

'IT'S THEIR JOB, NOT OURS!': HOME-SCHOOL RELATIONS IN CYPRUS

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Abstract – *In a previous paper (Phtiaka 1996) I looked at the relationship between home and school in Cyprus from the school's point of view. This paper completes the picture exploring parental views on home-school relations. It investigates parental motivation and decision making, and questions what lies behind parental 'absence' from school. It finally attempts to enrich our understanding of home-school relations by identifying what different groups of parents want and need from school. The paper is based on nine case studies of families whose children attend second year at Country Primary School and builds on research carried out during the children's first year in school. Findings indicate that all families without exception care about their children's education and accept responsibility for it. They are very positive in their evaluation of school and teachers and accept teacher authority on all educational matters. Finally, all parents agree that co-operation between home and school benefits the children. Families are nevertheless divided in their approach to school as they have varied school experiences. They voice different needs and expectations from school depending on which group they belong to: the over-involved, the middle or the marginalised group. The paper concludes that given parental goodwill it is the responsibility of the school to initiate contact with the families on their own terms and to avoid interpreting their behaviour through a deficit model, requesting from the vast majority of parents what only a small minority can provide.*

Introduction

Dear president of the community, head-teacher, dear teachers, parents and our children, it is with feelings of joy that I welcome you on behalf of the Parents' Association. Once more the end of the school year finds us refugees, away from our paternal homes and our sacred land. (...) Despite the difficult conditions of our refuge however, we have managed with teachers' and parents' help to organise our school perfectly well and to see it function wonderfully, without problems, supported by all necessary facilities and equipment, notwithstanding the large number of pupils it accommodates. *Of course, parental participation in*

school activities could have been on a bigger scale and therefore more effective! Nevertheless I believe that we managed to make considerable achievements. (my emphasis) We arranged health insurance for our children, we placed fans in the classrooms so that children can attend classes more comfortably during the summer months, we bought musical instruments, and much more...'

Thus did the President of Country Primary School PA¹ greet parents and teachers at the end of year celebration on June 20th 1995. Teachers did not need to reply and parents were not offered a chance to express themselves. Fortunately I had become acquainted with their views a few months back...

... In a recent paper (Phtiaka, 1996) I argued that the issue of home-school partnership has for a long time been dealt in the literature in a fashion that ignores the power struggle underpinning the relationship. I suggested that efforts to bring parents in close contact with school raise ethical issues of power and powerlessness and pose questions of partnership equity. They also mistake parental anxiety or resistance for lack of interest, and occasionally strip parents from the only defence they have against public scrutiny. I concluded that as researchers and educators we need to consciously distance ourselves from 'blaming the victim' techniques, ensuring that schools are self-sufficient in providing for their students and do not make demands beyond parental ability or time. Instead of complaining about parental inadequacies we need to direct criticism and demands for help towards the State. Adequate school resourcing, I argued, is the best way of dealing with inequalities in home interest and support, considering that for a number of children support at home will always be impossible or inadequate.

I am still convinced that it is vital for educational research to keep such concerns at heart and to continue to question the social context within which schools and parents operate and research is carried out. Despite noble intentions, narrow focus on support techniques at the micro-level is not only inadequate, but also dangerous, as it may well distract from the cause of the problem and lead back to 'blaming the victim' approaches.

The previous paper looked at the issues at hand from the school's point of view. This paper will complement the earlier one and complete the picture of home-school relations in Cyprus exploring parental views on home-school relations. It will closely investigate parental motivation and decision making, and will question what lies behind parental 'absence' from school. It will finally attempt to enrich our understanding of home-school relations by identifying what different groups of parents want and need from school.

The research project

Both the previous paper (Phtiaka, 1996) and this one are products of a research project looking at home-school relationships in Cyprus. The project started in May 1993 with a survey of all primary schools (65) in one Educational District (Georgiou, 1996). This was the First Phase. It was followed by the Second Phase which consisted of case studies in four of these schools, chosen for their complimentary character in terms of size, location, socio-economic background, catchment area, as well as age and gender of head teacher, given that those appeared at the survey to be influential features on home-school relations. The findings from two of these schools, Country school and St. Paul's school, have been reported elsewhere (Phtiaka, 1994, 1996). This paper is based on data from the third phase of the project, which involved nine families from Country Primary School.

Country school and community

Country School is a large Cypriot² primary school in the outskirts of a village near the sea. The school draws its intake from a large refugee settlement established outside the village following the 1974 Turkish invasion.³ Only 16 out of the 343 children come from the village which is very small compared to the settlement. 95.5% of the pupils come from young refugee families. Their parents were themselves at school in 1974 when they became homeless. This in itself raises very interesting issues regarding the social conditions and needs of the families, but this will not be the focus of this paper. According to the headteacher's estimates, only 5% of the families include parents who are University graduates and practice professional jobs. 20% are further education graduates employed in the public or private sector, 20% are secondary education or training graduates, mostly privately employed and 5% are unskilled labourers with little or no education.

The vast majority of parents, 40%, are skilled labourers with elementary education. The refugee settlement is large and unattractive with very few public facilities including the church and some shops. It is built to the north of the school, while the village is to its south, and is therefore geographically quite distinct from it, the school functioning as a border between them. There is little contact between the settlement and the village, even though both parties have an interest in the school and contribute to its running. Connections between the settlement families are also very limited as the headteacher (a refugee himself) explains:

Mr. Solonos: Look, people from the settlement come from 48 different communities. They don't have the connection people have when they are born and brought up together in a village. Those who come from one community perhaps mix with other people from the same community, and those from another community do the same. Their habits and their customs remain the same they had in their own community because they came here when they were grown ups.

Helen: So it is like a city not a village...

Mr. Solonos: Well, almost! You may not greet someone even if he is your neighbour, as it happens in a city. While in a village you would greet young and old alike because you consider them all a part of you.

Helen: And do they still feel strangers after 20 odd years?

Mr. Solonos: The young are different. See, the children all have a similar mentality. But the grown ups still hold the mentality they had when they came over. They do not mix. I think in a few years the divisions will disappear if the Cypriot problem remains as it is now (unresolved).

Clearly, refugee families have divided loyalties (Loizos, 1981; Aga-Khan and Bin Talal 1986; Hirschon, 1989). A refugee settlement is by definition something temporary. They did not come here to stay. They came here to stop until the military and political problem is resolved. In conditions of fear and insecurity following a war, human relationships do not easily flourish. Years later, when they find themselves still in the settlement, the refugees begin perhaps to feel the need for a community, but this need has to compete with loyalty to their birth place. This loyalty keeps alive their will to return and cannot easily be abandoned. The dilemma is evident in the adults' approach to relationships in the community, and influences to an extent the children's feelings too. It is in this context of suspicion and enforced temporary co-habitation that relationships within the community and between families and school need to be examined.

Defying the social conditions of its area, Country Primary School is a proud, well built, friendly and comfortable school, surrounded by pleasant gardens and playing fields. It has 343 children and 15 staff under the direction of a 63 year old male headteacher. Some of the staff, including the headteacher, are refugees but do not live in the settlement. The school is well organised and runs 'like a clock', everyone knowing exactly what they are supposed to be doing and when. Staff turnover is low, as teachers are happy to stay for a number of years (Ministry of Education permitting), comforted by the pleasant atmosphere of the staffroom,

and surrounded by facilities (music room, medical room, playing fields, book collection, map collection, and so on) elsewhere unavailable. Children are on the whole disciplined and well behaved, and parents eager to help at home and in school. As one teacher, Eleni, puts it:

Whatever we ask them, they do, most of them. They come and inquire (about their children) and we are pleased... We don't have stropky parents. They are easy going, they do as they are told, the kids come to school prepared...

Eleni, first year teacher

Eleni's comment on how the relationship between home and school operates needs to be noted. For the time being however, we shall remember that Country school is a very organised and pleasant school, with a relaxed and happy atmosphere.

The families

Country Refugee Settlement consists of a variety of households with varied incomes, including professional families, clerks, skilled workers, and unskilled manual workers. The population of the study examined in this paper includes 9 families from all three categories, all but one of which had a first year child in school in December 1993 when the family questionnaires were distributed to all 57 first year pupils (Georgiou, 1996). Six families were identified because their completed questionnaires gave means of identification which allowed me to trace them, two were approached because of their limited communication with the school, and one because the father was the president of the PA. The family not included in the 1993 sample was an English one with a very interesting language home-school communication problem. Pupils were first asked for permission to contact their parents. Permission was granted by all of them. Parents were consequently contacted at home and asked if they were interested in an interview on home-school relations. If hesitant or unable to fix an appointment at first call, they were invited to contact the researcher at their pace. All but one family approached did so. In this way nine families were identified.

All families were interviewed at home with the assistance of a tape-recorder, at a time convenient to them in December 1994. They all had a child in the second year, except for one, Antonis who was repeating the first year class. The conversations were cordial and the interviews very well received, parents welcoming the interest shown in their children's progress and their own problems.

The children themselves were very excited by the visit and participated with interest and enthusiasm when present. The children at the heart of the discussion were: Costantinos, Myria, Argiri, Xanthi, Pinelopi, Christina, Helen, Yiorgos and Antonis. In the interest of confidentiality I shall not draw a family portrait for each family as I would like to.⁴ Instead I shall provide the necessary information as I deal with each case.

Learning: whose responsibility?

I have argued elsewhere (Phtiaka, 1996), that one of the main issues raised in the area of home-school relations is the issue of responsibility. Whose responsibility is it to educate the children? Does this responsibility lie with the State, the School or the Home?

We cannot deny that in 20th century Europe the State holds a major share in this responsibility and so criticism and pressure need to be directed to the State. However, targeting the State is a long, hard struggle which may well be slow in bearing fruit. In the meantime we, as educators and researchers, may be faced with the problem of identifying the most effective ways to facilitate student learning. Such concerns are most likely the moving force behind applied research studies which have been addressing the issue of home-school partnership for a number of years worldwide (Atkin *et al.*, 1988; Cairney and Munsie, 1992; Cairney *et al.*, 1995; Cairney and Ruge, 1997; Davies, 1991; Epstein, 1992; Georgiou, 1977; MacBeath and Turner, 1990). The two concerns, targeting the State and seeking practical solutions at the chalk-front, need to be addressed in parallel nonetheless, and one should never distract us from the other. Furthermore, while applied research is more rewarding to participants, understanding of the issues is incomplete and therefore applied research ineffective if the social context and the dynamics of the broader situation escape us. Consequently, we can only temporarily turn our attention to practical issues, never denouncing the theoretical concerns.

Our understanding of the relationship between home and school needs to be enriched with information from many angles. Findings so far (Phtiaka, 1994, 1996) indicate both school and parents to be interested in children's education and to require each other's assistance. However the border between each one's responsibility is not clear. Teachers are seen to believe that their job is completed within the walls of the classroom. What happens beyond that is not their responsibility. Is this the case? Is it true that if learning is not successfully completed in school premises within school hours this is not a school problem? Are slow learners, for instance, to be left to their own or their parents' devices?

How can any delay in learning be compensated and by whom? Here is a reminder of how some teachers feel about the subject:

I had a mother visiting the other day. I managed to say what I had to say, but instead of me telling *her*, *she* was telling *me* that the kid can do all these things, while in fact he can't! (...) Deep inside, parents know the problems, but they do not want to admit them...

Irini, second year teacher

Why should a parent not want to admit their child's difficulties if such difficulties are due to inadequacies of school teaching, and if the school is responsible for overcoming them? It seems to me that unwillingness to admit any weaknesses on the child's behalf can only be understood in terms of parental denial that they have failed their own responsibility; be it to produce a bright child, or to help the child overcome its problem. The teacher also seems to understand this exchange in terms of shedding off responsibility. 'Instead of me telling *her*, *she* was telling *me*' (emphasis original). Is this an example of teacher-parent shifting off the responsibility for the child's failure to each other? And why would that be happening if the border of responsibility was clear?

Unlike the UK where responsibility for pupil learning has for a long time rested on the school,⁵ such responsibility in Cyprus seems to lie squarely with the home. This is evident in the education system's relative lack of compensatory educational devices and time, constant parental search for compensatory education in case of pupil problems (Phtiaka, 1994), and direct parental statements. What do parents believe? Having established the school view on the matter, there is a need to direct our attention to parental views. This will help us better understand how home and school relate to each-other and identify power struggles and/or opportunities for co-operation.

Parental views

In this study parental views were characterised by consistency and a good insight into pupil behaviour. Parents' opinions were surprisingly close to school ones regarding responsibility issues. However, parents articulated thoughts and needs which have to be closely examined before our question on responsibility is answered.

A number of concerns were shared among all parents, while others were unique to certain families, possibly a product of their profession, financial situation, or involvement in the Country School Parents' Association (PA). It is

useful to start by examining the views shared by all nine families involved in the study and then concentrate on the differences arising. It is reassuring, for instance, to see that there is basic agreement on all important issues which can be used as a basis for a very good cooperative relationship between home and school.

Common themes

All parents seriously care about their children's education

Contrary to popular belief and some research evidence (Bell, 1993) all data clearly indicates this to be the case. Decisions on matters such as choice of school, provision of study facilities at home, school work worries, and homework anxieties, demonstrate that all parents without exception are interested in their children's education, think hard about options available and take educational decisions very seriously. Even decisions which appear to an outsider, and possibly to the school, as mistaken, ill-judged, or harmful for the children's education, have painstakingly been decided upon by parents who care and often place themselves in hardship to offer their children what they think is best for them. To illustrate this point a good example may be the decision by Helen's mother to send Helen and her brother to Country School. Helen Stone and her family are English citizens living in Cyprus for almost two years now. The father works in the Middle East and the family has decided that Cyprus would be a good place as a base for the children to grow up and go to school rather than move around different countries every so often. No one in the family speaks Greek. They live in a holiday flat, away from the mainstream life of the village and the refugee camp. As a consequence the children get little opportunity to speak Greek at home while this is their means of communication at school. Helen, who is nine years old, has been placed in the second grade, that is with seven year olds, for most of the day, but takes language classes with the first grade, that is six year olds. The school headteacher is rather sceptical about her progress, but sees no better way of supporting her during school hours. He has advised the mother to encourage the children to play with Greek children at home to help develop their language skills. Helen's brother, who is placed in the first grade with children only a year younger than him, is in a better position. The mother explains her decision to send her children to this school:

I was going to put them in (an English School)... We went to see them and people persuaded me out of it. (...) I suppose being in (the Middle East) I know the kind of schools. It's more of a business. If you don't get through, that's it! You are out! And I spoke to a lot

of London Cypriots (...) who had their kids go through and been thrown out at the last minute and they don't know what to do with them! One of them may be probably about 15. He can't go back to Greek school because he can't do the Greek well enough. (...) So we checked, we found a house up here because I would rather have them go to a village school than... Then we went up to the school and we talked to the headmaster, made sure we got the house. (...) I went to see the minister of education and he said it's no problem as long as you go within the area that you live... You've got to live in the area the school is in, that was another reason that we moved down here. But it's a lovely school!⁶

It is evident here that a decision which can easily be considered ill judged or harmful for the children's education is instead the product of a long and painful decision-making process for the mother, who has conducted careful research within the means available to her. On careful consideration this decision has a very good success potential, especially for her son, who is younger and more sociable and whose gender offers an advantage over his sister regarding out of school, street socialisation with local children.

This is a clear example of a family choice which can easily be misunderstood and misconstrued by the school as lack of careful planning regarding the children's education, while it evidently is not. In the light of such instances we need to search parental motivation and judge parental decisions very carefully indeed.

All parents accept responsibility for their children's education

It is also clear that all parents without exception in this study accept responsibility for their children's education. For instance they consider themselves personally responsible for their children's homework, and explain how they monitor and control it and how they assist their children in completing it. Such views occasionally are elaborately stated and backed up by a coherent pedagogical philosophy as is the case with Constantinos' mother who is a secondary school teacher:

I was ill again yesterday, so my husband dictated a piece for him to write and helped him with his Maths. You see, I told my husband that we need to take the child closer to us, because I think we have somehow alienated him without meaning too. I believe that the responsibility rests squarely with us. We need to check his work

more! And not only that, I think this way you keep the child closer to you! If you go and sit near him, and explain something to him, you show him your love! You see, because of our work load we have become a bit alienated from the kids. We don't have enough communication, and where there is no communication, nothing goes right! In winter, you see, my time is limited... We come home at 2.00 o'clock p.m., and with them being three...⁷

Costantinos' mother

In other instances they are simply presented as a matter of fact, something that parents take as much for granted as the school does:

She is good at school. We don't have any problems. Of course parents need to work hard at home too. If you don't sit down with her to explain, it is difficult for the kid to understand. School is not enough on its own. I often sit with her for two hours of an evening...

Christina's mother

It is worth noting that the same is evident for the children. Behaviour and comments of pupils involved in the study, even those like Yiorgos, who is generally considered immature and irresponsible, also indicate acceptance of homework responsibility and constant worry about work completion.

Mother: Yiorgos sits down to work on his own account.

Helen: Does he?

M: Yes. In a little while we shall sit down to his homework.

H: He does not need to be pushed...

M: (No) It is strange he has not come to ask me to sit down with him to work yet. To be free, you see, during the weekend, so that he does not have to worry about work and can enjoy himself, he says...

Yiorgos' mother

As is evident from the above quotes, parents and pupils alike devote a lot of time and effort on homework seeing it as a necessary compliment to school work. What perhaps needs to be questioned is not their readiness to accept responsibility for it, which is backed up by numerous research findings (Finders and Lewis, 1994; Hoover-Dempsey *et al.* 1995a; Okagaki and French, 1998), but rather their ability, confidence and time available to deal with it. We shall come back to homework later, but here is an indicative quote linking homework with study facilities at home:

Mother: (...) I have a Maths encyclopedia and I read it. Where is the book Antoni? Where did we put it? (looks for it) Here it is! (she shows me) It has all the Maths from the first to the sixth year! (...) I bought it recently you know, I did not have it from the beginning, it is three or four months I got it... We had nothing like this in the house, no encyclopedias...

Helen: So, where did you find it?

M: (speaks proudly of the encyclopedia, shows it to me) It is 6-7 books! It has Maths, dictionaries, History... I saw them, I liked them. It is expensive, I tell him, but because... He comes every month! That day I told him... I don't have this much money... It is too much money... Even for paying by the month... He asked for 30 pounds, I tell him, I can't! Come down a bit! He said 15 pounds. O.K. I say, O.K.. As it is for the house, and it is good for the kids, it does not matter. Leave them! 15 pounds a month. He comes here and takes it!

Antonis' mother

The mother's struggle to do everything in her power to facilitate homework and help her children along is moving. Antonis' mother is not an articulate woman and often has difficulty relating to me what she wants to say. Her broken speech flow indicates, I hope as I translate it, her difficulty in communicating with a teacher (me), but also her willingness to do so, and prove that she does care, and is doing all she can to help her children succeed in school. Such instances indicate the lengths parents go to in order to fulfill their obligations to school. If their interest is measured by outcome alone, we shall never have the true picture of their commitment.

All parents are very positive in their evaluation of the school climate and the head-teacher's and teachers' work and attitude

Parental response regarding school staff and particularly the head-teacher and their children's teachers ranges from satisfactory to enthusiastic (unlike research findings elsewhere, e.g. Rabusicova and Pol, 1995). The language used, as well as the comments made, indicate a moving parental trust and affection for the school staff. Here is a lovely quote which indicates this:

The teachers are very eager to tell us, to advise us. All teachers. Our school is very good for the children, their cleanliness, their progress, right from Mr. Solonos to everyone I know. They try hard

for the kids. (...) It is a great school! I love everybody there. I feel like going home when I go to this school!

Argiri's mother

Parents go as far as comparing their child's teacher and head-teacher to their own and coming to the conclusion that school is a much nicer and cosier place today than it used to be in their days:

Mother: This headteacher! I have never met a man like him before! He loves the kids! When I go to collect Pinelopi I see him, he touches the kids, he strokes them, he shows them he cares. The other day he took my girl to give her candy! You feel as if he were... you don't feel him like a headteacher! In our days... We used to hear the word headteacher and get scared! We thought... you know... they used the cane in our days...

Helen: Yes, he is very friendly with the kids... And he usually knows them by name... Does he know Pinelopi's name?

M: Yes! He does, even though he does not teach her... You know, he is always there, in the entrance, most times... he says 'hello', he asks how we are, you feel... you feel comfortable... you don't feel like you used to feel at school in the old days...

Notwithstanding communication barriers, Helen's mother agrees too:

(...) The headmaster is really sweet! (...) The headmaster has always been lovely!

Criticism for the teachers, where it exists, comes from fathers who seem to be further removed from school reality than mothers are. It is often based on preconceptions rather than fact and finds the mother of the house in disagreement.

Father: I wonder if they will have a Christmas celebration...(..) And they have to make them dress like angels, to dress like this, to dress like that, why bother? Just to stay in their classroom and do it between them? If they are going to do that, why don't they invite the parents?

Mother: They do invite us! They do!

F: Not when the kids are performing...

M: Yes, they do...

F: Isn't that what you told me yesterday?

M: No, it isn't! I told you it is in the morning!

F: Well, in the morning... How can I go?

M: Well, I told you it is in the morning...

Helen: It is difficult...

F: Can I leave my work and go... Can someone say 'Today I am not going to work. I shall go and see my daughter...'

M: It is because fathers are not usually very interested... In the nursery there were not many... When it was done in the evening... There were not many (fathers)... But the school wants to do it! He (the headteacher) explained it to us last year. That they do not have a room and he is sorry they cannot have one big school celebration!

Maternal enthusiasm and trust for teachers is widespread. Mothers appear to become critical only when they are forced to carry the sole responsibility for their child's failure. Yiorgos' mother gives her assessment on what her child needs, having informed me that she had been invited in school to meet the educational psychologist who seemed to think that Yiorgos needed special care:

Helen: Does Yiorgos need any private tuition?

Mother: No, I don't think he does! I think he needs my attention, not to neglect him... and his teachers to be good to him, but also strict! Not to give in to him! I brought that to their attention as soon as school started this year, before it had even started. Last year's teacher was a very good teacher, she did a good job to put up with him for so long, but she did not...

H: She got tired?

M: Yes! She got tired! And she let him do as he pleased! While this year's (teacher) was strict with him right from the beginning...

It is interesting that in both cases where criticism is voiced the mothers are faced with enormous problems and the families are perceived by the school as 'problem families'. This indicates that parents are very adept at receiving messages about how valued or esteemed they are in school and respond to them. A critical position of the school towards the family is likely to elicit a critical response from the family in defence.

All parents accept teacher authority on all matters educational

Parental acceptance of teacher authority on educational matters is on the whole quite remarkable and consistent regardless of parental education and occupation. Here is an example of unquestionable acceptance of teacher expertise.

Helen: (...) I've known her (a teacher in the school) since last year.

Mother: She is the best teacher! The kids learn with her!

H: Are all your teachers good?

M: They are. As far as that goes, yes, they are!

Yiorgos: Yes, yes, yes!

Older Brother: There is a teacher, in the fourth year, whoever does not prepare homework, he punishes him!

H: Really?

G: Yes! I know him!

M: That teacher... He is very good, he is! What is his name?

G: Menelaos.

M: He is very good that teacher! They all are! They all have their own way of doing things...

Yiorgos' mother

Parents seem to be convinced that teachers are the educational experts and must be allowed to organise their work as they see fit. They object to outside interference and are even protective of teachers from other parents' intervention or what they see as unreasonable demands.

If someone has a suggestion he can go to the PA and say 'here is what I think'. They can think and decide. If someone is a troublemaker and wants this and that, and wants to go to Mr. Solonos (the headteacher) and says this is what I want and he insists, then, I don't think the headteacher needs to take him into account...

Xanthi's father

Such basic trust and unwillingness to interfere has to be reassuring to teachers who are worried about parental confidence in their expertise. The question still remains however, why is this belief so strong? One reason seems to be that lack of external interference is to everyone's benefit as it ensures that basic standards are kept up (also Georgiou, 1995). Apart from that it appears that school authority still holds strong in Cyprus, and teacher image, although not as strong as it once was and teachers would still like it to be (Phtiaka, 1994; Georgiou, 1995), is nevertheless still powerful.

Acceptance of teacher authority and expertise is indicated by some kind of nervousness about school which is observed even among the most enthusiastic parents. This is a very useful finding when we attempt to understand home-school relations, as it indicates that reluctance to visit the school is a very complicated

phenomenon which can be explained in a number of ways most of which have nothing to do with parental lack of interest or care. Let's hear how parents themselves describe it:

(...) I heard it from other mothers that it is not right to go and ask every week, every two weeks...

Pinelopi's mother

My kids are not going to go to college! I just hope that they are quiet in school so that I don't get in trouble with teachers!

Yiorgos' mother

And then I think sometimes that the teachers, if they have just been through a day of work, the last thing they really need is for me to come in and start asking them questions in English (...) and not being quite sure if they can answer me. I don't like to bother them!

Helen's mother

It seems that many parents never grow out of being pupils when they visit the school. Old failures, fears or phobias continue to haunt them as adults negotiating their children's education (see also Finders and Lewis, 1994). It is remarkable that such reservations are observed in behaviour of parents who are themselves teachers – they describe it as unwillingness to disturb colleagues – something that must make us even more conscious that such behaviour can easily be misunderstood.

I used to go more often (than his father), because once a week I used to finish early at school and used to go and ask. I did not want to go more often and bother the teachers...

Costantinos' mother

Some parents are even prepared to put up with unfair treatment or misinformation instead of risking causing a scene at school:

Helen: Has it ever happened for Xanthi to learn something at school... to come home and say something you disagree with, for instance?

Father: It happened once, but I am trying to forget it...

Xanthi's father

or, even worse, restrict the child on an occasion where the teacher may need to be restricted:

Helen: What would happen say if one day Pinelopi came and told you something...

Mother: About the teacher?

H: Yes!

M: Well, I would say something to her I think... I would... You know... to encourage her a bit more, so that she would not come against the kid...

H: Like, for instance... Say that the teacher had told her off about something...

M: Well, I would say... Pinelopi, my kid, you know, in a nice way, so that she would not internalise it...

H: Ah! you would speak to Pinelopi, not the teacher...

M: Yes, yes!

H: Wouldn't you say anything to the teacher?

M: Eh... I wouldn't, I wouldn't say anything, I think... so that she won't... I think if you do that to them they go against the children more...

Pinelopi's mother

Keeping quiet is not true for all parents. Powerful parents occasionally interfere, over-stepping the boundary and causing problems for teachers. This appears to be the exception however, and the school needs to respond to the sensitivities of the parental majority.

All parents agree that co-operation between home and school has beneficiary effects on pupil work

Indeed some report noticeable changes in pupil behaviour or attainment after a discussion with the class teacher. This is very common and an expected finding among parents who are reported to have good communication with school. It is, however, particularly noticeable for parents who are accused of lack of co-operation, as it clearly indicates that they too are open to advice and make an effort to follow it once given. Here is such a parent:

Mother: His reading is good. Last year it was very limited, but this year he can read his words better than last year. He is weak in Maths. My elder is better at Maths... (she laughs).

Helen: He has matured this year. He is doing better...

M: I think the fact that I stayed home (quit my work) helped him... She (his teacher) told me 'you helped him at home, so I will help him in the class too. Help him a bit more at home', she says... Maybe it is my assistance that helped him learn... He is better...

Antonis' mother

The example given seems to indicate that the mother in question evidently values teacher opinion and tries to follow it up. Lack of success cannot be attributed to her alone. Other factors such as continuing interest from school or support systems available, also need to be questioned.

Summarising, we need to argue that these findings contradict many common myths about parental attitudes to school. In this study, parents from all spheres of life seem to have a high commitment to their children's education and a strongly embedded respect for schools and teachers. If anything, their acceptance of teacher authority and hierarchy makes them rather coy and reserved, and does not allow them to take initiative for approaching the school. As they see it, it is the teachers' job to teach their children, and they know best. They are standing by, ready to help anywhere they are needed, and leave the initiative to the teachers:

If the school needs anything, we'll buy it, no problem!

Myria's father

If they needed anything, I'd be happy to help if they asked me...

Argiri's mother

This needs to be noted as far as home-school relations are concerned as a reminder that parents are interested and willing to collaborate with the school. All families do not have the same needs however, and it is to their differences we now turn in an effort to understand how different families relate to school, what each can offer and what they need back.

Differences

While there is agreement on the issues discussed above, there is a clear distinction on parental views regarding other issues. This is very useful in helping us understand how different parents experience home-school relations. Parents are by no means a homogeneous group, and this needs to be remembered in our efforts to approach them. On a closer look the nine families of the case study sample split,

quite conveniently, into three groups. The families in each group have important similarities while being quite distinct from the other groups. This is not to say that all three families in one group are identical. They simply share school experiences and opinions in a way that brings them together and distinguishes them from the others. The grouping has been done on the basis of shared opinions, beliefs and values regarding school, and it is therefore interesting to note that families in the same group also share socio-economic characteristics. Each group is given a name which attempts to capture the essence of the beliefs of the families involved, and is examined separately. The three groups are the 'over-involved', the 'middle group' and the 'marginalised'.

The over-involved

The over-involved families are the families of Costantinos, Myria and Argiri (in order of involvement). What unites the three of them is their self-assurance and their over-identification with school which contrasts the 'school phobia' other parents exhibit. All three families also appear to have privileged information and access to school, and their children seem to be doing very well there both academically and in extra-curricular activities. Each family has a University degree. The fathers are professionals, two botanists and an engineer, two of them heavily involved in the PA. Two out of the three mothers are no longer working, one having in the past worked as a nursery school teacher, and the third is a secondary school teacher. In my interviews with them I spoke to both parents, if only briefly to the father who is not a PA council member, and the conversation with the two fathers involved in the PA council extended to wider issues regarding state educational policy, party political interference in education and the national problem. They were well informed on current affairs and articulated very definite personal opinions on all matters discussed.

These three families were the only ones in the study who did not express a wish for further feedback and information on their children's progress. This is not surprising as they all happened to enjoy privileged information and special treatment. Two of them, through the PA, were involved in decision making regarding school activities, and had instant access to the school staff, and the third benefited by neighbouring the school closely. Over-involvement and privileged access to school activities appears to have been extended to the children. All of these parents reported for their children frequent participation in school plays and presentations. All reported high grades and complimentary feedback on the children's work, ranking their children among the first in their class. The children shared these views and portrayed themselves as successful, occasionally commenting on other children's inadequate performance. An interesting feature

shared particularly by the two fathers involved in the PA, is a 'mistrust' of independent parental intervention and help in school, and a critical stance on other parents for lack of interest and involvement in school affairs.

All these features, identified them better with teachers, and placed them in a position of 'gatekeepers of information and home-school relations'. The PA president had been involved with PA council for 9 years while his three children attended Country school. He confided in me that during this time some ideas had not been followed up because of lack of parental interest and assistance. His criticism he articulated in his yearly address to parents during the end of year celebration thus:

'(...) Of course, parental participation in school activities could have been on a bigger scale and therefore more effective! Nevertheless I believe that we managed to make considerable achievements (...).'

Although the speech is carefully constructed and most probably does not mean to offend, a legitimate way of interpreting it is: 'While parents on the whole were disinterested and ineffective, the PA managed to...'. In this context the personal pronoun 'we' can easily be mistaken for dividing rather than uniting the parental community from the PA. This is particularly interesting as it gives rise to questions such as 'where does the home-school border lie?' and 'who guards it?'. For parents involved in PA business, the PA is clearly the mediator between home and school. Suggestions on parental initiatives not involving the PA were not welcome, the PA considered the proper medium between home and school. Yet it needs to be questioned if the PA in its present form offers what parents mostly want from school which is information regarding children's progress, and practical assistance at home.⁸ This is, oddly enough, something that this group of parents (and others like them) can easily provide for the school community, with or without PA assistance, and something which definitely interests the mothers of the group who seem to be more sympathetic to other mothers' problems.⁹ This is a good example:

Mother: There are mothers... I know a mother who is illiterate, no school at all, completely illiterate, and she has two children at school... Like, for instance those children, I could for half an hour... maybe I would not be able to help them for longer as I have the three kids...¹⁰ (...) Perhaps some parents could go to school in the afternoon and help those children. I think that would be a very good thing! Because there are many parents who are illiterate

unfortunately, not many, but there are some... As I told you, in the case I know, they are not rich or anything, and she is forced to send them to private lessons, because when the mother cannot read, how will she teach? No matter how much the kid wants to learn, how can it learn?

Argiri's mother

For the time being no such thing is happening while there are differences in the school treatment families enjoy. It is hard to judge to what extent special treatment is actively sought for by these parents, an inevitable side-effect of better acquaintance with school problems, or an uninvited effort by school staff to please them. A telling story involves the choice of Costantinos, the PA president's son, for the role of Joseph in the Christmas play. This needs to be seen in comparison with the choice of Yiorgos, a boy whose family has been included in the 'marginalised' group, for the role of the shepherd. It needs to be noted that at the time of recording I do not know Constantinos but I am familiar with Yiorgos from a previous visit. I quote from my fieldnotes:

I happen to be in the class observing on the day the teacher chooses children for the Christmas play. When the teacher announces her intention, there is excitement in the class. Children get enthusiastic and start shouting 'Miss, Miss I want to be so and so...'. The teacher appears to ignore them. There is no relation between what the children request and what they get. Clearly she has her own reasons for choosing these children. She looks around and calls names. The children who hear their name get up and stand in front of the others, smiling, evidently pleased they are chosen. Costandinos is called to be Joseph. He gets up slowly and reluctantly giving the impression that he does not want to participate in the play. He seems disinterested and rather unsuitable being so coy. He stands up and smiles nevertheless. All this time Yiorgos has brought the ceiling down with his cries: 'Miss! Miss!' He badly wants to be in the play and keeps shouting. For some time no attention is paid to him. Finally, and after the main roles have all been offered to others he is offered the role of a shepherd. Yiorgos stands up and smiles pleased with himself and the offer. It needs to be noted that all children in the class participate in the play. Some have speaking roles. The others are either shepherds (the boys) or angels (the girls). So being a shepherd is not such a big deal after all! I approach the teacher at break and ask her about her choice of

children. She tells me that she needs to choose children who will be able to carry the responsibility through. They must be able to learn the part and recite it properly. She cannot choose children who will let her down.

Fieldnotes, December 1994
Country Primary School

It is useful to mention here the Christmas play was a small affair where two classes performed their own play individually in a classroom. It took place in the morning when working parents were unable to attend, and was attended mainly by mothers. That said, all parents were keen to see their children perform and very proud to relate stories about their performance. This group of parents was lucky enough to have stories to relate. On the other hand Antonis' mother characteristically told me about her attendance of school performances:

I once went for my older boy's sake, it was Christmas again, I went. Last year I went too. But these ones (my sons) never have a poem to recite! I don't know... This year he is going to be a shepherd he says...

Antonis' mother

This is clearly a very different experience of the Christmas play for children and parents alike, and their disappointment is evident. These parents want the same things for their children but have no means of helping them to get them. Furthermore, they seem to receive a message that their children are not capable of handling such responsibilities and not worthy of such honours. Unsurprisingly, such parents and such children are not as enthusiastic in attending school events and being active members of the wider school community, thereby confirming their reputation as disinterested. Contrary to that, the parents identified here as over-involved seem to have the power to influence directly or indirectly teacher choices on such occasions and be always at the heart of school life.

Summarising, we need to state that this group of parents is characterised by confidence and self-assurance, possibly stemming from high educational qualifications and administrative skills. It benefits from privileged access to information and decision-making and enjoys excellent communication with school. Armed thus, these parents identify with the school system and function as gatekeepers between home and school. They share the school's view of the 'ideal parent' and striving to meet it they are in an excellent position to help their children succeed in school.

The middle group

Between those parents who are heavily involved in school decision-making, and parents who are marginalised, lies what must be the vast majority of parents. In our sample this group consists of the families of Xanthi, Pinelopi and Christina. What unites them is their expressed interest for more information and feedback from school (see also Hoover-Dempsey et al, 1995) and their voiced wish to be more involved in school activities. Unlike the over-involved families, the middle group families were a bit nervous regarding contact with school (also Finders and Lewis, 1994). They were very positive in their comments about teachers but rather cautious in approaching them, portraying some mild signs of parental 'school phobia'. The frequency of their school visits differed, mothers retaining the primary role in maintaining the contact.¹¹ They all contacted the school regularly, however, pacing their visits according to their concern. While Xanthi's mother had a daily contact with the class teacher as she delivered Xanthi to her class, Pinelopi's mother favoured fortnightly visits to school and Christina's mother argued that a monthly visit was enough to keep her in touch with what goes on and fit to help her child at home. It needs to be noted here that the first two were housewives, while the third worked as a nurse. Two of the fathers were skilled labourers and one was a bank clerk.

In two out of the three families interviewed, fathers were present, while in the third the father was still out at work. On all occasions mothers seemed to be more in touch with what went on in school and more positive towards teachers. No mother was involved in PA business or expressed a wish to be, all claiming to be very busy at home, even though one had been active in the nursery PA in the past. One father expressed a wish to be more involved in the PA council and voiced his displeasure for not having been informed in time for council elections. In any case work commitments seemed to prevent him from taking an active part in evening school activities. The same was true for the second father, whose work commitments prevented him from being present at the interview, while the third was not very interested in the PA even though he had time available in the evening. All three families, while being very happy with the school, required more feedback regarding their children's progress and more information regarding school activities. They were concerned that their voice was not heard in school and very appreciative of the smallest piece of information they received, as Pinelopi's mother indicates:

Mother: You know, I like the teacher's comments, to note if her writing was good under the spelling exercise, you know, 'next time make sure it is better'. It's a nice thing this teacher does to write

under (the child's work). (...) She wrote once or twice 'her writing has deteriorated'. I tried: 'Pinelopi not like this! Try to do it the way you did before!' (...) If I do not see 'unprepared' in her book, it means she did well today. And because I see that she (the teacher) ticks it every day... I like this system this teacher has, a lot! I don't know... I am really enthusiastic about it! I see every day, the work is checked...

Pinelopi's mother

This group seemed to retain the balance in school retaining a close but detached interest in school activities. They appeared to respond immediately to school requests without making particular demands. Interestingly, two out of the three families in the group considered their children to be of average ability, 'in the middle', while the third judged their daughter to have 'excellent attainment'. What is also interesting, and possibly related to their educational qualifications, is the parents' anxiety regarding homework. Xanthi's father explains:

These days the kid needs her mother or father next to her to sit down to homework. Look! There are days she finishes school and has no time in the evening to go out and play! Do you think this is right for a second year child? Imagine what happens to children who face difficulties with their school work!... There are days she needs to draw for the class, days she needs to write composition, days she needs to learn a poem, to do this, to do that... They give them so much work at home, there are days when she is still at work when she should be in bed...

Xanthi's father

The same anxiety was expressed by all three families, and, according to them such concerns were widely spread among parents:

Everybody says it! Wherever you go and ask, people say that there is a lot of work to be done at home and parents must do it! The kid needs your help to proceed. We are not refusing to help them, but we have great difficulty! Especially when our eldest was in the first year! We had to be teachers ourselves to show him how to proceed! And Christina? How many hours should she work? How many hours should the kid work? I ask you! (..) I remember an occasion last year... in the end the kid started crying, and my sister in law started crying! They had so much to do, so many pages

Maths... Wherever you go it is the same... You see, my friend... I have just come from there... He has two kids... His wife finishes at 7.00 p.m., she's just gone up to the house to start work there, he is still working... And the children need someone with them...

Christina's father

Parental anxiety regarding homework (Okagaki and French, 1998) has been prominent throughout the study, the difference being that the over-involved parents did not appear anxious about their ability to deal with it. Such anxieties make parents question their credentials in dealing with school, and place them in an inferior position compared to teachers. This results in a lack of confidence which materialises in 'phobia' for dealing with teachers (Finders and Lewis, 1994). Parents of this group found very hard to say 'I am not embarrassed to go because I know she will understand me', as Argiri's mother said. They were not as confident because they perceived the child's failure as a result of their own inability to help her. They felt at fault for not having the skills to help and feared that matters would deteriorate in the future.

Such fears may be interpreted as calls for assistance. Parents are clearly willing to accept responsibility for their children's education, but require help. On the whole, a call for more information, more involvement and more assistance is what can be said to characterize this co-operative group of parents. Let us now turn to a group which voices much more urgent needs.

The marginalised

The name of this group is coloured by the position they seemed to occupy in relation to others in school. What seems to unite these families, which are once again very different between them, is their difficulty in communicating with school, their powerlessness and their cry for help. All three mothers felt helpless and expressed a strong 'school phobia' which prevented them from regularly contact with teachers and keeping up with their child's progress. Children's attainment and progress was reported to be low, all three struggling to keep up with the rest of the class, two of them having repeated one year by the time they were in the second year. Parental anxiety regarding school work, and homework was much more evident than in the previous group. The mothers confided to lack of knowledge, time and energy in assisting with it, without for a moment denying that it was their responsibility to do so, or indicating that they were not trying to.

A very interesting feature of this group is the 'absence' of the fathers which seemed to make an already hard task impossible! Out of the three, only one

joined briefly and accidentally¹² the interview towards the end, the other two being unavailable. Helen's father worked abroad visiting his wife and two children every few months. Antonis' and Yiorgos' father lived at home but seemed 'not to be there' for their wives and five and four children respectively, at least with regard to school matters. They both did irregular and insecure unskilled labourers' shift work, one of them apparently struggling with serious financial problems. All mothers were housewives at the time of the interview, although they had held clerical and labourer's jobs in the past. All three women refer to lack of support from their husbands in a way which strongly contrasts the sharing of the other interviews and is quite touching. Yiorgos' mother reports:

Helen: I expect their father cannot help because he is working those hours when Yiorgos does his homework...

Mother: No! He just does not want to sit down with them to their homework.

H: He has no patience...

M: No! He has no patience at all, and the kids do not learn with him. He has no patience with the kids!

H: And you? Do you have patience with five children?

M: Eh... I try, while I work in the kitchen and that...

Yiorgos' mother

Lacking in support and faced with multiple responsibilities and limited education (or language in the case of Helen's mother) these mothers found dealing with school very hard. They were embarrassed to visit, they had nowhere to leave their younger children, two out of three had no transport, and all were scared they will be perceived by school as a nuisance. Helen's mother puts it very eloquently, although hers is a slightly different case from the others her communication difficulty owing to lack of Greek language:

I am a bit of a coward really when it comes to it! I pick them (the children) up five minutes later because I am a bit embarrassed! (...) I feel that I am an extra burden on them (teachers), because I think sometimes they can't explain what they want to say to me, and it's not their problem! I should be able to speak their language! I feel embarrassed that they have to make this extra effort to try and make... I can see their faces and that they are thinking 'how the hell am I going to explain this to her?'

Helen's mother

This is a wonderful quote as Helen's mother is a very sensitive woman and has the ability to capture feelings very well in a sentence. It is also very useful for our purposes for two reasons. First, because parents who have difficulties in communicating with school rarely can explain so eloquently how they view the situation (the other two certainly could not). Second, and most important, because this is a brilliant example of what happens when school and home 'speak different languages', the linguistic example extending to a cultural one. This, it appears, is what happens: The school clearly communicates to the parent what their expectation of a 'good' parent is, and how they rate him or her personally on that scale. The parent is aware, among others, that s/he is expected to speak 'the school language' and feels inadequate and guilty for failing to. So s/he prefers to hide at home rather than expose their ignorance in public. The best way to achieve this, is to keep away from school, even to the detriment of their child's education. This decision amounts to a defense mechanism and is not taken lightly. This is evident from the guilty feelings these mothers seem to have in abundance. What is very interesting here, is the role of the school in exploiting and perpetuating this guilt, perhaps in order to alleviate its own.

Antonis' mother is a case in point. A clothes industry labourer with irregular employment now staying at home with her newly born, she has four boys, the older 11 years old. Antonis is her second son. Both parents are poorly educated and can provide little assistance at home despite their efforts. The older boy is often in trouble as he is unable to read and write properly in the fifth year. The father has recently been called to school by the headteacher (who taught him when he was a boy) to be informed of his son's new problems. He reports:

Father: The headteacher said Antonis is the best in his class.¹³ His elder brother is very weak.

Helen: Yes?

F: Mr. Solonos put all the responsibility on my shoulders because, he wanted him to repeat a year and *the lady here* did not agree! (Points to the mother. The mother looks uncomfortable and attempts to explain how it all happened.)

Mother: He (the headteacher) asked me first! He asked me and said that it was hard (on the kid) to get him to repeat the class. 'If you want to leave him... he is yours, he said, he is a bit better... His Maths is pretty good, and he can tell all the letters apart, I cannot leave him in the same class, he told me... And so I told him, well, we shall help him at home and... He was better in the second year, but he deteriorated because he could not read... It is my fault, I don't deny it...I mean...

The mother is expected here both by the headteacher and the father to accept full responsibility for her son's failure to read and his consequent bad behaviour. Having chosen what she thought best for her child at the time, and, unsupported, having failed to help him, she accepts the responsibility and questions her decision. What she nevertheless does is to also question the school's responsibility for her son's illiteracy and consequent misbehaviour. In doing this, she is very careful not to accuse anyone directly, but to simply state that while she was doing everything possible on her part, the school was falling short of its responsibility:

Mother: (...) She (the teacher) put him out to clean the courtyard. That was... that was not something... I mean it is she who... it is this way that the kid goes astray... You know, when I was in the house I did so much for him (prepared exercises) and he sat down and studied. And I studied too! And he goes there and she puts him out... Well, this is an unacceptable mistake! Like this... Their mistake... While... if you get a bit cross, he is only a kid, there is no need to slap him. I some times give him a slap, but let's say, (what she needs is) to put him in order! If they don't put him in order, who will?

This is again an excellent point to stop and ponder at what the mother is saying. She outlines her own efforts to help the child, questions the teacher's role and indicates her disagreement with the punishment used, while pointing out that it is a school responsibility to keep discipline. It seems that a mother faced with as many problems as she is expects help with discipline as well as learning from school. This raises again quite sharply the issue of responsibility. 'Who is responsible for what' regarding children's education?

I argued elsewhere (Phtiaka, 1994) that both school and state agree that the family is. All nine families in this case study accept an impressive amount of responsibility for their children's education, and struggle to live up to social and educational expectations. So far there is no tension between the parties involved. What appears to be obvious, however, is that very few families can succeed! Coincidentally, these are the families where parents hold University degrees and well paid, stable jobs with convenient working hours. The others seem to find it difficult even when backed up by financial security, much more when they are not. This needs to alert us to the fact that we may be asking from parents something very few can provide, condemning the rest for failing to do so! All they can deliver, they do. Pressure and criticism simply increases their powerlessness and their alienation from school. Helen's mother puts it in a nutshell:

I am keeping my fingers crossed that eventually... that it will suddenly click!

On closing this section we need to remember that what summarises the relation of this group to school is a sense of powerlessness, and a desperate cry for help with discipline and learning. Parents, even the most disadvantaged among them, are not denouncing their responsibilities towards their children as schools often think. They are simply crying out for help in order to be able to see these responsibilities through.

What are these findings telling us?

Parents, even those who have in the past been considered as 'hard to reach', are not in the least hard to reach! Even the most disadvantaged of parents care about their children and are interested in their education. They are willing to help and are receptive of teacher advice. They feel honoured to receive it, they appreciate and treasure it, and are keen to implement it. However, their perception of school dictates reservation and leads to lack of initiative regarding contact with teachers. This is often mistakenly interpreted as a lack of interest and care for their children's education and unwillingness to accept responsibility for it, something which is far from true.

On the contrary parents are very keen to prove their interest and very sensitive to school criticism. They are quick to receive school messages and adept in perceiving that they are undervalued and underestimated. When they do, they respond with a critical evaluation of school responsibilities but can feel alienated and marginalised and lose all incentive to participate in school activities. The responsibility lies with the school to send the message that all parents are valued and their efforts are respected regardless of outcome.

Assessment of the home situation will inevitably take place at school. This in itself is a positive step. What may be negative is school response to it. It seems that such a response has overall, and perhaps for reasons embedded in teacher culture (Hargreaves 1988) been 'This is a problem family. Forget it!' while it should have been 'This is a problem family! Support it!'. The difference lies in the deficit model that has in the past been used to interpret such an assessment (Scott and Morrison, 1994; Cairney et al., 1995). This model has rejected parents because of failure to reach a required standard. Yet, the notion that one can 'become a more effective partner in (his/her) child's education, and thus a more effective parent (Bowe et al, 1994), is a problem notion and so it should be treated. What may take place instead is a needs assessment followed by an offer of support for the family

on its own terms.¹⁴ The discourse used to interpret parental behaviour has so far failed to be sensitive enough to cultural or other 'language difficulties' between home and school. It has consequently used interpretations and meanings from one language to interpret another. This has resulted in misunderstanding and misinterpretation of parental behaviour; especially that of the silent parental majority whose actions have been interpreted through the codes of the powerful parental minority. We have seen that their 'languages', their perceptions and their needs are at odds with each-other as one over-identifies with the school and the other is desperately trying to live up to given standards. Any use of one language to interpret the other is pointless. School will only fulfill its stated purpose by learning the language of the majority and responding to it. This requires listening and responding on the families' own terms, on the understanding that they too want the best for their children's education.

Where do we start?

Individual teachers, especially young ones, are not insensitive to parental needs. They are capable of offering sophisticated and insightful explanations for parental 'absence' from school replicating parental statements.

Eleni: Most parents come to see me. It is just the weak pupils' parents who don't come.

Helen: Don't they?

A: They feel ashamed from what I hear... Not from my (class) parents! We have relatives, uncles, brothers and sisters in law... They get embarrassed! 'What shall I go and say?', says my sister in law, 'To hear that he is such and such?' Not that she does not care! At home she helps them a lot! 'What shall I go for?' she tells me. 'Can't I see him? He is not getting anywhere...' Do you see? 'No!' I tell her. 'You must go, otherwise the teacher will think that you are not interested!' They don't see it like that! They think that... They are embarrassed to face... They think it's their fault! While there are many kids... (who are having problems)

It is fascinating to see the sensitivity in the teacher's description. Her views exactly parallel the statements of Antonis' mother. With that she manages to place teachers in the real world, reverse the roles and identify with the most disaffected mother of the study, at a time when powerful parents have identified with the school. This is quite an achievement and needs to be noted. Her perception is

particularly acute as she feels safe to move between the roles of teacher and mother and see both concerns.

Eleni: It is the teacher's responsibility first and foremost and then... If you do not tell them how to co-operate, how will parents know? He must be educated to sit down and... he must be a teacher... This is why... The teachers' children are not more intelligent! It is because of that... I always tell people wherever I find myself. I tell them: 'Don't think that teachers' children are more intelligent than yours! It is because they know how to show them! Or because the house is full of books! They see you read...

This is a daring statement compared to the response of teachers interviewed in their position as parents and being unable to remain in that role and disassociate themselves from the power offered by their professional position (Phtiaka, 1996). Eleni is the one who can best identify with parents, although interviewed in her capacity as a teacher, but she is not alone in empathising with parents and appreciating that pupil failure does not reflect parental lack of interest. So does Anna. They are both young teachers with 5 and 6 years of service respectively. They both see the problems and attempt an individual response within their means. Anna was Antonis' teacher in his first year. Noting that the mother could or would not come to school, she took the initiative to approach her and offer some advice. She is well aware of the family problems:

A: (...) One of them, Antonis, is very bad. The kid is in a mess!
(she gives details about the family situation)

H: And what can you do in all that?

A: Eh! What can I do? Simply to give the kid some love...

Such efforts cannot be sustained on an individual basis alone! A one-off meeting with the mother fizzles out as problems mount and the mother is unable to solve them herself. The school and the teachers can do much more than offer their love to the child. They need to internalise and support individual efforts. They need to provide a school ethos and a support structure for parents to come to school with their quests, teachers to be enabled to reach out to families, parents who are willing and able to help those who are not coping. What the state needs to do is financially support such efforts! Or else, reverse its rhetoric and be blatant about schools providing the grounds to assist the powerful to maintain their power and retain the weak from getting it. Parents are only asking for a listening ear and a helping hand and are immensely grateful to receive it, even if it is only the researcher's:

Helen: Is there something you want to tell me? Something that I have not asked related to school?

Father: (thinks) The good thing is... that there is this service you provide...

Helen: (for once lost for words) Well... Eh... I would not call that a service...

Father: I don't know how you call it... But I say service... for you to come here... close to us... isn't it?

Is it?

Notes

¹ All names of people and places used in this paper are pseudonyms.

² For details on the Cypriot school system, see Phtiaka 1996.

³ On July 20th 1974 Turkey invaded the island of Cyprus causing 200,000 people from the North of the island to become refugees in their own country. Twenty-four years later the border is still closed, Turkey retains an army of 35,000 on the North and the refugees live in settlements in the South.

⁴ I have referred elsewhere (Phtiaka, 1996) to the difficulties of qualitative research in a small place like Cyprus where informants are very easily identifiable.

⁵ Shifting responsibility for their children's education back to parents seems to be one of the many objectives of the 1988 Education Act in the U.K.

⁶ All quotes, except those of Helen's mother are translated from Greek.

⁷ This is a secondary school teacher, mother of three boys who are doing very well at school, who finishes work at 2.00 p.m. every day. Everything she says needs to be seen in this context.

⁸ At Christmas the PA gives clothes as presents pupils from low income families.

⁹ Gender issues are constantly raised in these findings, but are not dealt with in detail.

¹⁰ This mother has three children, the youngest two months old at the time of the interview.

¹¹ It is noticeable that mothers from all groups maintain the primary responsibility for the children's education, even when the father of the family is involved in PA politics. In this way mothers appear to be lumbered with all the work while fathers enjoy the titles (mothers unsurprisingly claim to have no time for involvement in the PA). Gender segregation on such issues is well documented in the literature (Biernat and Wortman, 1991; Okagaki and French, 1998; Stevenson and Lee, 1990; Ware, 1994).

¹² The father was asleep in the house the afternoon of the interview and joined us at the end. He looked rather embarrassed and gave the impression of stumbling on us as he was trying to leave the house.

¹³ This is not confirmed by the class teacher. She reports that his progress is more satisfactory this year than was last year, which is not surprising as he is repeating the class, but he is far from being top of his class.

¹⁴ Okagaki and Frensch (1998) also report in an ethnic context that different families have very different needs and intervention strategies that work in some family contexts (may be) ineffective in other family contexts.

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