

## **PROMOTING PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN MULTICULTURAL SCHOOLS: IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATORS**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In Malta, the number of foreign children is causing educators to think of new strategies which diversifies parental involvement in schools. It is no secret that parental involvement is an essential component of children's education. However, the engagement of parents in intercultural school setups is becoming increasingly challenging.

Teachers whose background is rather homogenous and with minimal exposure to the cultural subtleties of students coming from different backgrounds tend to develop pedagogies which are apt to their own cultural makeup – unwittingly disregarding the fact and the changing cultural environment around them. Teachers tend to assume that that all students are able to learn irrespective of cultural and linguistic disparities, hence they adopt pedagogical strategies based on perceived value free assumptions and strategies. Pedagogical strategies are often applied as a 'one size fits all' without considering the impact which cultural and linguistic have on parental involvement and student academic success (Valenzuela, 2010; CCTC, 2013).

School staff may find it difficult to appreciate that students whose culture differs from the dominant culture are almost coerced into accepting the cultural establishment permeating their educational development in schools. Teachers may also be unwittingly placing on parents the huge burden of obtaining such capital, resulting in undue pressure on students which frequently goes unnoticed.

### **TEACHERS' PREPAREDNESS IN RESPONDING TO CHANGING CULTURAL CAPITAL**

The multicultural mosaic present in our schools is unequivocally pervading our classrooms. The heterogeneous mix of cultural diversity poses pedagogical and social challenge to educators. Teacher effectively in culturally diverse settings is becoming increasingly questioned in terms of pedagogical effectiveness and curricular content to ensure equal opportunities for academic success, social development and enhancement of self-esteem. Valenzuela (2010) coined the term "subtractive schooling" to describe how school manage to "subtract resources" from culturally different students by operating assimilationist pedagogical practices. These practices inherently undermine learning by robbing students of their cultural and linguistic heritage. When teachers lack awareness of different methodologies in education or systematically exclude students' languages of origin or cultural artefacts from the classroom, they are inadvertently working against students' adjustment and academic performance. They would also be undermining love for schooling, a situation which will continue precipitating as years go by (Valenzuela, 2010). Also, instead of engaging in a constant re-examination of their own pedagogical practices, teachers may unintentionally shift the blame to the parents, claiming lack of interest and involvement as the sole reason for child's lack of success (Bower & Griffin, 2011). These practices destabilise learning by robbing students of their cultural and linguistic heritage. When teachers ignore the cultural underpinnings of learning or exclude a student's language or cultural artefacts from the classroom, they are inadvertently working against students' motivation for academic success while undermining the inherent pleasure to learn. This has a negative ripple effect which continues to exert its influence over time (Valenzuela, 2010). Instead of reassessing the effectiveness of their pedagogical paradigms, teachers tend to shift the blame onto parents-claiming that they (parents) are not living up to their responsibilities (Bower & Griffin, 2011). According to Gay (2010), such 'subtractive schooling' can be mitigated against by effectively implementing culturally responsive teaching – a teaching methodology that makes multiculturalism and culture the fulcrum of all instructional practices. Within this context, it is imperative to first understand the meaning of parental involvement and the various aspects and connotations associated with it.

Numerous studies have correlated the involvement of parents in their children's education as beneficial for their development and academic achievement (Beverage, 2013; Hill, 2009; University of Leicester, 2010). Research however suggests that although parental involvement has a positive effect on students' motivation, resilience and self-efficacy, grades being less affected (Fan and Williams, 2009).

### **DEFINITION OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT**

The definition of parental involvement has proved to be multifaced and dependent on the various contexts it is being used. Some studies define parental involvement in terms of how much parents attend to school events such as prize days, sports days, mothers' and fathers' days, parents' days etc (Bower and Griffin, 2011). Others

stated that parental involvement may be defined in terms of their investment in the child's education- be it financial, intellectual, transportation, time, energy or simply supporting social and academic opportunities for their children (Fishman & Nickerson, 2015; Hayes, 2012; Ice & Hoover-Dempsey, 2011). These initiatives are perceived by educators as important elements in parental involvement because they fit within traditional expectations and are clearly visible. There are, however, other forms of parental involvement which may be less observable and not easy to define or include within the realm of parental involvement (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006). Some studies suggest that culturally diverse parents, parents of low socio-economic status, or of limited educational background tend to be less involved in school affairs than parents coming from the dominant culture, parents of high socio-economic status, or those who are more educated (Artiles et al., 2010; Duchnowski et al., 2012; Rodriguez, Fishman & Nickerson, 2015; Wagner et al., 2012). Lack of childcare facilities can also be an additional hurdle for parents to participate as they would wish in their children schooling.

Moreover, different forms of parental involvement may go unnoticed because it occurs in the home and goes beyond traditional practices such as homework help (Bower & Griffin, 2011). For example, Latino cultures tend to invest a lot of time and energy to transmit knowledge onto the younger generations through the sharing of traditional stories and past family events (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006). Other kind of parent involvement which frequently go unnoticed include time spent in religious activities such as observance of religious practices and holidays, the uphold of traditional family customs and time spent with grandparents (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006). Though these parents may be perceived by school educators as 'less involved', they were actually expressing higher levels of involvement than others who do not uphold the same values. This research seems to imply that teachers have a rather limited understanding on what constitutes parental involvement (Bower & Griffin, 2011).

#### **BARRIERS TO PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT**

While teachers tend to place undue responsibility on parents for students' academic successes at school, there are other factors which impact heavily on educational outcomes. These include race, gender and socio-economic status (Galindo & Sheldon, 2012; Hayes, 2012; Wagner et al., 2012). Differences in social class (Lai & Vadeboncoeur, 2012) and in cultural values and beliefs (Chen & Garcia, 2011; DeGaetano, 2007; Lai & Vadeboncoeur, 2012) can cause strains between parents and schools. Differences in student outcomes can also be attributed to structural barriers faced by culturally diverse parents such as access to adult education, social status, access to child-care. Other studies point to a wide range of school and teacher factors which directly impact on parent involvement (Gay, 2010; Nieto, 2010; Valenzuela, 2010).

When teachers view parents in a "subtractive" manner they can be creating barriers to parental involvement (Chu & Garcia, 2014; Lai & Vadeboncoeur, 2012; Pollack, 2012; Ravindran & Myers, 2012). Negative perceptions held by school staff can also leave Culturally Diverse Parents feeling estranged from the school environments due to lack of trust in the system (Brandon et al., 2010). Moreover, many parents experience difficulty communicating with school staff due to language differences (Chu & Garcia, 2014; Torres-Burgo et al., 2010; Trainor, 2010). This impacts heavily on the readability and comprehension of school documents, such as school calendars, circulars, diary notes etc, not to mention the complex educational jargon present in official ministerial and governmental documentation. In one study, Vassallo (2014) reports how parents from certain countries had difficulty understanding the Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) of their child. This has resulted in parents communicating less with the specialists, thus resulting in minimal engagement time on how to help their child. Vassallo (2014) also contends that parents who find difficulty in English Language usage may find diagnostic terminology difficult to grasp. Terms such as 'differential diagnosis', 'low cognitive functioning' or 'developmental delay' may be difficult to understand, explain or even translate in another language. Further to his research, Vassallo (2014) maintains that navigating through the subtleties of cultures requires lots of insightful study and reflection. He stresses that body language, silence, colloquial expressions, pitch, intonation and pacing of speech all influence the overall interaction between parents and professionals. Terms such as 'careless', 'lazy', 'lacks discipline' may be familiar with parents but 'autistic', 'learning disabled', 'low intellectual functioning' may require lengthy explanations within culture specific contextual settings (Vassallo, 2014).

#### **THE IMPACT OF CULTURAL AND OTHER DIFFERENCES ON TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT**

Numerous studies concord that values and beliefs vary across cultures (Heggertveit-Aoudia, 2017). Culturally and Linguistically Diverse families offer a wide variety of beliefs, values and behaviours which when brought in close proximity, give way discord, mistrust and strenuous between parents and school staff (Nieto, 2010; Spring, 2012; Valdés, 2010). In their study on parent involvement in special education Garcia, Perez & Ortiz

(2000) found that the cultural interpretations attached to child development were in sharp contrast to the perspective of teachers and school psychologists. In particular they also found that what teachers perceived as “speech delay” was thought of as “normal” on the specific culture of the child and therefore were reluctant to respond to concerns presented by teachers about delayed verbal and non-verbal skills or low communicative abilities. Instead of allowing for disposition and ‘psychological space’ into understanding that families have their own cultural norms of understanding language development, teachers quickly branded parents as ‘lacking concern’, ‘in denial’ or ‘resisting’.

Teachers and parents may hold different and conflicting expectations about parental involvement and that could be the influence of cultural, racial, linguistic, socio-economic, and other differences (Duchnowski et al., 2012; Fishman & Nickerson, 2015; Harry, 2008; Ice & Hoover-Dempsey 2011, Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013). Research conducted by Lai & Vadeboncoeur (2012) claims that the mandatory involvement of parents during IEPs favours white middle class values since they are usually more skilled in advocating for parental and students’ rights.

Contrary to popular belief, the involvement of parents in education requires high social skills such as turn-taking in conversations, effective communicative competence and sharing ideas. These skills vary significantly from culture to culture (Kozleski et al., 2008; Lai and Vadeboncoeur, 2012). The levels of parental involvement in schools depend entirely on the effectivity of school-home communication and the psychological space which parents are allowed exhibit within the school walls. School staff need to be able to reach parents from a variety of linguistic backgrounds. If schools are planning for increased parental involvement, they would need accompanying material, such as pamphlets and e-mails to be properly translated in a language which parents understand (Trainor, 2010). Financial resources should be directed at employing translators and cultural mediators.

Lee & Bowen (2006) argue that parents whose culture is similar to that of the educational institution are able to capitalize more on the opportunities offered by the school. The researchers contend that these parents are able to bring their cultural and economic capital to good effect and to garner additional capital such as information on parents’ meetings, seminars, ladies, circles and father clubs. Such activities will in turn have an increased influence their children’s success. On the other hand, families whose cultural capital differs from the residing educational tend to take a passive role, thus precipitating a negative impact on student achievement (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Therefore, parental involvement tends to be heavily stirred towards parents whose culture is similar to that of the school (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Hence school authorities need to be cautioned against attributing lack of parental involvement of culturally diverse families to negligence or lack of interest. Apart from teachers needing intercultural competencies and skills to work with students who are culturally diverse, they also need to cultivate the skills necessary to work with families. Teachers often lack the necessary skills to effectively interrelate with culturally diverse families. They are often oblivious of the cultural capital which diverse families bring to the school and therefore are prone to underutilise an important cultural resource that can support their students’ academic success. Teachers may even perceive this new cultural capital as a hindrance to their academic planning (Moll et al., 2013; Valenzuela, 2010). Some culturally diverse families possess limited English Language proficiency and this can further strengthen pre-existing beliefs on culturally diverse families. This will also place additional responsibilities and increased challenge on underprepared teachers (Sullivan, 2011).

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

A Qualitative methodology was employed in the study to examine the intricacies of parental involvement as they forge their way through schooling their children. The methodology of the study is based on the phenomenological approach. The essential ingredient in phenomenological inquiry is the unique experience of people during their interaction with the phenomenon, the meaning they give to this experience and the interpretations arising from these meanings. Hence, the focus of phenomenology is not the world but rather the subjective experience of the person who experiences the world, in view of a particular issue or situation. In this study, the interviewing method served “the specific purpose of exploring and gathering experiential narrative material, stories or anecdotes, [and a] resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon.” Interviews gave the researcher the opportunity to opportunity to ‘delve deeply’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017) into the perceptions of school leaders and their role in leading their multicultural school. Interviews have the inherent quality to glean data through the use of multi-sensory channels namely verbal, non-verbal, vocal and hearing channels (Cohen et al., 2007). Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2000, p.272) argue that information collected from interviews give “greater depth than is the case with other methods of data collection”.

Twenty-one parents from ten different Maltese schools (state, church and independent) and from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds voluntarily participated in the study. Where possible and necessary, a community leader was sought by the researcher to serve as a translator and cultural interpreter. Also, the interview style was modified for participants whose first language is not English. Where possible interviews were conducted with both parents at the same time. These provisions ensured a high degree of interaction between the researcher and the respondent, enabling seamless conversation together the added benefit of clarifying arising perceptions or misconceptions (Ribbins, 2006).

Prior to interviewing parents, a meeting was held to explain the purpose of research and the process that was going to be used during the interview sessions. Participants were also informed that interviews were to be semi-structured i.e. researchers might need to probe through responses for the sake of clarity, need for repetition or more depth of responses (Gray, 2004). Such interactive process facilitated the researcher into gaining more in-depth insights on the participants' attitudes, opinions and actions (Kendall, 2008).

Interview respondents were assured of the utmost confidentiality and anonymity throughout the study. The highest of ethical standards were rigorously maintained and respondents were given the liberty to pull out from the study at any time they desired. Participants were also assured that transcription of data will be used for research purposes only and would be destroyed once the study is over.

The study was conducted during specific periods of the year, where the researcher had the opportunity to meet parents. A purposive sample was used in the study. This consisted of a non-probability sample that is selected based on characteristics of the population and the objectives of the study. Hence parents were selected on the basis that 1) nationality being non-Maltese and 2) have been in Malta for less than five years. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured throughout the study. The interviews consisted of a number of open ended questions lasting around 45 minutes.

The research questions identified in the study were:

- 1) To what extent do you participate in school activities?
- 2) What do you think are the major obstacles for parents not participating in school activities?
- 3) How and in what way can these obstacles be challenged?

Data analysis was conducted with the assistance of, CAQDAS (Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software, 2017) – a computer assisted qualitative analysis software which helped the researcher to identify emergent patterns and themes which could subsequently be utilized as the fabric upon which further analysis could proceed.

## **RESULTS AND ANALYSIS**

Parents suggested that their communities need to be more representative across all levels of the schools including at management level. Some parents, however, seemed to have a limited understanding of what parental involvement entails while others displayed reluctance to become involved due to work commitments. This lack of common understanding of what parent participation entails could be a primary reason for lack of involvement. Twelve parents out of the twenty-one, commented that their school never informed them as to the extent they are expected to participate. Five others commented that they limited themselves to 'important' formal meetings such as the prize day and the Parents' Day. Two parents suggested that policies need to be inclusive of the different cultures citing as example the Muslim Ramadam period as non-ideal to hold parents' days or parents' evenings. According to these parents, such insensitivity could deter parents' future participation in school events. Nine parents insisted that there has to be a policy which paves the way for allowances for parents coming from different socio-linguistic cultures, as these would lure parents to social functions organized by the school. They also commented that the non-provision of translators (both linguistic and cultural) such as the one employed for the interview, would be an added asset if participation is to be enhanced. According to these parents the same holds to digital and written communication, citing the school calendar, newsletter and websites as possible avenues where different linguistic communication can take place. A parent commented that the frequently she finds herself having to ask her child what is actually written on some of the school circulars.

The same goes with verbal communication. Six parents commented that sometimes they phone school and cannot have their message or complaint properly addressed due to the linguistic barrier. They say that policies need to be enacted which respect the fact that some parents are limited in both the English and Maltese

Language. They also suggested that parents' committees, apart from being more inclusive and representative, need to deliver these important messages to the school and educational authorities.

One parent said that members of the board of trustees in her school did not reflect the ethnic composition of parents and consequently policies are not reflecting the cultural composition of the students. Since parents on the school board of trustees make decisions on behalf of all school parents and children there has to be a cultural representation which "makes sense".

All parents believed, albeit to different extents, that schools are in no way directly responsible for racism or xenophobic attitudes which systematically excluded parents at the expense of others. However, the fact that the medium of communication in schools is English or Maltese inadvertently contributes to somewhat marginalise parents. As suggested by Valenzuela (2010) these lacunae have a profound impact on the level parental involvement in schools and consequently on students' progress and future successes.

The low levels of productive interactions between schools and parents has led some teachers and school leaders to conclude that parents from culturally diverse backgrounds do not demonstrate sufficient interest in their children's education and lack cooperation with schools. This viewpoint was continuously being challenged by the parents during interviews, who have, in more ways than one expressed possible reasons and also came up with solutions.

The absence of school policies which specifically target involvement from culturally diverse families need to be seriously considered. Such a provision is considered as "the most important determinant of effective home-school programmes" (Epstein & Sanders, 2000, p. 289).

Restricted opportunities for interaction between culturally diverse families and school staff are evident, with parents blaming the lack of accommodation for those parents whose English is not their first language. It must be stated that although some of the parents interviewed did possess excellent proficiency in English, they still suggested a culturally proficient mediator to assist them when interacting with school staff. Findings seem to support research conducted by Chrispeels (1990, 371) who stated that schools tend to direct their efforts at 'fixing parents rather than altering school structures and practices'. This is because problems are bound to inflate if cultural differences between parents and educators are not bridged by professionally trained people.

### **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

It was suggested by community leaders that the researcher could have informed parents whose culture is different from the mainstream, and/or with limited proficiency in English language they are entitled to the services of a cultural/linguistic interpreter rather than directly asking if they need one. This may have been the reason why some refused assistance. Community leaders also suggested that interviews with families could have been conducted at the same time so that parents feel more comfortable expressing themselves. Time accommodation would have been an ideal option as is the length of engagement time between research and participants prior and after interviews.

The presence of family member to serve as cultural interpreters could have contaminated the results of the study. Also, family members could have been better involved in planning interviews as this would give a clear message that their input is important. Meeting these parents at school could have been a further deterrent. In future, such interviews could have been conducted at the participants' home or workplace.

### **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

School need to be cognizant of the importance to acknowledge that *all* parents strive to ensure the best education for their children. Where parents feel a sense of detachment from school, it is the schools' moral responsibility to look out for reasons why this is so. School need to avoid engaging in assumptions that certain groups of parents lack the necessary interest for their children to progress. This is supported by research conducted by Van Wyk & Lemmer (2009, p.58), who called such assumptions "a fallacy".

School Educators need to be more sensitive and tuned to the potential offered by diverse family cultures. Such potential can be cultivated by creating effective home-school partnerships and recognizing the wealth which such endeavour is able to generate in schools. Schools are the ideal places for families of different cultures to meet and therefore it is up to the school to construct positive atmospheres and welcome parent warmly. This includes taking into account the multiple languages, cultures, race, socio-economic backgrounds, beliefs and religions practices of the parent body. School need to acknowledge that parents and students coming from cultures other than the mainstream deserve full respect and this needs to be exemplified into an array of

communication strategies taking into account the linguistic, prosodics, behaviours of all. In view of this, the employment of cultural translators/ mediators need to be seriously considered.

The enterprise of prompting more active involvement from parents is a Senior Management issue and needs to be planned and implemented with the rigorosity it deserves. Senior Management Teams are in a position to catalyse processes which promote opportunities for parents to become involved in their children's education of their children, irrespective of their backgrounds, socio-economic status or proficiency in the dominant language. A strong leadership ethic and staunch commitment by all stakeholders form the essence of such initiatives. Policies aimed at richer parental involvement need to be rewritten to reflect the realities of today's and future globalised education. The involvement of parents from diversified backgrounds into the construction, implementation and evaluation of newly of newly crafted policies would set the pace for increased cooperation.

In secondary and upper secondary schools, special assignment teams composed of parents, teachers and students can be set up with the aim of coming up with strategies of how to mitigate against difficulties related to cultural disparities between parents and staff or between staff and students. These strategies would then need to be evaluated for their effectivity in dealing with difficult situations.

Teacher training programmes need to be proactive and acknowledge the necessity for teachers and associated professions to work with parents of multicultural origin. Programs would need to include an array of knowledge about cultures and the subtle differences which exist across and within cultures. They would also include the practice of skills sets necessary for the effectively deal with situations arising out of cultural incongruities. It is by forming strong partnerships between parents and teachers, coupled with able leadership that we will witness benefits on our students.

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