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Parental Involvement in a Program for Preschoolers Learning a Foreign Language

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Abstract

The role of parental involvement in the sense of home-based or school-based programs for supporting children's early literacy development and education in the Greek state school context has not been well established. The „PIECE“ (Parental Involvement for the Engagement, Cooperation and Empowerment) program is a novel inclusion program implemented for a school year in a kindergarten in Northern Greece, which aims at enhancing parental involvement in a preschool foreign language learning setting. It targeted parents by including both school and home components with the ultimate purpose to support their role in improving preschoolers' early foreign language (FL) literacy. This type of involvement was operationalized as partnership among the researchers, the school and the parents. More specifically, they were involved in school activities and meetings, while they also spent quality time with their children at home doing activities and utilizing digital educational materials to support preschoolers' learning. The results obtained from questionnaires distributed to parents, the teacher/researcher's journal and the focus group discussions indicated the importance of "parental" involvement for effective FL learning in the early years. Concluding, the findings suggest that parental involvement in early language learning projects contributes to the enhancement of young children's oracy and literacy skills.

Introduction

An increasing interest in launching effective FL (foreign language) learning programs in preschool settings (Murphy, 2014; Rixon, 2013) has resulted in research examining the role of parental involvement in children's language development and their education (Driessen, 2019; Epstein, 2011; Garbacz, et al, 2015; Gaynor, 2012; McDowall, Taumoepeau & Schaughency, 2017; McWayne, Manz, & Ginsburg-Block, 2015; Vellymalay, 2012). Home literacy environment has been recorded as one of the most significant predictors related to early literacy skills (Hume, Lonigan, & McQueen, 2015; Niklas, Tayler, & Schneider, 2015), while parental involvement in school activities is also associated with significant benefits for children's school success and their overall development (Bempechat & Shernoff, 2012; Gordon & Cui, 2012; Paik, et al., 2019; Parsons & Shim, 2019; Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014).

Parents' personal views, family traditions and experiences that parents themselves bring from their school years contribute to their willingness to participate in their children's education (Young, Austin, & Growe, 2013). Researchers (Jeynes, 2012; Larocque, Kleiman, & Darling, 2011; Reynolds & Clements, 2005; Sheridan et al., 2019) claim that when parents are involved in the educational process a) the quality of education is improved, while student learning progress is more successful, b) satisfaction is expressed from the part of parents and children in relation to school community, c) discipline problems are reduced and adaptation to the school environment becomes easier, d) children's characteristics are identified and their educational needs are better met, and e) children's self-esteem is enhanced. Tracey and Morrow (2002) also emphasized the importance of the family environment in the development of children's literacy, while a positive correlation is found between parental involvement and reading and writing ability (Arnold et al., 2008; Sénéchal & Young, 2008; Vrinioti & Griva, 2015).

Epstein (1991, 1992) proposes a parental involvement model based on the theory of overlapping spheres of influence and composed of six types of involvement: a) parenting, b) communicating, c) volunteering, d) learning at home, e) decision making, and f) collaborating with the community. Based on the above, indicative actions are proposed for each of these six typologies. Since the typology is presented hierarchically we are led from covering the basic obligations on the part of parents and school to exploiting the potential and talents of parents, therefore creating the right conditions for their participation in school decisions. Epstein et al. (2002a) state that students' progress is the focal point of creating this two-way communication channel between the school community and parents. In such a framework all stakeholders are enabled to provide service to the community, building an interdependent relationship: on the one hand, school is assisted in understanding families' backgrounds, cultural capital within families. On the other hand, parents are assisted in providing appropriate home conditions to support learning.

The need for launching and assessing programs, that bridge the distance between school and home and involve parents in various activities, has been recorded in the literature (BavaHarji, Balakrishnan, & Letchumanan, 2016; Forey, Besser & Sampson, 2015; Reese et al., 2010). Families can more successfully address/overcome difficulties encountered during learning by working in partnership with schools and the community (Adelman & Taylor, 2002). In this line, an attempt was made by the authors of this paper to establish a partnership between the teacher and the parents that could help build positive attitudes towards the target language and enhance children's language performance. In the same vein, Holcomb-McCoy (2007, p.66) mentions "the key to increase student achievement and to ensure more equitable practices in schools is to increase parent and community involvement". In language learning contexts, parents' positive attitudes toward the target language seem to be closely related to recognizing its importance for their children's academic learning and feel confident in the teacher and the language curriculum. As a result, children are more likely to have increased motivation, to be actively involved in the lesson and to have a more positive attitude towards the culture of the 'other' country (Wong, 2014). Also parents can effectively enhance language learning of young children by providing them with authentic material (Choi, Chang, Kim & Reio, 2015; O'Hara, 2012) and appropriate language input, in terms of their needs and their age, in cooperation with the classroom teachers.

Therefore, in the present study emphasis was placed on strengthening bounds between school and parents. The study aspires to contribute to the existing literature on parental involvement programs by exploring how a parental involvement program can be framed. Also, it attempts to record the benefits of empowering parents' role by "making them a piece" in their children's early language learning. In addition, the study pursues to improve the effectiveness of family-oriented early interventions by discussing a number of recommendations to increase their sustainability. In more detail, the "PIECE" (Parental Involvement for Engagement, Cooperation and Empowerment) program was embedded in a broader study on learning a FL in the early years. Adopting the view that "if foreign languages are not learnt in the early years of schooling, the opportunities for mastery later on are dramatically and negatively affected" (Banfi, 2015, p. 2), a FL learning program was introduced in the Greek kindergarten context. It is an innovation program in the sense that a) a FL is not taught in Greek kindergartens; In the Greek educational system children officially start learning English as a foreign language in the first grade of primary school (at the age of six), and b) multimodal material designed by the researchers was integrated into the educational program, in order to allow for an interaction among children, their parents and the educational software.

Parents' engagement in the „PIECE“ program was realized through 1) their participation into classroom events and activities, 2) the formation of focus groups, consisting of a number of volunteering participants who attended some of the teaching sessions, 3) time spent utilizing the PIECE "toolkit" of multimodal activities at home to enhance preschoolers' FL literacy. More precisely, the objectives were set as follows:

- to investigate parents' perceived needs and consider the factors that influence parental involvement during the implementation of an early language literacy program,
- to develop multimodal activities that can enhance parental involvement in their children's language learning process.

Method

Participants

The sample of this study included fifty-two (52) parents (one parent for each child) of children aged 5-6 years (preschoolers) from one state kindergarten in an urban school in a provincial city of affluent economy in Northern Greece. Forty-two (42) mothers and ten (10) fathers, all of them of Greek origin, voluntarily participated in the program. Six (6) of them were also members of the two focus groups created. Before launching the parental involvement program, the teacher (one of the researchers) informed parents about objectives of the program as well as about the significance of their voluntary participation in it.

The demographic data collected provide information on the sex (mentioned above), the age (27% was older than 41 years old, 62% was between 31-40 years of age, while 11% less than 30 years old) and the educational background/level of the participants (see Figure 1), which was „high“ (37, 7 % were BSc holders) or „very high“ (42, 2% were MSc or PhD holders) for most of the participants. Regarding parents' English language proficiency level, most of them (64%) were advanced/ proficient language users (C1-C2), while 31% were at the upper intermediate language level (B1-B2) and another 5% at the elementary language level (Council of Europe,

2001). All preschoolers participating in the language learning program had never before learnt English as a FL in an official context.

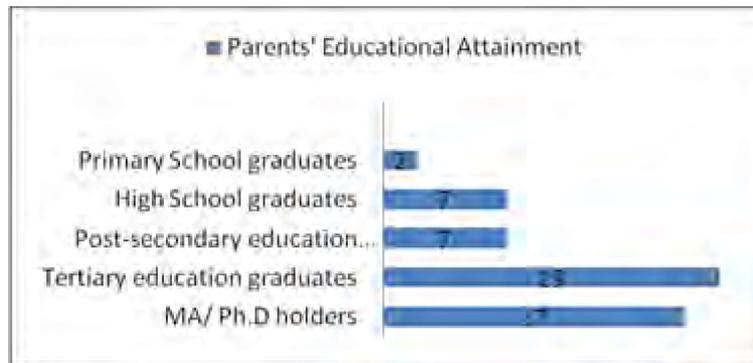


Figure 1. Parents' Educational Background

The Procedure

Epstein's model for parental involvement (1991, 1992) operated as a framework for a partnership between the school personnel and the family members. Taking into consideration the observations made by Epstein and Sheldon (2002), the researchers firstly engaged into a needs analysis process to decide which activities would work considering the unique needs of their school. Parents were interviewed and asked questions such as "What are your obligations as a parent?", "What activities have you been or you would like to be involved in at your child's school?", "What can the school/ the teacher of your child do to facilitate parental involvement?", "Which areas of school activities would you like to be involved in?"

Drawing on parents' perceived needs and the objectives of "PIECE" program, behaviors and roles were assigned and activities were organized on the basis of the following types:

Parenting: focus was placed on providing support, guidance and resources in order to create the right home study environment that could enhance learning. More specifically, parents were made aware of both child development issues and the recorded benefits of early language learning and they were provided with appropriate educational material by the teacher/ researcher. Educational software and online resources enabled both children and parents to improve their knowledge, skills and practices. Extracurricular activities, relevant to children's needs and interests, enriched the home-learning materials and allowed for the creation of a favorable learning environment (see Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001; Vrinoti & Griva, 2015).

Communicating: appropriate, two-way forms of communication between school and family were constructed to ensure effective contact regarding the educational program introduced and children's progress both at school and at home environment. The interaction, the provision of feedback and the exchange of views between the parents and the teacher during scheduled meetings (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014), enabled parents to monitor their children's progress, while the teacher gained a better understanding of families' background, their concerns and their needs (Epstein, 1995). Parents were also frequently informed by the teacher/researcher about their

children's progress through „interactive journals“ and reports, and they were provided with opportunities to respond to the teacher's comments by adding notes, comments or observations.

Effective partnership models allow for a continuum of parental involvement from activities realized in the school environment or in the specific classroom to home-based activities, such as organizing a child's study time or monitoring children's homework (Lemmer, 2007). Accordingly, all parents were involved in classroom or school events/activities (e.g. presentations of students' creative work, dramatization activities). In addition, focus group discussions were conducted with the parents-members of the Parent Association. Those parents were considered to be the parent-leaders (see Epstein, 1992) who could influence the attitude of the other parents, therefore aiming at further valuing parents' role, augmenting communicating and enhancing children's learning. The parents who were involved in the focus groups were invited to take part into the teaching sessions twice a month, at specific days and times that were mutually defined with the teacher/ researcher. Their participation was considered of utmost importance toward the quality and richness of data obtained. As Schumacher and McMillan (2010) maintain, when creating a social environment where group members communicate and interact the data obtained exceeds that gathered by mere interviewing.

Volunteering: parents were encouraged to volunteer and offer their leisure time and their talents at school events, assisting their children's learning in all respects. The teacher of the class placed special emphasis on making parents aware that family members are welcome and valued at school (providing assistance on the preparation of school events and activities, contributing to the organization of the classroom space etc.), therefore showing respect to families' strengths and efforts (Epstein, 1995).

Learning at home: the teacher/ researcher provided information to parents to help their children set educational goals and do their homework. In that way children's progress could be supported, while educational procedures were made clearer. More specifically, the researchers designed a story-based framework for the purpose of the early language learning program. By employing digital storytelling practices (Digital Storytelling Association, 2011; Rossiter & Garcia, 2010) multimodal elements (sound, images, animation, links) were incorporated in the content of the stories. As a result, young children had a number of opportunities to interact with both their peers and the learning material, experimenting with FL and honing their oral skills in the classroom setting. Regarding the home literacy environment and the literacy-related activities and materials provided by the teacher, parents were presented with a digital storytelling game to play by cooperating with their children at home. In more detail, every time a storytelling unit was completed in the classroom, a bank of pictures with QR codes embedded on them was left at parents' disposal. At the beginning of the pilot program parents had been given the software which identified the QR codes, enabling users to listen to a number of recorded messages and put the scenes of the story (pictures with QR codes) into the correct order. The software also provided the user with feedback regarding the correctness of an answer. Upon successful completion all story scenes were presented on the computer screen, synthesizing a digital book. In that way, children engaged in a digital “retelling the story” process in cooperation with their parents. Finally, they uploaded their digital books on an account shared with the teacher.

Results: Evaluation of the Parental Involvement Program

Both qualitative and quantitative data were gathered to estimate the effectiveness and feasibility of the PIECE program and examine the factors that have influenced parental involvement. Following a data triangulation approach (Kember, 2003), the instruments employed were: a) questionnaires administered to all participants (both quantitative and qualitative data), b) a teacher/researcher's journal (qualitative data), and c) focus groups discussions (qualitative data).

Questionnaires

Questionnaires were designed by the researchers, distributed to parents both before the implementation of the parental involvement program (Phase I - beginning of the school year) and upon its completion (Phase II - end of the school year). They consisted of two parts, namely a) Part A- demographic data (presented above), b) Part B- evaluation of the parental involvement program. In Part A, the data gathered were the same between Phase I and Phase II. The process was anonymous, but researchers ensured that the same parent (mother or father) filled in the questionnaire in the two phases. In Part B, parents were asked to answer the following 5 point Likert-scale questions:

- i. "Do you think that parental support during an early FL literacy program can contribute to successful language learning in the future?"
- ii. "Do you listen to songs and stories in the FL together with your child?"
- iii. "Do you think that an early FL start in the kindergarten and a multimodal home study environment (including games, stories and songs) can encourage your child to develop language skills?"

Their answers in the above mentioned questions in Phase I and Phase II are shown in Tables 1-3.

Table 1. Parents' Answers in Question 1

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Phase I	52	1.62	0.63	0.87
Phase II	52	1.73	0.76	0.10

Table 2. Parents' Answers in Question 2

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Phase I	52	1.76	0.89	0.12
Phase II	52	1.26	0.44	0.06

Table 3. Parents' Answers in Question 3

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Phase I	52	1.90	0.89	0.12
Phase II	52	1.67	0.58	0.08

According to the results, a significant difference was revealed between means in Question 2 (see Table 2), concerning parents and their listening to songs and stories in cooperation with their children. Therefore, it seems that the parental involvement program launched could provoke significant changes in the literacy practices adopted by the parents regarding their children's early language learning. The results also showed that parents' responses in question 1 (see Table 1) and question 3 (see Table 3) between Phase I and Phase II remained strongly positive or positive, as there were no significant differences produced between the means. In other words, their expectations for the parental involvement program in relation to children's successful language learning in the future and the development of literacy in a multimodal environment were met after the implementation of the program.

Parents were also asked to answer an open-ended question by commenting on their involvement in the program. They observed that "my child likes English and asks me to repeat the words and songs again and again at home", "I learned how to help and monitor my child's progress at home... she seemed to learn the words so easily as her mother tongue...", "before participating in the program I thought that only a professional teacher could help him...I thought I was not able to do so...", as well as "because of our cooperation with the teacher we felt we could contribute to our children's FL learning... all this information is useful to me to be able to help my daughter in the future".

A Teacher / Researcher's Journal

A teacher/researcher journal was kept once a week during the implementation of the parental involvement program in order to record and reflect on its effectiveness (Richards & Lockhart, 1994; Wallace, 1998). Upon the completion of the program, the data collected were processed qualitatively. Data emerged on (i) the role of the teacher/ researcher, (ii) the parents' role, (iii) the teacher-parent cooperation, (iv) the overall parental program evaluation/estimation.

For each thematic axis, a number of categories and subcategories were generated. Data were recorded on the teacher's ability to provide information, support and material for early language learning, as well as to encourage discussions and take into account parents' observations on syllabus evaluation. It was observed that parents' active participation in home-literacy activities ameliorated young learners' contact with appropriate language input outside the classroom's environment.

Moreover, the journal data revealed that children develop positive attitudes toward the target language and the learning procedure. In addition, the provision of ongoing information and the ability to communicate through interpersonal teacher-parent discussions or through notes and memos were recorded as useful, immediate, and essential factors of the program. Parents valued their role and showed willingness to cooperate. Finally, guidance, support and material provided to parents concerning some „recipes“ of enhancing their children's learning was recorded as being of particular importance for children's progress by both parents and the teacher/ researcher. The need for continuity of such practices was also recorded.

Focus Group Discussions

The focus group discussions were related to topics of special relevance to the study and they were conducted under the guidance of the teacher who acted as a coordinator. The interaction and communication among the group members differentiated focus group discussions from group interviews, which rely on an interviewer - group members" communication (Cohen & Manion, 2000, p. 288). At the end of the program, the parents who constituted the two basic groups were asked the following questions: i) Finally, how do you perceive parental involvement? ii) Describe your experience during your school visits. What did you (not) like most? iii) What are the advantages of your participation in focus groups?

Their responses were recorded, transcribed and analyzed qualitatively: Data were grouped in the following thematic categories: a) perceptions on parental involvement, b) benefits and barriers to school-home partnership, c) the role of parents. Parents declared that they felt a supportive environment was created during meetings and they better understood the syllabus designed by the researchers. Moreover, they admitted that the scheduled meetings, the visits to the classroom and the need to work together with their children at home were often a time-pressing or rather demanding, but creative process. In addition, they highlighted that the school-home partnership initiated by the teacher/ researcher responsible for the implementation of the early language learning program encouraged all of the parents to participate actively in the events. By providing members of the focus groups with ample opportunities to be involved in the learning procedure, the parents could understand the ways their children learn and develop language skills. In that way, they could provide the teacher/ researcher with useful feedback.

According to parents" comments their participation in the focus groups process proved to be an important factor for the successful development of their children"s oral skills in the target language. Most of them agreed upon work commitments and a busy schedule being barriers to parental involvement. Also their inexperience in relevant parental involvement programs was initially mentioned as a drawback but following on as a benefit, as they gradually gained valuable knowledge in their children"s learning and developed a sense of commitment to the achievement of the program"s objectives. Finally, they expressed their wish to participate in parental involvement programs in the next school year.

Discussion

Based on the results obtained from the questionnaires, the teacher/ researcher journals and the focus groups discussions, the present study reports the benefits of a teacher-parent partnership. The initial investigation of parents" needs revealed the necessity to support them during their children"s early start in the FL. Drawing on the objectives set, the factors that influenced parental involvement were shown to be a) spending quality time with their children in the target language, and b) developing positive attitudes towards school-parents partnerships and early language learning. The conclusions are in line with those reached by Reese, Suggate, Long, and Schaughency (2010) and BavaHarji, Balakrishnan, and Letchumanan (2016), who recorded the enhancement of language skills of young children when their parents deal with their literacy issues at home. It is

also noteworthy that parental involvement is related to parents' socio-economic status (Vellymalay, 2012) and their educational level (Epstein, 2011). These two factors seemed to have affected their predisposition to participate in school activities in the present study.

As far as the development of activities that can enhance parental involvement are concerned, the results of this study showed that the most effective methods are a) interpersonal meetings with the teacher, so that parents are constantly informed about the learning goals and are given chances to assist their children at home, b) partnerships between the school or the classroom teachers and the parents to encourage participation inside and outside school, establish a sense of belonging and focus on the parents' abilities, and c) the provision to record parents' suggestions and utilize feedback to evaluate the teaching practices, so as to better meet children's needs. It was recorded that providing parents with opportunities to actively participate in their children's learning process works positively towards the development of early literacy. Therefore, communication and cooperation among teachers and parents play a vital role in children's school progress (Larocque et al., 2011).

Some researchers report that parents may seem reluctant to get involved in school activities because they feel uncertain of their role (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2005) or they feel that teachers have a negative attitude to their involvement in the learning process (Michael et al., 2007). Drawing on the results of this study, parents' initial hesitation and uncertainty about supporting their children's learning changed through their participation in the scheduled meetings or the focus groups. In addition, it was revealed that the way the teacher cooperated with them, helping them to feel welcomed at school and facilitating their children's successful learning, empowered parents' role unresponsively to their previous background knowledge on language learning. The aforementioned findings are consistent with those of previous studies (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2005; Goodall & Vorhaus, 2011; Paik, et al., 2019; Parsons & Shim, 2019).

Conclusion

In the present study, school-teachers-parents partnerships were proved to empower collaboration and contribute to high performance in an early childhood language learning context. According to the results, parents are positive towards the introduction of early FL programs. Their active involvement can assist teachers in building an appropriate learning framework to support young children's first contact with a FL. Exploring parents' needs and their involvement in their children's learning allows for the implementation of activities that can lead to improved learning outcomes.

A solid cooperation was promoted amongst teachers and parents. All of them were working on enhancing children's language abilities by promoting a friendly environment towards bilingualism that would give the children the possibility to gain advantage in a modern multilingual society. However, we need to acknowledge that it is the conceptualization of parental involvement from the part of teachers that may cause barriers to involvement. Also, if the change in conceptualization around parental involvement is to be followed up with emphasis on teachers' preparedness to work with parents, effective collaboration and successful parent-school partnerships may be established in schools across country.

Considering the limitations of the current study, although the distribution of questionnaires and the focus groups discussions facilitated an ongoing evaluation of the program, interviews could also be conducted with all participating parents. Such a process could help better assess parents' attitudes and expectations regarding their role in the achievement of the learning objectives. Furthermore, it could trigger a reflection process for researchers and permit the formative assessment of the early language program. Moreover, the parents participating in the study were all of Greek origin. Future research could be conducted with parents coming from different sociocultural backgrounds, so that they could have the opportunity to express their views or concerns. Concluding, all stakeholders i.e. researchers, educators, educational policy decision-makers can take the above mentioned recommendations into account, in order to acknowledge the benefits and overcome the barriers toward the implementation and sustainability of parental involvement programs in language education in early childhood contexts.

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