

# Co-operating with Parents for Equal Opportunities in Education

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The importance of positive home-school relationships and shared decision making for children's well-being and achievement at school is well documented. Based on this, our action-research project was designed to enable parents to recognize and demand their children's rights. The primary goal was to improve the well-being and performance of children with disabilities in a Lyceum in Cyprus. To this end, we approached eight parents of four children with disabilities, aged 15 to 17. Through attentive listening, explanation of the legislation, support, encouragement and meetings with the special education stakeholders we tried to encourage parents demand their children's right to equal opportunities in quality education in a positive learning environment. In order to assess the intervention, the parents, the children and their teachers were interviewed. We found that the children were satisfied because they had significantly improved their grades, their self-confidence and their relationships with the teachers, albeit the children had not the same performance. The teachers were pleased because of the children's increased participation in the classroom, even though some of them had reservations regarding power issues. The parents were also happy with both their children's improved well-being and performance and the teachers' efforts to respond to the children's needs. In conclusion, co-operating with parents and developing working partnerships may increase the likelihood for equal opportunities in education, while learning at school may become a more joyful and fruitful experience.

*Keywords:* parental involvement in education, co-operation with parents, home-school relations, inclusive education.

## Introduction

Despite the complexity of the issues surrounding the factors that influence children's behaviour and performance, research has shown that parental<sup>1</sup> involvement in the education process is of great importance for children's learning, tangible academic benefits, improved behaviour and successful inclusion (Bastiani, 2003; Reece, Staudt, & Ogle, 2013; Whalley & the

Pen Green Centre Team (PGCT), 2007). Surprisingly, although positive home-school relationships play a significant role not only in children's well-being and achievement, but also in school effectiveness and efficiency, the relationship between home and school still constitutes a contentious issue (Beveridge, 2004; Gill, Morgan & Reid, 2013; Phtiaka, 2001). Of course, home-school relations have never been static across time and space; in contrast, they have been mirroring multifaceted and complicated issues, such as the existing power relations, the dominant culture and the imposed education policy (Gaitan, 2012). As a result, home-school relationships may be placed within a broad spectrum of feelings and behaviours that range from hostility and fierce conflicts in the school arena to close cooperation and strong partnership between parents and teachers (Bæck, 2010).

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<sup>1</sup>Having in mind that the concept of 'family' has changed during the last decades, the definition of parents in this paper includes "mothers, fathers, legal guardians and primary carers of looked-after children" (Children's Workforce Development Council, 2008, p. 78, as cited in Hughes & Read, 2012).

### **The spectrum of home-school relationships and the impact on children**

The relationships between parents and teachers are usually tinged with a controversial variety of feelings and emotions. Thus, even though a harmonious home-school relationship is the best scenario, a large number of parents have experienced tension, anxiety, and unpleasant feelings some time during their interaction with the teachers (Williams, Williams & Ullman, 2002). In fact, some parents feel intimidated and stressed by the thought of having to be involved in school life, especially if they experience poverty, have poor literacy skills, or are from an ethnic minority group (Gaidan, 2012; Hands, 2013; Kersey & Masterson, 2009). Frustration, confusion, stress and discrimination experienced by parents because of negative home-school relations can act as barriers to the effective communication and the essential information sharing between parents and teachers. Ironically, when terrified and embarrassed parents back away, teachers often misinterpret and condemn their behaviour as the inertia of 'hard to reach' or indifferent parents. In this way, home-school relations eventually grow not only poor but also negative for the children's well-being and performance (Harris & Goodall, 2008; Martin, 2006; Whalley & the PGCT, 2007).

From the perspective of parents, establishing partnerships working with teachers is not an easy task. Parents may believe that teachers are reluctant to share information with them or listen to what they have to say, even though parents may be called upon to work with teachers. Moreover, they argue that they often find themselves under pressure to conform to what teachers suggest, despite their likely disagreement (Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2008; Rogers, 2007). From their perspective, teachers may believe that parents meddle too much in the things that go on in school and that they should follow obediently the mandate of the school (Bæck, 2010). Thus, for the school, cooperation usually implies that teachers decide and parents agree, which is hardly a cooperation at all (Symeou, 2014; Tveit, 2009).

The attempts to control the parents by transforming them into obedient and docile partners seem to have negative implications for the children. In fact, developing positive home-school relations in a battlefield for power struggles appears rather utopian (Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2008; Tveit, 2009). This situation is more

challenging when home-school relations involve children with disabilities. As research reveals, parents of children with disabilities often feel that they are left out and that their children are faced as a sum of deficits and an amalgam of deviations from normality rather than being approached as persons. Moreover, they believe that professionals' endeavours to identify disabilities and syndromes are privileged, whereas their intimate knowledge of their child is devalued (Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2008; MacArthur, 2004; Phtiaka, 2001).

It seems then that when the roles of parents and professionals in decision-making and school life are unequal and confused, home-school relationships grow problematic (Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2008). Thus, tension between parents and teachers in the school arena and poor partnership may raise barriers to inclusion and deprive children with disabilities from equal opportunities in education (Bæck, 2010; Beveridge, 2004). In contrast, when teachers develop trusting relationships and partnership working with parents, then allies for the benefit of the children are created (Russell, 2011; Vincent, 2000). As a result, children's achievement, performance, and behaviour are improved. Moreover, likely problems and misunderstandings may be tackled at an early stage. In addition, when the relations between their parents and teachers are positive, children show greater self-direction, self-control and social adjustment, increased self-esteem, better psychosomatic health, and more positive relationships with their peers. Since these benefits seem to last throughout the children's school career, positive and trusting home-school relationships seem to play a pivotal role in the children's successful academic and social future (Gill et al., 2013; Waldman et al., 2008).

The basic components of positive home-school relationships are mutual respect and partnership working. Of course, defining partnership is difficult because it means different things to different people. Generally, partnership suggests cooperation, sharing of ideas and interaction. Moreover, it implies complementary expertise, critical friendships, understanding and willingness to learn from each other (Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2008; Vincent, 2000). Furthermore, real partners both listen and are listened to, while they are properly informed through a continuous process of dialogue and knowledge exchange (Hughes & Read, 2012; Risko & Walker-Dalhouse, 2009; Todd, 2003; Veck, 2009). Partnership then is

related to mutual respect and support, open, honest and continuous communication and negotiation, joint working, and shared decision-making (Gill et al., 2013; Hughes & Read, 2012; Pugh, 2010). As a result, cooperative parent-professional partnerships and the consequent family satisfaction become the bedrock of children's improved outcomes and important markers for their long-term development, particularly regarding children with disabilities. It seems then that active involvement of parents in schooling is an essential prerequisite for improving the children's well-being and performance (Phtiaka, 2006; Russell, 2011).

### **Parental role in schools in Cyprus**

Given that parental involvement in their children's education is related to fewer behavioural problems and better academic performance (Hill & Taylor, 2004; Hill & Tyson, 2009), a trend towards increased parents' participation in schooling may be observed in many countries (Zuckerberg, 2013). In Cyprus, parents constitute a rather active group, which is dedicated in the promotion and development of better education for their children, through Parental Associations. However, apart from typical attendance at meetings with teachers and occasional participation in selected school events, parents seem to be marginalised regarding policy and decision-making (Symeou, 2014; Zaoura & Aubrey, 2011).

As a result of realising their secondary role, parents of children with disabilities in Cyprus decided to form an advocacy group, believing that unless they struggle together, inclusion would never become a reality. Thus, albeit a bit late compared to other countries, they started their struggle for change, against a system that was raising barriers for children with disabilities. As a result, they eventually prompted the Government to pass the law 113(I)/1999, which legitimized inclusion (Symeonidou, 2002). However, their voice is still not strong enough to launch inclusive practice or to claim an equal share in decision-making (Phtiaka, 2001; Symeou, 2014).

Parents in Cyprus are almost completely absent during decision-making about services, which ought to be provided to their children. Thus, being declared as a caring process in the 'best interest' of the child, decision-making regarding children with disabilities takes the form of professional expertise, sometimes against the wishes of the parents or without even consulting them. Even when parents are asked to give information about

their children, it is someone else –an expert– who decides upon the best course of action (Damianidou & Phtiaka, 2013; Phtiaka, 2007). As a result of the lack of legal and state support, powerless parents seem to have no other option than obeying school verdicts and conforming to what is decided for their own children by others. However, feelings of disappointment, anger and unfulfilled expectations may constitute a source of conflict between home and school (Phtiaka, 2006).

By positioning parents as simple informants, the highly centralised education system in Cyprus empowers the 'experts' and backs up the professionals to jostle parents and reproduce the existing power relations. Thus, the central and leading role of professionals in decision-making concerning children's assessment and placement has resulted in their unquestioned dominance. Within this framework, parents in Cyprus are usually sidestepped and not listened to (Batsiou, Bebetos, Panteli & Antoniou, 2008; Phtiaka, 2001). According to Veck (2009) however, listening is an important process in order to effect change.

Thus, lack of positive home-school relations and family alienation from school may have critical implications for addressing children's needs, as well as for the development of their full potential. Since parents are an important source of information on the workings of the systems designed to meet their children's needs, keeping them out of decision-making appears to have a negative impact on children. Over-dependence then on specialists' verdicts may turn the attention on the assumed deficits and the child's limitations. In contrast, when parents become part of the discussion regarding their children and their needs, the focus is transferred to the children's potential and what the child is able to do. In this context, parents become the voice of their children's feelings and desires and thereby legal options and individual wishes may be matched (Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2008; Symeou, 2014; Zaoura & Aubrey, 2011).

Powerless and marginalized people are less likely to readily express themselves and their feelings and to effect change (French & Swain, 2008). Thus, powerless and fearful parents of children with disabilities in Cyprus may even blame their children for not managing to cope with the dominant education system and for having problems at school. At the same time, professionals continue to adopt the disabling position of the 'expert', a title that allows them to

remain powerful (Phtiaka, 2006). According to Bæck (2010), threats to the teachers' power, which stem from a larger political movement towards empowerment, cause teachers to set strict boundaries around parents' involvement in school. Thus, teachers' efforts to keep the power balance as it is and the parents' difficulties to negotiate with the system seem to eventually affect equal opportunities in education for children with or without disabilities (Slee, 2001).

Given that involving parents in decision-making and schooling may improve disabled children's well-being and performance, teachers ought to listen to the parents and include them in decision-making (Hill & Taylor, 2004; Hill & Tyson, 2009). After all, as pointed out by Bæck (2010, p. 323), it is the teachers who actually define the nature of the relation between home and school:

"Teachers are in position to either destroy or maintain the traditional barrier that exists between home and school, and teachers' interest, attitudes and competence regarding home-school cooperation is crucial for its success".

Based on the above, we began contemplating our responsibility to find ways to involve parents in schooling and decision-making regarding the education of their children.

### **Methodology**

Since one of us teaches inclusive education at the university and the other is currently working as an assistant head-teacher and is responsible for the implementation of special education programmes in a secondary education school, we had easy access and frequent communication with parents of children with disabilities. We noticed that some parents of children with disabilities hesitated to come to the school, or had an aggressive approach, while, according to the teachers, their children had low performance and decreased participation during lessons, or behavioural problems. Based on this observation, as well as our firm belief regarding the importance of positive home-school relationships and partnership with parents, we decided to conduct action research in order to find solutions to the above problem.

Action research constitutes a powerful tool for schools that may help them to make progress on school-wide priorities and meet the needs of a diverse student body (Sagor, 2000). Thus, the assistant head-teacher liaised with the university

lecturer to begin the cycle of action research in the school. We followed Sagor's (2000) seven-step process for action research. In this way we began reflecting on the topic of our research. We concluded that being happy at school and maximizing their potential is a right of all children, regardless of ability. Based on the importance of positive home-school relationships and parents' involvement in decision-making (Reece et al., 2013; Whalley and PGCT, 2007), we decided to work with the parents in order to effect change.

The second step involved identifying the values, beliefs and theoretical perspectives we held. Thus, we, as the researchers, decided to frame our research within the social model of disability, according to which disability is socially constructed (Oliver, 1990), and the interpretivist paradigm, which postulates that reality is constructed intersubjectively (Bryman, 2008). The main value that guided our research was home-school partnership as the cornerstone for students' well-being and school success (Gill et al., 2013). Within this framework, we decided to liaise with the parents and act to benefit children with disabilities.

The third step was to identify our research questions, which were the following:

- How can we encourage parents of children with disabilities in Cyprus to participate in schooling and decision-making regarding the education of their children?
- What are the effects of co-operating with parents on the well-being and performance of children with disabilities in Cyprus?

Next, we selected our research tools. Since our aim was to involve parents in schooling and explore the effect of co-operation with parents' on their children's well-being and performance, we decided that the most appropriate tool to gather information was the semi-structured interview (Bryman, 2008). The fifth step was thematic analysis of our data, during which we identified the items of analysis that were grouped in subcategories, categories and main themes, according to the research questions. The next two steps involved reporting our findings and taking informed action, as suggested by Sagor's (2000) model, based on the participants' suggestions and the relevant literature. Finally, our intervention was evaluated through semi-structured interviews with the parents, the children and the teachers. Based on the results, a second action research cycle will be initiated in the near future (Sagor, 2000).

### **Ethics procedures**

Our research was guided by the BPS (British Psychological Society, 2006) ethical guidelines. Firstly, the school gave us permission to conduct the study. Secondly, all participants gave informed consent to participate in the study and the intervention. In addition, the children gave assent and their guardians gave consent for them to participate. Participation was anonymous and confidential, while participants were notified that they could discontinue participation at any time without any penalty to them. In order to make sure that participants would not experience undue discomfort during the project, a friendly climate was kept, while the day and time of the meetings were scheduled according to what was more convenient for them. Finally, all the participants were treated with respect and empathy.

#### *Parents' and children's profiles*

The parents' and children's profiles are presented in table 1.

#### *Interventions*

In total there were three meetings with the researchers and each pair of parents, during which we implemented the following interventions, separately for each pair:

- attentive listening: we began our interventions with one to two hour sessions with the parents, during which we conducted the first part of the semi-structured interviews. During the meetings, we encouraged them to freely express their feelings and experiences regarding their relationships with the school. To this end, we listened to the parents attentively and treated them with empathy, which is an important component of supportive relationships and improved communication. Since empathy is related to reduced prejudice and better understanding of thoughts, it enables better perception of situations and more accurate assessment of actions and consequences (Cunico, Sartori, Marognolli, & Meneghini, 2012).

- Explanation of the legislation and the children's rights: a second meeting followed, during which we explained the basic principles of the current legislation regarding the rights of both children with disabilities and their parents. In particular, we highlighted the right for equal opportunities in education and the parents' potential to demand and assure the implementation of the latter. To this end, we explained that the parents were entitled to

participate in the meetings of the special education committee and discuss, approve or disapprove decisions, and ask for or reject particular measures, which they might believe would benefit or harm their child, respectively (Cyprus Parliament, 1999).

- Encouragement to demand equal opportunities in education for their children: since discouraged and intimidated parents are less likely to demand their children's rights (Gaidan, 2012; Hands, 2013), we organized a third meeting. Our aim was to encourage parents and boost their confidence and determination by providing them with the knowledge and the legal means to break the oppression and raise their voice against the authorities, so as to dismantle the barriers to equal opportunities in quality education and satisfaction of their children's needs.

- Organization of meetings with the head-teacher, the teachers, the school counsellor, the educational psychologist and the SENCO: after several private meetings with the parents, we organised official meetings with the authorities, as defined by the Law 113(I)/1999 (Cyprus Parliament, 1999). During these meetings the parents not only participated, but also were determined and self-confident enough to raise their voice and demand what their children were entitled. In this way, they played a principal role in decision-making. Since their main arguments were legally underpinned, the school authorities eventually agreed to their demands and made the necessary adjustments to satisfy their children's particular needs (see table 1).

- Support: throughout the process, which lasted for approximately three months, the parents had our continuous support, which included frequent informal personal communication, legal advice, psychological support, and boosting their confidence.

### **Findings**

Our data from the interviews included information regarding home-school relations and the parents' and children's status before, during and after our interventions. The findings are presented below.

#### *Before the interventions*

The first meetings with the parents aimed to facilitate the expression of their feelings about current and previous experiences during their interactions with the school. All of the parents had

Table 1  
Parents' and children's profiles

Parents	Child	Disability	Needs of the child
Friksos (43, Secondary education (SE)) + Maria (43, Tertiary education (TE))	Antonis (boy, 17)	Psychotic disorder	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Support to manage obsessive compulsions and anxiety, particularly during tests</li> <li>- Differentiated instruction</li> <li>- Extra time to finish assignments and tests</li> <li>- Encouragement</li> <li>- Stimulation of self-confidence and self-esteem</li> <li>- Attentive listening</li> <li>- Development of trustful relationships</li> <li>- Applied Behaviour Modification</li> <li>- Less pressure</li> <li>- Arrangement of the classroom environment</li> </ul>
Andreas (67, SE) + Lenia (66, TE)	Panagiotis (boy, 16)	ADHD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Differentiated instruction</li> <li>- Extra time to finish assignments and tests</li> <li>- Encouragement</li> <li>- Attentive listening</li> <li>- Development of trustful relationships</li> <li>- Applied Behaviour Modification</li> <li>- Less pressure</li> <li>- Individualised programme</li> </ul>
Kostas (42, TE) + Eleni (39, TE)	Marina (girl, 15)	Dyslexia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Differentiated instruction</li> <li>- Extra time to finish assignments and tests</li> <li>- Encouragement</li> <li>- Attentive listening</li> <li>- More emphasis on oral than writing</li> <li>- Less pressure</li> </ul>
Giorgos (41, TE) + Niki (38, TE)	Rafaella (girl, 15)	Turner's syndrome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Support to manage increased anxiety, particularly during tests</li> <li>- Differentiated instruction</li> <li>- Extra time to finish assignments and tests</li> <li>- Encouragement</li> <li>- Stimulation of self-confidence and self-esteem</li> <li>- Attentive listening</li> <li>- Development of trustful relationships</li> <li>- Less pressure</li> <li>- Controlled classroom temperature</li> <li>- Readiness to provide first aid if needed</li> </ul>

experienced rejection, underestimation, decreased respect and marginalization:

*"I feel that my opinion doesn't count. So I usually sit there and say nothing. And nobody cares what I think. They just tell me what they expect me to do"* (Andreas, Panagiotis' father).

*"I came to talk with her teacher, because she (my daughter) had failed at a test. The teacher was very aggressive and made me feel that it was my fault. The truth is that the teacher had not taken into account that my daughter was entitled to give oral examinations. I tried to tell her but she didn't listen. She kept on saying that my daughter is lazy and that she misbehaves and that she doesn't study at all at home"* (Eleni, Maria's mother).

Moreover, the parents felt that, before our meetings, they were neither listened to, nor

informed about decisions, which were often taken without them:

*"They decided that she needs a school caregiver to be with her all the time. She doesn't need that! They didn't even ask us! She has a syndrome that needs medical interventions, but she knows what to do, and the school can simply call us if something is wrong. I don't want her to feel ill and fragile, because she is not! We tried so hard to raise her self-confidence, we don't need this now!"* (Giorgos, Rafaella's father).

In addition, the parents felt that they had been repeatedly forced to agree with the mandate of the school, which sometimes treated their children as non-disabled students and had not made the necessary adjustments so as to satisfy their needs. As Maria revealed, teachers were not at all informed about her child, even after a whole month from the beginning of the school year:

*"It was unbelievable. I came to the school in October to ask the teachers why my child is feeling anxious, and I found that they had no idea about his condition. It's his third year in this school for God's sake! And they told me that he has to read more, be more careful and participate in the lesson. How? He needs to be approached firstly, and feel that he can trust you. Otherwise his compulsive obsessions become unbearable. For example, he has been repeatedly demanding from us to buy a particular type of car. This is because he feels stressed at school, and when he comes home his behaviour is uncontrolled"* (Maria, Antonis' mother).

As a result of the prevalent tension and alienation, parents felt frustrated and angry with school:

*"I feel very angry with the school. I have been calling them for a month now, last year for the whole year. I came to school so many times. And I realised that unless I shout nothing changes. I have explained my child's needs to them, again and again. How many times do I have to do this? I don't know what else to do"* (Lenia, Panagiotis' mother).

They also felt helpless and tired from their interactions with the school and the education system. According to Maria:

*"I am really tired. It's been twelve years now and I am fed up. Why do I have to run, run, run to reassure my child's rights? The system eats you alive. No empathy, nothing. I am a mother, I know my child, and I need the school to respect me and believe me"* (Maria, Antonis' mother).

Some parents seemed to be rather pessimistic regarding the future of their relations with the teachers:

*"I don't think there is any point in trying to build relationships with the teachers. I have been kind and soft for years, and nothing changed. They think they are the "experts", hence I am nothing to them"* (Giorgos, Rafaella's father).

The previous comments from the interviews were taken into consideration in the design of the interventions. The main finding was that the parents had a desire to advocate for their children, but did not have the means, the time and the

courage to express themselves, nor the opportunities to be listened to. These findings prompted us to design an intervention that focused on providing parents with the knowledge regarding their children's rights and the obligation of the school to involve them in decision-making, and thereby boost their confidence and determination. In addition, we tried to encourage the development of positive home school-relationships through the sharing of information, feelings and experiences between parents and teachers.

#### *During the interventions*

During our interventions we tried to make parents feel welcome and experience a different teachers' attitude, which included respect, attentive listening and support. As a result, parents began to feel relieved and less stressed.

*"It's the first time in years that I feel that I am listened to. I am so glad that eventually I found the support I need. Now I wake up in the morning and I am not stressed anymore that my girl will come to school and have problems and nobody will care. I know that there is somebody here to support me and my child"* (Niki, Rafaella's mother).

Moreover, because of having the opportunity to be engaged in dialogue and to share their views, both parents and teachers felt that they might be allies. Eventually, being convinced that teachers and parents had the same goal, which was to improve the children's performance and well-being, both of them understood that it was important to build trustful relationships and partnerships. According to Friksos:

*"It is important to have the school on our side. It is the only way to change things and benefit our child. He needs us to stick together, to try together to help him"* (Friksos, Antonis' father).

It is noteworthy that, when the parents understood their children's rights and the extent of their power, they felt more self-confident, less intimidated by the authorities and they were eager to firmly demand their children's rights.

*"I will not stop here. Unless her needs are satisfied and she is treated with respect, I will continue demanding what I know she is entitled to have"* (Kostas, Marina's father).

As a result of our interventions, parents not only had the courage to ask for changes at school level so as to satisfy their children's needs, but they also dared to reject suggestions that did not fit their children's wishes and dreams for the future.

*"They told me that Rafaella has difficulties in a lesson she has selected – she needs this lesson in order to go the University and study in a particular scientific field. It is the dream of her life, her purpose, her goal. And they called me from school to tell me that she must leave the lesson and take something easier instead, because she will never manage to be good at it – she is a 'weak' student according to them. And they called me and exercised so much pressure on us again and again. And I talked with my girl, and she was crying, because she really wants the particular study. But now I know my rights and her rights, and I told them that I don't give my permission, and that she will not change her subject, and that the school ought to find ways to support her, as the Law 113/1999 orders" (Giorgos, Rafaella's father).*

### **After the interventions**

In order to assess the interventions, we interviewed the children, the teachers and the parents. Firstly, according to the children, satisfying their needs and treatment with respect had a positive impact on their school-life, self-confidence and their relations with both the teachers and their peers, albeit some shortcomings.

*"I am much better now, I still have stress before tests, but my teachers help me manage my anxiety, and I always have extra time to finish a test" (Rafaella).*

*"This is my final year at school – I will graduate in June. At the beginning I thought that it was too difficult and that I couldn't make it, but now I have my friends and I have support from my teachers and I don't feel stressed that much. I believe I can do it and maybe someday I will go to study at the University if I want" (Antonis).*

*"Everything is ok, I have my friends, there are lessons that I like, and teachers understand me more now than before. They don't try to fight with me. I want to finish*

*school and next year I will go to the University. My grades are not that good yet, but I will try more next year" (Panagiotis).*

*"It's ok, I think my teachers listen to me more and try to help me understand the lesson. Of course there are teachers who still don't care and make my life difficult" (Marina).*

Secondly, the teachers felt more satisfied because the children participated more in the classroom and performed better regarding tests and assignments, while less behavioural problems were observed.

*"He communicates better, he is more careful at tests, he asks questions, he has friends and he is less stressed. There is an improvement as well regarding his tests" (Antonis' English teacher).*

*"He is much more well-behaved now. He is kind, he doesn't have any anger bursts anymore. He shows more self-control" (Panagiotis' History teacher).*

Importantly, some of the teachers acknowledged their responsibility to differentiate their instruction, to listen to the children and to approach them with empathy.

*"I felt that I had to differentiate my instruction. Now I don't give her the same paper as the other students. I try to 'break' the exercise so that she can finish one task at a time. I also encourage her and I tried to build better relationships with her by talking to her during school breaks. She seems less stressed now and she performs better" (Rafaella's Mathematics teacher).*

*"I go next to him during tests and I ask him if he needs me to explain anything to him. And he has a better performance and more self-confidence. He seems less stressed now" (Antonis' Religious studies teacher).*

However, there were teachers who had reservations regarding the students' potential and questioned the process of giving power to the parents.

*"She is very weak, she doesn't want to work, she is arrogant – she will never learn English no matter what I will do" (Marina's English teacher).*

*"This is a mistake. She takes very low marks in tests. We have to convince her parents that she cannot learn physics! She*



*ought to change her electives – take something easier, accounting for example”* (Rafaella’s Physics teacher).

*“It is not a good idea to involve parents in decision-making. They just talk and talk and talk, and they blame us for their child’s incompetency. They shouldn’t meddle so much* (Panagiotis’ Modern Greek teacher).

Finally, the parents expressed their satisfaction and their relief because they were listened to and participated in decision-making, while their children showed increasing signs of improved well-being and performance.

*“I would like to thank the school and the teachers because of listening to us and respecting our wishes. I am so relieved these days, because Antonis has changed so much. He doesn’t say anymore that he doesn’t want to finish school and he is not stressed. He is performing better, he has made new friends and he even goes out with them after school. Our child is happy at last, and because of this we are happy, too. It’s really been a long, long process but I am really glad we finally managed to reach a shared understanding with the school and the teachers; and this is reflected on our child’s happiness”* (Maria, Antonis’ mother).

*“We finally have people who support us, allies, we don’t hesitate to demand what our daughter needs. Our daughter seems less stressed because she knows that both her parents and her teachers co-operate and work together for her”* (Eleni, Rafaella’s mother).

## Discussion

Being a parent of a student with disability is not an easy situation. Thus, before the intervention, the parents that participated in our research felt marginalized, frustrated, oppressed, tired and pessimistic regarding home-school relationships and the effects on their children. Moreover, they did not seem confident or knowledgeable about their ability to demand that their children have the services that they were entitled to. As Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2011) explain, parents of children with disabilities are not only disempowered by school, but also have to face the governance of professionals. As a result, they are constantly subjected to scrutiny, high

levels of surveillance and judgment from school and professionals and pressure to conform to what the school wants, which is intimidating. To make things worse, a large part of teachers, who actually have the power in the school setting, do not seem to favour inclusion. Usually being related to inadequate initial teacher training and stereotypes about disability as a medical condition, this negative attitude constitutes an important barrier to the development of cooperative relationships with the parents of children with disabilities and renders parents helpless (Batsiou et al., 2008; Koutrouba, Vamvakari & Steliou, 2006; Symeonidou, 2002).

As a result of the intervention, improvement in the partnership working from the perspectives of parents, children and teachers was observed, albeit with some reservations and minor shortcomings. Since parents are the experts regarding their children and their needs, involving them in school life and considering their perspectives as a rich source of valuable information may offer a common ground for allies with the teachers for the benefit of children with disabilities (Todd, 2003). Hence, since the child’s progress and development appear to be largely dependent on parents being engaged in schooling and playing a key role in the design and subsequent implementation of interventions (Russell, 2011), education should be a shared responsibility between parents and school (Waldman et al., 2010). As this study showed then, providing a platform for parents and teachers to listen to each other and to act on their desires to improve the experiences for the children may have positive results regarding children’s well-being and school performance (Souto-Manning, 2010).

How then can parents of children with disabilities in Cyprus be encouraged to participate in schooling and decision-making regarding their children?

Despite sporadic teachers’ complaints that parents are hard-to-reach, multiple entry routes that meet different needs ought to be employed in order to encourage parents to contact and visit school on a regular basis, to participate in school life and share information with the teachers (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). Having in mind our interventions, some of the methods that teachers may employ in order to encourage parental involvement include the following (Gill et al., 2013; Kersey & Masterson, 2009; Reece, Staudt & Ogle, 2013; Tveit, 2009):

- Inviting parents to school regularly and keeping them up-to-date with their children's progress;
- Encouraging parents to be involved in school and out-of-school learning activities and to have a voice in school governance;
- Facilitating parents across different sectors of society and cultures to be involved in the work of the school;
- Providing parents with the essential knowledge regarding their children's rights and listening to them so as to encourage their participation in decision-making.

Of course, in order to understand why it is important to involve parents in schooling and decision-making, particularly parents of children with disabilities, we need to answer our second question: what are then the effects of co-operating with parents on the well-being and performance of children with disabilities?

Based on our findings consistent with other research (e.g. Gill et al., 2013; Russell, 2011; Vincent, 2000; Waldman et al., 2008), co-operating with parents has the following effects on children with disabilities:

- More respect by authorities regarding the children's rights, as shown in the implemented changes in the aforementioned school, aiming to accommodate the needs of children with disabilities
- Improved performance and better learning, which was confirmed by the children's better marks and assignments of improved quality

- Improved well-being, which, according to the children and their parents, was reported as feeling happy both at school and at home
- Better relationships with the teachers and the children's peers, as described by the children, their parents and teachers
- Less behavioural problems, as the teachers reported.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, even though the extent of parental involvement seems to be influenced by various factors such as parent status, education, health, social class and previous experiences with school and teachers, it is worth trying to establish trusting home-school relationships and dismantle the barriers to parental involvement in school life by co-operating with them. In this way, children's well-being and performance may improve and learning at school may become a joyful and fruitful experience (Gill et al., 2013; Desforges and Abouchar, 2003). In Cyprus, parents of children with disabilities have been trying for the last few decades to raise their voice for the benefit of their children, with limited success (Phtiaka, 2001; Symeonidou, 2007). Despite the small sample size of this research and the likelihood for different experiences in different settings, this study seems to provide evidence that inspired teachers may become change agents and promote equal opportunities in education for all children, through effective co-operation with the parents.

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