

Past and present in the notion of school-family collaboration

Loizos Symeou

School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Cyprus College

Resumen

Pasado y presente del concepto de colaboración centro docente-familia. En este artículo se analiza la noción de colaboración escuela-familia y su interés para los teóricos, investigadores y profesionales de la educación. Se describe en primer lugar cómo los movimientos históricos y políticos llevaron al establecimiento y afianzamiento de la colaboración entre los centros escolares y las familias, y se hace referencia a los diferentes roles y responsabilidades que estos movimientos han asignado a los padres y madres. Sobre este particular se hace referencia al apoyo que la política educativa de distintos países ha mostrado para iniciar estas vías de interacción. Seguidamente se revisan resultados empíricos de carácter internacional y regulaciones educativas que apoyan el valor de los vínculos escuela-familia. El artículo finaliza describiendo diferentes modos en que las familias se involucran en los procesos de aprendizaje académico de sus hijos, así como varias tipologías para llevar a cabo la implicación de las familias en los centros escolares. Se hace mención también a diferentes conceptos utilizados en el ámbito de estudio de las relaciones escuela-familia y a los condicionantes y factores que parecen definir el contenido y alcance de estas relaciones.

Abstract

This paper explores how the notion of school-family collaboration evolved as a major concern in the agendas of educational theorists, researchers and practitioners. It first describes how political and historical movements urged the establishment and enhancement of collaboration between schools and families, and refers to the different roles and responsibilities assigned to parents by these movements. Reference is made at this point in how policy in specific countries supported and initiated school-family interaction. It then reviews some major international empirical findings and policy initiatives which argued for the significance of school-family liaisons. The paper concludes by describing different ways families engage in their children's schooling and some typologies of family engagement in their children's schools. Notions used in the field of school-family relationships and school and family conditions and factors that appear to define the content and the scope of school-family relationships are outlined.

Introduction: The evolution of the notion of school-family collaboration

Schools and families are dynamic institutions, which have changed markedly in the last century. Not surprisingly, school-family relationships have also shifted and are considered nowadays a significant determinant of the quality of the education provided. Nonetheless, for most of the twentieth century on an international level, schools and pupils' families were separated. Teachers were conventionally the only ones who had explicit and legitimate rights to express any opinion about educational issues and educational practice. Pupils' families were excluded both as individuals and as groups from the formal aspects of their children's academic development and from all educational matters.

Between 1950 and the mid-60s nonetheless, a higher degree of attention to school-family relationships was raised when empirical evidence indicated the effect of macro visible 'social' factors in educational achievement. This evidence suggested that the family's structural characteristics or family ascriptive and configuration variables (e.g. socio-economic level, educational level, race, religion, family size) and the family's functional characteristics (e.g. parental behaviour, roles, perspectives, perceptions, attributions, involvement in children's education), may influence school achievement more than any school factor (e.g. teacher subject knowledge, pedagogy, school characteristics, educational structures). It was also recognised that families' functional characteristics played a more important part in explaining school success, rather than their structural characteristics. A child's in-school attainment was likely to depend more than anything else, on the social, cultural, and learning experiences, attitudes and aspirations of the child's home background (e.g. Bernstein, 1975; Marjoribanks, 1979; Bloom, 1982; Lareau, 1987; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Coleman, 1990; Davis, 1991; Georgiou, 1993), what was called, the 'curriculum of the home' (Kellaghan, 1994; Coleman, 1998). Schooling was thus viewed as providing educational opportunities and achieving its aims only insofar as what it offers builds on, and directly engages with, the fundamental education and 'curriculum' which the child experiences at home.

Both national and international studies supported this claim. At an international level, Bloom (1982) suggested (after reviewing both separate national studies of education in seven countries and international studies involving twenty-two nations), that the home environment was the most powerful factor in predicting the level of school achievement by accounting for more of the student variation in learning than do other factors, like the school curriculum, the quality of the instruction in the schools, the differences among teachers and schools.

A very well known example coming from England was the large-scale study carried out for the Plowden Report in 1967 (Plowden Report, 1967), which suggested that the home environment and particularly parental attitudes accounted for more of the variation in children's school achievement than the variation in schools. More recently, this was further emphasised in the UK Government's commissioned evaluation of the National Numeracy and National Literacy Strategies, which stated that "outcomes of schooling are heavily influenced by non-school factors especially family background [...] School outcomes have higher correlations with family variables than with any factor in the school (Levin, 1999, p. 4).

The impact of these findings was soon reflected in how theorists, researchers, and practitioners asserted the value of schools and pupils' families establishing strong, positive, communicative relationships in order to collaborate. While it was made clear that family and school have separate and distinctive roles in the education of children, there was a call for greater collaboration between the two to enhance children's success in school. Thus, at many countries increased efforts to open the school to pupils' families and to improve school-family contacts and relationships are encouraged as advantaging the child itself (see for example for Europe: EURYDICE, 1997; European Parents Association, 2005).

The Political and Historical Context

Many changes in the broader international political and historical context also contributed to the opening of the school to families. These changes are still influencing school-family liaisons within different educational systems to varying degrees. One such factor is democracy, and more particularly the idea that citizens have the right to participate in the control of institutions in which they are involved. In education, families and parents are seen to have the legitimate right to have their voice heard by participating individually and through representation in governing bodies or parents' groups in decisions that affect them and their children's future (Tomlinson, 1991; Knight, 1995). Parents have become 'governors', 'decision-makers' or 'managers' in some educational systems. The aim is to make schools more responsive to demands and wishes of the parents who entrust their children to them. In some countries, this change was also attributed to the decentralisation/devolution trend (Turney, Eltis, Towler, and Wright, 1990; Crump & Eltis, 1996)

Concern for parental democratic rights was one factor that led to the accountability movement, namely that schools should be accountable towards the public, their 'clients'/'customers' and the taxpayers. This movement considers that, since families pay through taxes for the services the school offers, the school must demonstrate its effectiveness by focusing on the social and academic needs of its pupils (Jowett, Baginsky, & McNeil, 1991; Tomlinson, 1991; Wolfendale, 1992; O'Connor, 1994; Bourmina, 1995). Thus, it is argued that the productivity and effectiveness of schools are improved, a prerequisite for economic development and the ability to cope with the strains of social and political change (Davies & Johnson, 1996). Parents, according to the accountability movement are viewed as 'consumers' of educational services who indirectly 'monitor' their quality in order to exercise the power the market gives a consumer to switch supplier, namely having the right to express a preference for the school they wish their child to attend. This role had been traditionally confined to those who could afford to pay directly to send their children to private schools. It has been argued that the creation of such a market has generated a competitive arena for both schools and parents (Crozier, 2000), thus limiting the development of effective schooling for all pupils and manifesting social inequalities (Tomlinson, 1991; Munn, 1993).

Democratic rights are also intertwined directly with the idea of 'equal opportunity'. According to this idea, since the population is comprised of different sub-groups which *do* provide differential learning experiences for their children, equality of opportunity aiming to enhance the learning circumstances of all children could be achieved only if schools maintain strong relationships with *all* families (Tomlinson, 1991; Rabuřicová, 1995). Nonetheless, there is great debate about whether schools are able to provide equality of opportunity. Even when all school families are invited in the school, it is middle class families which seem to be much more visible in the school (Reay, 1998; Crozier, 2000). It is also argued that these families control school-family liaisons, since they know how to 'work' the system in order to impose on the teachers and the other families -especially the working-class families- their own demands (Bell, 1999; Lareau, 2000). Ignorance of the power structures underpinning school-family relations can raise ethical issues of power and powerlessness and pose questions of equity when efforts are made to bring families in close contact with schools (Phtiaka, 1996). It is thus claimed that an effective relationship between families and schools, which manages to provide equal opportunities of involvement to all families is based on 'empowering' parents (O'Connor, 1994; Wolfendale 1997; Waller & Waller, 1998).

One of the main issues raised in the area of school-family liaisons is that of responsibility in educating children. Governments' policies vary as to who is responsible for educating children. For most of the 20th century in Europe, the state held a major share in this responsibility. However, recent policies in most countries in Europe, like the 1988 Education Act in the UK, show a trend towards shifting responsibility for children's education back to families (Bourmina, 1995), thus reinforcing the surge for family engagement in the school. Similarly, the United Nations Declaration for the Rights of the Child places the responsibility for the education and guidance of children on their parents, whereas the European Convention on Human Rights requires the State to respect the rights of families with regard to the education of their children (Tomlinson, 1991).

Given this context, official boards and educational policymakers in many countries have supported school-family interaction, and government initiatives have emphasised the need for increased family involvement in education. For example, in the USA parental involvement has been required by local school systems in order to receive state funds and has been specified as one of the four key ingredients amongst teaching, curriculum, and the setting for the social, emotional and academic growth of young children (McBride & Lin, 1996). Similarly, in Britain the rights and responsibilities of families in the educational process and the partnership between teachers and parents as co-educators in the learning process continue to be emphasised in many public documents and recent legislative developments (*c.f.* Martin, Ranson, and Tall, 1997; Crozier, 2000). Finally, in Australia, it has been stressed since the late '70s that greater community involvement would be the key to improve education, and that parents should be consulted and informed to participate in decisions about educational policy at both system and school levels (Turney, et al., 1990).

Empirical Evidence in the Field

Research evidence has argued to find positive effects of strong school-family links on pupils' school improvement and success. Nonetheless, a long-lasting lively debate exists among international researchers in relation to the outcomes of school-family collaboration. The inconsistency in the language in the area, the contextual and geographic differences in the implementation of relevant innovations and methodological differences have made it extremely difficult for researchers to endorse these claims as legiti-

mate and reach consensus on whether these findings reflect valid measurements or are merely artefacts of these differences. Correspondingly, a number of researchers doubt the beneficial effects of family involvement on children's schooling. For instance, Keith, Reimens, Fehrmann, Pottebaum, and Aubey (1986) claim that there is only an indirect and not a causal relation between the two variables.

Bearing in mind this debate, such research has suggested that a school culture that *actively* cultivates school-family collaboration relates positively with a series of school improvements, with first of all improvements in the child's school performance, attainment and adjustment (Marjoribanks, 1979; Becker & Epstein, 1982; Henderson, 1987; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1987; Stevenson & Baker, 1987; Epstein, 1987a; 1992; 1995; Reynolds, 1992; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Bourmina, 1995; Connors & Epstein, 1995; Bastiani, 1996; Benito & Filp, 1996; Krumm, 1996; Georgiou, 1997; Newbill & Putney, 1997). More specifically, this research has argued that such a culture fosters learning and high achievement scores (in particular through elementary school), that it increases pupils' motivation, participation and competence during lessons, that it augments children's expectations from themselves and that it improves their homework habits. Moreover, research has asserted that school-family relationships contribute to improving children's school behaviour and attitude towards schooling, to reducing absenteeism and increasing the number of years in school.

Some research has also suggested the improvement of general teacher day-to-day functioning (Becker & Epstein, 1982; Epstein, 1986; 1992; Mannan & Blackwell, 1992; Reeve, 1993), the increase of parents' self-efficacy and their motivation to resume their own education (Becker & Epstein, 1982; Davies, 1988), and the development of a general family and community support for the schools (Epstein, 1992; Townsend, 1995). Finally, active school-family liaisons have been cited as one of the prerequisites for school effectiveness (Hopkins, Ainscow, & West, 1994; O'Connor, 1994; Sammons, Hillman, Mortimore, 1995; Coleman, 1998; Pasiardis, 1998).

The most persistent criticism of these claims is that of generalising its findings without considering that not all families have strong relationships with schools. Correspondingly, there is great debate on the applicability of these findings to all students' improvement. There are fears that attempts to bring family and school closer may widen the gap between socially and economically deprived children and the rest of the children. Therefore, even the most ardent proponents of initiatives for engaging families in their children's schooling admit that benefits occur only when families are "aware, kno-

wledgeable, encouraging and involved” (Epstein, 1992, p. 1141) and that the comparison has to be at the intra-class and background level and between children of similar aptitude (Henderson, 1987; Epstein, 1992; Luster & McAdoo, 1996; Steinberg, 1996). Similar caution is needed in relation to claims that these findings apply for all grade levels, children’s ages and phases of children’s schooling, for all types of schools (i.e. urban, suburban, rural), and even for ‘difficult’ or ‘disadvantaged’ schools. Finally, it must be noted that most of this evidence is based on studies that were carried out in the so-called developed countries. There is some data from developing countries indicating that some of these findings are culture sensitive and may not pertain in all cultural contexts. Therefore, reference to such studies should be made in relation to each educational system separately and the respective political-historical context. Moreover, the lack of homogeneity among families’ profiles and needs must be taken into serious consideration when attempting a description of the nature and extent of school-family relationships even within the same context.

Forms of School-Family Links

Families’ engagement in their children’s education might be multidimensional. Theory as well as research and program development have offered many suggestions of ways families and schools can engage, in so far as is possible common trends across different countries to appear evident. Georgiou (2000) proposes a typology of five ways in which families get involved in their child’s education. He refers to families’ supervision of the child’s school behaviour (the different ways a family might try to regulate the child’s behaviour at home that directly relates to school life); families’ control of the child’s out-of-school behaviour (behaviours that have no direct connection with schooling, but are presented to relate in some ways to it); families’ assistance with the child’s homework; and the development of children’s interests and talents. The fifth type is the contacts and relationships that families can establish with the school itself. Such contacts are largely defined and controlled by the openness of the school to families, and particularly the opportunities provided by the school, and the staff’s attitude towards the various types of practices the school establishes with pupils’ families. Thus, families’ links to their child’s school might range from complete distance from the school or peripheral contacts with teachers to their full-scale participation in the decision making process.

Fullan (1982) suggested four ways that families can contribute in their children's school: in teaching while the child is at home, in the teaching at school, in voluntary labour, and in school management. Tomlinson (1991) proposes her own typology of school-family relationships consisting of: (a) the exchange of information (through correspondence, parental visits to the school, school-family conferences and school events, reporting of pupil's progress, etc), (b) the personal involvement of the families in educational matters that concern their child (helping their child with homework or the work in the class), (c) the informal involvement of families in management matters (through their representation in the school's Parents' Association (PA) as audience or maintaining any other passive role in such groups), and (d) their formal involvement in educational management and policy (as elected members of an executive body, e.g. the school's PA). A similar typology has been proposed by Turney, et. al. (1990).

Epstein (1987a; 1987b; 1995) and her colleagues (Connors & Epstein, 1995; Epstein & Becker, 1982; Epstein & Dauber, 1991) suggest six types of school-family relationships. The six types place emphasis on parental duties, communication between the family and the school, family's voluntary labour in the school, school's help at home and 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 assumption in all these typologies is that it is the official school that holds the decision for the establishment of practices and arrangements that link it with families. It must also be noted that each school's achievement on a specific type of practices might vary, thus a school may develop some of them on a higher or lower degree, but may be opposed to others.

Parental Involvement or Parental Participation?

The rubrics 'parental involvement' and 'parental participation' in schools have often been used by the literature interchangeably to describe a broad spectrum of practices that link school and families. Nonetheless, the two terms denote two different concepts. Parental/family *involvement* would rather refer to procedures which allow families to have a role in what is happening in the school, but where the nature and extent of this role is predetermined by the school's professional staff (Tomlinson, 1991). It would thus

refer to a simple 'mingling' in school matters with families' role confined to being spectators at events or activities which schools do for parents (Davies & Johnson, 1996), or to activities that can be described as 'parental duties' (Vining, 1997) or 'voluntary labour' (Reeve, 1993). In this case, the 'parent' is viewed from the perspective of a 'volunteer'. Therefore Munn (1993) suggests that 'parental involvement' practices are concerned mainly with the well-being of the family's own child.

The term *participation* would rather signal a shift to a broader and different range of relationships between families and schools through procedures that allow parents to take an active, full-scale role in school governance and decision-making. When referring to 'parental/family participation' the notions of equality and sharing are involved: all parties mutually recognise the freedom of the other to enter into the established relationship and genuinely respect the contribution of each other, thus sharing responsibility and authority on a continuous basis. Participation places families explicitly within the collective activity of the whole school and all the children in it (Munn, 1993) and it is more likely to presuppose a revitalisation of the administration and operation of schooling at all educational levels, i.e. the class, the school and the state (Soliman, 1995; Stapes & Morris, 1993).

The difference between the two concepts can be illustrated by the metaphor of an athlete meeting. At such a meeting, the spectators get *involved* from the tiers of the stadium while the athletes *participate*. Getting *involved* thus means being just a spectator, not to have any rights, to be an outsider. On the contrary, *participating* would mean taking direct action, being a part of the team, and that without all participants' contribution the whole game is at a disadvantage.

Martin, et. al. (1997, pp. 49-51) propose a four-stage development model of family-school links, which provides a detailed description of how involvement can evolve to a participatory partnership between families and schools. The first stage is defined as the stage of 'dependence' in family-school relationships. Families at this stage are passive and deferential towards teachers' professional knowledge and training. The second stage is 'membership', where families begin to be consulted about their views by the school. The third stage is 'interaction', whereby the active participation of families in the life of the school is expected and encouraged, and families are valued as co-educators. When school-family relationships reach the level of participation, one can refer to a 'partnership'. At this stage 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 described schools of the first stage as 'self-contained' schools, those of the second as schools under 'professional uncertainty', those of the third as schools of 'growing confidence', and schools at the fourth stage as schools having 'a concordat' of mutual commitment with their pupils' families.

School and Family Perspectives of their Relationships

Family and school factors contribute to the frequency and the quality of school-family liaisons. As far as the family is concerned, literature refers to the family's demographic characteristics. Comparing demographic characteristics, research has indicated that women, whites, higher-income and better-educated persons tend to be more in contact with schools than their counterparts.

In relation to gender, involvement with school appears a female 'brief' and fathers are described as maintaining a distance from schools (Blackmore, 1995; Reay, 1998; Phtiaka, 1998; Lareau, 2000; Crozier, 2000; Symeou, 2001). Despite recent changes in family characteristics that may change this pattern and some evidence suggesting a 'fatherhood movement' leading to an increased 'male involvement' in schools (Turner, 1997), mothers are presented as engaging more in the child's schooling, not only because they choose to do so, but sometimes because they are assumed to have such a role.

Lower SES families in the so-called developed countries are consistently found to be less commonly involved in schools and to face more obstacles in getting involved in specific activities (Finders & Lewis, 1994; Vincent, 1996; Reay, 1998; Georgiou, 2000; Lareau, 2000). Nonetheless, it has been claimed that it is more the content of the programs itself and the way teachers encourage families to get involved that raise the obstacles these families face. Teachers, by imposing through their requests specific strategies and models on families, seem to assume specific qualities in children's family-based socialisation experiences which only some families can provide, thus excluding the rest (McBride & Lin, 1996; Vincent, 1996; Georgiou, 1996). Correspondingly, being more 'invisible' in their relations with the school does not necessarily mean lack of interest and should not be explained as indifference for their children's schooling (Reay, 1998; Phtiaka, 1998; Crozier, 2000). This relates to the critique questioning the assumptions of the official rhetoric about 'partnership' with regard to the relative power

position of the teachers and parents. Since families in most countries have no 'power-base' (Tomlinson, 1991), teachers dominate families-school relations by using their power as a control mechanism (Vincent, 1996). Even though other families might experience these circumstances as well, this is more likely to determine low SES families' engagement (Lareau, 1987).

Studies investigating families' perceptions about their engagement in their children's schools describe families as agreeing with the need for fostering good school-family relationships (e.g. Department of Education and Science, 1989; Elam, Rose, & Gallup, 1993). Nonetheless, practical and psychological aspects of linking with schools are found to intervene as decisive variables on the frequency and activeness of families' contacts with their child's schools. From a practical side, lack of time, stress, and competing demands of home and work (Wolfendale, 1985; Finders & Lewis, 1994; McBride & Lin, 1996), minimal opportunities for involvement (Turney, et al., 1990), late notice of meetings (Moles, 1987), and different goals between parents and teachers for children (Crump & Eltis, 1996) have been cited as the most significant.

However, it is the psychological side that introduces most obstacles for families. Parental low self-esteem (Martin, et al., 1997), mistrust, anxiety and ignorance (Rabúřicová, 1995), misunderstanding, diffusion and confusion about the families' role (Wolfendale, 1985; Tomlinson, 1991; Phtiaka, 1996; Crump & Eltis, 1996; Krumm, 1996; Terrell, 2002) are some of them. Many families see schools as a cold and threatening environment and consider school communication as synonymous with 'bad news' (Moles, 1987) or are angered by what teachers say to and in children's presence (Terrell, 2002). Some parents fear dealing with teachers, because they associate them with their own experiences as pupils, and others feel intimidated by educational jargon, 'sophisticated' educators and the system (Turney, et al., 1990; Tomlinson, 1991; Finders & Lewis, 1994; Rich, 1996; Rosenthal & Sawyers, 1996; Georgiou, 1998; Phtiaka, 1998). Many families refer to indifferent or antagonistic attitudes on the part of school personnel (Becker & Epstein, 1982) and see themselves as being inhibited and repelled by schools and teachers who adopt a purely businesslike approach showing little interest in their views (Turney, et al., 1990). Families also consider some school practices as intrusions in their personal life (Wolfendale, 1985), or consider their engagement as "a cheap educational practice" mobilised only when teachers cannot cope when facing financial shortages (Phtiaka, 1994). Many parents are critical of educators who assume two-parented families, when referring to 'broken' homes, when giving assignments assuming the

presence of a father or a mother, or when planning social events that require the non-existing parent. Such perceptions are psychological barriers for single parents and limit the impact and influence of effective outreach programs (Fredericks, Rasinski, & Ritty, 1991). Sometimes, no matter how inviting teachers or the school may be, many parents feel that as non-teachers, they are not qualified to have a say in schooling (Rich, 1996), that teaching is meant to be the teacher's job (Tomlinson, 1991; Flood, Lapp, Tinajero, & Nagel, 1995; Phtiaka, 1998), or that parents should not be pressured to involve themselves in schools (McBride & Lin, 1996).

As far as teachers are concerned, there is evidence that they are unaware of the aforementioned difficulties families face. Rivalland (1994), for instance, found that teachers tend to measure family involvement in terms of parents' visits to the school. They thus consider non-coming parents as apathetic and they do not appreciate that the majority of parents are providing many home-based forms of support (Reay, 1998; Crozier, 2000). Some other studies suggested that there is a gap between the beliefs teachers individually express and what most of their schools' programmes and policies reflect. On the one hand, teachers have positive views of active family involvement in children's education, agree that this involvement is important (Cutright, 1984; Alleksaht-Snider, 1995), and are willing to attract families in ways beyond what has been achieved through traditional processes (Crump & Eltis, 1996; Georgiou, 1998). On the other hand, very often the message sent out by teachers -either consciously or subconsciously- is that parents are not welcome, and that they should leave their children's schooling to the experts, that is, the teachers (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Bastiani, 1996; Symeou, 2001).

Many factors might relate to teachers' hesitancy and ambiguous attitudes. Teachers seem to fear family interaction as questioning their professional expertise, and their traditional authority and status. Therefore, some teachers call parents 'parents from hell' (European Parents Association, 2005) and establish a distance from families in order to safeguard their own positions (Newport, 1994; Alleksaht-Snider, 1995; Georgiou, 2000; Vincent, 1996; Laloumi-Vidali, 1997). Teachers might feel overwhelmed by parental problems, and fear that family involvement will exert increasing demands, undue pressure, and higher expectations upon them (Bosco, 1982; Moles, 1987; Rosenthal & Sawyers, 1996), particularly from articulate parent groups, minority parent groups, or parents from cultural and linguistic backgrounds that are different from their own (McBride & Lin, 1996). Teachers' prior experiences working with parents may also influence their attitudes and practices, and many teachers fear that ultra-conservative community

attitudes can inhibit innovations and worsen educational standards (Turney, et al., 1990). Other reasons for teachers' reluctance are low expectations for families follow-up efforts, the complexity, formality, impersonality and centralisation of the public school system, lack of time (Bosco, 1982; McAfee, 1987; Moles, 1987; Ostrander, & Ostrom, 1990; Alleksaht-Snider, 1995; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; McBride & Lin, 1996), basic resistance to change, difficulty in relating to some parents, and absence of external rewards (Turney, et al., 1990). Some teachers also cite the lack of support of resource personnel and the absence of other teachers who could model effective practices, the absence of communication with the previous year teacher, and the absence of appropriate preparation during their initial training (Alleksaht-Snider, 1995).

Another factor that has been cited as relating to schools' linking with families is the grade the child is in. Even when teachers implement activities that foster family involvement in the school, these activities seem to decline dramatically from lower to higher grade levels. Epstein (1987a; Epstein & Dauber, 1991) found in her studies that in primary school, family involvement practices by teachers are gradually restricted, and that this trend continues into the secondary grades. Primary school programs of family involvement were found stronger, more positive, and more comprehensive than those in the secondary schools of the studies. Similarly, the lower the child's age, the more active appears the family's involvement in children's schooling and the more positive towards it are family's perceptions (Georgiou, 2000).

Other factors which influence teachers' stance towards linking with families are some personal characteristics. For instance, younger, novice and less experienced teachers are cited as having difficulties in relating with families, whereas more experienced teachers and those who have a high degree of self-efficacy seem to interact more frequently with them (Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 1987; Alleksaht-Snider, 1995; McBride & Lin, 1996). Even reasons such as the academic subject, might also play a significant role with programs of family involvement and teachers' willingness to involve families in their practices. Epstein and Dauber (1991), for example, found that teachers of language and reading use more family-involving practices than those of other subjects. Finally, the school's catchment area has been cited to play a role in school-family links. Epstein (1987a) found that schools in urban areas use more family involvement techniques, whereas Lareau (1987; 2000) found that schools in working-class catchment areas appear to face more difficulties to link with families when compared to schools in more affluent areas.

The school's headteacher seems to be a determinant factor of a school's relationships with pupils' families. Headteachers usually lead the implementation of school-family innovative activities, oppose them or leave them to the teaching staff (Epstein, 1987a). Sometimes, the headteacher is the only one who is positive toward parental involvement whilst among the staff there is a strong nucleus of entrenched opinions.

Epilogue

During the last decades in many educational systems, a high degree of attention has been drawn to the relationships between schools and their environments, particularly the pupils' homes. As this paper pointed out, theorists, researchers, and practitioners portray this relationship as a significant determinant of the quality of education provided, and assert the value of family and school not only being in an agreement, but also establishing strong, positive, communicative relationships between them in order to collaborate. Despite how school-family relations were approached in the past, and, as discussed, largely due to a series of political and historical movements, lively efforts are currently directed to bring the two agents closer by opening the school to pupils' families and by improving home-school contacts and relationships. Additionally, the paper presented some of the growing evidence indicating the considerable influence of the social, cultural, and learning experiences, attitudes and aspirations of the child's home background on children's scholastic development. Hence, nowadays families are considered more than ever before -at least at a broad theoretical level- as having the right to be involved in school enterprises, while different roles and responsibilities have been assigned to parents in different education systems.

Different ways and forms in which families might engage in their children's school life were also presented in the paper. However, it must be pointed out that changes in school-family relationships do not follow a linear progression. Nor is there only one form of relationship at any given time. Many factors affect the kind and degree of parental engagement in school. As this paper pointed out, these factors are mostly socially constructed and historically variable, and carry the imprint of the larger social context.

More significantly, it appears that if teacher-parent collaboration is to have pedagogical value and if the purpose is for all families to successfully intervene in their children's schooling, there is an urgent need for addressing

the 'dehomogenisation' of policies and approaches of collaboration with parents. The school must be able to take this initiative if broader home-school liaisons are to occur, since it is the school that appears internationally –with large variations– to controls any process of change in the area. In such a case, the teachers' role is of extreme importance in order to facilitate and encourage this process.

These attempts might take the form of studying the implementation of specific plans and investigating their impact on teachers and families, identifying obstacles to the effectiveness of the strategies used, and suggesting initiatives to better meet the needs of the participants. During any such attempt, the lack of homogeneity among schools', teachers', and families' profiles must be taken under serious consideration.

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