Types of Parental Involvement in Greek Preschool Settings: A Case Study

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Abstract: The significance of the parental involvement in pre-school education is widely recognized. However, this is not the case in Greek pre-school settings. By contrast with the UK and other countries around the world, less attention is paid on parents' role in their children's education in the Greek system. In addition, the literature in this field is limited. The present study aims a) to clarify the forms of participation parents are currently engaged within Greek pre-school settings, b) to explore what forms of participation they aspire to and finally, c) to ascertain which forms of parental participation the educational staff wish. More precisely, this study will present some of the most frequently used models and typologies with regards to parental participation. These models guided our observations and interviews in a particular case study, which tries to investigate the ways parents participate in their children's education, in a Greek, public pre-school setting.

Keywords: Parental Involvement, Preschool Settings, Greek, Organisational Change, Educational Staff

Introduction

CHILDREN HAVE TWO main educators in their lives; their parents and their teachers. Parents are the prime educators and family provides both the context in which learning occurs and the continuity between home, pre-school and school. Since children's learning continues to be influenced by their home even when they have progressed to early childhood education, it could be argued that there is no clear line to show where the parents' input stops and the teachers' input begins. Both the school and the parents have a crucial role to play in their children's learning and the impact is greater if parents and schools work together as partners (http://www.teachernet.gov.uk). The closer the links between parents and early childhood educators the more effective learning becomes (Ball, 1994).

Involving parents is neither a new concept nor an untested one. Running through the literature someone comes across a wide range of terms ('parental involvement'; 'parental participation'; 'working with parents'; 'collaborating with parents'; 'partnership with parents'), which aim to describe the ways parents and teachers co-operate and communicate and the ways parents are getting involved in their children's education. The existence of all those terms suggests that there is a variety of ways parents can participate in their children's setting.

The term 'parental involvement' has often meant the physical presence of parents on site (Braun, 1992) and describes staff's attempts to find and create opportunities for parents to be involved in various ways (Wolfendale, 1983).

On the other hand, the term 'partnership' is viewed as a form of higher-order participation and implies equality and a division of power (Foot et al, 2002). According to Pugh and De' Ath (Curtis & O' Hagan, 2003) partnership "is characterized by a shared interest of purpose, mutual respect and the willingness to negotiate and implies a sharing of information, responsibility, skills, decision-making and accountability" (ibid., p. 101).

However, the importance of parental involvement in the pre-school curriculum is not only proven by research but it is recognized by government reports in many countries and parent rights are promoted by law (Wolfendale, 1992; Bell, 2002; http://www.dfes.gov.uk; Bertram & Pascal, 2004).

As it becomes obvious from the variety of the existing models and typologies, which appear in the relevant literature and will be presented below (Bridge, 2001; David, 1990; Henry, 1996; Smith, 1980; Wolfendale, 1983; Wolfendale, 1988; e.t.c) and from the different definitions of the terms, which in the present study will be used along each other as umbrella terms, there is a wide range of roles parents can have in their children's preschool setting. Early childhood educators have to be aware of those typologies and models in order to be able to apply them or form their own model, based on their needs and the needs of the families they serve.

Models of Parental Involvement

Based on the ascertainment that parents are not a homogenous body and, depending on their needs, beliefs and free time, may value differently and prefer different types of involvement in their child's education and different models of parent – teacher co-operation and contact, schools need to develop their own policy framework in terms of parental contact taking into account that no particular model will suit all parents (Atkin and Bastiani with Goode, 1988).

On the other hand Laishley and Lindon (Wolfendale, 1983) have seen parental involvement from a different perspective and attributed to parents six different roles, which are: 1) parents as organizers or fund raisers; 2) parents on management committees; 3) parents as helpers; 4) social contact for parents; 5) information and knowledge for parents; and 6) offering help to parents with their problems (ibid., p. 100).

Teachers can choose from a range of models, typologies, descriptive frameworks and classification systems introduced by several researchers (see Henry, 1996; Wolfendale, 1983; Wolfendale, 1988; Smith, 1988, e.t.c) and adjust them to the needs of the families they serve.

One of the most frequently referred to model, in the UK literature, is the one introduced by Pugh (1987·cited in Bridge, 2001). According to Pugh's five-fold model of parental involvement in pre-school centres, parents can a) not participating; b) be active in the management and maintenance of preschool outside sessions; c) help during sessions; d) work with staff; and e) have decision making roles (Bridge, 2001, p. 8). According to Edwards and Knight (1994) the five major elements in Pugh's analysis are: non-participation, support, participation, partnership and control.

Another well known model of parental involvement is the one introduced by Gordon (1979·cited in Henry, 1996). As depicted in Figure 2, Gordon attributes to parents many roles and only if some parents play each of the roles, that is, if all spokes are strong, will the wheel of parent-teacher collaboration turn.
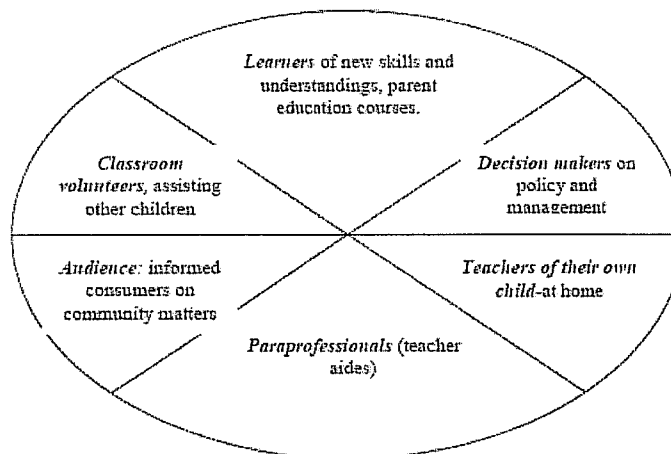

Figure 2: Parent Roles in Parental Involvement According to Gordon (Henry, 1996, p.p. 28 -9)

Joyce Epstein (Spodek and Saracho, 2002), has also developed an interesting framework. Epstein distinguishes six types of family/community involvement. These are: a) communicating; b) parenting; c) student learning at home; d) volunteering; e) decision making and advocacy; and f) collaborating with community.

According to where the focus lays, Torkington (David, 1990) has suggested the following three types of parental involvement: a) school-focused, which refers to approaches where parents help the school achieve goals; b) curriculum-focused, which includes parental involvement in the children's cognitive skills; and c) parent-focused, which supports parents to know and understand their own children's development and learning, together with assistance in developing their own skills, confidence, knowledge and abilities (ibid., p. 124).

Cunningham and Davis (David, 1990) have also proposed the following three models: the expert model, in which parents have a peripheral role and control remains in the hands of the staff; the transplant model, in which it is recognized that parents do have some talents which are of worth and can be enlisted to the advantage of the children; and the consumer model, in which the parents ultimately make the decisions.

Despite the fact that the previously presented models seem to be different, a closer examination of them ascertains that they include more or less the

same categories although they have a different focus. The most frequently used categories are: 1) involvement in the management and decision-making; 2) involvement in school support, that is servicing the group alongside the children (as volunteers, helping in chores, in routine tasks, making and mending, e.t.c) but not actually working in the group; 3) parents as teachers, that is working with children on educational activities at home or at school; 4) ongoing contact between parents and teachers, which can be written (e.g. brochures, booklets, letters to parents, reports, e.t.c.) or spoken (e.g. coffee mornings, workshops, discussion groups, e.t.c.); 5) parents as learners; and 6) parents as audience (consumers and links with community). Often, it is also mentioned a category which has to do with the group's 'warmth' and 'openness", and refers to the extend to which mothers use the group as a place where they are able and welcome to spend some time and enjoy social contact with staff and other mothers (Smith, 1980).

Generally, it could be argued that parents can be seen either as clients or as partners and they can have a role either on the premises (e.g. run toy or book libraries, regularly supervise children's activities, e.t.c) or off the premises (e.g. help children make things at home, help on school trips, e.t.c.) (Edwards and Knight, 1994).

The previously presented models and typologies of parental involvement are by no means the only ones. In the relevant literature one can find plenty of others (see Atkin, Bastiani and Goode, 1988; Edwards and Knight, 1994; Ferri and Niblett, 1977·cited in Smith, 1980; Smith 1980·cited in Wolfendale 1983; Wolfendale, 1988). Neither is the one better than the others are.

Undoubtedly, parents and schools cannot avoid some involvement, even if they wished to. However, in order for parental involvement to be effective each school should develop, based on the existing typologies, its own parental involvement plan, which will be adjusted on the needs and expectations of the parents and teachers it serves.

Parental Involvement in Greek Pre-School Settings

As already stated, the concept of parental participation does not receive, in Greece, the same recognition as in other countries. Running through the Greek literature it becomes obvious that few writers have concentrated on that issue and little research has been conducted.

The institution of family is of high importance in the Greek culture and its contribution to and importance in the child development is well acknowledged. Family education in the early

childhood is said to be natural, unique, and irreplaceable (Kitsaras, 1988, Sakellariou, 2006, p. 18).

Of course, this does not imply that no other type of pre-school education is needed or used. On the contrary, pre-school settings are considered as being the second important learning and educational milieu, and that complement family education. The role of the nursery school is said to be 'family-complementary' (Kitsaras, 1988, p. 79).

In the Greek literature it is mentioned that the co-operation between the pre-school setting and the family is essential for the 'principle of continuation' of the experiences and learning of the child, for having an effective work done in the nursery school and for achieving "the proper education and appropriate instruction of the child" (Papaliakou-Dimopoulou, 1993, p. 146). Co-operation has also a legal basis. The Greek state has offered parents' the right to intervene with democratic procedures in the formation of the educational policy and in other aspects of school life, such as the function of school (Tsakalidis, 1987).

Yet the importance of the co-operation between family and preschool settings, is not widely recognized, and that is evident in the restricted Greek literature, in which refers to only some patterns of participation of parents in their children's program. According to Daraki (1995) parents and teachers communicate in order to exchange information over topics concerning either the children (aspects of behavior at home and at school) or the program (aims, methods and programs of the setting). Thus, parents may participate in the everyday activities taking place in the setting, in the organization of activities and festivals and in the everyday program of the setting.

In addition to the above, Papaliakou-Dimopoulou (1993) highlights the following types of parental participation, as a means for boosting co-operation: a) direct personal contact and acquaintance between parents and teachers; b) questionnaires (the aim is to learn the way children live in their home); c) parents' meetings; d) school exercises/festivals; e) school magazines and newspapers; f) help and financial support to the family; and g) out-of school activities and co-operation.

Despite the fact that, to a certain degree, the importance of parental participation is acknowledged, not much emphasis is given in the types of parental involvement, in the Greek literature. Thus, the main question is to what extend are the before mentioned types implemented. Based on that ascertainment, the present study aims to discover the ways Greek parents get involved in their children's preschool settings.

Design of the Study: Research Methodology and Methods

A. Methodology

The present study constitutes a multi-method approach. Its first part constitutes a desk-based research. Due to the lack of rich Greek literature over the topic, the researcher used the UK literature as a basis, in order to draw the theory, that is models and typologies of parental involvement, which allowed her to research, compare and draw conclusions for the Greek reality. The second part of the study, which is a case study contacted in a public, Greek preschool setting, in the suburbs of Ioannina, attempts to examine the concept of parental involvement in Greece and the ways Greek parents get involved in their children's preschool settings.

A case study research concentrates on the close examination and understanding of one specific dynamic entity, it is real and provides insight into what happens in a setting and why. As a result, the "case study provides evidence for the generation of theory and policy making, that is based upon known and recorded practice" (Bridge, 2001, p. 9). Case studies extend the boundaries of existing knowledge and go beyond it, namely they help us to illuminate.

Of course case studies do not stand without problems and criticisms. One of the main considerations about case studies is the one concerning subjective interpretations and generalization. In order to eliminate subjectivity and to ensure validity of data generation methods we used the method of triangulation, that is we used both interviews and observation for crosschecking findings and we elicited data from both parents and educators.

B. Methods of Data Collection

In order to capture people's opinions, feelings and practice, the kind of atmosphere and context in which they act and respond qualitative methods of data collection were used, that is interviews and observation techniques.

a. Interviews

The researcher has chosen to use semi-structured interviews, with which there are a series of set questions to be asked and space for some divergence, with the interviewer then returning to the structured interview questions (Wisker, 2001). Since the aim of the present study was to investigate the types of parental involvement in Greek pre-school settings, it was useful to interview both parents and teachers. Furthermore, due to the fact that what matters in the present study is the variety and depth of responses from different kinds of people and not the number of interviews with the same kind of interviewees, the researcher interviewed the three educational staff of the setting (the head teacher and two educators) and three parents, randomly selected from the setting's catalogues.

The researcher took short notes of the interview, but she also tape-recorded it and used it as back up for the notes in order to avoid misinterpretations and be more focused on other aspects, too, such as non-verbal behavior. The notes were taken during the interviews in order to avoid omissions, which can occur when based on memory.

A framework was prepared for our interviews and each category of respondents was asked the same questions.

b. Observation

School observation was also employed in order to elicit information about actual school-parents communication practices and to complement interviews. That is because, although interviews provide, according to Nisbet and Watt (Bell, 1999) important data, they reveal only how people perceive what happens, not what actually happens. On the contrary, direct observation may be more reliable than what people say in many instances since it allows checking whether people do what they say they do or behave in the way they claim to behave.

The researcher has chosen to conduct non-participant observation, which is less intrusive. The observation was conducted, in a public preschool setting, in the suburbs of the town of Ioannina, during the whole day, for three days in order to crosscheck attitudes and facts and to ensure that data is relatively stable. The observation took place in the reception of the setting, in order to see how parents are welcomed and the way parents and teachers communicate and interact with each other, especially on the times of arrival and departure. In order to understand whether the setting is on its own welcoming for parents and enables communication, a spatial map was drawn, during the first day.

The researcher aimed to investigate the communication that occurs between parents and teachers, observing not only verbal but also non-verbal communication.

An observation framework was developed in order to limit the categories and themes observed. The researcher recorded separately her own thoughts and feelings of what was observed from what was actually observed, in order to eliminate subjectivity. Finally, she kept both jotted and direct observation notes. That is, notes written in the field and notes as soon as she leaves the setting

Analysis of the Results

Case study data revealed that there is plenty of informal communication between parents and teachers and an ongoing sharing of information, during the times of departure and arrival, especially over the child's day, children's adaptation in the setting, matters of instruction, children's progress and behavior towards other children, the activities, food, e.t.c. As far as formal communication is concerned, there is a convention of teachers and parents every two weeks.

The most commonly mentioned type of participation is that of financial help and support, which includes paying a minimum tuition fee for their children's attendance or bringing to the nursery materials and supplies.

As far as the main research question of the present thesis is concerned, that is the types of parental involvement in Greek preschool settings, the textual analysis of the interview transcript revealed that parents either do not participate in the setting or they participate in some ways. Reiterating the models of parental involvement presented in the UK literature, we can argue that the following categories are found in Greek nursery schools.

Based on Smith's (1980) model, we could argue that parents appear to servicing the group, but not actually working in the group alongside the children. More precisely, parents help in the preparation of festivals or other events organised by the nursery, in many ways such as preparing things needed for the festival, buying materials, or helping in the decoration of the school. Yet, this is not happening in a regular basis but whenever needed. Despite the fact that parents' support and assistance are sought, whenever needed, we could not argue that the "volunteering" category of Epstein's model (Spodek and Saracho, 2002) appears, since parents are not provided with plenty opportunities for involvement and furthermore, parents are rarely recruited and organized to help and support school activities.

Parents are also involved, according to the Greek law, in the management committee of the nursery. Yet, it is important to mention that this is not the case for all parents but there is one representative parent for every fifteen (15) nursery schools.

Apart from the above, parents can be characterized as teachers of their own children, but only at home. Parents argued that they do their best to support their children's learning at home (read to their children, paint, play, singing, create things, discuss, learn poems and so on), but on their own initiative. Yet, that type found in the present research can not be compared with Epstein's (Spodek and Saracho, 2002) "learning at home" category, because Greek teachers do not provide information and ideas concerning curriculum related activities and do not support parents by providing activities which may support school instruction.

Research data also revealed that parents can be characterized as learners of new skills and understanding (from Gordon's model) and that information and knowledge are provided for parents. Yet, we could argue that there is not a formal way, which is enforced by the school's parental involvement plan, in order to lead towards those categories, but the provision of information is informal and concerns the everyday contact. In fact, parents learn on their own initiative by asking teachers, who consider experts, about several things.

In addition to the above, we could argue that the present case study also detected the type of family involvement which Epstein (Spodek and Saracho, 2002) characterizes as "communicating", though not as formal as suggested in the model. Greek parents and teachers appear to have a regular and meaningful communication about school programs and children's progress in school. The extent to which parents exchange views is not known, but as it becomes obvious from the interviews parents are just informed and do not have a saying in aspects concerning school's function.

Finally, one of the most commonly found types of communication is the "miscellaneous category" suggested by Smith (1980). That category involves factors that have to do with the "openness" of the group: parents visiting the group before the child starts; staying to settle the child; visiting to discuss problems with staff; visiting for special events; parents dropping in casually to see what is going on in the group. As the observation data revealed, the setting is open to visitors, the staff is always available and ready to discuss and communicate with parents and parents are not perceived to be either "problems" or "intruders". Of course, the existence of that category depends on the character of the staff and their attitudes towards parents. Therefore, it cannot be generalized to all public settings.

Generally, it could be argued that in Greek preschool settings prevails the expert model, suggested by Cunningham and Davis (David, 1990), in which parents have a peripheral role and control remains in the hands of the staff. Parents get involved in the concrete and practical area, by providing basic help with learning, fund-raising and support and the focus is on the classroom and school (Wolfendale, 1988).
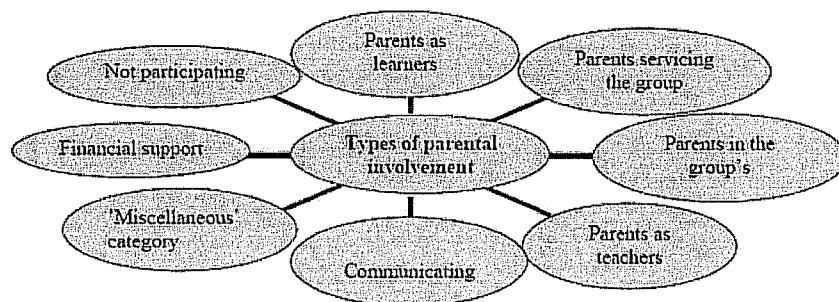
Figure 3: Ways in which Greek Parents are Getting Involved in their Children's Education

In conclusion; based on the models and typologies presented previously and on the data revealed from the observation and interviews, we could argue that Greek parents do not play a central role in their children's school. On the contrary they have a very conventional role in the nursery school, they have no input (active participation and co-operation with teachers) towards their children's instruction, they do not participate or get involved in school's everyday function, their involvement is limited, and it is mainly reduced to their financial support, whenever asked. In Greece, parents and teachers have separate roles and each part has a different role in children's life; parents' main role, as far as school is concerned, is to bring or take their children from school. Teachers are responsible for children during their attendance. In general it could be argued that there is a lack of structured communication model between school and parents and that the application of the variety and the range of forms of contact that exist in the UK is a marginal issue in school planning.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The concept of parental involvement seems not to be acknowledged in Greece by both parents and teachers. Both parties seem not to be aware of what the term involves, and there is a lack of provision of opportunities for getting involved. Further, in Greece there is not an official action from the state, towards parental involvement.

Research data reveal that there is a generally positive attitude towards parental involvement. Parents are encouraged to become teachers of their children, they are welcome to participate in the nursery school and they are expected to be willing to offer their help, whenever asked, to their children's advantage. Thus, teachers feel that parents have a say in their children's school, they appear to be willing to accept and encourage more parents' involvement and help, and they want parents' not only financial help and support but general help in the whole function of the nursery.

However, the interview transcripts reveal that teachers may appear to be willing to parents' contribution to events and activities but not to the pedagogical work done in the nursery. More precisely, it was argued, that due to the fact that parents do not have the knowledge, skills and expertise needed they have nothing to offer as far as that aspect is concerned. Furthermore, it was argued that participation and involvement of parents in a greater extend than now would cause mix-up and the situation will be complicated. That is why they are in favor of financial help or parents' servicing the group but they simultaneously want parents and teachers to have distinct roles and parents not to get too much involved.

It becomes obvious that teachers do not accept all types of parental involvement and an overlap of answers concerning the roles teachers aspire for parents, was revealed.

Parents on the other hand, seem to show willingness to participate and appear to welcome any call for help. They argue that more involvement would bring them closer to their children and would help them learn more of them. They also do acknowledge the difficulties and constrains of getting involved and they do not seem to attribute the needed level of importance to the concept of parental involvement.

As already stated, parents and schools cannot avoid some involvement with each other, even if they wished to. The type and the extent of parental involvement depend on several factors discussed elsewhere. Among them are teachers' and parents' attitudes towards involvement and the extent to which opportunities are provided.

In conclusion, parental involvement is a case in Greece, too. Maybe not deliberately, but it is. Whether they want it or not parents and teachers do communicate and co-operate, more or less.

Based on the above data we can draw some conclusions and formulate some suggestions.

Firstly, the above results lead to the conclusion that there is a general cry for training for both teachers and parents. In order for parental

involvement to occur, teachers have to be trained and become aware of what the concept involves, of which are the benefits stemming from parental involvement, and of how parents can be involved. Thus, training will boost teachers' confidence, will help them work towards empowerment, which leads towards "more equitable, respectful interrelationships with themselves and their environment" (Curtis & O' Hagan, 2003, p. 106), and will make them understand that parents are not a threat for their professional status.

Parents' training is also required. Parent education courses should be running in order for parents to understand the role they can play in their children's education, to gain skills and knowledge and to understand that their involvement in their children's education is not only a legal right but also an obligation for them.

Further, the State itself should provide opportunities for parents to get involved and construct programs and official policies towards that aim. Provoke involvement of parents in their children's education should become the State's aim.

Moreover, in order for an effective co-operation between parents and teachers to occur it should be understood that parental involvement can take many forms, and that it can be a continuum of relationships between family and teachers, which can occur both at school and at home. This diversity in the types of involvement, the beliefs, and the needs of each part suggests that there is not a single formula or a 'perfect' model, which, every school should or could follow. On the contrary, based on its special needs, each setting can introduce a model that meets its specific needs. Action research can help towards this. Having the needs in mind and based on models suggested by researchers, teachers can find the perfect model of parental involvement for their setting.

Parental involvement has much to offer to all those concerned. However, in order to work towards it, training and thinking in an 'open' manner is required. No parent can be substitute for a teacher. Accordingly, no teacher can deputize for a parent. None of them should fear the other or seeing him/her as a threat. Working in tandem will cause no mix-up but a better and more productive climate for teachers, parents and of course children.

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