

**THE EFFECTS OF INVOLVEMENT AND ENGAGEMENT MODELS OF PARENTS
IN PRESCHOOL AND ELEMENTARY EDUCATION**

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Abstract: The involvement, engagement and collaboration with the parents in the preschool and elementary education is an important segment in the learning process. It is important for the forming and development of the personality of the children and students from a cognitive, affective, emotional, conative and a psychomotor aspect. There is a need for development and stimulation of effective and efficient quality approaches in the form of diverse models for inclusion and engagement of the parents in the education process of their children. This demands planning and devising models that are adequate to the developmental, educational, social and cultural needs of the preschool and school institutions in the current social environment. It is essential that we take into consideration the ways and nature of the involvement and engagement of the parents in the fulfilment of the demands, needs and expectations regulated in the education in these modern conditions and the influence of the current challenges.

The modern pedagogical knowledge and research work highlight the need for use of different, adequate and efficient models of involvement and engagement of the parents in the preschool and elementary education that will serve the students and help them achieve higher score when graduating, while taking into consideration the divergence and inconsistency of the different influences from the environment, as well as the increasing impact of the modern changes.

A quality research was carried out by using the descriptive and the descriptive-interpretative method and by analyzing content and conducting a semi-structured interview. The sample covered 60 parents and teachers, as well as relevant documents and literature about the models of involvement and engagement of the parents in the preschool and elementary education.

Keywords: models of involvement and engagement of the parents, preschool and elementary education

INTRODUCTION

From many aspects, the involvement and the engagement of the parents in the preschool and early school education is very important for the development and education of the children and the students, as well as the relationships with others, the collaboration with the teachers, and the fulfillment of the goals and objectives in the schools. According to specific authors “family and community involvement frequently means helping reach goals defined by the schools (administrators and teachers) that reflect only school values and priorities” (Jordan et al., 2001, p.10).

The importance of the inclusion and the involvement of the parents in the pedagogical literature is treated from many aspects, as ways, models, strategies, relations, factors, etc., at the same time emphasizing the difference in the defining, approach and the expectations from this. The reasons for this are partially founded on the educational setting, policy, philosophy and the specifics of the educational systems in different countries regarding the preschool and early school education.

UNDERSTANDING AND DEFINING THE PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT AND THE PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT

There are many definitions by many authors that differ primarily in the different approaches in the treatment of the matter regarding the defining of the involvement and engagement of the parents. According to some authors “the parents or caregivers investment in the education of their children is parental involvement,, (LaRocque et al.2011, p.116), i.e. it refers more to the parental intervention and participation in the education of their children with the goal to acquire information for the academic development of their children (Crozier, 1999). The involvement of the parents can be understood as an activity taking place between the parents and the children, and the children and the teachers, which can contribute for the development and the accomplishments of the children. (Abdullah, Seedee, Alzaidiyeen, Al-Shabatat, Alzeydeen, Al-Awabdeh, 2011). The parental involvement is defined as an involvement of the parents in the education of their children in home and school context (Smit et al., 2007). According to the previously listed author, this is different from the term parental engagement.

In the pedagogical literature, there are many definitions of the terms parental involvement and parental engagement. For many authors this implies different understanding of the range, factors and the importance of the influence and the results of the children and

students. According to some authors, parental engagement implies active engagement of the parents in the learning of their children, both at home and school. In the works of many authors, oftentimes we come across the unclear distinction of the terms parental involvement and parental engagement. The first term refers more to the goals, needs, projects, etc., which are later discussed with the parents in terms of how they can contribute and get involved, whereas parental engagement implies “listening to” what the parents think, expect, what they care about, etc. According to Leithwood and Jantzi’s (2006, *School Leaders’ Influence on Learning; The Four Paths, p.8*)“ parental engagement in school is nurtured when parents come to understand that such involvement is a key part of what it means to be a responsible parent, when parents believe they have the skills and know-how to make meaningful contributions to the school’s efforts and when they believe that school staff, as well as their own children, value their participation in the school”. More specifically the term involvement implies *doing to*; whereas the term engagement implies *doing with*.

The importance of the parental involvement and the parental engagement lies in the potential for the increase of the shared participation and partnership of the educators, teachers and parents in the process of education of the children and students, while taking into consideration the cultural, social background, as well as the expectations, dreams, opinions and the needs of all participants in this process.

THE IMPORTANCE AND MODELS OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT AND ENGAGEMENT

There are many researches which show connection between the parental involvement and the school accomplishments and the motivation of the children and students. (Gottfried, Fleming & Gottfried, 1994). Also, the influence of the parental participation in the output results in the process of education of their children and students is confirmed, i.e. their attitude, motivation and approach in the solving of problems, the connections with others, etc. (Grolnik, Friendly and Bellas, 2009). According to other authors (Ferguson, 2007), the parents are irreplaceable partners in the process of improvement of the accomplishments of their children and students in the kindergarten and school, as well as in the development of their specific talents. This is why, reading at home, discussing specific topics, areas, phenomena, events, the participation in joint activities, spending active and eventful free time, etc. by the parents and their children are models that give greater support to the children and improve the accomplishments of the children and students in the preschool institutions and schools.

Factors that influence the parental involvement and parental engagement are the level of education of the parents, the socioeconomic status, the cultural background, the family structure, the cognitive, social and other abilities of the parents, the neighborhood, etc. (Duncan & Magnuson, 2005). There is a confirmed connection between the level of education of the parents and the cognitive development of the children when they are only three months old. Heckman (2011) confirmed that the “soft skills” of the children (motivation, training to work with others, ability to focus on the task, self-regulation, self-esteem, etc.) are connected from the earliest age with the socioeconomic status of the parents. In this context, the cultural background also has a specific degree of influence depending on the degree of cultivation of the cultural values shared by a specific family. Regarding the social status, specific researches confirm that there is a connection between the social class and the development and accomplishments of the children and students. The parents from the middle class develop the social skills of their children more (Williams, Shanks & Destin, 2009) by encouraging them to participate in activities that develop talents and abilities for interaction and negotiating with the social institutions in the future.

The expectations and beliefs of the parents are another important factor in the accomplishments and relationship of the children with the kindergarten and the school. The parents who have high expectations and beliefs in the competency of their children and students and who develop and stimulate their curiosity, openness to new experiences, perseverance, etc. contribute towards a positive and quality approach and greater accomplishments in kindergarten and school.

Vice versa, the punishments, over-control and negative attitude towards the accomplishments of the children and students often lead to lower accomplishments, motivation and negative attitude towards the kindergarten and school (Gottfried, Fleming & Gottfried, 1994; Grolnik, Friendly & Bellas, 2009).

There are specific forms of parental involvement and participation in the kindergarten and school, such as: *representative; direct and without contact* (Nordal, 2007). In the first case, we are dealing with involvement of a part of chosen parents in the councils and work-groups of the kindergarten or school. In the second case, it is a formal involvement and participation of the parents in parental meetings. The third case refers to the participation and involvement of the parents in conversations, encouragement and other forms of support related to the kindergarten and school in general.

When we speak of parental involvement and parental engagement, we must highlight the

different roles and positions that the parents have (Macbeth and Rav, 1994), such as: an *administrative role* (one that refers to the participation of the parents in different bodies for collaboration and decision-making, then the participation in school trips, voluntary work, as well as other initiatives related to the school); and an *educational role* (the parents fulfill this role by directly teaching the children). The relation educator, teacher and parental involvement and parental engagement, can be *traditional* (it is most important to emphasize the role of the kindergarten, school) or *partner* (the emphasis is placed on the relationship and collaboration among the educators, teachers and parents).

The models and the forms of parental involvement and parental engagement are different in different countries depending on the laws and the positioning of the educational system, but they mainly refer to the involvement and engagement of the parents in the management, organization and realization of the educational goals and tasks in the kindergarten, the school (school, parent boards, councils, activities, projects, extracurricular activities, instructional content, etc.). There are differences regarding how the parental involvement and parental engagement are regulated. This role can be at the highest level, such as the right to make decisions or it could be of consulting nature. Different authors in the pedagogical literature share different opinions about the models of parental involvement and parental engagement. The model by Epstein J.L. (2001), which offers a possibility for developing programs for parental involvement in the kindergartens and the schools, is the most famous one. It contains six types: parenting (help for the parents to create an environment for learning and development of the children and the students at home); communication (designing effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and children's progress); volunteering (recruiting and organizing parent help and support); home tutoring, learning (providing information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning); involvement in decision-making (including the parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives); collaboration with the community (identifying and integrating resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development). The model of parental involvement process by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) is also well-known. It has five levels: parental involvement decision; parents' choice of involvement forms; mechanisms through which the parent influences the child/students outcomes; tempering/mediating variables. Later on a revision was carried out and five levels were left

with changes in each level regarding the coverage and the contribution, influence etc. of each level to the next one.

THE RESEARCH

We carried out a qualitative research using the descriptive and descriptive-interpretative method, with material analysis and a semi-structured interview as researching techniques. The research sample covered a total of 60 parents and teachers from kindergartens (16 educators and 14 parents) and primary schools – elementary education (15 elementary school teachers and 15 parents) of different gender, ethnic, education and social background.

Regarding the question about the parental involvement and parental engagement in the administrative work of the educational institution (i.e. the role), there were differences regarding whether the respondents were educators, elementary school teachers or parents, as well as if the institution in question was a kindergarten or a school. Namely, the parents of the elementary school students believe that they are informed about their participation in the administrative work of the school, through the parent councils, boards, etc., however they rarely receive feedback about the discussions and the decisions made in the mentioned boards and councils.

Regarding the question about the parental involvement and engagement in terms of the curriculum (the extent to which they are informed, the extent to which they can support and help their children at home), the educators and the elementary school teachers stated that the syllabi are published on the websites and other official media of relevant institutions, which gives the parents insight into the material, however the parents rarely show initiative and desire to discuss them. On the other hand, the parents consider that they are not competent for this matter (parents with high-school education and low social status). They do not know if they can make decisions for intervention in the syllabi (regardless of the level of education and the social status), and they also lack sufficient time to participate in the realization of the set educational goals (parents with high level of education and social status).

Regarding the question about the parental involvement and engagement in terms of the school and extracurricular activities, the educators and teachers believe that they are within the requirements of the programs and the laws, but that they also depend on numerous objective and subjective factors, such as how busy the parents are, their indifference, or focus on providing support and help to the children and students at home. Most parents think that they are more involved when it comes to extracurricular activities and the supplying of teaching and other necessary materials, while regarding the instructional content, the parents

with lower level of education and social status think that they are not competent, while the parents with higher level of education and social status offer more support and help to the students at home, and are more focused on the competencies of the educators and the elementary school teachers than on their own involvement and engagement in the direct realization of the instructional content.

Regarding the question about the gender of the parents who show interest to be involved and engaged in the kindergartens and schools, the opinions and attitudes of the educators, elementary school teachers and parents are the same. Namely, the majority of the respondents think that fathers are more involved in the administrative work (boards, councils, etc.), while the mothers are more involved and engaged in the educational activities.

Regarding the questions, there were no significant differences in terms of the opinions and attitudes of the educators, elementary school teachers and parents. It is interesting that all the respondents were not able to clearly determine what model of parental involvement and parental engagement is present in the kindergarten or school that their child is attending, both on a local and a central level. This shows that the matter about the models of parental involvement and parental engagement has not been treated sufficiently in the preschool institutions and in the elementary education. This means that we should strive to overcome the practices of the so-called “controlled” or “borrowed” models for involvement and engagement of the parents, since every preschool and elementary education institution is a unique and specific educational, social and cultural environment with specific characteristics and needs which are, to a certain extent, not unified, i.e. different from the other institutions and environments.

RESUME

Parental involvement and parental engagement is a wide and a very significant area in the sphere of the preschool and elementary education, as a result of the contribution, the influence and the interaction regarding the future development of the children and the students. The approach to this matter sometimes does not depend merely on the existence of an established system of norms and regulations, but on the competence, the eagerness to improve and render real the participation of the parents in the work of the educational institutions. In this direction, the models of parental involvement and parental engagement should be adapted and established in order to increase the quality of the involvement and engagement of the parents, taking into consideration all the educational, social, cultural and other differences and incorporating them in the models of involvement and engagement as

advantages, rather than limitations. In fact, the educational institutions should grow into centers for support, help, council and collaboration with the parents and vice versa, as resource centers for involvement and engagement of the future generation of parents by the previous generations.

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