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SYMEOU, L. (2003). Family-school communication: Critically revisiting parent-teacher briefings. In S. Castelli, M. Mendel, & B. Ravn (Eds.) *School, family, and community partnerships in a world of differences and changes* (pp. 119-134). Gdansk: University of Gdansk.

Family-School Communication: Critically Revisiting Parent-Teacher Briefings

Abstract

In this paper, I present part of the findings of a research which investigated family-school communication. More particularly, I explore the information schools and families exchange during teacher-parent briefings and I critically discuss how parents make use of this communication. The research was a multi-case study conducted in six state primary schools in Cyprus, with the participation of seven teachers, their pupils and the latter's parents. A number of briefings between parents and these teachers were observed and audio recorded. After such meetings, teachers, parents and pupils were interviewed individually or in focus-groups. The data was analysed with the use of the ATLAS.ti software package and involved both qualitative and quantitative content analysis. The analysis indicated that the content of parents and teachers briefings focused on specific aspects of the children's school-life. Differences as far as the use of the information received were distinguished amongst types of parents. Particular groups of parents seemed unable to interpret or effectively make use of the information they received in order to support their children's schooling, whereas others appeared more successful. Finally, I suggest that, despite the pedagogical value placed on parent-teacher briefings, these might not succeed in fulfilling their purpose of enhancing children's school performance for *all* pupils and that they might even consolidate or widen existing stratification among pupils of certain family environments.

Family-School Communication: Critically Revisiting Parent-Teacher Briefings

Introduction

Children live simultaneously in the worlds of the school and the family, moving back and forth between the two at the beginning and the end of each school day. Similarly seems to move the communication between school and home. Epstein's six-level typology concerning the involvement of families in their children's education life (Epstein, 1995; Epstein & Dauber, 1991) proposes the development of a two-direction system of communication by the schools with a twofold aim: firstly, for the family to be informed about the school programs and their child's school attainment, and secondly, for the school to receive information about the family conditions and environment relating to the child's schooling.

International empirical evidence reveals that, even though some schools attempt to establish a variety of practices in order to facilitate this two-direction communication, in most occasions it is more likely that flow of information between school and families is mainly directed from the former to the latter. Moreover, it appears that this communication is controlled by the former, who additionally determines its content (e.g. Crump & Eltis, 1996). Correspondingly, most schools communicate with families to inform them about their programs, conditions, regulations and decisions, or about the children's academic progress and everyday attitude. This type of communication appears to be the more prevalent of any other type of family involvement programs or practices initiated by the schools (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Symeou, 2002). In addition, schools communicate their concern for the family's welfare and responsibilities, and often remind or advise parents of their responsibilities to prepare their children for school, to make sure that their children do their homework, get enough sleep, eat enough breakfast, bring their books and supplies, and so forth. At the same time, it is suggested that schools remain reluctant to share information about other aspects of schooling, like processes of teaching, learning and the curriculum, discipline issues, and homework practices, which families might regard as fundamental and most significant to their children's understanding and well being (Martin, Ranson, & Tall, 1997).

Communication with families can be written and oral. The former is achieved by sending home memos, lists, litanies, forms, permission notes, report cards, calendars of the school year, and notices of special events. It can be either for individual children or the whole class. Personal contact appears to be the most effective method of reaching parents and it is widely used by many teachers at all school levels. Schools establish some formal ways in satisfying these school-to-family contacts on a personal level. The 'parent-teacher conferences' that provide information about an individual student to the parent and the 'open houses' that present information about the school and classroom to groups of parents, are examples practiced internationally. Some schools might additionally arrange for telephone conferences or monthly phone calls (Berger, 1996).

The parent-teacher conference is often the sole contact between parents and teachers, especially at the high school level. These conferences could be used by parents to discuss their home situations and any special conditions that may influence the child's successful attendance at school, hence the teacher can gather information about the family's rules, roles and learning styles. Conferences can also help solve

students' problems by focusing on the common interest of the child's development (Johnson, 1993). 'Open houses' are usually orientation meetings held early in the school year. Open houses are usually held for matters of general concern of the school, like the teaching of mathematics and the school's marking and assessment practices. In USA, these meetings often take place during the American Education Week when families and the community are encouraged to visit classrooms and observe the school at work.

Many other informal ways of contacting and communicating with parents are cited as settings where both teachers and parents gain insights into one another's perspectives, as for instance casual before-school and after-school meetings, when the teacher might briefly discuss with a parent an immediate subject (Medwell, 1992; Harding, 1996). These occasions might be equally productive with more formal arrangements and may offer much useful information that teachers and parents would not feel it appropriate to arrange a special meeting to discuss.

In the case of Cyprus, there is evidence that relationships between schools and families are generally restricted (Georgiou, 1996; Phtiaka, 1996; Symeou, 2001; 2002). Communication practices, which seem to be the most widespread established links between families and schools, aim at providing families information about their own child, the schools' function and the ways families can support the school's work (Symeou, 2002). A distinctive establishment of state primary schools in Cyprus is the one weekly period during which parents and guardians can visit their children's teachers to be informed about their children's schooling. Regulations require schools to assign on each teacher's weekly timetable this period called the "Parents' weekly visiting period" (Cyprus Ministry of Education and Culture, September, 2002). It is a tradition going back to the foundation of the first primary schools of the Republic of Cyprus in 1960, and has shown to be a well-respected practice by both parents and teachers.

In the present paper, I record the findings of a research, which explored the information exchanged between teachers and parents during the weekly visiting period in Cyprus, and I critically discuss how parents make use of this communication.

Methodology

The research was a multi-case study conducted in six state primary schools, with the participation of seven teachers, their pupils and the pupils' parents. Participant teachers were voluntarily selected. Their profiles are presented in Table 1.

During my random occasional visits at the schools of the participating teachers' and after parents' consent, I attended a number of meetings between parents who were visiting these teachers during the weekly visiting period. The meetings, 42 in total, were audio-recorded. After attending a series of three or four such meetings, I interviewed all participant teachers individually and in a focus-group. Additionally, I interviewed individually or in focus-groups 46 parents who consented to be interviewed and their children. In most cases, the interview was conducted at their home, and in some cases, it took place exactly after the briefing with their child's teacher in the school. Both individual interviews and focus-group interviews were aiming at exploring the content and the main issues which were raised during teacher-parent meetings and the use parents made of the information they received.

Table 1 Profile of the research participant teachers

Size Location	Small schools	Large schools	
	Low SES catchment area	Low SES catchment area	High SES catchment area
Urban schools	/	Stacy (Female, University degree, Long teaching experience)	Lena (Female, University degree, Long teaching experience)
Rural schools	Homer (Male, University degree, Medium teaching experience)	Gregory (Male, University degree, Short teaching experience)	/
	Vicky (Female, University degree, Short teaching experience)	Nicky (Female, Postgraduate degree, Long teaching experience)	
		Mary (Female, University degree, Medium teaching experience)	

The data was analysed with the use of the ATLAS.ti software package and involved both qualitative and quantitative content analysis. The qualitative analysis consisted initially of an intra-analysis of interviews gathered from each separate site in order to explore the main emerging themes and ideas within each site, followed by an inter-sites analysis of interviews, aiming at comparing these issues across sites. The quantitative analysis aimed at quantifying the content of the observed parent-teacher briefings.

Findings of the Study

Having set out the background of the research in terms of theoretical considerations and methodological approaches, in this part of the paper I describe the findings of the research. The presentation draws firstly on those findings that emerged as the most noteworthy patterns, which appeared as the broader concluding findings of the study. Secondly, I present the more striking differentiating patterns across the families that participated in the research. In my own interpretations, in order to seek contrasts between different families' use of their communication with their children's schools, I make use of the central concepts of the family's educational 'ephephesis' and educational background. These enabled me to group these contrasts into themes as I present them below.

Content of Parent-Teacher Briefings

Both the actual briefings content analysis and interviewees' observations indicated that most of the parent-teacher meeting's discussion was dominated by the teacher. The content analysis of the transcribed parent-teacher conversations revealed that approximately 70% of the whole discussions was dedicated on issues communicated by the teacher and only the 30% constituted parents' talk (Table 2).

Table 2. Content analysis of parent-teacher conversations during the parents' weekly visiting period

<i>Content of Discussion</i>		<i>Teacher Count of Words</i>			<i>Parent Count of Words</i>		
		<i>N</i>	<i>% of contributio</i>	<i>% of total talk</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>% of contributio</i>	<i>% of total talk</i>
<i>Presenting/ Demonstrating Information</i>	Child's character, behaviour and social relations	3310	6.53	4.75	5870	30.97	8.43
	Child's achievement (test results and everyday performance)	19320	38.16	27.77	3750	19.78	5.39
	Homework, home activities, working habits	6480	12.80	9.31	7340	38.73	10.55
	Non-academic school issues	1230	2.42	1.76	1100	5.80	1.58
	Parent-Teacher Collaboration	1010	1.99	1.45	500	2.63	0.71
	<i>Total</i>	31350	61.93	45.06	18560	97.94	26.67
<i>Advising/ Suggesting Solutions</i>	Child's character, behaviour and social relations	4090	8.07	5.87	-	-	-
	Child's achievement	6700	13.2	9.63	-	-	-
	Homework, home activities, working habits	3250	6.42	4.67	-	-	-
	Parent-Teacher Collaboration	1740	3.43	2.50	-	-	-
	Overall schooling	1120	2.21	1.60	-	-	-
	<i>Total</i>	16900	33.38	24.29	-	-	-
<i>Supportive Commenting</i>		1420	2.80	2.04	-	-	-
<i>Other (e.g. greetings, social comments)</i>		950	1.87	1.36	390	2.05	0.56
<i>Total</i>		50620	100	72.71	18950	100	27.29

The content analysis demonstrated additionally that parents' and teachers' discourse could be classified in a number of content-particular broad categories. From their

part, teachers' discourse was mainly comprised by the presentation, demonstration or illustration of information regarding the child or school related issues and the provision of advices, suggestions and solutions about these issues. At a smaller extent, teachers would comment to support their interlocutor's response to their talk, whereas a small part of their talk was dedicated to greetings or social comments. Parents' discourse, apart from the social element of the discussion, was mainly comprised of presenting information about the issues raised during the meeting. Table 2 breaks down how the parent-teacher conversation is distributed among the above categories/types of discussion and the two participants, as these have been counted in terms of words.

As indicated by the table, the major category of talk identified from the content analysis was that of presenting or demonstrating information regarding the child and his/her schooling from the teacher to the parent and vice versa. This category included all those instances when the two agents intended to offer information to the other on an issue relating to the child or his/her schooling, or when they were trying to extract information from the other. This information exchange captured approximately three quarters of the total talk (71.73%). Teachers' participation in the discussion during the visiting period was focusing on presenting information to the parent. Thus, teachers appeared to dominate the presentation of information category of talk by having roughly double the saying regarding this category in comparison to parents (45.06% and 26.67% of the conversation, respectively). When parents raised a specific issue for discussion, it was mainly for informing the teacher. Thus, parents, from their part, were found to contribute to the information exchange mainly after the teacher's direct provocation or in the course of the discussion after the teacher's initiative in bringing to the fore a specific issue. More rarely their contribution to the discussion was after their own initiative by triggering themselves the discussion of specific subjects.

The presentation, demonstration and illustration of information from the two interlocutors concerned issues relating to the child's character, behaviour and relations to others in and out of the school; the child's overall or subject-matter particular school achievement in terms of test results and everyday written (e.g. the child's performance in essay writing, spelling, reading, maths and social sciences) and oral performance; the child's homework and related task responsibilities and habits; non-academic school related information; and the parent-teacher collaboration. These specific types of information exchange are discussed and presented in more detail further down.

A significant general conclusion is that nearly half of the information presented by the teacher related to the child's school achievement (27.27% out of 45.06% of the total talk), while from their part, parents, focused on presenting information about the child's homework and working habits and activities, and about the child's personal characteristics and behaviours (10.55% and 8.43% out of 26.67% of the whole talk, respectively). Many times during this contribution in the discussion, parents appeared as a mediator of information between the teacher and their child, since in some specific cases their children were reluctant to initiate a discussion with their teacher on a particular matter of their concern. Both children themselves and their parents affirmed during the individual interviews and focus groups that children do not do so because they are afraid of their teachers, rather than because they are shy. The exploration of the most prevalent occasions when pupils recruited their parents for transmitting their query indicated that children did so in those cases they knew that

the teacher had already set clear a specific class rule or tradition and their query would come against it, or when they recognised that the teacher would disagree with their query because, it would not take in consideration other pupils' point of view or benefit. The two most typical cases a child would ask the parent to mediate to the teacher was for the child to want to sit next to another pupil than the one the teacher selected and when the child did not manage for some reason to meet his/her homework responsibilities.

It is noteworthy that nearly all parents' talk (97.94%) was aiming at presenting information to the teacher or initiating discussion relating to the presentation of information. The teachers during their dialogue with parents nonetheless, tended to maintain another role for themselves, that is, the role of advising the parent and suggesting practical solutions to him/her as regards respective issues to those raised for the purposes of presenting information. This advising component of the discussion constituted an offer of specific or more tentative guidance to parents on the issue discussed, either for achieving specific learning goals with their children or for assisting the parents in dealing with an overarching concern relating to their child or their family. More specifically, teachers were found to offer advices and solutions to parents regarding the child's behaviour and relations, his/her school achievement, about homework and other school related home activities, about parent-teacher collaboration, and the child's overall schooling. Interestingly, from all issues on which teachers offered their advice, the one that received the most prevalent position was academic achievement. Parents in no case appeared to offer any type of advice to their child's teacher regarding any particular aspect of their child's schooling.

Information about the child's class/school attainment

The focus of the parent-teacher meeting appeared to be that of the child's achievement. This is clearly illustrated in Table 3, which presents the topics discussed during the observed briefings.

Table 3 Issues Discussed during the Weekly Visiting Period

<i>Issue of Discussion</i>	<i>Count of Words</i>	
	<i>N</i>	<i>% of total talk</i>
Child's character, behaviour and social relations	13270	19.07
Child's achievement (test results and everyday performance)	29770	42.79
Homework, home activities, working habits	17070	24.53
Non-academic school issues	2330	3.34
Parent-Teacher Collaboration	3250	4.67
Overall schooling	1120	1.61
Other	2760	3.96
<i>Total</i>	69570	100

This finding was also pointed out in families' and teachers' interviews and focus groups who repeatedly stated that the main issues during their meetings were the

child's school attainment, the child's school behaviour, and homework responsibilities. "The teacher talks to us about our child's achievement at the different subject-matters and his/her behaviour" was parents' typical response.

During the informing process about 'the child's school attainment', teachers and parents concentrated in both strengths and weaknesses in a series of attainment related issues (Figure 1).

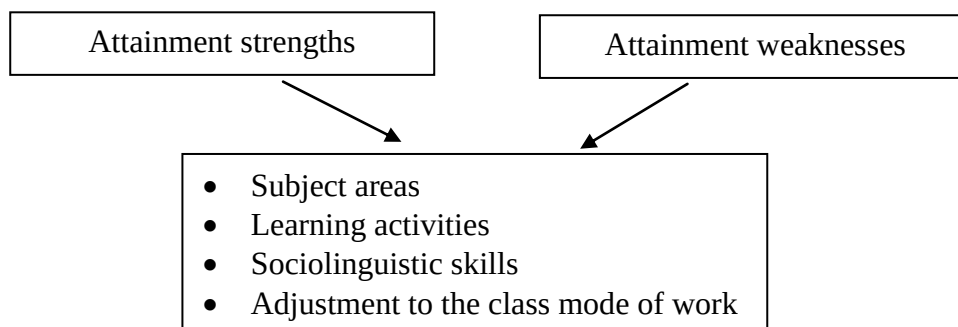


Figure 1 Content of the weekly parent visiting period: Information relating to children's school attainment

Specifically, their discussion dealt with strengths and weaknesses of the child's attainment in specific subject areas (mainly in language, maths and social sciences), in specific learning activities (like essay writing, spelling, reading) and the child's sociolinguistic skills (particularly, when and how to use the dialect and the official language in verbal and written activities). Moreover, it concentrated on the child's adjustment to the class mode of working and learning (e.g. pace of work, stress, concentration, laziness or boredom). Mrs Christou provided her own experience and evaluation of her experience with the first teacher of her son who supported her child in adjusting to the school context:

When my son went for the first time at school...he was only five and a half years old. He was very immature and terribly slow in reading and writing. Thankfully, he had a very good teacher who had very good psychology knowledge and managed to help him...you cannot imagine how much she helped him! She also helped me as well, on how I had to deal with him.

Some times before and some times after proceeding to practical suggestions to parents, teachers tended to explain the parent how they themselves deal with a specific matter that concerns the parent's child in the class. For instance, Mr Demetriou, the father of a boy who was attending grade one and was facing reading difficulties appeared quite informed that his son teacher "has a CD program...and she takes my [his] son during her time-off in order to help the child read".

Teachers, as both the observation showed and a number of parents stressed, tended to communicate to parents both their pupils' strengths and weaknesses in school attainment. Moreover, they appeared trying not to overwhelm parents with all the weaknesses a child might experience, but rather to emphasise the most significant and urge parental attention and action towards these difficulties. Particularly when a child appeared to be facing basic difficulties, teachers, as many parents admitted, tended not to focus on secondary inadequacies. Nonetheless, a respectable number of families appeared to sense that what the teachers emphasize during their conversations is the 'child's weaknesses' and 'school difficulties'. When parents and children were asked to indicate the type of information they receive when parent and teachers meet,

most mentioned ‘attainment weaknesses’. However, the observations showed that more than half of teachers’ comments during these meetings (54.88%) aim at fostering and recognising the child’s or the family’s efforts and achievements. This parental claim thus might be an overstatement of this aspect of the parent-teacher briefing. Perhaps this can be attributed to parents’ negative emotions and bitterness when receiving ‘bad news’ and how the latter might overshadow the positive information received.

In any case, as parents themselves claimed, many parents seemed to be aware of their child’s ‘attainment weakness’. Sometimes, particularly in the case of educated parents, parents might bring the difficulty faced by their child in the discussion themselves during the weekly visiting consultation. Mrs Euphemia referred to such an occasion:

My son was always very stressed when he needed to write an essay. The situation with him was unbearable. Therefore, I told his teacher that there was a problem. His teacher’s observations were similar to mine, but this was something I could tell myself that I was experiencing this everyday and was seeing him having so much stress when the day to write an essay was approaching. (II)

Nonetheless, rarely did teachers encourage parents to bring in their own perception regarding their child’s learning difficulty or offer them the opportunity to articulate their own observations. Hence, it was very rare for a teacher to ask directly the parent what difficulties their child faced in his/her learning. On the contrary, it was more common for parents to take the initiative to do so, something which was noticed by parents themselves, as well. For instance, sometimes some parents took the initiative during the parent-teacher contact to reveal to the teacher their child’s difficulties or weaknesses concerning particular activities, like spelling or math problem solving. Sometimes, this parental initiative during their conversation was followed by a particular complaint regarding the issue in discussion, the teacher or the school.

Teachers tended to supplement their information regarding the child’s school attainment with specific suggestions about how parents could deal with a specific matter. Teachers followed two different approaches in suggesting to parents how to assist their child with attainment weaknesses. The first approach was for the teacher to describe very abstractly the child’s school attainment. These teachers usually concluded with remarks like “I want him/her [the child] to try a little bit more”. The other approach was more subject-matter specific. Teachers employing this second approach tended to inform the parent for all or nearly all school-subjects and to refer to the child’s particular strengths and difficulties in order to make specific suggestions on how the parent can help the child at home. For instance, these teachers would provide specific suggestions on how the child should learn his/her dictation at home when the child experienced difficulty with it.

This latter type of teachers appeared to recruit various evidence sources in order to demonstrate parents their child’s school attainment. First, they tended to make constant reference to the child’s written work, writing books and notebooks, as well as in their class exercises and tests. Special attention was given to the essay-writing book called ‘Think and Write’ and in tests results. Mrs Elia described such experiences with the teacher as follows: “Every time I go to see my child’s teacher, he shows me his record-book where he has children’s grade for each separate school-subject”.

One of the participant teachers used to demonstrate parents on a flow chart their child's rank on a specific test among all the class pupils. The figure illustrated all pupils' marks on the test with each child's initials on the respective mark. The teacher used to show the chart and direct the parent's attention to the cut point of his/her own child's mark. The following quotes a specific occasion when the teacher introduced this element to inform a parent about their child's test results:

If you see her right here...if you want to see how she does in relation to, without this having to stress us...if you want to see us in relation to the rest of the class, [...] it is this here, do you see her? She is somewhere, lets say...she is not the best in her class, ok? She is at this level here, but she has progressed in comparison to the last test.

Information about the child's class/school behaviour and character

Another core issue raised during the weekly visiting meeting was that of the child's class and school behaviour. Most teachers were found to place an emphasis on this issue, but it was usually parents who showed a particular interest in being informed as much possible about it. This special attention placed on behaviour by the parents compared to other topics can also easily be identified by an examination of the content analysis of the conversation during parent-teacher weekly briefings (Table 1), where the portion of the parents' talk about it appeared the second highest of their total contribution to the discussion.

All parts in this case, that is teachers, parents and children, consented that the attention of the parent-teacher briefings was the child's 'behaviour problems' and 'deviant behaviour'. Quite typically, teachers tended to raise the issue by referring to particular 'behaviour problems', thus initiating a whole circle of discussion with the respective parent about the 'problem'. Much less frequently, teachers tended to bring to the fore information regarding particular incidents of a child's 'positive behaviour' class and school patterns. This was more identified in the cases of a few of the participant teachers.

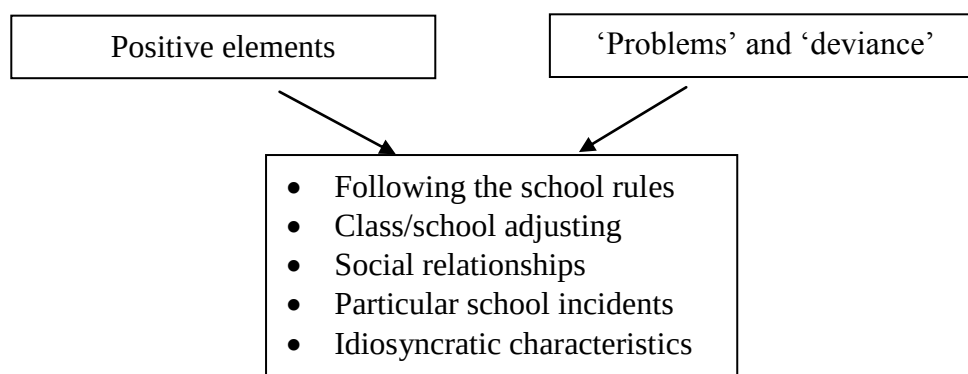


Figure 2 Content of the weekly parent visiting period: Information relating to children's school behaviour and character

More particularly (Figure 2), the two parts tended to discuss issues following the school rules (e.g. whether the child talks to others during the class session without a permission) and the child's ability in adjusting in the class and the school conditions. A regular topic discussed relating to children's difficulty in adjusting in school and class expected behaviours was that of adjusting in the beginning of a new school year

or when first entering the school. A mother provided her personal experience of dealing with such a 'deviant behaviour' in the parents' questionnaire open-ended question, an experience which was found to be quite common: "My child was crying the first day of grade one. We discussed it with the teacher and we came up with a solution. Now the child feels fine".

Moreover, teachers were found to refer to the child's social relations in and out of class, like demonstrating aggressiveness towards others or experiencing long-lasting difficulties in relating with other classmates or schoolmates. The latter was an issue raised often by parents as well, since it appeared devastating for their children's life. Children urged their parents to act as their mediators to the teacher in order for the teacher to provide 'solutions'. An outstanding example of such a circumstance was that of a pupil who was systematically failing to relate to her classmates and her mother took the initiative to discuss this with the teacher, since she considered that the 'problem' was too persistent.

Finally, teacher and parents tended to discuss particular school incidents which could illuminate positive, but much more often negative, aspects of the child's behaviour and character, like incidents while handling a specific school challenge. A characteristic example of a relevant behaviour was the case of children who tended to demand particular attention from their teacher during the class session. In most cases, these incidents were brought up by the teacher who had the opportunity to observe them in class, whilst in some cases parents initiated the discussion of the incident after being informed by their child. Such an example was the case of the following mother who described an occasion she felt she needed to take the initiative herself to mention a particular incident about her son to the teacher who thus managed to find a solution:

My son was elected as the president of his class, but denied the position due to responsibility-fear. Latter on, he regretted it. We [the father and the mother] discussed it with the teacher and our child separately, and decided that he had to take the responsibility and accept the consequences of his actions.

Parents claimed that the discussion of their child's school behaviour and the teacher's observation of incidents identifying their child's character was one of their major concerns. As they said

...[We, as] parents are concerned about our child's behaviour in the school, not only in the class, the general behaviour, because we raise our children, not only to become literate, but to become right persons as well (Mr Mathew).

Thus parents, particularly rural and low or average educated participant parents, tended to supplement their contribution to the discussion when referring to a behaviour issue or their relevant arguments with information about their child's overall and everyday character. This type of information was what they communicated more on their own initiative than any other type of information. In general, it appeared that participant parents were eager to describe their child's character to the teacher. Furthermore, this type of information appeared to capture a significant part of the parent-teacher initial meetings during the beginning of the school year. In the latter case, this took place more after the teacher's invitation via a direct or indirect relevant question, in order to learn more about their pupils. Teachers tended to provoke parental information regarding the child's behaviour during their early meetings with parents and some teachers, as both themselves and some parents indicated, combined this information with information they requested from the last year's teacher.

Relevant topics to the child's behaviour and character appeared to be more or less systematically raised in the flow of the discussion of other issues. The most frequently observed children's characteristic being discussed during the weekly visiting period was children's shyness. This was systematically identified in rural school sites, where it seemed as a common characteristic of pupils' school behaviour, which puzzled both parents and teachers. Many parents in these areas, and much less in urban areas, stated that "my [their] child is very shy in the class and feels ashamed to raise his/her hand during the class session, and we [they] try to deal with it with the teacher".

The analysis of the weekly visiting period observation data indicated also that other issues relating to the child's character were prevalent during these parent-teacher contacts, like the child feeling stressed as regards school matters, concerns relating to the child being mature for his/her age, and the child being reserved from everyday school activities. A matter of particular attention among the concerned parents was the issue of a child's school stress. Many rural and urban parents raised this issue and maintained that their children were feeling extremely stressed about their schooling. The following quote is from the conversation of one of the teachers, with one of his pupils' mother.

Mother: I am very afraid that he will get stressed again when he goes high-school.

Teacher: He doesn't look stressed to me...

M: No, he does get stressed.

T: Does he? Well, look, if he gets stressed only a little bit, that's good.

M: Two years ago I had to take him to the doctor because of his stress [...] He had constant pains in the stomach...his stomach...his stomach. I took him to the doctor: "He doesn't have anything, it's just from his stress; he had spasms of his bowel". It was from his stress. We discovered then...

T: There wasn't such an incident this year, isn't it?

M: No, it was last year and the previous year. His teacher then was telling my son when he was expecting the correct answer to one of his questions during a lesson "Come on, S., I was not expecting that you wouldn't know this" and he was thus stressed.

Information about homework and school related home activities

The issue that emerged as the participant families' major concern regarding their relationship with their child's school and overall schooling was that of school 'homework'. Nearly *all* families who participated in the study identified the 'homework' issue as their everyday 'nightmare' with regard to their child's school-life. With one way or another, parents at their vast majority when received the opportunity to comment on their child's schooling pointed out their indignation about having to deal daily with their child's homework. For instance, when parents were prompted during the interviews and the focus groups by an open introductory question to describe their general experience of their primary school age child, nearly all concentrated on 'homework'. Both parents and children confirmed that children appear to have a lot of homework at home, something which teachers admitted themselves. Correspondingly, many parents agreed that 'something has to be done' and stressed the need for the Ministry of Education and Culture to draw the lines in relation to the nature and extent of homework.

This topic was even more stressed by rural areas families, as well as low educated families. School-life appeared to be devastated by the phenomenon of the 'homework load' and thus described 'homework' as their main constant agony as regards their child's schooling. Additionally, in the case of some of these families, 'homework' seemed to capture their whole school concern, thus becoming synonymous with 'schooling'. The extreme majority of these parents, and particularly mothers, appeared to be struggling between providing their family the basics for their everyday living and predominantly dealing with 'homework'. As a rural area mother argued

All parents are very puzzled about homework. A Grade one child needs the whole afternoon to study. The mother who has to be next to the child for so many hours pays the price.

A recurring direct and indirect blaming for this 'homework load' among many participant parents appeared to be the overloaded curriculum and the approaches followed by the teachers in the process of delivering it. Mrs Georgiou articulated her perceptions, as follows:

I am wondering about the rapid way things are being taught, which does not provide time for children to comprehend what they are taught. The teacher is in a rush to cover the subject-matter without caring if it has been understood. Generally, all parents are doing the teachers at home.

Similar were the views of another mother who noted that:

[...] children sometimes (not always) come home with a lot of homework and they don't know where to start from probably because the work hasn't been explained properly in class, either because there are too many pupils or because it isn't made interesting enough.

Not surprisingly, homework issues received a significant portion of the parent-teacher conversation, as indicated by the content analysis of the observed parent-teacher meetings, as well as teachers' and parents' interpretations of what was taking place during these meetings. It was additionally revealed that it was parents who paid most attention to discuss about homework (Table 3). Homework topics were those for which parents performed an active role in the discussion. This rendered the information exchange process more mutual. Being more articulated about this issue, was probably underpinned by their 'privilege' of personal first-hand daily experience of homework, and above all their immense puzzlement about the 'proper way of studying at home'.

It is noteworthy that, in comparison with the overall parental interest and concern about the homework issue, this did not receive an analogous position in teachers' practical advices (Table 2). Correspondingly, many parents tended to take the initiative to ask the teacher to provide them with homework tips and how to deal with a number of homework activities. Hence, they largely expressed the belief that the teachers' support and suggestions or tips on homework matters facilitate them in supporting their child's homework. This was more clearly articulated by rural and low education parents.

'Home study habits' was the 'homework' aspect that appeared to attract more teachers' attention than providing homework tips. Teachers tended to place attention to their pupils' study habits at home from the beginning of the school year. More specifically, it was revealed that during the first meetings between a teacher and an individual parent, all teachers took the initiative to raise the home study habits topic and established a two-direction discussion with parents about it. These attempts

usually aimed, as teachers themselves asserted, at investigating how class study habits relate to home study habits, for instance what strategies parents use during homework assistance and how these match with the teacher strategies, particularly for writing an essay, checking spelling, doing a summary, doing home reading, improving writing skills, and so forth. Moreover, teachers tended to do this in order to identify the conditions under which homework is being done, like whether the child studies in his/her own private place, whether he/she studies alone or under supervision, whether he/she puts in order his/her school suitcase, and how long it takes the child to finish his/her homework. The ultimate purpose was, as teachers explained, for them to “consider these factors while approaching each child thus knowing how far to push for”.

Participant teachers also tended to raise the issue of study habits when a specific learning or studying difficulty would emerge. They thus wanted to inform the parent about the specific difficulty and simultaneously explore whether this behaviour was demonstrated at home as well. As they pointed out, the issue of study-habits was mainly brought up by the teacher more frequently in the case of children that, according to the teacher himself/herself, appeared to have learning difficulties and/or maintain different study habits at home and school. Some parents also identified this when asked whether they were prompted by the teacher to discuss home study habits. At the other end of the spectrum, when the child did not exhibit particularly difficulties, teachers rarely brought up the home study habits issue, since, as a parent indicated “when the teacher is pleased with a child [...] she does not trouble about his/her study habits” (Mrs Marcou, II).

Homework discussions were mainly concerned with the particular subject-matters areas of language and maths, as well as general approaches to homework habits. The following figure breaks down the main types of homework themes which appeared to receive most attention by parents and teachers during their meetings.

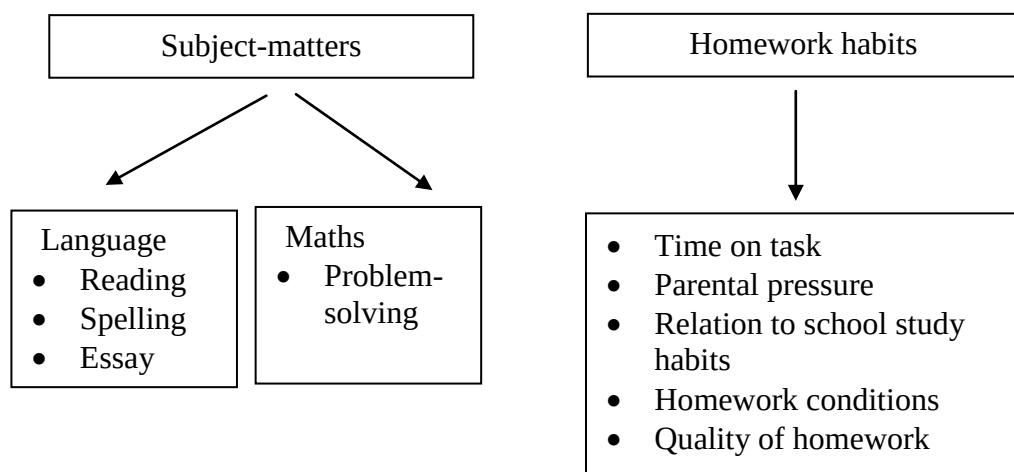


Figure 3 Content of the weekly parent visiting period: Information relating to homework and school related home activities

For instance, concerning reading, parents for the most part requested guidance on how many times their children should do their reading. For instance, a mother was feeling that she exaggerated in the number of times she was persuading her child to read the extract, since sometimes the child ended up reading it by heart. When she brought the

issue up, the teacher provided her specific directions in order to supervise a more balanced reading session with her child at home. Concerning spelling, the core issue brought up was how much emphasis to be paid on spelling at home when children were filling exercises in their note books, in the composition book, in exercise books and in writing books.

Finally, parents tended to appeal for general assistance on issues like the quality of the child's work at home or setting a time framework for homework responsibilities. The first issue concentrated on how much time, effort and emphasis the child should devote or how much pressure should the parent put in order for the child to achieve a specific learning goal or a specific exercise or project at home. A number of parents mentioned this example as something for which they could not take the initiative to direct their child without receiving the teacher's advice. A particular example was that of a father who needed guidance about how much attention to place on drawing activities at home and was advised to demand from the child to devote time on drawing or on any similar activity only if the emphasis was on the drawing as such, but to spend a minimum time on it when drawing was a side-activity of an exercise.

Time spent on studying at home for homework purposes seemed as of core interest and simultaneously apprehension for participant parents. Parents were bringing up the issue quite systematically, either when their child would spend too much or too little time for doing his/her homework. A Grade 3 father, for instance, brought up this issue when he visited his son's teacher during the school year's first term, since the child was spending more than three hours per day in order to complete his homework obligations, something which the family considered as outrageous for a child of his age. The discussion led, as the father himself explained, to a mutual agreement between the parent and the teacher that the child would be obliged to end his studying after one and a half hours of studying, and if not finished to face the consequences of not finishing his homework the next day at school, something which solved the 'problem'.

Relevant aspects were also issues like handling the case when the child feels boredom or laziness while studying at home. This appeared to be a more intense issue in discussion at the end of the school year, when pupils were expecting the closure of the schools and summer weather exhausted them. The following is from a relevant section of the conversation between a parent and a teacher during the last visit of this parent at the teacher:

Mother: I must admit that she is bored during the last days. You understand...to feel boredom, not wanting to study. She doesn't have...she is tired. You know...

Teacher: It is the weather. Isn't it all of us who are falling apart?

Other information

Teachers may take the opportunity of this personal contact with parents for informing parents regarding particular class or school activities and events. Teachers exploited the meeting opportunity to urge parents to participate in such events, or inform them about relevant family responsibilities, such as costume preparing, etc. The following quote demonstrates the latter case:

Teacher: We are no doing our rehearsals for the end-of-year event...

Mother: Oh yes, regarding this event, what exactly do you expect...you told us about trousers...what exactly do you want? (The teacher explains what he expects parents to do).

From their side, parents tended to utilise this occasion in order to be informed and clarify relevant issues.

Parents' Use of their Communication with the Teacher

Participant parents stressed with no exception that after attending a briefing with their children's teachers they aim at cooperating with them in order to overcome specific difficulties. Parents generally maintained moreover, that they try to implement teachers' suggestions and what they agreed on, and that what they actually do is to "try to implement the teacher advices". The aim of parents, as most of them maintained, is to support their child in "making progress" and "becoming better" on the issues discussed during their contact with the teacher. Quite impressive was the conclusion that both parents and teachers consented that via their contacts "things go better for the child".

Correspondingly, most parents' initial response after a meeting with the teacher was to inform their spouse or the other family adult who was absent with what was conferred and concluded. Depending on the families' schedules, this briefing was followed or preceded by a discussion with the child himself/herself on the content and conclusions of the parent's meeting with the teacher. The most typical parental response when asked during individual interviews to provide examples of their actions after a personal contact with the teacher was that they "discuss" with the child the content of their meeting and "explain" to the child what the teacher said. While discussing and explaining to their child, some parents indicated that they try to translate what was discussed with the teacher "in the child's own words", so that the child comprehends the adults' talk. During this initial parent-child conversation, some parents pointed out that they try to exhibit to their child their respect to the teacher's suggestions, as well as their trust for the teacher's expertise and accountability. Usually, in case the teacher's message was positive, this parent-child discussion was accompanied by an applaud of the child's efforts or by a commitment for achieving better results until the next teacher-parent contact. In case the teacher's information pointed out a 'fault' of the child, some parents admitted that did not hesitate to reproach their child. Usually, the parent-child discussion appeared to end with the parent's admonition to the child that the next meeting the teacher would to tell the parent that the child is "getting better".

After this point of common aims and intentions, it appears that participant parents subsequent actions varied substantially, with different families recruiting extremely different ways of putting in action the content of an oral briefing. A careful investigation of parental responses to the interviews revealed that families' reported succeeding behaviour could be distinguished into four broad types of parents.

First, there was the group type of parents whom I called the 'indifferent-like' or 'apathetic-like' parents. These were the parents who, due to a series of factors and regardless of educational background, socio-economic status or ability, claimed that they would not enter any further systematic attempt to support their child according to the briefing. These parents were consciously against further supporting their child at home and believed that they should not be assigned such role or be expected to contribute in such way in their child's day-to-day schooling. Some of these parents, for instance, supported that it is the school's responsibility to provide all the necessary support to the child, that the parent should not have to intervene at all, or that schools should not demand from the family to deal with academic aspects of their child's schooling. Some of the parents whose child was attending the upper grades had

particular beliefs regarding the age until which they should care about these matters. They explained their views saying that parents should terminate their immediate support to their children's day-to-day schooling after primary school ages or other particular school thresholds, for instance after the first grade. In order to justify their views, the more educated parents of this category cited their perceptions on building their children's self-independence and self-confidence. Less educated parents evaluated their academic 'knowledge level' and thought themselves as unable to implement teachers' suggestions and directions. Parents who believed that their child was a high achiever, thought that they needn't support their children's school activities.

The other three identified types of families, though distinguishable in some respects, shared a common overall aspiration about education. Despite the fact that the proceeding behaviour of these families in applying the teacher's directions intervened with their characteristics like their educational and socio-economic background, working conditions, time constraints, and actual academic efficiency, they all exhibited an overall educational aptitude, orientation and inclination, what could be described better with the Greek word 'epheis' ('desire') for education. All three types of these families quite systematically appeared to try to accommodate, successfully or unsuccessfully, support or supervision according to their conversation with the teachers, in order to enhance their child's school performance.

Some of these families, which I called the 'good-will, but no action' families, were families who exhibited good-will and ambitious intentions to assist their child according to the briefing's concluding suggestions, but eventually, as they revealed, did not appear entering any other endeavour. These parents' intervention concentrated on obscure and tentative actions. As they claimed, their main action after a briefing was to "discuss what the teacher suggested with the child and provide him/her with the appropriate advices", "advise the child in the best way" or even "advise the child to do the right thing and listen to his/her teachers". Some other systematic reactions of these parents were to stress to the child that "the teacher wants you [the child] to try a little bit more", and "talk to the child in a good way in order to try to make him/her comprehend his/her mistake so that it stop doing it". This category of parents thus terminated their intervention at this superficial discussion-type intervention, probably because they felt inadequate in offering further support to their child or academically incompetent to this end. Low education, rural area parents and parents of low achievers who participated in this study mainly constituted this category of parents.

The second type of parents, 'not knowing how' parents, showed a similar pattern of behaviour after their contact with the teacher, but afterwards entered into a more distinctive countermove. More specifically, most of these parents appeared to move further from a superficial admonishment after their meeting with the teacher and kept trying to remind the child what the/she should be doing. These parents were also not very successful in practice, probably because they had difficulty in translating or implementing what the teacher suggested or even due to lacking practical step-by-step suggestions or tips from the teacher's side. A typical case of mother who fits in this category of parents provided a specific example of what followed her contact with her child's teacher:

My child's teacher told me that my child was sometimes talking a little with the child sitting next to him. I was constantly making this remark to my child and I

was asking from him to pay more attention to the teacher and talk to the other child only during the break.

At other times, these parents claimed that they succeeded, “I tried to help my child [as the teacher suggested or in order to ‘solve’ the ‘problem’], and he/she finally made it” or “made a lot of progress”, but their success appeared to have an ambivalent value. Both previous and the following examples demonstrate that these parents, who constituted a significant proportion of this study’s parents, did not have practical tips to help their child achieve what the teacher suggested: “When my daughter was doing a lot of spelling mistakes, I sat next to her in order to remind her some grammatical rules while she was writing”. Low and average education parents of all types of achievers, in both rural and urban sites, fit in this category of parents.

The last group of parents identified were the ‘close to education’ parents. These parents probably due to their ability to comprehend and handle the information and directions provided by their child’s teacher and/or due to being granted with sufficient information by teachers seemed being effective in supporting their child. These were mostly educated parents whose children were not facing particular difficulties with their schooling. These parents appeared to be capable of strategically responding to teachers’ directions and adjusting them in their family’s particular conditions. Thus, after an initial and generic discussion with their child similar to all other parents, they were more likely to implement consciously or impulsively the teacher’s suggestions and a set of specific strategies.

Most of the ‘close to education’ parents intensively tried to “cover the space” and “surpass the deficiency”, by supporting their child with daily exercise and practice, if the teacher had suggested that the child needed improvement. They appeared more or less conscious of a particular role they had to play, put the responsibility for their child’s success on themselves and thus differed from other types of parents. Most of these parents tended to schedule an initial intervention period during which they closely supervised their child’s homework and exercises. Usually, their support took the form of a scaffold, which was very soon withdrawn for the child to study effectively alone with the minimum of supervision. Moreover, as some of them indicated, most times they tried not to overwhelm their child by telling him/her “to deal with all points that need[ed] to receive more attention at once”. Rather they followed teachers’ example to focus only on the most significant issues, e.g. reading, spelling, etc, and only when this was overcome to deal with the rest. They also stressed that they were considerably careful not to put too much pressure on their child or as a mother stated “to ask for something he [the child] cannot do”. This occurred, for example, when they estimated that this might have been above their capacities, or that the circumstances were not ideal, e.g. if the child was tired. These parents were more likely to continue to support their child even when the teacher told them that their child’s attainment was satisfactory.

When the teacher had referred to the child’s school behaviour, ‘close to education’ parents claimed they directed a skilful, sophisticated and long lasting discussion with their child in order to deal with the issue in consideration. The following father described his experience after a personal contact with his son teacher, which focused on a specific ‘behaviour problem’:

After I talk to the teacher, I think about it. What I do then is “dialogue with the child” so that I understand his motives and his psychology that urged him in the specific behaviour. We always try to find solution with the child [father’s emphasis]. I listen to him, and we take decisions together.

As in the above case, these parents tended to stress more than the other parents words like ‘discussion’, ‘respect’, and ‘not-imposing’ to describe their efforts.

Another specific illustration of how a mother dealt with the information she received by the teacher is the following:

The teacher told me that, even though he is definite that the child knows a specific answer, he doesn't always raise his hand. When I went home, I discussed it with my child and he didn't deny it. He said: "Many times I raise my hand but he [the teacher] tells other children to answer the question". I explained that the teacher has to check all children by assigning them to write something on the blackboard or to reply to one of his questions. Now, after many discussions, he has comprehended this.

The last quote demonstrates additionally these parents ability to provide their own solutions, or extent on teachers' solutions when handling issues relating to their child's schooling and the information they receive by their children's teachers.

Some of these parents appeared to set specific aims and specific deadlines for the implementation of what was decided to be done, in order for the child to make the optimal progress until the parent's next visit at school. Sometimes these deadlines were co-decided with the child, whereas other times parents tried to keep them themselves.

Interestingly, ‘close to education’ parents were found to be generally critical towards teachers' advices and directions. As a rural area and educated mother claimed, “I listen carefully and try to achieve what the teacher advices me, if only [mother's emphasis] I believe that this is the best for my child's interest”. Similarly, an urban area parent clarified that after meeting their child's teacher *they*, “being the parents of the child, decide what should be done”, and a middle class mother stressed that she abides by the teacher's advices, if she believes that these “are for the child's good sake”.

An outcome of parent-teacher briefings across the three latter family types was for these families to arrange private lessons by an expert for the child. Sometimes this was after the teacher's direct advice and at other times after parental initiation. The phenomenon was more frequent in the urban than in the rural sites, and in most cases this was employed when a child had ‘learning difficulties’. An example was the case of a low educated, rural area mother who admitted that “after being informed by the teacher that my [her] child was weak and understood that I [she] couldn't help the child more, I [she] sent him for private lessons”. Not surprisingly, in the case of ‘good-will, but no action’ and ‘not knowing how’ parents, due to not knowing how to transcend their school-related difficulties but still wanting their child to “go better” in school, some of them employ the help of other familiar people who “have more capabilities” than them, probably also because they could not afford the expenses of professional trainers.

Some sought refuge to professional and experts when the teacher revealed a ‘behaviour problem’ or a ‘deviant behaviour’. Only rarely rural area and lower education parents said doing so, whereas it was more parents in urban areas who admitted that they might easily seek advice from an expert to this end. As a mother in one of the urban sites explained “When there is a problem and I need assistance from more educated people than me in order to help my child, I do so”. Another example of a family that decided to ask for a specialist's advice about their child's behaviour after the mother contacting her child's teacher was the case of a parent recognised

who, as it is illustrated in the following quote, succeeded in dealing with her child's behaviour by cooperating with both the specialist and the teacher and herself.

My child was demonstrating aggressive behaviour. When the teacher informed us, we visited a clinical psychologist for advice. We then informed the [child's] teacher and cooperated in order to help the child to exceed it, as happened.

Conclusions

In this final section of my paper, I draw out interpretations, which derive from the data analysis. I discuss the study's main findings placing emphasis on the contrasting findings between different family types based on my conceptualisation of the family's educational 'ephephesis'.

One of the main conclusions of this study is that the content of parents and teachers briefings focused on specific aspects of the children's school-life. Most of the parent-teacher conversation was dominated by the latter, who focused on presenting information or advising the parents about the child's school exhibited achievement, behaviour and homework activities. Parental contribution to the briefing was mainly limited to respond to or supplement teacher's talk or after the teacher's direct invitation to do so. Rarely did they after their own initiative. Parents did not adopt a role of providing any suggestions or advising the teacher on how she/he could better handle issues relating to their child, neither were they encouraged to do so. The only instances at which the teachers consciously encouraged parents to articulate their own perspective in the discussion concerned information about the child's home behaviour and homework habits. This occurred in parent-teacher early meetings, since this information is more likely to be useful for the teacher understanding the child's overall school relevant habits and performance. Thus, parents in their majority appeared, at least during their contacts with teachers, subordinate or kept in subjection by teachers' expertise and professional knowledge. This could imply their trust towards contemporary teachers' expertise and professionalism. The complaints, however, made by other parents about the limited opportunities granted to them to reveal their own perspective and cautions about their child's schooling and home-related behaviour, as well as the critical stance kept by others about teachers' suggestions about their child during their contacts, might point out parents' powerlessness in front of teachers and the school. Moreover, parental dependence to teachers exhibited during their briefings might be a phenomenon lasting only during their face to face meetings and thus might explain the formers' criticism towards aspects of their relations with the latter, which is an argument supported elsewhere (Symeou, 2003).

The data analysis also revealed differences in the use of the information received amongst different types of parents. Particular groups of parents seemed unable to interpret or effectively make use of the information they received in order to support their children's schooling. Apart from the minority of 'indifferent-like' or 'apathetic-like' parents who for a series of idiosyncratic or other factors did not appear to support their children after their briefings with teachers, most of the other parents declared their support or supervision of their child's school work according to their conversation with teachers. What distinguished these other parents from 'apathetic-like' parents was that they all appeared to cultivate a family culture of educational 'ephephesis', which was identified across these families, regardless of their socio-economic or local background characteristics and practical constraints and realities. This family culture seemed to transcend their personal or family stances,

opinions or constrains in whether or not they would support their child's school work, thus urging them to show evidence of a genuine decision to consider teachers' instructions and put them into practice. Their eventual success, nonetheless, in sustaining an effective implementation of their declared purposes is likely to be dependent on their families' characteristics and particularly their personal or family educational recourses, as well as on the teachers' ability and willingness to provide detailed and specific guidance in how parents could support their child at home.

More specifically, even though the 'good-will, but no action' families and 'not knowing how' parents showed evidence of attempting to put in practice what was concluded during their briefing with teachers, their intervention was more likely to be unsuccessful. Both groups felt inadequate and incompetent to comprehend and handle the information and directions provided by the teacher in order to offer systematic and concrete support to their children. The former were likely to exhaust their intervention in concentrating on obscure and tentative advices towards their children, whereas the latter, who tended to be more practical, seemed using tentative and ambivalent approaches in a clumsy, spasmodic and improvising manner. No matter how confident they left their meeting with the teacher and how they felt they had understood their child's school attainment realities and what they should do in practice, this did not correspond to what the teacher attempted to communicate to them or was not eventually implemented in a successful manner. Participant teachers of this study accused these parents for deficiencies in their ability in comprehension and attributed it mostly to their low educational level. One of the participant teachers expressed her thoughts regarding the reasons why these parents did not support their child successfully and according to their directions with the following:

[...] they cannot correspond whatever I say to them either because they don't understand what I am telling them or because they can't do it. I don't know, it might be due to the education factor. For example, in one of these cases [...] the mother has [...] not graduated from primary school [...] and she obliges me to talk to her about how to read and how to make calculations [...]. I really don't know what is going on.

In most cases, these families were coming from deprived educational backgrounds, found in both urban and more frequently rural areas. On the contrary, it was more 'close to education' families who seemed capable of responding to teachers' directions and employing a strategic plan to support their child's school life.

A second and equally important conclusion was that 'good-will, but no action' and 'not knowing how' families faced extreme difficulties in comprehending teachers' suggestions and considered that the directions and advices they received by teachers were too abstract and general, thus leaving them with a lot to understand on their own. Even though teachers were urging parents to support their child according to their mutual decisions during their briefings, often teachers' contribution to parents was not detailed enough and did not take the form of step-by-step practical tips, which would be easy to implement. At the same time, this study concludes that it is likely that teachers might sustain consciously an unwilling stance to provide such detailed guidelines to parents. This might be indicated by teachers' emphasis on informing and advising parents about school-exhibited behaviours and their less interest about the home perspectives. Teachers reluctance to provide information about aspects of children's schooling that families might regard as fundamental, which has been cited elsewhere as well (Martin, et. al, 1997), might signal teachers' lack of sensitivity or culture in viewing parental perspectives and needs. They may also reveal their

perception that briefings with parents are mostly for them to communicate their own perspective about children and to indicate parents what their responsibilities are. This might also, however, suggest a weakness on behalf of teachers to provide this more detailed and concrete information which will guide parents to support their children at home, either due to lack of adequate relevant education or even due to lack of appropriate communication skills. Participant teachers' attempts to communicate with parents was at times clumsy, whereas sometimes they did not convince of being genuine in trying to differentiate their communicating style for the sake of transferring effectively their message with those groups of parents who exhibited a particular difficulty in 'talking' the school's and the teachers' 'language'. Teachers' persistence to report children's marks to their parents might explain or disguise such inadequacies. Teachers might use mark reporting as a straightforward and fair for all communication tool, but avoid providing any substantial supplementary information, which could have been of more use for parents. Once again, it was mostly 'close to education' parents who managed to utilise better teachers' feedback. This occurred either because they were more able to comprehend teachers' language or because they were receiving more information by teachers who were feeling that they are more understood by these parents. These parents might even be more demanding in receiving detailed information during their briefings with teachers. It might be finally the case that these parents know how to support their children anyway and what their actual aim of contacting teachers is to receive their evaluation of their child's school performance in order to intervene at home and enhance it.

In conclusion, the ability or the background of the family to deal with educational issues might be the determinant factor in parents' success to make effective use of the information they receive by teachers during their contacts with them. Even though these parents are mostly found in middle and high-class families, participant families in this study living in difficult environments also managed to successfully support their children by following teachers' directions. It was not poverty, poorness in the financial sense or their social conditions as such that determined this success, rather than being enough educated to be highly motivated and confident in school-related knowledge and approaches. Families who appeared to have educational resources, which were not so different from those required in the school, were managing to effectively support their children as indicated by the school. In other cases, the parents had little education and/or their own educational and pedagogical experiences were limited or quite different from the school's pedagogical approaches. They thus appeared to handle limited or irrelevant to school educational resources and could not contribute significantly to their child's school successes. Even though these parents *do* come to school and demonstrate their genuine interest for sustaining a vivid relation with the school for the child's sake and to try to support their child at home, they manage to practically contribute very little or offer assistance of ambivalent value. This study reveals that, unfortunately, the proportion of families that belong in the category of parents is substantial.

Implications

This study could draw out implications for pedagogy, for educational policy and for research. In terms of pedagogy and educational policy, the main implication concerns the aim and outcomes of parent-teacher briefings. This study revealed that, despite the pedagogical value placed on parent-teacher briefings, these might not succeed in fulfilling their purpose of enhancing children's school performance for *all* pupils and

that they might even consolidate or widen existing stratification among pupils of certain family environments. Should parent-teacher briefings have pedagogical value, this value must be equally distributed to all parents. Teachers therefore need to be more conscious of the differences across parents and their various abilities and needs according to their educational background. They should find ways in fulfilling these different needs by adopting skilful approaches, which aim at communicating effectively with each parent. They must also realise that what happens during any contact is of critical importance and that the vast majority of parents reach the school with high expectations of cooperation with teachers in order to enhance their child's schoolwork. It is the teachers' task to find the ways to offer them all the proper types of information and communicate this in the most appropriate manner for each particular parent so that all parents depart from the school knowing what and how they need to support their child so it manages better at school. During each particular contact moreover, teachers need to make parents feel welcome. They should challenge them to share their own perspectives, opinions, ideas, anxieties and suggestions with regards to their child's schooling. Parents provide education at home anyway, and as Spreadbury points out (1995, p.3) "we need to see parents as the child's first teacher, and because of the emotional links between most parents and their children, parents may well be the child's most important teacher". Teachers need thus to learn to listen to parents and listen, apart from the actual content of what parents are saying, to the emotional meaning behind the words. As this study pointed out, all too often, school people have their own agenda and do not listen to parents. Teachers need to know how to contact the families in a way to let them know that the teacher understands them, is working with them and for them (Rosenthal & Sawyers, 1996).

Consequently, there is an immediate need for teachers to be trained during their pre-service and in-service education to improve their communication skills when working with parents of different educational, ethnical and socioeconomic backgrounds in diverse contexts. Teachers' ability of knowing how to communicate effectively, and how to end the conversation graciously, summarising any agreements and understandings is crucial. Moreover, staff development activities could be especially critical for novice teachers providing significant experiences from which they can begin building their relevant knowledge bases. As positive educational change only occurs through changes in teachers' attitudes towards the family environment, any staff development, professional development, professional renewal, continuing or in-service education must be the most important family-school activity a school system or particular school could launch.

Finally, in terms of research, there is a further need to develop studies which will refine the concepts presented in this paper, in particular the concept of the educational 'epheis' of families and their educational resources, with respect to qualitative accounts and approaches. This research could draw on Bourdieu's views of cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), which might assist in looking at and describing relationships between parent-school communications and shed some light on their complexities. Bourdieu's views, as well as Lareau's (2000) similar ideas could be potentially powerful ideas in describing, understanding, and seeking similarities or discrepancies between cultural resources of families and schools, in particular as far as the educational aspects of these resources. Of similar importance would be to empirically explore parent-teacher communication by drawing on Moll's and his colleagues concept of 'funds of knowledge' (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez,

1992) in order to identify asymmetries in family-school communication, as this study attempted to do, and revisit both formal and informal communications between families and schools.

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