

# STRATEGIES USED TO GAIN AN EFFECTIVE PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT: SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION AND TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This preliminary study examines the perceptions of school administrators (principals and assistant principals) and teachers regarding the management of parental involvement. Principals, assistant principals, and teachers from both Jewish and Arab elementary schools were interviewed. Using a qualitative research approach, results show that the active participation of parents is the most important factor to achieve beneficial outcomes. At the same time, it is important to draw clear limits to their involvement. The school administrators and the teachers were in favor of parental involvement and some of them expected more involvement for the child's sake (especially in Arab schools). They believed that it is very important for the student's academic achievement and success. Regarding parental involvement in pedagogic issues, the staff were more hesitant, with some against this kind of involvement. Principals' leadership seems to be key for successful parental involvement and the optimal strategies are partnership and collaboration, not only with the parents but also with the teachers.*

## **KEYWORDS**

*Parental involvement, Educational system, Participation style, Principal leadership, Israel.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The involvement of the parents in the education system is an important and central issue in the educational process, and this involvement has increased in Israel over the years (Addi-Racah & Ainhoren, 2009; Freund et al., 2018; Zahalka, 2007). Parental involvement has many positive aspects both in improving the school's functioning from an organizational and pedagogic perspective (Boonk, et al, 2018; Fisher, 2010; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014) and in improving students' scholastic achievement, social success, and self-image (Boonk, et al, 2018; Ryan et al., 2010; Rios-Harrist, 2011). The involvement of parents is multidimensional, composed of a variety of behaviors, attitudes, and expectations. It is also prominent in public and scientific discourse.

Hill et al. (2004) defined parental involvement as “parents’ interactions with school and with their children to benefit their children’s educational outcomes and future success” (p. 1491). This definition reflects parents' perspectives, but there are other school stakeholders: school administrators, teachers, students, the municipal council, and policymakers in the Ministry of Education. There is a differentiation between home-based involvement (the interactions that take place between the child and parent outside of school) and school-based involvement (Freund et al., 2018). Our study focuses on school-based involvement which includes according to Freund et al., (2018) activities such as parents observing their child in class, including her or his

performance during school activities, attending a teacher - parent meetings, volunteering to assist in school's social activities, or the child's classroom learning, etc.

In this study, we explore the perceptions of school administrators and teachers (the main stakeholders) regarding parental involvement. We also examine the strategies that the school administration uses to direct parental involvement into productive activity to benefit their schools and prevent negative parental intervention.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Enhancing parental involvement is one of the most important activities of comprehensive education reform programs across the world (Alinsunurin, 2020). Family-school relations and parental involvement have a significant positive influence on children's educational performance and their ability to succeed in the future. It maximizes the potential of students and closes demographic gaps in achievements (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Gonzalez, et al., 2013). Additionally, it was found that parental involvement has a significant positive relationship with school administrators' perceptions of the school's learning climate which are related to teacher behavior/management (Alinsunurin, 2020). Fisher (2010) notes that many studies have been conducted on parental involvement, most of which are done in elementary schools, reflecting the prominence of parents' involvement in elementary schools. Studies on this subject have shown, among other things, that parental involvement is essential and that it is of great benefit to all the stakeholders.

Involving parents in intervention programs, such as anti-bullying and victimization, is a crucial component of schools' activities. Also, psychological and health problems, such as ADHD, OCD, anorexia, and smoking addiction among youth, can be improved by engaging parents (Alinsunurin, 2020).

### **2.1. School Administration's strategies and Teachers' Perception Regarding Parental Involvement**

Fisher (2010) and Rios-Harrist (2011) noted that researchers who dealt with the subject have determined that although most school administrators (principals and assistant principals) agree that involvement is important, they are not unanimous about its definitions. In countries, such as the United States, Canada and Israel, policymakers expect the school administration to cooperate with parents, but what skills are required of principals for this are not clear. In Fisher's opinion, the lack of clear findings regarding the relationship between the principal's style and parental involvement stems from the lack of a clear definition of the concept itself, as without a clear definition, it is hard to examine a relationship between variables. In addition, the lack of clarity of the term "parental involvement" hinders principals' support for involvement.

Vidislavsky and Shemesh (2010) noted two main strategies that principals adopt in their interactions with parents in order to encourage their positive involvement. They are: a) performing activities that support learning and express appreciation for learning; and b) developing of school activities that support parent-teacher relationships. Goldring (2002) found that principals typically adopt three response strategies in their interactions with parents. First, *Partnership* - attempting to bring parents closer to the school's approach and have them accept and identify with the school's goals by creating a match between school resources and parents' expectations. The interaction is characterized by principals trying to guide parents regarding the type of cooperation and levels of involvement desired in the school which can help it. Second, *Coalitional cooperation* - through the creation of a coalition aimed at full collaboration between

the school and the parents, taken when principals and parents work together to achieve common goals. In this case, principals see parents as important allies because of similar goals and interests and strive to involve them. This type of relationship is especially typical when trying to achieve a common one-time goal. Last, *Formalization* - assimilation of parents' representatives into the mechanism and institutionalization of the relationship between the parents and the school. Formality is often achieved by a principal's influence on the appointment of preferred parents to various positions/functions in the 'parent association' which becomes a support group for the school administration's decisions. Additionally, the principals establish formal procedures for handling parental requests. Constrictive procedures are a system that can be used to lower the level of uncertainty regarding parents' intervention (negative involvement).

The effect of attitudes or strategies of principals and teachers regarding parental involvement was examined by Addi-Racah & Ainhoren (2009). Their participants included principals, chairs of parent committees, and teachers of 11 medium-sized elementary schools. They also divided principals' behaviors into three strategies regarding parental involvement: bureaucratic, professional, and participant. In Israeli schools, they found that principals who had a collaborative approach contributed to a positive attitude of teachers towards the involvement process, while principals who implemented the bureaucratic approach contributed to an ambivalent attitude of teachers towards the process.

Goldring (2002) argued that principals do not always adopt a single strategy, but rather change their strategy according to the particular coalition of parents, their relationship within the educational-professional system, and other political matters. However, all three strategies allow principals to balance this complex relationship. It has also been found that principals do not choose a strategy as a matter of personal style, but rather integrate their strategies into the general political and social context of the environment of their organizational relationships. According to a study by Goldring (2002), all principals claimed that they respond with friendly behavior to parental involvement rather than cooperation and formality. Formality, according to the study, is used very rarely.

Addi-Racah & Ainhoren's (2009) findings indicate that teachers showed resistance and negative attitudes toward parental involvement in schools where parents were empowered. Teachers showed ambivalent feelings about this issue in schools where the administration was professional and bureaucratic and showed positive attitudes in schools where there was participatory administration. Further research data regarding teachers' attitudes show that 67% of teachers believe that parental involvement in school activities has become a negative intervention and 54% of them are afraid of students' parents (Trabelsi-Haddad, 2003). Another study conducted in Israeli schools from different sectors found that the level of teacher burnout corresponds to the level of teachers' perception of parental involvement; the more the teachers showed a positive attitude towards parental involvement, the lower their burnout (Peretz, 2001). This can explain Freund's et al. (2018) findings that teachers' invitation for parental participation in school activities was low. They also found that parental involvement for both Arab and Jewish parents in school was relatively low.

## **2.2. Israeli Society and the Educational System**

Since its establishment in 1948, Israel has undergone significant political and socioeconomic changes. Since the 1970s, the Israeli economy has shifted from a centralized socialistic economy to a capitalist market economy and from a collectivistic to a more individualistic society (Sharabi, Polin & Yanay-Ventura, 2019). Today, Jewish society places great emphasis on individualism, materialism, emphasizing instrumental achievements, personal autonomy, and independence while Arab society emphasizes collectivistic values of conservatism, conformism, and obedience

to authority (Sharabi, Shdema & Aboud-Armali, 2021). Israeli Arabs (about 19% of the population) have been partially and slowly affected by these socioeconomic changes (Kaufman, Abu Baker, & Saar, 2012; Schnell & Shdema, 2016). However, unlike Jewish society, Arabs in Israel tend to be more conservative, emphasize tradition, the welfare and safety of the group, with a rigid hierarchy system and little autonomy – all fundamentally collectivist characteristics (Kaufman et al., 2012; Sharabi, 2018).

In addition to cultural differences, other sources for the differences are the long-term high degree of residential, educational, and occupational segregation between the two groups. Israeli Arabs live mostly in villages and as an ethnic minority, they try to keep their way of life, culture, language, etc. (Schnell & Shdema, 2016). Arabic is the language of instruction in Arab schools while Hebrew is the language of instruction in Jewish schools. Although the systems are separated, they are equal in terms of curriculum, national exams, etc.

The educational system in the 1970s was highly centralized with the Israeli Ministry of Education supervising every aspect of the educational system. Schools were heavily bureaucratic and uniform, functioning with only marginal, insubstantial parental involvement. Since the 1980s, there has been a steady process of decentralization and devolution of educational services to local authorities and the schools themselves (Addi-Racah & Ainhoren, 2009; Freund et al., 2018). This process paralleled the shift from collectivistic to individualistic values and is reflected in the style of parental involvement. In the past, parents put the school's needs and its promotion as a top goal, while in recent years most of the involved parents are focused on their own needs and interests, namely their child and her or his class (Sharabi, Cohen-Ynon & Soskis, 2021).

In recent years, teachers indicate that parental involvement has become more intense, and undermines their authority and work. The outcome is a decline in teachers' occupational status and eventually, it leads to a deterioration in the quality of recruits (Addi-Racah & Ainhoren, 2009; Sharabi et al, 2021). Freund et al. (2018) indicated that today parent-school relationships are characterized by a mutual feeling of distrust. Parents have become active clients who inspect and scrutinize school achievements and activities.

### **3. METHOD**

Since perceptions about the magnitude of parental involvement are subjective and involve unobservable aspects that can be best elicited through cooperation with the participants, this study employed a qualitative research approach within the framework of grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). This framework is particularly well suited for cases in which theoretical information is lacking. It requires researchers to work closely with participants and to encourage them to describe their experiences in their own terms, and to employ an interpretive and reflective methodology to understand the findings (Charmaz, 2000).

#### **3.1. Participants**

The study included interviews with sixteen staff members from four elementary schools (two Jewish schools and two Arab schools). In each school, the principal, assistant principal, and teachers were interviewed. The research method was semi-structured interviews that enabled the pedagogic staff to describe how they perceived the concept of parental involvement. What are the advantages, disadvantages, and difficulties of parental involvement, as well as how to improve parental involvement and decrease negative, problematic parental intervention? The main questions all the interviewees were asked: a) describe the parental involvement in your school; b)

what are the difficulties arising from parental involvement in your school? And c) how are the staff and the principal coping with negative parental involvement?

#### **4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The participants define two forms of positive parent involvement: (1) A parent's involvement in the school concerning their own children's performance, including activities directly associated with learning processes, such as help with schoolwork, and responding positively to teachers' requests for help; and (2) parents' involvement in promoting the goals of the school and everyone within it, i.e., teachers, administration staff, and students. The teaching staff in both population sectors (Jewish and Arab) view parental involvement as important and essential. They feel both of these forms of involvement are necessary. They state, for example: "The parents are a central part of the school, and their involvement leads to greater closeness between the teachers' and parents' worldviews. Also, the parent's involvement can positively influence the child's performance in school". The teaching staff from the Jewish sector views parents as partners: "I call parent involvement 'collaboration', which means making parents part of school life. Through their involvement, parents can enrich the school".

The teaching staff views the parents' involvement as beneficial for students and teachers alike: "A student's success in school is a function of the teachers-parents-students triangle, when the parents are involved and active in the school, their child benefits as well as all the students in the school". Several teachers assert that parent involvement is one of the guarantees for teachers' and students' success in the school: "Positive parental involvement promotes the school and the teacher's work". According to the interviewees, parent involvement enables the parents to have a closer relationship with their children's school: "Parent involvement provides parents with greater access to information and what goes on at the school, it enables them to get to know their children even better, and they see themselves as active partners, not just outside guests".

Numerous teachers referred to the necessary conditions for optimal positive involvement. The first is maintaining a good atmosphere and optimal communication between parents and teachers: "When parents display respect towards the teaching staff, appreciate the staff, and speak positively to the staff, the result is positive involvement". Some teachers also ascribed importance to the parents' involvement being jointly defined: "The entire teaching staff should define the relationship together with the parents, examine the place of the parents in the school, and what their areas of involvement are; this will prevent conflicts and their involvement will be optimal". The teachers contend that the parents' involvement should be under their "supervision", which would prevent negative involvement, for example: "The teacher should navigate the parents' involvement, the teacher holds the power"; "Sometimes parents ignore the teacher's authority and professionalism, and they enter a territory that isn't theirs".

According to the majority of the teachers, optimal parent involvement depends on the personality of the teacher or the principal. They state: "A teacher's personality can influence optimal or negative involvement, the teacher has to be true to herself, show that she's a professional, act according to clear principles, she should know school procedures and act accordingly, just like a principal has to act in accordance with procedures and a clear and professional policy; this way, there's a possibility for the involvement to be positive, and for less negative involvement".

According to the respondents, positive involvement is when parents enlist to volunteer and devote time to activities for the school's benefit, while not interfering in anything that does not fall under the parents' authority: "In my view, positive involvement takes place in every activity that benefits the children in the class, and which doesn't border on disagreement from either side..."; "Parents' activities, collaboration, and initiatives [should be] in measured doses, not too

much”; “Optimal parent involvement is when parents contribute to the school, give of their time, their energy, when they participate in the educational endeavor by offering help, volunteering, like decorating classrooms, arranging things for certain projects, ‘peak days’ around a particular topic, volunteering that benefits the school”; “Parents who can give a lecture in their field of knowledge, who can help and advance weaker children, help with social activities, soccer or basketball teams, parents can help with the school’s appearance, improve its exterior and interior, obtain resources and raise funds – that’s optimal involvement”.

Several teachers (as well as principals) state that optimal involvement can only occur when there is a relationship of trust and when the parents are heard: “The more we open up and include, there’ll be greater involvement”; “We need to tell the truth, not lie even if the school’s situation isn’t that good, if there’s truth, there’s an effort”; “There has to be trust and openness to prevent conflicts between the parents and the staff”.

The administration staff in the Jewish sector emphasizes trust and openness as facilitating positive involvement: “Once you involve them, they’re more empathetic, they’re less aggressive, we mustn’t underestimate parents, the trick is to work with parents when you constantly have to avoid backing yourself into all kinds of corners, to listen to their feelings, read the map and see that there are all kinds of interests at play...”; “As a principal, on parent days and the joint parent committee meeting, I open the year and describe our educational endeavor to them, the data, the work program”.

All the principals use words like parent “collaboration” and “participation” in their definitions of optimal involvement in all educational spheres: formal and non-formal, and opening the school to parents: “When the administration staff outlines the path, you see that the more open you are the greater their involvement, I believe in collaboration, that’s the most important thing, you can’t promote a school, you can’t promote goals, and any educational agenda without involving parents, parents have an opinion, they’re educated, and they can be partners, they can help, I’m in favor of maximum collaboration”; “As far as I’m concerned, they can come every day, experience learning, I want them with me, I and the parent committee opens up everything, it’s a culture of collaboration, without it the school can’t soar to new heights”; “I have a very cooperative committee, involved in programs and building cultural activities, I’m also interested in the pedagogical aspect, I want to see them involved there as well, but I don’t see them there yet”.

On the one hand, the principals place importance on parent involvement in the pedagogical content as well, and on the other, they also state that boundaries have to be set: “I want them to be involved in pedagogical matters, but there have to be boundaries... Parent involvement, when parents are also involved in the educational process, when they’re involved in the school’s pedagogical aspect or the curriculum, there’s a blurring between the teacher’s professionalism and the parents... Any move the parents take part in that involves pedagogy has to be guided and goals and aims have to be presented that the parents and the educational staff agree on in advance, in order to prevent negative involvement and interference”.

The educational staff and teachers in the Arab sector distinguish between two forms of involvement: (1) Parents’ involvement concerning their own children’s performance, i.e., a parent’s contact with their child’s teaching staff, supporting teachers when there is a problem with their child, and attending parent days and other activities initiated by the school; and (2) parents’ involvement in their children’s school, i.e., participating in parent leadership, promoting the school’s goals, and collaborative work between parents, administration staff, and teachers.

Several of the teachers interviewed claim that parents' involvement in their children's studies is higher than it was in the past but still insufficient: "In the schools, parents' involvement in what's happening with their child is higher than their involvement for the benefit of the school"; "The attendance of parents at parent days is sufficient, but when there's a school event or elections for a central committee, parents refrain from attending". The participants note the importance of optimal involvement for keeping parents informed about their child's academic performance: "Parent involvement is when parents are kept informed about their child, and the staff doesn't leave the parents to cope on their own"; and participation in various events: "We do things collaboratively, we do joint activities".

The participants relate that parent involvement in the schools primarily manifests in contact with the local authorities when there is a budgetary problem or a shortage in resources – the parents serve as a link and ensure that the shortage in the schools is addressed. They also help when a problem arises between the school and parents when the school and teaching staff are unable to form a positive relationship with the parents and gain their support: "The parents on the committee help solve problems with certain families; in fact, they're the connection between the school administration and teachers and the parents, they also help with the [local] council to obtain equipment for the school"; "Parent involvement is mainly in the financial aspects and the political aspect with reference to the [local] authority".

While the teachers would like to see more active parent involvement in pedagogical content, they also set boundaries: "I think it's important for parents to be involved because they are society, and if society is involved in pedagogical content as well, it'll contribute to us, to the school"; "I don't have a problem with parents being involved in the pedagogical aspect, it's pertinent, and if they explain to us and to the principals why it's important to study a particular topic that'll be based on knowledge, I'm all in favor"; "I'm happy with involvement when it's positive, they show interest in what their child is learning, ask what can be added and improved, in general there's involvement, but not enough. There's involvement when it comes to the authorities and the municipality, if we need more resources, they apply pressure"; "They mainly help with the [local] council, they bring us equipment... parents on the committee help us with families with which there are difficulties"; "For two years, we haven't received anything from the [local] authority, everything was donated by parents so we could keep going. The council was in a bad state, now they only give the minimum, the basics"; "They're very active, they approach the local authority, if we need equipment, the parents exert pressure on the council, that's their main contribution".

Members of administration staff in the Arab sector state that a positive change has occurred in parents' conduct and involvement: "There's a change for the better in parent involvement, parents are starting to understand that they have a part to play, some take it to a good place, others use it for their own benefit. The parent committee has started to understand what its function is." According to them, parents who previously viewed the school as the sole source of knowledge and the only educational institution, have changed their perspective, and are starting to take a more active role in the school than they did in the past, and also contribute their skills and abilities.

Their involvement primarily manifests itself in participation in school events, and the relationship between the school and local council or municipality, and to a lesser degree in the principal's decisions or pedagogical planning. "The parents come to school, we do things collaboratively, 'peak days', decorating classrooms, there's a slight increase in attendance on parent days, and there are parents who come to give lectures to the children"; "There's a process of parent involvement, but it's still hard and not enough"; "The parents help us a great deal in terms of budgets, and when there are students with behavioral problems – they're involved, they help us with that child's parents". The principals emphasize the benefits of parent involvement for the

success or failure of their work: "The parents helped me considerably, they're part of my success at the school, they gave me a lot of support... I reached a mutual understanding with them, respect, very good relationships, they support me, very much believe in me".

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The findings support Vidislavsky and Shemesh's (2010) perceptions regarding the role of the school principal in shaping parental involvement. The very fact that the school principal is the head of the organization, his/her leadership, authority and a liaison between the institution and factors outside it in general, make him/her a crucial figure in the quality of dialogue with parents. The school principal has a vital role in determining the degree of parental involvement and the degree of effectiveness of their involvement. They also indicate that: a) The involvement of the principal in the partnership's efforts is essential; b) It is important to develop strong support for a partnership between parents, teachers and community members; and c) The partnership should be consistently and regularly expanded, and a formative evaluation should be evaluated to promote student success and development.

Although studies in Israel find that principals and teachers believe that parental support and involvement in school activities have a positive effect on its success (Addi-Racah & Ainhoren, 2009; Fischer, 2010; Freund et al., 2018), teachers expressed fear of the potential negative outcomes of the process. The school administration must empower, support, and direct teachers regarding varied situations of negative parental involvement since they are in the frontlines. Teachers' reactions/attitudes are crucial in successful and beneficial interaction between the main stakeholders of the school (students, parents, teachers and school administration).

It was found the collectivistic and altruistic values of Arab society are reflected in their involvement. Parental involvement in the Arab sector is much lower regarding their child's benefit and more for the benefit of the school. They help acquire varied resources for the school. This involvement is directed mostly by the principals. In Jewish schools, there is an opposite pattern of involvement, namely the parents' agenda for the benefit of their child, while they care less about the school's needs. This pattern reflects the individualistic values in Jewish society. The above findings are consistent with previous studies regarding parental involvement in the two sectors (Sharabi, et al., 2021; Freund et al., 2018).

In conclusion, parents are more aware than ever of their place in the school and their part in the processes that take place in it, and it is important to turn them into constructive partners. Therefore, continuous contact between teachers and parents may make the school a close and familiar institution for the parents, allowing them to both influence its character and be influenced by it. The teachers and the rest of the educational staff are professionals in the field of education and therefore they are responsible for the academic advancement of the students in the school as well as the student's social and emotional well-being. In order for teachers to perform this complex task, boundaries must be set so that their professional autonomy is respected, and they must be allowed to exercise professional judgment without external pressures. It is important to note that getting parents involved in a dialogue with the educational staff does not diminish the teacher's professionalism, but on the contrary, obliges them to improve and reach a higher pedagogical level. The school administration has to enhance constant dialogue with parents since it can make the teachers sensitive to the strengths and weaknesses of each student, as well as learn from the parents about the student's needs, in order to promote the well-being of the student and ultimately contribute to the success of the school. For further suggestions how the school administration can improve parental involvement, see Rios-Harrist (2011)



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