

Teachers' and community stakeholders' perceptions about school – community relations in Cyprus

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This paper describes the findings of a comparative study of rural and urban communities in Cyprus concerning the perceptions of primary school teachers and community stakeholders as regards school–community relations. The data were collected via a semi-structured interviewing technique amongst primary school teachers and community stakeholders. The analysis of the qualitative data demonstrates that both primary teachers and community stakeholders whether in a rural or an urban area consider school–community cooperation as a positive and important factor in their respective spheres of interest. However, teachers were found to maintain a more conservative stance towards relationships with the local community, believing that their professional autonomy is threatened by interferences of community stakeholders and agents. Furthermore, there was a divergence of perceptions between rural participants and their urban counterparts as regards to the extent to which such a cooperation should take place; both teachers and community stakeholders in rural areas seemed to be more willing to extend their communication and their relations in additional fields. On the contrary, teachers and community stakeholders in urban sites seemed more conservative towards such a situation; they regard that such a cooperation and such relations should be limited. The findings come to validate similar findings reported in the limited literature in Cyprus (Georgiou, 1998; Symeou, 2002) and indicate that there is a lot of ground to be covered towards extending and improving school–community relations for the benefit of all institutions concerned.

Introduction

School is an inextricable part of society as well as the community to which it belongs. They are social subsystems which cannot function isolated from the hyper system of the social environment (Polydorou, 1995). Therefore, "the fulfilling of the aims set commonly said by school and family along with the rest of the society" (Pasiardis (2004). Characteristically, Hoy and Miskel (2001) maintain that "schools are open systems and depend on exchanges with environmental elements to survive. Multiple environmental influences come from different levels of society and affect what happens in schools" (p. 252).

School–family–community collaboration is nowadays a great issue for research in sociology, psychology and education. Many researchers and academicians from lots of countries of the world have worked on it. Lots of researchers and theorists have studied the topic and support that understanding the meanings of school, family and community partnerships may open new educational perspectives, build trusting relationships, strengthen children's educational resources and sensitize about the usefulness of true cooperation (Georgiou, 1998a; Symeou, 2002; 2005; Mendel, 2005; Yeo, 2005).

Others pointed out that school effectiveness cannot be seen in other terms than those of partnership and parents' inclusion in school processes and capitalize on the potential benefits that can be gleaned from bringing schools, parents, and community agencies together to help students academic and social achievement.

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So, teachers and school leaders must be active change agents and team builders in order to guide their institutions in the preparation of future educators that will conduct effective family and community involvement programs and practices (Phtiaka, 1999; Alexsaht-Snyder & Schwartz, 2001; Hiatt-Michael, 2003; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Symeou, 2006).

This paper describes the findings of a comparative study of rural and urban communities in Cyprus concerning the perceptions of primary school teachers and community stakeholders with regards to school–community relations.

Aim of the survey

The aim of the study reported in this paper was to survey and compare the perceptions of teachers and community stakeholders concerning their collaboration between school and community, and compare the two agents' perceptions on the specific topic in rural and urban areas.

More specifically, the first major purpose of this study is to explore and compare the perceptions among the primary school teachers and the community stakeholders with regards to school–community relations. Secondly, this research tries to explore the differences between the perceptions of people living (community stakeholders) or working (primary school teachers) in rural and urban areas.

Finally, the study aims at exploring the perceptions of teachers and stakeholders about who is involved and who should be involved in such a relation as well as the actions that take place and the actions that should take place, the arising benefit in school or in community participants and finally how peoples' character and behavior influences relations.

Methodology

The survey data were collected via a semi-structured interviewing technique amongst primary school teachers and community stakeholders. Information was collected through individual and group interviews. Interviews evolved around nine thematic topics: general opinions about school–community collaboration; stakeholders with which school nowadays collaborate; stakeholders with who school should collaborate; activities that take place in schools with school–community collaboration; activities that should take place in schools with school–community collaboration; school or/and community profit after two parts' collaboration;

impact of school-community collaboration; general evaluation of nowadays collaboration; other perceptions about school – community collaboration.

The population examined in the present survey consisted of teachers and stakeholders living and working in Nicosia urban and rural areas. The survey was held at villages in Nicosia district and regions of Nicosia urban area.

School teachers were selected in a way so the sample would be as representative as it could be. So, young and older teachers, with few or more working years in urban and rural schools were interviewed. Moreover, the sample included headmasters and assistant headmasters. Community stakeholders were selected in such a way so that a lot of community groups participate in the survey. More specifically city hall, village council, school board, parents associations, athletic groups, church, banks and cultural groups were represented.

On the whole, 5 teachers and 10 stakeholders were interviewed. Three teachers and 4 stakeholders were interviewed in the rural area. The stakeholders of the rural area interviewed were a member of the village council who is also a member at the school board, a member of parents association, a member of the village's bank committee and a member of the church council.

The two teachers who worked at an urban area school were a deputy headmaster and a teacher. The stakeholders of the urban area were a town councilor who is also a member of the school board, a member of parents association, the municipal competent for culture and society, a member of the church council, a member of the region's bank committee and a member of an athletic group.

After all interviews were transcribed they were carefully read so that specific issues to be detected in order to be analyzed and discussed. Later on, these issues were labeled according to the above referred topics and were banded together as well as according to by whom they were said (rural area teacher, rural area stakeholder, urban area teacher, urban area stakeholder). Afterwards, these grouped statements were compared (e.g. urban area teachers' and stakeholders' beliefs about activities that should take place in schools with school – community collaboration). The following part of the paper describes the particular results reached after the intensive study of these comparisons.

Results

Bearing in mind the aim, the purposes and the research questions of the survey and also taking into consideration what interviewed people have said, this survey reached specific results.

Firstly, it was stressed by all participants that school–community collaboration is very positive and important both for the school and its work, as well as the community. Almost all interviewees said that nowadays a good collaboration does exist although it could be elaborated.

Both rural area stakeholders and rural area school teachers were more willing to school–community collaboration than their urban area counterparts. For example people working in rural areas seemed very willing to participate in voluntary activities (e.g. planting a place at school or the village, cleaning the river) on weekends or in the afternoon, when the school is closed and people are not working. On the contrary, people working in urban areas didn't mention anything like that. They floated ideas for activities that could take place at schools or other places of the region during school working hours. For example, a municipal member was very happy because a teacher visited the city hall with her students.

Notwithstanding their willingness to school – community collaboration, rural participants seemed to comprehend the significance of such collaboration with regards to their position. For example, teachers mentioned that school has a very positive collaboration with church, when at the same time a member of the church council who took part in the survey didn't mention anything on the issue. Furthermore, stakeholders proposed ideas regarding their position. It was very impressive that a member of the church council, during the group interviewing, was saying without cease that kids should visit more often the church, keep a fast and go more often to a priest for auricular confession. When, however, the other collocutors shared different views or proposed something else, the specific person started again mentioning the church and how it should collaborate with teachers and kids during the school day.

In addition to that, teachers working at rural area schools seemed to maintain a more conservative stance towards relationships with the local community, believing that their professional autonomy is threatened by interferences of community stakeholders and agents. For instance, during the group interviewing, community stakeholders mentioned different type of activities that could take place with the teachers' contribution whilst teachers didn't consider their contribution as necessary.

For example, every year the parents' association and village's council organize an eastern feast. The front man of the parents' association believed that teachers should have an essential role in this event, whilst the teachers although they thought that this is an excellent event they believed that they should take part only as visitors.

Moreover, rural community stakeholders mentioned much more activities that promote school – community collaboration than what teachers suggested. It was clearly implied that stakeholders would be very pleased if once or twice a month a big event through school – community collaboration took place in their village. Rural stakeholders seemed very willful to a school model as it was some decades before, when the teacher lived in the village, visited everyday the village's coffee shop and on Sunday the local church where he had the role of the priest's assistant and lay clerk. On the contrary, rural area teachers believed that such events could take place two or maximum three times a year, as it happens nowadays. They believed that what they do is enough and even more than what they are obliged to do in their free time. Urban area stakeholders suggested that these activities should take place once or twice a year and didn't imply that teachers should have any role in the organizational part of it. Urban area teachers are much more conservative, while they didn't mention at all any activities of this style. They believe that teacher's job is preparing himself for the class and thus teaching has nothing to do with contributing or collaborating with the community in the afternoon. Of course, a few ideas were mentioned (e.g. collaborating with theatre schemes), but it wasn't very clear whether spending afternoon teacher's free time would be right.

A great difference was observed between rural and urban area counterparts at the task of who nowadays collaborates with school or should collaborate in the future. Both teachers and stakeholders in rural areas mentioned all the village's groups such as village's council, school board, parents' association, local bank, kindergartens, church council, village's welfare board, athletic groups, cultural groups and dancing groups. Characteristically, a rural area stakeholder declared that school should collaborate with all village groups by organizing events with each group separately, but mainly through a big event (e.g. spring festival) in which all groups should collaborate both in the organizational part and also in active participation during it.

Contrarily, urban area teachers and stakeholders mentioned less organized groups although at the specific region exists a larger number of groups of this kind compared to the rural areas where survey took effect. The only groups that have been suggested for school – community collaboration were parents' associations, school boards, banks, municipal and of course the group that the interviewer was representing (e.g. church council or athletic group). For example, nobody suggested the collaboration with cultural groups or choirs that take effect in the region. An exception was the proposal of a teacher who suggested the idea of collaboration with theatre schemes although didn't mention any concrete example of a group like this.

In the theme of what activities nowadays school and community carry out through their collaboration, rural and urban area stakeholders gave different examples. Urban area stakeholders mainly mentioned financial contribution to schools and watching events that were prepared merely from teachers. It was very impressive the fact that an urban area stakeholder said that the municipality collaborates very well with the school due to a Christmas ball that took place in the school theatre. Another urban area stakeholder said: "Yes, we have an excellent collaboration with all regions' schools. Every year a specific amount of our budget is offered to schools for mounting athletic events or buying educational equipment." Rural area stakeholders, except from the financial contribution, mentioned more events such as parades for national celebrations, Christmas charities, Easter feasts and painting competitions.

Rural area stakeholders suggested a whole more of events that could be organized through school – community collaboration than their urban area counterparts. For instance, rural area stakeholders suggested cultural festivals (through the establishing of choir and dancing groups), athletic festivals, national day celebrations, cleaning the school and the village. On the contrary, urban area stakeholders suggested only a few events to be held, such as parades and cleaning competitions.

Urban area stakeholders didn't seem aware of activities or events that take place in other schools through school – community collaboration. On the other hand, rural area stakeholders compared what events are organized in neighboring villages due the specific collaboration. An urban area stakeholder said that at a neighboring village a "Mothers' Day festival" is going to be held, so it could be a good idea to be organized to their village too.

Rural area teachers, as rural area stakeholders, again had much more suggestions to make for events that could be organized through school – community collaboration than

their urban area counterparts. Rural area teachers proposed such events like putting on a play with parents' collaboration, organizing cultural festivals, etc. Contrarily urban area teachers suggested activities that could take place only at school working time and in accordance with the curriculum. For example, the implied activities of visiting the region, making an environmental review, etc.

All the participants declared that through school – community collaboration, benefit occurs for both the school, as a system or as persons as well as the community, as a whole or as individuals. The entire idea behind this was that students realize that they are members of the community and the community is reflected school, and of course children, as an important part of it. It was also mentioned, that through this collaboration children act as conscious citizens, a role that they will have to play in the future. The only difference at this point was that rural area stakeholders spoke much more ardently than teachers and/or urban area stakeholders.

The only point with which everyone totally agreed was how peoples' character and behaviour is influenced by the collaboration. All the participants agreed that school – community collaboration relies on the ability of others to collaborate. Nothing of the above mentioned can be achieved if people aren't open – minded and aren't willing for such a collaboration, despite the arising difficulties.

Conclusions

The analysis of the qualitative data collected in this survey demonstrates that both primary teachers and community stakeholders, either in a rural or an urban area, consider school–community cooperation as a positive and important factor in their respective spheres of interest. This finding validates previous researches in Cyprus. Characteristically, Symeou (2005) supports in an ethnographic multiple case of teachers and families that close contacts between teachers and families may strengthen families' social capital and result in children's school success and all-round development.

Moreover, it was revealed that both rural area stakeholders and rural area school teachers were more willing to school–community collaboration than their urban area counterparts. In addition, rural area teachers and stakeholders referred to much more activities that nowadays take effect in their school and communities by collaborating each other, than urban area teachers and stakeholders. Furthermore, there was a divergence of perceptions between rural participants and their urban counterparts with regards to the degree, to which such cooperation

should take place; both teachers and community stakeholders in rural areas seemed to be more willing to extend their communication and their relations in additional fields.

However, teachers were found to maintain a more conservative stance towards relationships with the local community, believing that their professional autonomy is threatened by interferences of community stakeholders and agents. Similarly, Georgiou in a relevant study (1996) reports that the current home–school relations in Cyprus are actually controlled by the school system. Teachers and principals are satisfied with this arrangement and behave defensively when it is threatened. Similarly, Smit and Driesen (2005) support that in France and Germany, there is no such a prominent ‘partnership’ culture as in the other countries reviewed in their research. Teachers seem to prefer to keep a “professional” distance between themselves and parents. The fact that they depend on parents as “suppliers” of pupils is regarded problematic by teachers in these countries. Teachers and parents sometimes join hands, but only as long as the teachers benefit from this collaboration.

At the same time, teachers and community stakeholders in urban sites appeared more conservative towards such a situation; they

believe that such cooperation and such relations should be limited. Noteworthy, all participants declared that through school–community collaboration, benefit occurs for both the school, as a system or as persons as well as the community, as a whole or as individuals. Besides, Georgiou (1998b) indicates that “teacher – parent – student partnerships are not easy. ... When they do happen, those involved benefit, sooner or later”. Furthermore, “by including activities that shape students’ sense of identity and culture, schools can build a sense of community in each student. Thus schools have a role to play in promoting both personal growth and cultural renewal” (Macgregor, 2005).

Finally, all the participants agreed that promotion and improvement of school–community collaboration is influenced by peoples’ character and behaviour and relies on the ability of others to collaborate.

The findings of this study come to validate similar findings reported in the limited literature in Cyprus (Georgiou, 1998a; Symeou, 2002) and indicate that there is a lot of ground to be covered towards extending and improving school–community relations for the benefit of all institutions concerned.

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