School – family relations: Greek parents' perceptions of parental involvement

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While the value of the school-family partnership is universally accepted, it is not always easy to promote effective parent-teacher partnership. A central question that emerges is how schools can ensure that they develop their home-school relationship in a way that acknowledges the needs and perspectives of children, parents and teachers and enhances parents' participation in school activities. Our main assumption is that we can better understand school-family relations, by examining the beliefs held by both teachers and parents about their relationship. This study addressed Greek parents' perceptions of teachers, as well as their own role and responsibilities, parental involvement activities and areas of cooperation with teachers. Analysis of 581 questionnaires to parents revealed that parents perceived distinctly separate roles between teachers and parents. Teachers were perceived as "experts" in academic domains, while parents were perceived as "guardians" of children's social and emotional growth. Both teachers and parents' role was to keep each other informed about children's achievement in school and home setting respectively. Results of the study are discussed in terms of implications for initiatives to develop school-family relations in teacher training programmes.

Introduction

Unlike many kinds of relationships, the parent-teacher relationship occurs by assignment rather than choice, with the schooling of the child as the only common interest (Keyes, 2002). Given the decline of nuclear family and the community, a truly collaborative partnership between parents and teachers becomes imperative (Lindle & Boyd, 1991). It is well supported in the literature that school-family cooperation contributes to pupils' achievement (Laloumi-Vidali, 1997; Coleman, 1998), pupils' participation in school-family relationships (Beveridge, 2004), parents and children cooperation in homework (Epstein & Lee, 1995), improvement of pupils' behaviour, motivation and self-esteem (Haynes, Comer, & Hamilton-Lee, 1989), parents' satisfaction on teachers' role (Rich, 1988), inclusion of children with special needs in regular schools (Frederickson, Dunsmuir, Lang, & Monsen, 2004) and the evaluation of health education programmes (Warwick et al, 2005).

In addition, the context of school and family relation has been delineated by a plethora of models (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986; Case, 2000; Georgiou, 2000; Getzels, 1978; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991; Matsagouras & Berdis, 2003; Matsagouras, 2005; Symeou, 2003). Epstein's (1995) model of parental involvement however, appears to be the most prominent and complete in the literature. Epstein's typology includes six major aspects of parental involvement ranging from assistance with parenting to full collaboration between home and school: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making and collaboration.

Lately, Matsagouras (2005) taking into consideration the historical and socio-cultural background, developed four types of teacher-parents' collaboration, in order to explicitly describe teachers and parents' role and responsibilities according to their perceptions: a) the school-centered type, in which teachers' and parents' role are distinctive, with teachers being responsible for children's academic achievement, and parents being responsible for children's social and emotional growth, b) the collaborative type, according to which both teachers and parents interact, with teachers maintaining the dominant

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roles and responsibilities and parents being restricted to supplementary roles, c) the negotiative type, in which teachers and parents' roles are deemed equal and responsibilities are symmetrically distributed to both of them and d) the family-centered type, in which parents' role is central and teachers act as guides to the decisions about the child.

Beside the general consensus in the literature about the importance of school-family collaboration, it is not always possible to be achieved in practical terms. This is due to the difference in perceptions about the context and the content of the collaboration between the participants (Attanucci, 2004), the lack of a sufficient definition of parental involvement in the literature (Daniel-White, 2002; Lawson, 2003), the lack of equivalent relations between parents and teachers (Beveridge, 2004; Weininger & Lareau, 2003) or barriers such as parental work, geography and parents' lack of time (McBride, Bae & Blatchford, 2003).

The lack of knowledge and skills about a successful collaboration between parents and teachers however, consists of the most crucial barrier. From the one hand, parents need guidance from teachers about their children development (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995) and from the other, teachers ask for parents' involvement in schools, but they are not equipped with the skills or knowledge to promote such an involvement (Brouzos, 1999; Leitch & Tangri, 1988; Morris & Taylor, 1998). Therefore, a need arises for teacher educators to equip prospective teachers with skills and strategies in order to develop effective communication with parents. Before the development of teacher training programmes however, the exploration of both teachers and parents' perceptions of their role, the content and the context of their collaboration is required.

In terms of teachers' perceptions, Katz (1984) suggested that there are three categories of teachers: in the first category, there are teachers who argue for the distinct role between school and family, in the second category, teachers focus on parents' role and seek for equal ways of cooperation with parents, empowerment and assignment of teaching roles to parents and lastly in the third category, teachers focus on school-family cooperation. Studies on teachers (pre-service and in-service) in Greece and Cyprus revealed that teachers perceive distinct roles between teachers and parents and conceptualize their cooperation in a rather limited and school-centered way (Angelides, Theophanous & Leigh, 2006; Poulou & Matsagouras, 2005; Symeou, 2003).

In turn, parents' perceptions of school-family relation are predicted by both parents' socio-cultural background and their educational orientation and by their expectations about the school effectiveness, in terms of their children's achievement and the practices employed for parents-teachers' interactions (Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). Current study acknowledges the importance of parents' perceptions of school-family relation and hypothesizes that the exploration of parents' perceptions is necessary if any query about the encouragement of parents' participation to school activities is to be answered. Specifically, the current study aims to explore:

a) parents' perceptions of teachers' role
b) parents' perceptions of their own role
c) parents' perceptions of their involvement activities and
d) parents' perceptions of the areas of cooperation with teachers

Method

Participants
Five hundred and eighty one parents (201 male, 34.7% and 379 female, 65.3%, 1 missing) voluntarily participated in the study. The participants came from Athens area, the majority of them had tertiary education (45.2%), had jobs in the public or private sector (48.1%) and had two children (47.2%).

Measurement
Current study consists of a part of a larger study on teachers (pre-service and in-service) and parents' perceptions of school-family relations. Parents were asked to complete an inventory concerning their perceptions of school-family relations, similar to the one used in a previous study of teachers' perceptions (Poulou & Matsagouras, 2005). The items of the inventory were developed through the analysis of interview transcripts with 3 in-service teachers on their perceptions of school-family relations and the review of the literature. Items were responded on a 5-point Likert scale, with 0 strongly disagree and 4 strongly agree with the item.

Results

Parents' perceptions of teachers and parents' role
According to table 1 (see Appendix), parents gave high ratings to teachers' role mainly in domains related to "parents' information about their child in school", and learning processes, such as "pupils' assessment",

"classroom organizations" and "teaching methods" (mean split: low teachers' ratings≤ 3.14, high teachers' ratings >3.14). In contrast, parents' gave significantly lower ratings in reference to parents' responsibility in the domains above (mean split: low parents' ratings≤ 2.10, high parents' ratings >2.10). "Teachers' information about the child" was the item received the highest ratings in terms of parents' responsibility, in conjunction with items referring to children's social and emotional development. These latter items in turn, received significantly lower ratings in respect to teachers' role. Parents also gave high ratings in their responsibility to "decide on their child's school or class". "Coping strategies for dealing with children's learning problems" was the item received high ratings, while items such as "setting the educational priorities", "the courses taught in school" and the "provision of building materials of the school", received low ratings in terms of both teachers' and parents' responsibilities. The low ratings in the above items were rather expected, since the Greek educational system is centralized, and therefore the educational goals and structures are assigned by the Ministry of Education (see Table 1, Appendix).

Parents' perceptions of involvement activities

In terms of involvement activities in school, parents preferred "parent-teacher conferences at school" and "parents' invitation to work in classroom". In contrast, "home-school journal", "family-teacher meetings outside of school time" and "home visits" were the activities with the lowest ratings (see Table 2, Appendix).

Parents' perceptions of the areas of cooperation

The most prominent areas of cooperation between parents and teachers were found to be "providing parenting info" and "help with children's behaviour problems at school". On the other hand, "parents' participation in school organization matters" and "parents' help with the teaching process as assistant teachers" received the lowest ratings by parents (see Table 3, Appendix).

Discussion

Current study revealed a clear-cut differentiation between teachers and parents' roles, with the teachers being responsible for the parents' information about the child and the organization of the learning process, and the parents being responsible for the teachers' information about the child and the child's social and emotional growth, respectively. These results are in line with Epstein and Lee's (1995) study, where 90% of the families rated learning process as the prominent responsibility of schools. In our study, parents' preference of the formal involvement activities such as parent-teacher conferences at school and parents' invitation to work in classroom, in areas of cooperation such as information provision about the child and help with children's behaviour problems at school, further confirms parents' preference for concrete and superficial relation with teachers. This is actually true in cases where there is a need for help, such as behaviour problems. Different parental preferences were found in Lindle and Boyd (1991) study, where although all parents named parent-teacher conferences as the main method of participation, they favored informal communication with teachers, like calls at home.

Parents' perceptions of the diverse roles of school and family are in congruence with teachers' perceptions in similar studies (Attanucci, 2004; McBride, 2003; Lawson, 2003; Poulou & Matsarouras, 2005). At the first sight, this similarity in perceptions concerning the distribution of roles seems rather practical, since teachers and parents' roles move in a parallel direction, aiming at pupils' benefit. It denotes however, a total separation of the roles and an apparent domination of the traditional school-centered model of school-family relations. Taken from a different perspective, Phtiaka (1999) argued that the acknowledgment by both parents and teachers that they are partners in knowledge of the child, with their only difference lying in the area of expertise, is a pre-requisite of a successful partnership. Nonetheless, teachers and parents relations are not restricted to the exchange of information, as in the case of "ex officio" relations.

Here, according to Miretzky (2004), the 'emotional intersubjectivity' and the common understanding of certain emotional practices consist of the starting points for the improvement of such relations. Direct and honest communication, trust, mutual respect and goals reflect "the communication requirements" of democratic communities. At this point, there is a need for teacher educators to equip prospective and in-service teachers with skills and strategies in order to facilitate effective communication with parents. We need professionals who recognize the need for a balanced relationship with clients, who build positive and affective relationships as well as rational, and teachers who are experts at the same time in human relations, child development, subject matter and pedagogy (Lindle & Boyd, 1991). This study consists of an attempt to identify school-family relations and the degree of parental involvement, according to parents' perspectives, aiming further to the evaluation and improvement of teacher training programmes on that specific area of interest. Future research need to provide information about parents' perspectives using in depth interviews in combination with teachers and school administrators' beliefs.

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Appendix

Table 1: Means, standard deviations and paired t-test of parents' perceptions of teachers and parents' role (N=581)

Domains of responsibility	teachers		parents		
	mean	**sd**	**mean**	**sd**	**t-test**
Parents'/teachers' information	**3.75**	**0.56**	**3.01**	**1.20**	
Pupils' assessment	**3.61**	**0.64**	1.34	1.37	31.71**
Classroom organization	**3.57**	**0.69**	1.00	1.15	39.67**
Setting teaching methods	**3.49**	**0.72**	1.65	1.16	28.32**
Types of homework	**3.40**	**0.82**	1.60	1.29	24.00**
Setting learning goals	**3.35**	**0.75**	1.31	1.55	24.07**
Decision of the child's learning style	**3.34**	**0.83**	1.76	1.19	24.23**
Coping strategies for children's learning problems	**3.32**	**0.85**	**2.84**	**1.06**	8.66**
Management of children's special abilities	3.09	0.80	1.83	1.29	17.87**
Children's social and emotional development	3.08	0.94	**3.10**	**1.12**	-0.26
Coping strategies for children's behaviour problems	3.07	0.83	**2.66**	**1.18**	5.85**
Setting educational priorities (cognitive, emotional, social, etc)	3.04	0.95	1.47	1.27	21.56**
Children's development of attitudes, and capacities in school	3.03	0.85	**2.17**	**1.25**	12.59**
Setting the courses to be taught	2.77	1.19	1.09	1.18	23.27**
Development of children's physical skills	2.75	1.01	1.88	1.30	12.06**
Responsibility for child's development in general	2.75	0.93	**3.38**	**1.00**	-9.85**
Development of school-community relations	2.65	0.98	**2.38**	**1.20**	3.99**
Provision of school building materials	2.19	1.21	2.08	1.35	1.38
Parents' decision of the public school of their child			**3.05**	**1.28**	
Parents' information about the school effectiveness			**2.97**	**1.17**	
Parents' ability to change their child's classroom or school, in case of problems in cooperation			**2.52**	**1.35**	
Parents' ability to decide for their child's teacher			1.26	1.34	

*p≤0.05, **p≤0.01

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Table 2: Means and standard deviations of parents' perceptions of parental involvement in teaching (N=581)

Involvement activities	$\bar{x}$	sd
Parent-teacher conferences at school	3.80	0.54
Call home	1.76	1.40
Notes to individual parents	2.25	1.36
Invite parents to work in classroom	2.58	1.39
Classroom newsletters	2.25	1.36
Home-school journal	1.42	1.30
Family-teacher meetings outside of school time	1.39	1.41
Home visits	0.68	1.08

Table 3: Means and standard deviations of parents' perceptions of the areas of cooperation with teachers (N=581)

Areas of cooperation with teachers	$\bar{x}$	sd
Provide parenting info	3.64	0.74
Parents help with homework	2.40	1.38
Parents help with children's behaviour problems at school	3.60	0.74
Parents input on child's projects	2.13	1.22
Parents participate in the selection of school books	2.11	1.28
Parents help in the teaching process, with the role of "assistant teacher"	1.53	1.35
Parents organize activities for school fund raising	2.51	1.25
Parents do volunteer work at school	2.70	1.19
Parents participate in school organization matters	1.82	1.36
Parents help with school and community cooperation	2.64	2.17