

## Turkish Parents' and Teachers' Opinions Towards Parental Participation in a Rural Area

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**Abstract:** The aim of this study was to define parents' and teachers' opinions on parental participation practices in a rural area. The study involved collecting interview data from 18 parents with children in the 1<sup>st</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades and 18 teachers in these grades. Five fathers and 13 mothers were interviewed. The interviews were constructed according to the six types of parental participation described by Epstein. The questionnaire comprised six questions including themes such as; what kind of information the parents need about their children's schooling and development in all grades; how might the parent get involved in class and school activities; what is their opinion about how they can help the teacher concerning classroom activities, etc. The structuring content analysis technique was used to analyze the data. The results revealed that the parents perceived that teachers and school administrators expected the parents to support the school financially, to help organizing some of the social or sporting activities at school, but not to support the school administration or be involved in class work / school work. The study also showed that teachers' perceptions differed according to which grade they were teaching in. Also, both parents and teachers lack adequate information about how parents might be involved so as to improve student achievement.

**Key words:** Parental participation • Parents' and teachers' opinion • Elementary school • School-family cooperation

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### INTRODUCTION

Contemporary approaches to personal development, with their focus on holistic attitude, emphasize the need to simultaneously consider individual development and socialization, which requires cooperation between school management, teachers, students and families at all levels. They emphasize that school-family relations have a multi-dimensional structure and also that education at home and at school requires the appropriate sharing of responsibilities. This responsibility sharing is not only limited to cooperation between parent and school in those activities supporting student development or achievement, but rather all interactions between parent and school should reflect such a partnership [1, 2].

There have been various efforts to reach a detailed and multi-faceted definition of parental participation using different models that focus on the content, aims and duties of those participating in the process [3, 4, 1]. However, the model used by Epstein has drawn a great

deal of attention in literature, as it considers all aspects of parental participation. According to Epstein, families are one of the four key components of a better and more improved education: training, curricula, setting and parents [5]. In Epstein's model, there are theoretical "overlapping spheres" that explain the cooperation and shared responsibilities between the home and the school. These overlapping spheres define relationships between the family and the school, while the concept of overlapping spheres is, in turn, defined by the rules and practices of the school in question. Epstein's model places parental participation practices under six major headings. The model is based on the notion of creating environments that will simultaneously support student learning and enable the school to develop as a whole. Thus, the types of parental participation are defined within the model as follows: parenting (parenting skills, child development and home environment for learning); communicating (from school to home and home to school); volunteering (parents as volunteers in school

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and class); learning at home (involvement in learning activities at home); decision making (including parents in school decisions and developing parent leaders); and collaboration (integrating resources and services from the community to strengthen schools, students and families) [1, 5]. The study is based on this model.

In the literature, parental participation is found to be a factor positively associated with variables such as student achievement [6, 7, 8, 9 and 10], school attendance [11, 12], diminishing discipline problems [13, 14] and increasing social skills [15]. Studies on parental participation not only focus on the many benefits of and the necessity for, parental participation, they also identify the potential obstacles to school-family cooperation. Socio-economic status and level of education [6, 1, 16, 17, 18], lack of time [19, 1 and 20], work and occupational characteristics [21, 1] and cultural history [22] were found to particularly affect the cooperation levels of the families. Wheeler [23] and Ramirez [24] argue that teachers' attitudes towards participation can also be an obstacle to parental involvement. Ramirez [24] additionally noted that teachers often find families to be insufficiently involved in supporting the education of their children, or in contributing to the managerial activities of the school. Hornby and Lafaele [25], Crites [26], Hoover-Dempsey, *et al.* [19], Epstein, *et al.* [2], Epstein and Jansron [27], Epstein [28] and Bhering [29], on the other hand, have found that the main barrier to parental participation is the school management's and teachers' attitudes towards parental involvement and their limited knowledge concerning the issue.

Consequently, to be able to develop efficient family participation programs and to acquire the support of both families and teachers in developing and improving participation, it is crucial to identify the perceptions of and attitudes towards participation among parents and teachers [2]. The aim of this study is, therefore, to answer the following questions:

- What is the opinion of parents and teachers concerning the information parents need to have on the schooling and development of their children?
- What is the opinion of parents and teachers concerning methods of communication?
- What is the opinion of parents and teachers concerning the voluntary participation of parents in school or class activities?
- What is the opinion of parents and teachers concerning the subjects that parents and teachers should cooperate in?

- What is the opinion of parents and teachers concerning the obstacles to parent-teacher cooperation?

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

**Participants:** The research group consisted of 18 first grades, fifth grade and eighth grade teachers from five elementary schools in a rural area of Turkey and 18 parents of children in these grades. A total of five fathers and 13 mothers participated in the study. The reason more mothers than fathers participated is that fathers usually stated they were busy at work, whereas mothers wanted to participate, stating it was their responsibility to take care of the children's education. Of these parents, six were of first graders, six of fifth graders and the remaining six were parents of eighth graders. Ten of the parents were educated to elementary level only, four were high-school graduates and three were college graduates. The mean age among the parents was 37. Of the teachers, six were first grade teachers, six were fifth grade teachers and six were eighth grade teachers. On average, they had 14 years of experience in teaching and, apart from the elementary school teachers who teach all the subjects until the fifth grade, the participants comprised of history, math and literature teachers.

**Measures and Data Analysis:** The interviews, conducted through the use of a semi-structured questionnaire, were constructed in order to identify parents' and teachers' perceptions according to the six dimensions of parental involvement (parenting, communication, volunteering, learning at home, decision making and collaborating with the community) described by Epstein [1, 2]. The questionnaire comprised six questions and included themes such as: what kind of information parents need about their children's schooling and development in all grades; how the parent might be involved in class and school activities; on which subjects parents and teachers can cooperate; which method or methods are most suitable for sharing information; what their opinions are about how they can help the teacher in terms of classroom activities, etc. Moreover, both questionnaires had the same content, although the questions for the parents and teachers were structured in relation to their duties and responsibilities as either teacher or parent. Interviews were conducted in the school by three interviewers, trained in both the subject and in interviewing techniques. The interviews were subsequently transcribed verbatim.

In the analysis, the procedure for semi-structured interviews defined by Schmidt [30] was followed. In the first phase of analysis, all transcribed interview comments were read line by line and the draft analytical categories were formulated. During the second phase of coding, the descriptive labels of categories were distinctively described, tested in a number of interviews and then the coding guide was formulated. Finally, in the third phase of coding, every interview was coded according to all the categories in the coding guide. There were five general themes defined for analysis: Information parents need to know, methods to communicate with parents, working with voluntary parents at class and school, the subjects need to establish the partnership, obstacles for the partnerships. Mayring [31] claimed that kappa-coefficients of 0.70 are normally sufficient: in this study it was 0.83.

## RESULTS

### Teachers' Results

**Information Parents Need to Know:** For all three grades, the teachers stated that the information parents need the most is information on child development and education (14, 33.3%). In addition, teachers stated that parents need to have information on school rules and teaching methods (13, 31%). In contrast to the other groups, fifth grade teachers stated that families need to be more knowledgeable about the "importance of education". This importance of education theme covers statements complaining about the lack of interest by families in the schooling of their children and lack of awareness concerning how important education is for the future of children. One of the parents from the 8<sup>th</sup> grade stated: *"Unfortunately, not all parents know how the quality of education should be and how much it is important. First, they should understand this"*.

**Methods to Communicate with Parents:** Concerning the question as to which communication methods were the more appropriate, teachers mostly said parent-teacher conferences (12, 30.8%) although the eighth grade teachers said one-to-one meetings were more appropriate (one-to-one meetings came second in the most appropriate communication methods list of first and fifth grade teachers). When asked which of these methods they use or prefer the most, teachers mostly stated a preference for the one on one meeting. One of the first grade teachers mentioned: *"I prefer one on one meeting. This city is my hometown, so I know almost all the parents. I try to go over the problems by talking at home, at the market or even in the street when we meet"*.

Teachers were also asked from where/whom the families could get information about the school, the teachers and the training methods or curricula used. Teachers from all grades responded that they, the teachers, were the most appropriate source for this kind of information. In addition, the fifth and eighth grade teachers mentioned the school management and first grade teachers the school psychologist, from among the possible sources.

### Working with Voluntary Parents at Class and School:

Teachers stated that the parents could provide financial support for class activities, or could help the teachers or the school management in the organization of various events (13, 59.1%). Two of the first grade teachers indicated that parents could also participate in class activities by giving lectures on their areas of expertise or occupations. Concerning school activities, it was similarly stated that parents could provide financial support or volunteer to help with the organization of social/cultural or sports events.

**The Subjects Need to Establish the Partnership:** On the question of issues that require family cooperation, teachers emphasized that partnership is vital in the subject of teaching effective learning methods (9, 33.3%) to the students. However, teachers at different grades gave varying responses. First grade teachers said that issues that required family participation were the organization of social activities and dealing with students with behavioral/social problems. Fifth grade teachers, on the other hand, said that family cooperation was needed in issues such as the study habits of the students and in cases where the student is having academic problems. Eighth grade teachers emphasized the need for family cooperation, especially in behavioral or discipline matters. An 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher stated: *"parent-teacher and parent-school cooperation is so important. If the cooperation can be established, there is nothing that cannot be achieved at school"*.

When asked when the best time for cooperation was, teachers in all grades responded that non-class and non-school hours were the most appropriate (13, 54.2%). Non-class and non-school hours, in turn, were defined as being at the end of the school day, during lunch break, or at weekends. In addition, first and fifth grade teachers indicated that no special place was needed to cooperate with the parents and that a quiet place anywhere on school premises would suffice, whereas eighth grade teachers said there needs to be a special meeting room for teacher-parent activities.

**Obstacles for the Partnerships:** The last question in this category concerned the barriers preventing teachers from cooperating with the parents. Teachers in all three grades responded that the negative attitude of parents towards cooperation was the biggest obstacle (10, 41.7%). However, teachers also stated that parents avoided going to the school or meeting with the teachers because when they are invited to the school, they thought they would be asked to make financial contributions. The other obstacle mentioned by teachers was the parents' lack of time (10, 41.7%). Teachers stated that parents can't find the time for cooperation with teachers because of their working conditions or because someone requires care at home.

**Parents' Results:** Results of the analysis conducted on parents' responses show that, on the whole, parents have positive attitudes towards participation; however, parents' lack of information concerning the issue, coupled with their past experiences, affect the manner and the frequency of their participation.

**Information Parents Need to Know:** Concerning the first question on the type of information needed, most of the families in all grades stated that they would like to be informed about the rules and practices of the school (28, 77.8%). The 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade parents added that they would like to know more about adolescent development, while the first grade parents about what they could do at home to facilitate literacy education. Parents frequently mentioned that they want to do the best for their children's education, but they don't have sufficient knowledge and, in some cases, they can't decide what to do.

**Methods to Communicate:** Paralleling teachers' responses, the parents also indicated that the most appropriate method for communication was one-to-one meetings (14, 53.9%). One of the first grader's parents said: *"I feel shame at talking about certain matters in front of others. I prefer a private talk with the teacher. It is better because I have a chance to ask and learn more about my own child. When someone is there you cannot ask that much"*.

Fifth and eighth grade parents also mentioned parent-teacher conferences as an appropriate method of communication. A majority of the parents identified the teachers as being the most appropriate source of information on school management, curricula and methods of education. However, they also stated that, in

case they did not get sufficient support or information from the teachers, they could meet with the school management and if necessary, with the provincial directorate for national education as well, the latter being the highest authority within the boundaries of the province in terms of education.

**Working Voluntarily in Class and at School:** Parents in all grades stated that they could assist the teachers in class and school activities. This might be interpreted as an indication that parents have positive attitudes towards parental participation. However, when asked what kind of support they could provide, most parents specifically referred to their ability to provide financial support for class or school activities (17, 65.4%), adding that they did not know how else to give support. Some parents also stated that, besides financial support, they could also help with the organization of sports, cultural, or academic activities planned by the school (17, 56.7%). However, it was concluded that some parents thought teachers and principals have negative attitudes towards voluntarily involving parents in class or at school. One parent of an 8th grade student stated: *"When my child was in first grade I visited the school more often. The times that I didn't, the teacher asked me to. But now, when I visit the school to learn about my child's progress, some teachers get angry at me and say 'teaching is our business. You just care about the home conditions you create for your child.'"*

**The Subjects Need to Establish Partnership:** On the question of issues that require cooperation between teachers/school management and parents, most parents responded, "helping the student to acquire good study habits" (17, 60.7%). Additionally, parents stated that teachers and families should cooperate over the behavioral/social problems of the students (9, 32.2%). Parents' responses to the question as to the best timing for cooperation work were also similar to those given by teachers; the end of the school day, lunch breaks, or weekends (14, 51.8%). Parents of first and fifth graders also mentioned the short breaks between classes as an appropriate time for such meetings. Regarding the question of the appropriate place, parents of first and fifth graders suggested an empty classroom would do, whereas parents of eighth graders said the teachers' lounge would be more appropriate. Only one parent, whose child is a fifth grader, mentioned the need to have a special room designated for this purpose.

**Obstacles for the Partnership:** The majority of parents in all three grades stated that there were no obstacles in general (16, 84.4%). However, some parents noted that the manners and attitudes of the teachers and school management towards the parents constituted a major obstacle (15.6%). Consequently, these parents avoided having contact with certain teachers/school managers because they were too authoritarian or closed-minded to communicate. One of the 5th grade's parents said: *"If the teacher or principals are open to communication, you can do everything for success. But some of them get angry when you say something. So, I cannot say anything after that, because they can destroy something in my child's education"*.

## DISCUSSION

The data for this study shows generally that parental participation is supported both by parents and teachers, but the practice is not yet in line with this pledged support.

Conducted analyses proved that teachers think parents need first and foremost to be informed about child development and education, whereas parents predominantly think they need to be informed about the rules and practices in schools. The fact that parents state this need might be interpreted as resulting from the notion that teachers and school management are not providing sufficient information for parents, or not taking their views into consideration because parents are not perceived as important partners. This finding is also supported by other studies with Turkish participants [32, 33, 34, 35]. In fact, although teachers and school management believe in the importance of parental participation and its positive effects on the school's success, their practices do not support their stated beliefs. In this context, the perceptions of parents towards the school's management, the teachers and the school in general are also important.

Results of the analysis show that Turkish teachers' perceptions on parent participation and the strategies they use are limited. To communicate with families, teachers of all grades currently prefer parent-teacher conferences organizing two or three times in a year. They use one-to-one meetings only when there is a problem or concerning private matters. Intriguingly, unlike the teachers, parents state that they prefer one-to-one meetings. Both Epstein [1] and Muller [36] argue that bidirectional communication between school and home is crucial for student success. Epstein states that

teacher-parent communication can be conducted over the phone, via e-mail, or by home visits or one-to-one meetings [1]. This study found that teachers mostly use parent-teacher conferences to communicate with the parents, to the exclusion of other methods, which indicates there is only a limited amount of communication between parents and teachers. Parent-teacher conferences may not always be the best strategy for communication because of scheduling conflicts due to different work hours and because some parents may be less willing than others to participate in such meetings: this is a factor that limits parental participation. Besides this singular focus on only one of the possible communication methods, none of the participants' schools had made provision for a special family room. Both teachers and parents stated that a special place is not needed for teacher-parent meetings and that an empty classroom would do, or as one of the participants from the eighth graders group said, the teachers' lounge could even serve the purpose. However, there is not only lack of a designated place, but also a lack of a designated hour for developing or improving parental participation, which indicates that in the cases under study, participation is neither regular nor systematic. This is in direct contrast to the suggestion of Epstein et al., who emphasize that, for efficient parental participation to take place, there needs to be a regular and systematic program attended by families, students, school management and teachers [2].

The results showed that most parents and teachers think parental participation is needed only in cases when a problem arises, specifically with regards to the behavioral/social skills or the academic success of a student. These findings parallel those of Poulou & Matsagouras's study [37] on the attitudes of Greek parents and Ahioglu and Sen's study [35] on Turkish parents' attitudes. Both studies found that parents visit the school or meet with teachers only in cases when there is a problem concerning the student. Conversely, many studies have found that efficient parental participation programs from kindergarten onwards and through high school years, prevent, or at least reduce the frequency of social/behavioral problems at these grades [13, 38].

Participants in this study stated that they could volunteer to help with school and class activities. However, both parents and teachers indicated that the expectation from the parents is that they either directly help with the organization of activities, or provide indirect assistance in the form of financial support for the class or school. According to the Turkish National Education

Basic Law, on the other hand, state schools are free and that asking the parents to make financial contributions to the education of their children is a punishable crime. The results of the study also show that such expectations have a negative effect on the voluntary participation of parents in other activities as well.

Another problem that hinders participation in school and class activities seems to be the perceptions of parents concerning the attitudes of the teachers and school management. In this study, some parents stated that they avoided going to the school because of the attitudes of the teachers and the school management, noting that they didn't feel welcomed at the school. Invitations to involvement from teachers and all school members are often key motivators in parents' decisions to become involved [3, 39]. Such invitations show parents that participation in their child's learning are important, expected and supported. In this study, although teachers stated that parental participation is important, it seems that its implementation in actual practice is weaker. In this study there is considerable numbers of proof that show school administrators and teachers are not generally receptive towards parental participation and from their perspective, parents' main role is to send their children to school ready to learn.

Improving all aspects of parental participation throughout the country, while also attaining common standards, do not seem like plausible goals in the short term, given the centrist and bureaucratic structure of the educational system and traditional views of parents and teachers' roles and responsibilities in education. Efforts since 2005 to reform the education system have also included the requirement that school-family connections are strengthened, as emphasized in the amendments to the National Education Law, subsequently published in laws and regulations [40]. However, the traditional approach and definition of parents' and teachers' role and responsibilities at education of children which it emphasize school administrative and teachers can only make a difference in the extent of parental involvement in a school and parents role is limited with to prepare the child ready to learn at school is a matter to be solved [41-43]. Of course the developing and improving parental participation is a fundamental responsibility for teachers and school management, on the other hand, as Epstein stated, the success of the practices of involving parents to education is sharing responsibilities and including bidirectional partnership because of providing environment to children success and to support their development.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, two specific suggestions would be to provide in-service training to teachers and school management on parental participation and to make necessary arrangements in the curricula for prospective teachers. In addition, projects to improve parental participation should also include strategies to help develop a culture of democracy, both among the teachers and families, as well as in society as a whole, given the collectivist culture prevalent in the nation.

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