current education system in Cyprus where there is a lack of organized and systematic relevant official policy, and where the school controls the procedures for the introduction of innovations and changes, it seems that it is the school itself that must undertake the initiative and the responsibility to establish such efforts. The role of the educationalists and especially the principals in planning, organizing and encouraging of these efforts will be of prime importance.

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