

# Parental Involvement in Literacy Instruction: The Perspectives of Greek Special Educators

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## Abstract

Considering the need for parents to operate as co-educators, it is particularly important to understand the perceptions of special education teachers who deal with children's learning difficulties regarding parents' involvement in literacy instruction. Nineteen special educators who have been serving children with reading difficulties in inclusion settings of mainstream schools around Greece, participated in the present study. They have been interviewed using Epstein's (1987) framework and data has undergone a thorough qualitative analysis. The results indicated the significant parental role in the literacy development of children with learning difficulties and the benefits of their involvement; reveal the responsibility of teachers and school for enabling parent involvement and the levels of perceived and actual involvement. Suggestions for bridging the gap between theoretical views and actual practice are discussed in the light of Bronfenbrenner's (1994) bioecological interactive concept of family-school partnership and a family-centered model of provision for children with literacy difficulties.

## Keywords

Parental involvement, special educational needs, literacy difficulties, special educators

## 1. Introduction

It is well established that parental involvement (PI) is related to children's academic achievement. PI is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct which refers to a broad variety of parental behaviors and beliefs or attitudes that directly or indirectly relate to children's school achievement. Two broad dimensions that of home - based and school - based involvement have been provided to distinguish what parents do at home (e.g., reading with children, encouragement/support for learning, assistance with homework, educational expectations for achievement) and at school (e.g., school visits, volunteering, teacher-parent communication) (Epstein, 1987).

Some types of PI may be more beneficial than others. For example, parents' expectation is a strong predictor of achievement followed by encouragement and support. Less clear are the contributions of assistance in children's homework and involvement in school activities (Wilder, 2014). Homework involvement has produced positive, negligible, or even negative associations with children's academic development. Positive outcomes have been produced when parents receive training to be effective in this process (Senechal & Young, 2008). Moreover, Gonida and Cortina (2014) found that different types of PI in homework were differentially associated with the academic outcomes examined, whereas parent autonomy support was the most beneficial one. It is important to note however, that PI can influence children's academic achievement indirectly through the mediational role of child academic competence (i.e., characteristics such as cognitive ability). The most powerful factor for developing feelings about literacy and literacy achieve-

ment is maternal education. Mothers with higher education are in general, more successful in their involvement than mothers with lower education (Boonk, Giselaers, Ritzen, & Brand-Gruwel, 2018). Home literacy environment (HLE) is a mediator between family SES and children's literacy skills. HLE is characterized by the variety of opportunities for exposure to literacy as well as parents' literacy abilities and dispositions to provide them (Burgess, Hecht, & Lonigan, 2002). Shared storybook reading and parental teaching of literacy skills at a young age (e.g., age 4) predict word-level and reading comprehension 2 years later, among children with a family-risk for dyslexia (Hamilton, Hayiou-Thomas, Hulme, & Snowling, 2016).

Despite the beneficial aspects that PI presents in children's education there are barriers in their communication and collaboration with schools and teachers. Parents' unwillingness or lack of opportunities to become involved is often reported. Involvement may be encouraged but they have not received instructions on e.g., how to help with homework. It is a culturally stable pattern for concrete and superficial relation with teachers. The analysis of the beliefs held by 581 Greek parents revealed distinctively separate roles with the teachers being the 'experts' in academic domains and the parents responsible for developing social and emotional aspects (Poulou & Matsagouras, 2007). Teachers on the other hand, prefer compliant supporters of their views and tend to ask for support only when parents are willing to follow their instructions in areas that teachers consider their domain (e.g., Steensel, McElvany, Kurvers, & Herppich, 2011). Focusing on Greek teacher perspectives, Koutrouba, Antonopoulou, Tsitsas, and Zenakou (2009) suggested that although socio-economic and cultural issues cannot be precluded from a weak parent-school collaboration scheme, there is lack of adequate infrastructure such as shortage of trained staff (i.e., educational psychologists) responsible to help educators and parents collaborate effectively.

Parents' motivation to become involved is an issue of concern on this matter. Parents' perception of self-efficacy and belief system guide their decisions and efforts to become involved in their children's education. The mechanisms encompassing their incentives have been articulated by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) with a model specifying three components namely, modeling parent's behavior, reinforcement for behaviors leading to school success and direct instruction. Both their beliefs and thoughts about themselves as parents and their role in children's learning, shape parental attributions of the child's achievement, influence their involvement and motivate respective actions regarding the educational process (Georgiou & Tourva, 2007). The school's ability to create a welcoming and informative setting for exchanging ideas and invitations to discuss students' progress are invaluable because these indicate that school and teachers value parents' involvement. However, their personal life, circumstances (e.g., timing), and personal abilities (e.g. competence in math) have a specific contribution to this collaboration (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007). The conceptualization of a collaborative scheme is better perceived within a model of synergy in education. It defines a common educational experience simultaneously and in cooperation of persons differing in age, cognitive infrastructure, social or cultural level. The aim is participants' change of attitudes and behaviors from a state of indifference-disinterest to an active and effective participation (Mylonakou & Kekes, 2007). The shared responsibility model assumes that families are part of a dynamic system that supports or constraints their involvement. Therefore, larger comprehensive or complementary learning systems may engage cross-age and cross-context involvement pathways (Weiss, Bouffard, Bridglall, & Gordon, 2009).

Nevertheless, family involvement is not a panacea, rather a strong component for greater educational equity, improved developmental and educational outcomes and inclusive practices for children who most need it. Current inclusive forms of schooling require parents and teachers to interact, working collaboratively towards the promotion of inclusive practices for students with special educational needs (SEN). Moreover, the education of children with SEN and literacy difficulties, requires a good level of PI. Barriers to a great or moderate involvement are parent related (lack of time or education, cultural or socioeconomic differences, parent attitudes or belief system) or teacher related (lack of available time or training in working with parents, teacher attitudes). The difficulties in achieving a good level of collaboration have been underscored in studies addressing the issue both in developed countries (US: Burke, 2013) and developing ones (e.g., Bhutan: Jigyel et al. 2018, Albania: Balli, 2016, Israel: Hebel & Persitz, 2014). The severity of the child's difficulty may impact parental time, responsibilities, and energy. Besides, there is high level of stress in the families of these children affecting parents, siblings, and the relationship among them. However, families benefit when take charge of child's education and educate/train themselves instead of relying totally on external agencies (Gupta & Singhal, 2004; Sugden, Baker, Munro, & Williams, 2016). Parents' participation in their children's education leads to positive outcomes including greater continuity of intervention programs, more effective problem-solving strategies, greater generalization, and maintenance of treatment plans (Spann, Kohler & Soenksen, 2003; Watts Pappas, McLeod, McAlister, & McKinnon, 2008).

In this study, we examine the perceptions of special education teachers who are currently teaching in primary schools in Greece, in efforts to understand how they perceive their role as educators, and the role of their schools/institutions in

making PI possible for parents of students with learning difficulties. It is important to record the views of special educators from Greece in order to illustrate factors related to the socio-economic and cultural differences in the transition from a therapist-centered to a family-centered model, which is in line with the principles of inclusive education (Morfidi, 2019). This paper explores a subset of questions that focus on understanding special education teachers' perceptions of (1) the role of parental involvement in their children's success; (2) communication between school and parents of children with special educational needs; (3) parent volunteering at school; (4) student learning at home; and (5) the inclusion of parents in shared decision making; and (6) collaborating with the community (Epstein, 2011).

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1. Participants**

Nineteen special educators from Northern and Western Greece, including 5 males and 14 females, agreed to participate in our study. Participants were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling. Initially, a cluster of teachers affiliated with the University had been contacted. Furthermore, they were asked to invite other colleagues willing to participate. The average age of teachers was 42.7 years (range: 26-53); their average years of service in general education was 10.57 years; and their average years of service in special education was 8.10 years. All teachers had a first degree in education and expertise in special education through teacher training or master's programs.

### **2.2. Data Source and Collection**

The semi-structured interview was organized including the following questions: How can parents collaborate with school personnel in improving the literacy skills of children with learning difficulties? How can a culture of parental involvement be encouraged in school? How can you as an educator engage more parents of children with learning difficulties in literacy instruction? What resources, actions or programs are needed to enable a culture of parental involvement in school? What do you believe to be the advantages and disadvantages of parental involvement in school activities? Do you believe there is adequate communication between the school and parents of children with learning difficulties? Should special education teachers be in regular contact with parents of children with learning difficulties? What are the barriers, if any, in communicating with parents of children with learning difficulties? Should the school allow parents to volunteer in the classroom or during other school activities? Should parents of children with learning difficulties assist their children at home? Should the school invite parents of children with learning difficulties to participate in decision making processes that can impact their children? Should the school collaborate with parents and the community (including other professionals) to better achieve its goals of assisting children with learning difficulties?

### **2.3. Procedure**

Participating teachers answered the questions in Greek. Two interviews were carried out via written response followed by telephone conversation. The data collection process lasted five months. The first author translated their replies from Greek to English. All of them had been informed about the purpose of the study.

### **2.4. Data Analysis**

The data analysis process was carried out in the following steps. First, each question was isolated from the transcripts and assigned an identifying number. Both authors read the narrative, employed a line-by-line coding of each sentence, and arrived at themes and subthemes independently. The emerging themes were discussed and the frequency with which they occurred was tabulated. In subsequent meetings via Skype, the authors jointly agreed on a final set of themes and the categories under which they will be placed. These categories include: (1) the role of parents in primary school children's education; (2) the benefits of PI; (3) teacher and school responsibility for enabling PI; and (4) perceived and actual PI.

The first and second category of themes, were derived from 126 and 196 lines of data respectively. The third was derived from 466 lines of data, while the fourth category of themes was derived from 108 lines of data. The data from these questions were aggregated; resulting thus in 896 lines of data from which frequencies of themes were derived. The themes suggest that special education teachers perceive that (1) parents play an important role in their children's education; (2) the benefits of PI are significant; (3) special education teachers and other professionals within the school environment, share a responsibility for enabling PI; and (4) as special education teachers, they need to understand the reasons why parents do not become involved.

### 3. Results

#### *Parents' role in their children's education*

Parents, guardians, and the system in which the family is rooted, are often the most salient in the lives of children (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). This developmental, ecological perspective recognizes the significance of cultivating supportive and mutual relationships between and among families and educational institutions (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). From the perspective of the participants, approximately 66 percent of their responses suggest that parents need to take the initiative to collaborate with teachers and the school in efforts to help their children do well academically. Many participants emphasized the active role that parents need to play. For example:

*The role of parents must be an active one. Parents must also collaborate with the school to achieve better outcomes [such as] assisting the reading instruction processes directly and efficiently.*

Some participants asserted that:

*Parent involvement in the school's effort is a determining and regulating factor. Parents contribute in their own way to the learning process and the emotional development of the child with learning difficulties. The parents' role is three-fold: parents must show understanding of the child's difficulties; parents must understand the teacher's viewpoint; and parents must support the child and assist the teacher's work. Parents must be collaborative, understanding, patient and above all, a good guide for his/her children.*

All participants emphasized the importance of collaboration between parents, the teacher of the regular class and special educator:

*Parents need to be collaborative and [behave in an] unbiased way towards [their child's] teachers.*

Participant responses suggest their awareness that many parents do not easily accept their child's difficulties in mastering speech, language, and literacy. Many respondents agree that how a parent relates to the child's learning differences is crucial and suggest that parents not only remain positive and accepting of their child's learning differences, but also establish a collaborative relationship with teachers in efforts towards this end. One particular response captured their thoughts well:

*The role of the parent is more important than the teacher. Parents must be engaged already at the pre-school stage. Engagement of parents early can help identify their child's language disorders in comparison with other kids of the same age. Parents must also be able to withstand the social prejudice of their child as a special education student. Parents need to understand that there's no stigma in a special education class rather it is help for their children.*

Although participants were unanimous in their advocacy of parental engagement in their children's educational trajectory, twenty percent of their responses suggest the importance of observing boundaries between the school and parents. That is, parents should allow the school to make certain decisions regarding the best methods and strategies for increasing their children's literacy levels, as they (parents) do not possess sufficient knowledge of the educational process. Regarding children's assistance at home, some participants believe that parents interfere with the school's work by reading with their children at home, which creates confusion for everyone. Most participant responses, however, indicate that it is important that students read other books beyond those required in school in efforts to increase their reading speed. Some participants suggest that:

*Reading at home should include exercises and materials we provide, as well as books beyond the schoolbooks (extracurricular). It would also be useful for parents [themselves] to read a newspaper or a book at home, so they become a model for their children.*

This response recognizes the salience of vicarious learning, which suggests that students' observations of their own parents engaged in reading and discussions regarding what they have read, can serve as motivations for their own interactions with and motivations for reading consistently. It is thus important that parents cultivate their children's interest in and enthusiasm for reading. Moreover, participants believe that the materials they recommend (including books, software and certain websites) are not only appropriate for a child's reading level but a good source of practice for students. Some participants assert that they practice reading and speech/language skills daily with their students via movies, reading titles and subtitles, street signs and recipes. In this way, by combining picture and sound, reading becomes a game and not a punishment. Many participants caution that parents should make sure that reading at home is free from stress and pressure. Despite the preponderance of responses demonstrating participants' advocacy of parents helping their children at home, some responses can be read as mixed messages. For example:

*I am an advocate of reading at home. Language difficulties can be improved to a great extent by reading books. Reading materials for home use is not good to give, because parents do not know how to manage. When parents ask, I give them advice on how to read a book together with the child at home.*

*The teacher's reading instruction follows a certain manner. The parent reading with the child at home is taking initi-*

*ative by trying to simplify things for the child and provide further information. This leads to completely different results, causing the child confusion. Thus, the child is struggling even more, and finally gives up. Therefore, every parent initiative should be taken with teacher agreement.*

Participant responses demonstrate that while they advocate parents' assistive role with their children at home, they would like for (1) parents to be aware of the strategies they (teachers) use; and (2) to propose others that parents can incorporate in their work with their children.

*Parents should support reading at home. Children can progress if they read at home in peace and quiet. The special educator can provide means for practicing accurate and fluent reading, phonological awareness and teaching of graphemes and phonemes. In other words, how to handle the small word units. In this way, children will acquire reading skills with their parents' help.*

*Yes, [but] this should be done in agreement with the teacher. The teacher should guide the selection of appropriate material for practicing reading at home.*

*There are cases of parents who are able to help the child. They understand what the teacher is doing and are able to apply it. This is not the case with everybody. Some may not know, have the ability or understand how to handle these situations. It happens very often that this confuses the children. I have reached the point where I tell them 'do not interfere, we'll do everything at school. It is going to move a bit slowly, but we are going to get there'. For example, I teach the letter sounds and they try to help with syllabification by using the letter names. The child is of course completely puzzled. If they get clear instructions e.g., a worksheet to work on at home, this is usually better. Things are not so bad if parents follow my materials and instructions.*

#### *The Benefits of Parent Involvement*

Eighty-five percent of participants' responses indicate that in their children's educational trajectories PI has a positive, beneficial influence in their child's attitude towards school. While parents and teachers each play different roles, they both contribute to a common goal: student success. Many participants agree that there are significant benefits from PI at the behavioral and social levels. Participants suggest that the more frequently parents visit the school and get to know the teachers, the safer they (parents and children) will feel themselves.

*The student will be more attentive in his special education class when s/he realizes the parents' presence and interest. He/she feels safer, shows greater interest and motivation. Every parent case is different, however. Some of them feel comfortable with the school's care for their children and so do not want to get interested in working with them at home. This is a major issue with negative consequences for the child.*

In this vein, participants advocate that parents and teacher together, form a secure setting for children's learning at school and at home. Other benefits include improvements in the child's learning conditions. For example, the child, particularly those with learning challenges, feel supported and helped in difficult situations, and with consistent and positive PI, can progress. In cases where students are supported, there are positive outcomes in short amounts of time. Participants stress that it is vital though, that parents help teachers to know and understand their children as conversations like these, can change parental behavior from insecure and critical to friendly and communicative. In addition to the progress the child makes, the connection between parent and child also improves. This strategy can help build a positive attitude for both teachers and parents and enable nascent problems to get resolved before escalating. Nevertheless, participants' responses often include perceptions of the disadvantages of PI, which includes the idea that many parents interfere with teaching more than they should. According to the participants, this practice leads to a possible confusion of roles, which creates problems as parents often have trouble understanding why a teacher will pursue certain strategies and methodologies for helping students with special needs. Moreover, participants suggest that if parents observe boundaries *and* appreciate the educator's role, this will help to generate mutual and collaborative solutions. In addition to noting the many benefits of parental involvement, participants' responses discuss the consequences of non-involvement, which they assert are often evident in whether the child makes progress or not. In this regard, negligible parent interest tends to make the teachers' work more difficult in that it affects the students' rate of progress and their level of school achievement, while at the same time it may add stress, anxiety and frustration for both teachers and students. Participants also indicate that the child's rate of progress is different when only the teacher is working with the child. Overall, when both teachers and parents are working in tandem, the outcome of their intervention is qualitatively different and positively impacts a students' cognitive, psychological, and social progress.

Participants caution however, that while PI is essential for student success, extreme parental pressure on the child with learning difficulties can have negative results, especially if, in a reaction to extreme forms of involvement, the child refuses to make an effort in school and/or finds it difficult to communicate with the parent. It is thus crucial for parents to support and encourage their children in healthy and positive ways, particularly as this strategy can minimize the difficulties students have with the learning process and in an educational setting. Participants recognize that ad-

dressing this “psychological situation”, particularly with kindergarten children and those in the elementary grades, is pivotal. If the situation is psychologically stable, both parents and teachers can work to provide support for the student. However, parents, despite their wish to help their child, sometimes may not know how to organize assistance for their child. This can lead to compound problems and frustration for both the child and teacher, including a sense of alienation and isolation. Ultimately, it is the child who suffers, as he or she may not get the much-needed support and resources.

*The child must be empowered with everything necessary to try and achieve. This increases motivation for learning since the child is successfully developing in a stable place while simultaneously socializing and interacting with his/her peers. The child does not feel disabled and rejected and participates in school activities. On the other hand, the child's psychological stability gets threatened when the parent does not know how to handle the situation.*

*The parent must be patient with the child otherwise, the child feels discouraged and demotivated, and this has a serious impact on the child's learning.*

Participants also raised an interesting issue, that PI can have the unintended consequences of making children with learning problems feel even more disabled, which can impact the way these students think and behave. It is crucial to recognize that different kinds of attention, irrelevant or peripheral interventions can have serious consequences for the child, family, and educators. Many participants indicate that parental involvement often results in better school progress and cognitive development for students. They suggest that where successful parent involvement is evident, both parents and students view the school and the future from a positive point of view. This leads to better attitudes that stem from a sense of security and trust, which in turn increases the comfort levels of students and parents, with experimenting and discovering, in collaboration with their teachers, new ways of learning difficult material and progressing to higher levels.

*Minimal or no parental involvement causes children's negative attitude towards their surrounding. Thus, psychological problems occur, and the child often internalizes them. This can exacerbate a decline in learning achievement at a critical stage and must be tackled as soon as possible. It is like a chain, if one piece is disturbed, the rest is also affected. That is why it is important to have a trusting relationship. Sometimes an intervention cannot be effective enough if it is not supported beyond school hours. The intervention moves very slowly.*

*It is sad to think that you lose something you could have won, particularly if you think that you could have motivated the parents. That is why trust is important, but you need to convince parents of your good motives. Some parents may believe that I invent things to do in order to get sufficient number of children [in my special education class] to ensure that the school's special class will continue to operate.*

Taken together, participants' responses emphasize that PI can produce better student outcomes with regards to increased levels of achievement, pro-social behavior, school attendance, and more positive attitude towards study at home. These outcomes are facilitated when parents adopt methods and techniques advocated by teachers to support their children at home. Parents also form more positive views about the teachers after having contact with their program. Several participants note that often, it appears that parents who are more involved tend to take the initiative for their children, which can deter students from taking the initiative for themselves.

*Teachers and schools are responsible for increasing parent involvement*

Ninety-two percent of participant responses indicate the significance of engaging professionals such as speech pathologists, psychologists, and social workers in efforts to assist special education students and their parents. In addition, participants suggest that being aware of the research and how to implement best practices in their classroom is critical for executing their responsibilities. For example:

*Once we worked together with the local speech pathology university department to help a special case. This year we have the case of a child facing socio-emotional problems due to parents' divorce. Of course, there are language and learning problems associated with it. The social worker has helped us a lot and we want the best for the child.*

Many respondents suggest an awareness of the need for continual learning by working with professionals at local universities and those in other primary schools:

*Of course, if the child needs further help, we ask speech pathologists to help. We also ask help from other professionals. We invite them in our school because we also need to get better. It would be good to have a psychologist at school.*

*Irrespective of the collaboration that the school is forming with the parents, the special educator needs to build collaborative relations with other schools who have children with learning problems and their special education teachers. The exchange of views and advice is for the benefit of the school and the young students.*

*The school is a child's second house [...] in order to meet the needs of the children and expectations of its representatives, it must be updated and informed about new developments. This is done by contact with the parents, other schools, specialized teachers, and professionals. The dialogue, the exchange of ideas and acquisition of new knowledge lead to*

*[student] success. For this reason, [our] school is organizing seminars, meetings and inviting everybody [to participate].*

There also appears to be two-pronged responses in participants' comments. That is, firstly, participants suggest that they need support and assistance in teaching students with special needs, before (secondly), they can affectively interact with parents and provide any necessary and relevant information.

*Apart from the collaboration with the parents, which I believe is essential and imperative, the school must organize seminars and presentations by professionals specialized in special education, covering issues of concern for parents and educators. The parents must not get overloaded with information because this might get them stressed and could lead to negative outcomes.*

*Within every school there should be a psychologist for consultation and advising. It is not always easy to recommend a professional [in private practice]. There should be an organized network, direct feedback and exchange between the professionals outside the school and the special educator.*

*Collaboration with parents is the most significant part in this effort. I believe that the additional information and feedback that our school is getting from child psychologists and professionals in special education can increase what our school can do to accomplish success levels.*

Several respondents suggest the bidirectionality between the continual professional development of educators and their ability to provide parents with the correct information and feedback. For example:

*The school should collaborate with parents of children with difficulties in reading and writing and provide useful information for tackling the problem. Often these children have speech and language difficulties and need help from a speech pathologist. They also have behavioral problems since they have low self-esteem and get isolated. Psychologists' support for the children and social workers' support for the parents is necessary.*

*Definitely, [our continual learning provides] a global perspective about the child's problem. A cross-disciplinary view of the problem can be informative, and the child's needs are better met, especially at the cognitive and behavioral levels.*

Many participants indicate that in cases where the problems special education students are experiencing, are so severe, they address it by working together with other professionals. However, they do recognize that while some speech pathologists teach reading, sometimes they (speech pathologists) focus on completely different areas and this may confuse the student and parents. Many participants believe that it is important that all professionals involved in the child's education, observe the child and be fully aware of the child's history. This common knowledge of the issues and challenges that the child is experiencing can lead to common solutions. In this regard, many participant responses suggest that the school is not the only entity responsible for students; and that parent groups, special education centers, speech therapists, all have a role to play in the academic and social integration of students and their success. Some participants commented on a new intervention in their school for identifying and teaching children with learning difficulties. In this endeavor, they note that they work together with a psychologist and a social worker and that they actively learn from and help each other, including parents: 'We all have a common target: the child's improvement at the cognitive, behavioral and academic level'.

Several participants respond that schools and families are two different systems with a common goal: the education and socialization of the student, particularly those with learning difficulties and language problems. Many participants suggest the scheduling of more parent meetings and increasing the frequency of these meetings so that parents can have more opportunities to relate issues of concern. Schools can also use these meetings to explain any programs or interventions in an understandable way, in addition to encouraging parents to form discussion groups and engage in conversations regarding literacy issues. By discussing common issues, parents will realize that their child is not the only one encountering difficulties and will take a different perspective.

In turn, if parents perceive that the school and teachers are available, they will respond to the teacher's efforts. The parent will realize that they have something in common: the same goal of increasing student success. On the contrary, parents do not respond to the teachers' call when they are judgmental and feel disappointed. The helpful teacher finds the child's strengths, despite the learning disability, and starts the process of improvement without conditions.

#### *Perceived and actual parent involvement*

Bryk and Schneider (2002) suggest that trust in schools is one of the main predictors of mutual collaborations between parents and educators. Many participants echoed this finding with their own assertions that the first essential element in good parent involvement is trust, mutual respect, acceptance and understanding. Parents tend to be more involved, participants suggest, when they perceive that their relationship with teachers is not competitive and conflicting, but they are allies with a common goal. Despite this ideal scenario, some participants' responses suggest that:

*There is not particularly good contact [with parents]. We try to get in touch with them, but they neglect [our at-*

*tempts], willingly, unwillingly or because of their work priorities. More specifically, I take care to have meeting dates, but participation is scant. Also, I try to communicate with them sending questionnaires at home. In this way, I get to know their opinions, and I adjust my teaching accordingly.*

*There is not sufficient communication. Once a speech and language problem is identified, they do not get involved. We take care to explain how the child progresses, particularly in reading. I believe that there should be regular contact, but it is not possible. It is true that we often call the parents, but they do not have an opportunity to respond. Therefore, we try to find alternative means of communication such as the 'notebook of communication'. It is a notebook where the special educator takes notes about what happened during the lesson, how the child reacted and what targets have been achieved. Thus, when parents get to school, they know exactly what the educator has done.*

There is a distinction between parents with very young children and the changing perception of the supports available for special education students and this helps parent involvement rates to increase. Alternatively, as noted in other parts of this article, once speech and language problems are identified, parents do not get involved. However, several participants acknowledge that parents are involved and do want to stay involved.

*Yes, I'd say that the majority of parents are in frequent contact with educators. Particularly, the parents of young children who are at a very crucial developmental stage, ask about their progress almost daily.*

*Yes, nowadays the schools get particularly interested in the special education class and the special education teachers have a motivation to work. [This helps with] parent approval and leads [parents] to have an active participation and frequent contact with the teachers.*

Although many participants do recognize that many parents are under pressure due to work obligations, financial problems, they also believe that this situation leads parents to neglect the school and their children's teachers.

*Parents believe that the child is in good hands, being looked after by the special education teacher. However, this is wrong and has negative implications because only with sufficient contact and communication, students are going to achieve their goal. In other words, the link between the two systems [the school and parents] is determined by parents and unfortunately in our day, there are many indifferent parents.*

*No there is not. Many times, the school is asking for it but parents' response is weak, because parents perceive the school as a place for child-care free of charge, provided by the government. Also, many parents have not formed expectations for their children. They believe that it is sufficient to appear at school for receiving school grades every trimester. The opposite is happening much less frequently: parents having true intent for collaboration, but teachers may perceive intervention as their own part, rejecting parents as redundant and harmful in their work.*

Participants raise the idea that parents may genuinely want to be involved but teachers are resistant because they do not want interference in their work.

*There is not adequate communication between school and parents of children with learning difficulties as regards their literacy, because teachers perceive parents as 'annoying' particularly when they advise on issues regarding children's education, whereas others claim that parents are negligent on school – parent collaboration. Some educators are afraid of parents' negative criticisms. Parents also are afraid to approach the teachers because are afraid of negative comments for their children. The point is that school and parents need to be in close contact to get informed about what happens at school and at home respectively. It all depends on the level of problem acceptance. If there is acceptance and wants to help, there will be a way to do that. Parents who do not really accept the problem really do not get close. The parents' educational level is also important to find a way to communicate.*

#### 4. Discussion

The four themes that emerged from the current data provide empirical support for Bronfenbrenner's (1994) bio-ecological framework suggesting a multidimensional approach to understanding home – school partnerships. The model is described by five concentric systems (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, chronosystem) one of which, namely the mesosystem, has been exclusively dedicated to the home-school partnerships. A bi-directional relationship among the systems is predicted. In the present study, the pressures, and influences between the microsystem (e.g., parents, school), the mesosystem (home-school partnerships) with the rest, through the lack of resources, the educational climate, critical events, as well as broader attitudes and beliefs are revealed. The data show a consensus on the important parental contribution at all levels. However, the reported barriers undermining a healthy communication include biased criticism, social prejudice, stigma, or lack of understanding, inadequate knowledge or competence to assist.

The benefits from PI are well understood by the participants and highlight how the meso-system strengthens the educational outcome for all persons involved. However, they direct parents on extracurricular reading practices and homework activities that do not interfere with their instruction. The perception of parent as an intrusive figure in the class and



an obstruction to their work is strong, which indicates how the exosystem (e.g., weak educational policy), macrosystem (e.g., values of past time teaching practices) and chronosystem (e.g., educational challenge affected by financial restrictions) influence the meso (home school partnership) and microsystem (e.g., family) around the student. Within this context is explained, how the absence of teacher and parent training programs is prohibiting the development of a good collaborative scheme. Furthermore, the exosystem, a weak educational policy, which is not open to communication with specialists who take care of the students, restricts the level of collaboration. There is not much freedom for interaction between the special educator and a free launched speech therapist. Besides, mainstream schools do not employ speech therapists or social workers. Seeking help and advice from University personnel when available (also reported in our data) is often good practice however, the co-ordination between school work and other professionals beyond, is very limited. Since the issue of parental consent is becoming prominent in the education of developing countries such as Greece, an ‘informed consent’ should be encouraged, moving towards a framework where parents, teachers and other professionals will work together.

Children with special educational needs, need consistent support. Despite the barriers that are frequently reported in this study and relevant literature, an ‘open door policy’ allowing parents to visit at any time and observe the classroom, thus enabling them to learn from the teacher during action, could already be a solution to the problems of family support with early literacy instruction. Current developments in special education such as the Response to Intervention framework or other existing service – delivery models should be utilized based on home-school partnerships. It is unanimously reported by the teachers in this study and is well established from the body of research in the area, that in order to maximize educational outcomes with multiple benefits for the child’s learning opportunities and parents’ self-efficacy beliefs, a home-school partnership should be an integral part of broader interventions.

The issue is presenting challenges for both research and practice. There are contextual factors influencing partnership intervention research, such as recruitment, attrition, mobility or sustainability and fidelity of the intervention (Avvisati, Besbas, & Guyon, 2010). Other factors involve the lack of resources, school personnel training, school leadership and climate. The multidimensionality of home-school partnership is calling for synergetic approach forward. Moreover, the factors impeding program effectiveness may be mediated and potentially moderated by access to technology, media and internet. Since use of technology is wider and easier than ever, connectivity between schools and community is improving with profound changes to communication alternatives between families and school. Therefore, the chronosystem conditions of the bio-ecological framework facilitate the process of home – school interactions serving as a medium in bridging their relationship (Patrikakou, 2016).

Research is informative for training the next generation of educators to effectively integrate parents in their practice. Pre-service and in-service training for teachers implementing research-based evidence from partnership programs should be a focus of policymakers and part of policy objectives. University programs should elaborate on the means to investigate the problem locally, considering the circumstances, changes, and unique features at stake. Most importantly, special education programs should emphasize on the shift from a specialist-centered model in which the special educator is the expert who directs and controls service planning and delivery, as well as the level of parental involvement, to a family-centered model in which family is actively involved both in the instructional process and the decision making.

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