

Parental Involvement in Elementary Schools During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Teachers' Challenges and Crises

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Abstract

Differing levels of parental involvement in schools are common. There are ways how to deal with and channel this phenomenon in productive directions. The COVID-19 pandemic forced schools to switch from regular in-person teaching to virtual teaching/ distance learning (via Zoom, Teams, etc.) while enabling parents to “join the class” in real-time. From the pandemic’s beginning, many parents stayed at home voluntarily or involuntarily (due to unemployment, unpaid vacation time, or working from home) and witnessed their children (supposedly) studying. This situation often led to intensive parental involvement and even intervention in teacher behavior, teaching methods, discipline requirements, etc. This unusual situation led to increased conflict between parents and teachers resulting in teachers’ frustration, stress, and intention to retire or resign. This case study aims to shed light on this new phenomenon while describing situations from teachers’ work and drawing conclusions about the processes that teachers, pupils, and parents underwent during the pandemic.

Keywords: parental involvement, elementary schools, distance learning, COVID-19 pandemic, teachers

1. Introduction

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

Beyond the positive outcomes of parental involvement, there are negative outcomes. Increasing parental expectations of their children and the competition for high grades in order to direct their children to a successful future career, often causes increased parental involvement; an involvement that is often an aggressive intervention in the work of teachers and principals (Sharabi, Cohen-Ynon, & Soskis, 2021). Until recently, parents could only hear from their children and other children about how teachers behaved in the classroom. Therefore, their involvement occurred together with the parent’s realization that they did not know exactly what had happened. At times, parental discourse with teachers was about the varying narratives, i.e., what had happened. This limited parental involvement while teachers and principals tried to direct such involvement in constructive directions from their point of view (class events, parties, decoration, etc.).

This situation changed drastically with the COVID-19 pandemic from the beginning of 2020. The pandemic led to curfews, closures and/or restrictions of businesses, dismissal of employees, and forcing employees to take unpaid vacation time and/or work from home. In addition, schools were closed by governmental decision without prior notice and schooling transformed immediately to distance learning via relevant technologies, especially Zoom and Teams. Alongside the staggering changes in daily life, teachers and pupils who were trying to cope with new and unfamiliar media, including using a camera and microphone, the parents at home sometimes became “additional” pupils since they could join the class anytime.

This unique preliminary study describes the “new normal” for schools, teachers, pupils, and parental involvement or intervention during this time. It also outlines the perceptions and feelings of teachers at the

beginning of the pandemic as well as further along during the pandemic. Our research goals are: a) reflect the difficulties experienced by teachers, pupils, and parents during the period; b) understand the reasons, the depth and type of parental involvement; c), learn about the teachers' difficulties with parental involvement/intervention and their insights regards this involvement; and d) Analyze, explain, and draw conclusions about the processes that teachers, pupils and parents went through during the pandemic.

2. Literature Review

The involvement of the parents is multidimensional, composed of a variety of behaviors, attitudes and expectations. It is also prominent in the public discourse and scientific discourse (Sharabi et al., 2021). Alinsunurin (2020) indicates that parental involvement is one of the most important bases of comprehensive education reform programs across the world. Parental involvement and family-school relations have a meaningfully positive influence on children's educational outcomes and their ability to succeed in the future. It maximizes the potential of pupils and closes demographic gaps in achievements (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Gonzalez et al., 2013).

Additionally, it was found that parental involvement has a significant positive relationship with school administrators' perceptions of the school's learning climate which are related to teacher behavior/management (Alinsunurin, 2020). Cohen and Cohen (2001) note that parental involvement is related to their world of values regarding education. The more parents believe in education and school as a central means for a better future for their children, the more they will strive to be involved. Involving parents in intervention programs, such as anti-bullying and victimization, is a crucial component of schools' activities. Also, psychological and health problems, such as ADHD, OCD, anorexia, and smoking addiction among youth, can be improved by engaging parents (Alinsunurin, 2020).

Parental involvement can be defined as "parents' interactions with school and with their children to benefit their children's educational outcomes and future success" (Hill et al., 2004, p. 1491). This definition reflects parents' perspectives, but there are other school stakeholders: school administrators, teachers, pupils, municipal councils, and policymakers in the Ministry of Education. Fisher (2010) notes that many studies have been conducted on parental involvement, most of which are done in elementary schools, reflecting the prominence of parents' involvement in elementary schools. Studies on this subject have shown, among other things, that parental involvement is essential and that it is of great benefit to all stakeholders.

There is home-based parental involvement which refers to the interactions that take place between the child and parent outside of school. School-based involvement includes activities such as parents observing their child in class, including her or his performance during school activities, attending teacher-parent meetings, volunteering to assist in school's social activities, or the child's classroom learning, etc. (Freund et al., 2018). The pandemic period changed these types of involvement since school studies were transferred by distance learning to the pupil's home, involving parents in real-time.

The issue of boundaries regarding parental involvement i.e., when it is unconstructive or problematic, is important, especially at a time when the boundaries between the classroom and home are blurring. Our study focuses on the teachers' coping with this new reality, describing the emotional and psychological effects of the situation on them.

2.1 Teachers' Situation During the COVID-19 Pandemic Period

During the pandemic period, when closures took place and learning took place remotely, varied studies were conducted on the impact of the new situation on the emotional, physical, and pedagogical aspects of pupils and teachers (e.g., Bornstein, 2020; D'Mello, 2021; Presley & Spinazzola, 2020; Skinner et al., 2021). The impact of this challenge for teachers to cope with a new and complex reality has led to PTSD (Post-traumatic Stress Disorder) and other adverse effects. D'Mello (2021) studied the mental state of teachers one year after the onset of the epidemic and reported high pressure related to being teachers, high fear of infection from the disease in school activities, and much anger regarding the education system's policies as well as their decisions regarding epidemic management.

There was also an increase in the incidence of PTSD, anxiety, and depression. The most stressful experiences of teachers during the epidemic were: dealing with new and difficult challenges in teaching, dealing with uncertainty, pressure, and various overwhelming emotions; spending more hours learning and teaching with the new media, and the perception of teachers as worthy of blame (D'Mello, 2021; Fan et al., 2021). The initial studies on teacher self-efficacy during the pandemic indicate many teachers had a decrease in self-efficacy, which was also connected to teacher stress (Rabaglietti et al., 2021) and burnout (Pellerone, 2021; Pressley & Ha, 2021).

In addition to these stressors, there was added intensive involvement of parents who were “present” at the teachers’ online lessons. The transition from schooling to home caused parents a certain level of confusion and incorrect interpretation of online schooling. Many parents started using the term ‘home schooling’ although it refers to schooling children at home by parents (Kolak et al., 2021). This situation created a blurring of the boundaries between home and school and contributed to parental involvement regarding the manner of teaching, the pedagogical content, and the way the teacher treated the class in general and their child in particular, during the lessons. Our study sheds light on this unique situation and focuses on the teachers’ experiences and perceptions regarding parental involvement as well as reflecting on teachers’ difficulties and feelings.

2.2 Studying in Elementary Schools in Israel During the COVID-19 Pandemic Period

In March 2020, the Israeli Ministry of Education decided to close all the schools and switch to online classes. This ended in May 2021 when pupils returned to in-person learning in schools. During this period, teachers in elementary schools sent pupils a weekly schedule the night before the start of the school week, including zoom links for every lesson. Pupils had to enter the online classes according to this system. However, guidelines and procedures constantly changed following each new directive from the Ministry of Education which created various constraints that affected the planning of lessons for pupils. These changes required the teachers to be very highly flexible and adapt to each change whereby various problems were created.

The frequent changes (by the Ministry of Education and school administration), led to several problems that increased the tension of parents and pupils. Sometimes, pupils were given a schedule with lessons by teachers other than their regular teachers. Specialized teachers (e.g., mathematics) had to occasionally teach classes in which they knew neither the names of the pupils, their learning status, nor their strengths and weaknesses. The frustration with the system was mutual. Pupils entered the virtual classroom via the link they received but sometimes were faced with a teacher they did not know. The situation created a lot of confusion, insecurity, frustration, and even the “disappearance” of the pupils from the lesson.

Sometimes, parents were unaware of the various changes, especially when a “new” teacher, who did not know the pupils, entered the virtual classroom to teach, at times for a whole week or more. Often, parents approached the homeroom/head teacher with anger due to the multiple changes. Parents complained that the teacher did not adapt the teaching to the child, nor address the pupil’s character or difficulties (simply because the teacher did not know the children). During this challenging period, the teachers were on the frontline dealing with the parents’ and pupils’ complains and frustration and this study focuses on parental involvement during this exceptional period, from the point of view of the teachers who experienced it.

3. Method

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

3.1 Participants

In this study, we interviewed 10 women teachers from 3 elementary schools in the Haifa area (northern Israel). The teachers’ ages ranged from 27 to 57 with their teaching experience being between 4 and 32 years. The research method was to conduct semi-structured interviews that enabled the teachers to describe how they experienced parental involvement after switching from in-person teaching to distance learning during the pandemic. In the interviews, the teachers described unusual situations of parental involvement, the difficulties they encountered, and what are their insights from this period.

4. Findings and Discussion

At the beginning of the pandemic period, there was an effort by the pedagogic staff in elementary schools to keep in continuous communication with parents (by telephone and Zoom conversations) to explain the new rules and way of learning and to answer various questions. The teachers felt however that many parents did not collaborate with them and sometimes blamed them for their children’s behavior:

“It should be noted that one mother is almost always dissatisfied with the very idea that the pupil does not work in the Zoom classroom, but she does not cooperate or set boundaries” (Miri).

“A pupil who barely attended classes entered the Zoom and then added animal figures to his face (using video filters) also in addition to making noise and movements. This greatly interfered with the lesson, and I asked him to remove the animated characters or join the lesson without a camera. He preferred not to attend at all. Following this, his mother called, got angry, raised her voice and scolded me. She argued that I should have ignored his distractions and let him attend class” (Dalia).

“Parents complained that children are asked to learn independently, to perform asynchronous tasks without the support of the teacher” (Dana).

“Over time, parents started calling and complaining that the curriculum was too busy, as pupils got homework and online assignments from each teacher. Pupils sat for 5 hours in the zoom classes, and then also [were supposed to] sit and prepare homework” (Shani).

Many parents stayed at home during the closures, with some working from home while others were forced to take leave by the organizations for which they worked. This enabled those parents to watch and listen to the zoom classes as their children learned. In fact, parents were participants in the zoom lessons who also criticized the teachers in terms of classroom management, the attitude towards their child, etc.:

“There was a mother who listened to the lesson and the way I managed the learning. After class, and in the middle of the school day when I was teaching class after class, she called me. She expressed her dissatisfaction that I was noted and mentioned pupils who were late for class, that I was “threatening” that if a pupil was more than 5 minutes late, he /she would not be allowed to enter the class” (Einat).

“One mother remarked to me that I was raising my voice and even shouting at the pupils—the mother was also a representative of the class committee, and it is not easy to deal with her” (Miri).

“From a conversation initiated by one mother, I noticed that she was covertly present during all my classes. She raised complaints about my demands from the pupils, like not letting latecomers into the class, requiring pupils to speak one by one and not to interrupt others, or needing to use the camera in class. These were school rules, and all teachers were required to act accordingly. In fact, all the mother’s claims were against the school’s rules and regulations, but it seems that in this ‘crazy’ period the parents criticized everything” (Shani).

“One mother called to tell me that I was not encouraging her son, I was not praising him and was ignoring his presence. I should emphasize that this pupil only goes into 4-6 lessons during the whole week (out of 24 lessons), did not turn on the camera, did not participate, and when I would ask him a question, he did not answer. Of course, when he did participate on rare occasions, I encouraged him. The allegations intensified even though the child was barely present in the zoom classes” (Rachel).

“Some parents demand that you give preference to their son/daughter because it is difficult for them to concentrate in Zoom learning, but it is difficult for all the children. I do address their difficulties and there are other children who actually need more personal treatment” ... “and the parents need to accept my professional decisions in class and back me up” (Sari).

“When I did not let pupils who were late to enter [to Zoom class], there were parents were very resentful and angry, saying that the pupils’ sleep routine had gone awry during the period they stayed at home. They went to bed late, had trouble getting up in the morning, and meeting deadlines. Some parents backed up their children because they just had no control over the kids’ bedtime” (Nili).

Parents’ involvement and their relationships with teachers during the pandemic changed for the worse as the parents’ frustrations with the situation and their lack of control over it caused increasing friction with the teachers. Parental involvement sometimes took on an aggressive tone. At the same time, they blamed the teachers. Many teachers were unwilling to accept such treatment and felt antagonism toward the parents. Some teachers felt that the crisis in the relationship with the parents would continue even after returning to in-person studies:

“Any such conflict made it difficult for me and the parents to have a proactive discourse, an understanding and sharing discourse throughout the year even when the pupils returned to learning in class” (Eti).

“One mother tried to force me to change the rules and let her son join the class even if he was late. I did not accept her opinion and she threatened to turn to the principal and kept shouting and talking abusively. I had to hang up after I told her we would only talk in the principal’s presence” (Miri).

“Of course, after her behavior and accusations, it was difficult to have a conversation that would advance the pupil and take the mother out of her emotional fixation. Since then, I’ve been trying to avoid any contact with her” (Orit).

Some teachers showed empathy towards the parents because they too had children who studied at home. However, they expected parents to take responsibility and oblige their children to meet the demands of the education system:

“Parents were exhausted from dealing with pupils at home. Sometimes, in a family of 3-4 pupils, not enough computers were available for each one to study. When the family had a young child in kindergarten or a child in first or second grade, the parents said they needed to be close to the young children and could not deal with the burden” (Einat).

“A situation arose where the teachers demanded pupils enter the class on time, but the parents were unable to act or help. There was a feeling that the parents were failing to fulfill their role. They did not have authority; they did not know how to set boundaries and force their children to join the class” (Sari).

“One mother told me that before she goes to work, she wakes up her child, but when she goes to work the child falls asleep and does not study. She must go to work and therefore cannot cooperate fully”. . . . “There was a feeling that there were parents who would not cooperate or help if I asked them. Their difficulties with several children, the pressure from school and kindergartens, the pressure from the corona pandemic, and in general from this period caused some parents to be passive, not to confront their child, but rather the teacher who demanded ‘too much’ in their words” (Rachel)

“The parents complained a lot, claiming in addition to the children in school, they had to be more available to their small children who needed very close supervision. So, if there were several pupils in the family, it was not possible to help everyone”. . . . “The parents felt a lot of pressure” (Dana).

“They would say, ‘I would not quarrel with the child every day regarding the Zoom, I will not force her when she does not want to, I cannot do anything about it, I tried, and I failed. . . . Enough, when she wants, she will and when she does not – she does not have to. It is difficult for a child to sit for hours in Zoom class. The child is miserable and sad, and even if she is sitting in class, she is unable to learn anything’ . . . “These statements indicate that parents sometimes avoided situations of additional stress at home, feeling them unnecessary” (Orit).

“Parents indicated that they found themselves busy all day with ad-hoc solutions for each child. They thought that teachers should lower their demands because this burden creates a great deal of tension at home, especially among parents who have several children and cannot meet everyone’s needs” (Dalia).

The above can be summed up in what one of the teachers said about the behavior of the parents during this period:

“During the Corona pandemic, the parental intervention was limitless, perhaps also because they experienced stress and fear during this period and were emotionally flooded” . . . “Maybe that’s why any problem of their child in the classroom, caused them to pounce on us and blame us for the child’s abnormal behaviors instead of taking responsibility and investing in their child’s emotional and behavioral side” (Nili).

4.1 Conclusions

The immediate shift from in-person class to virtual learning was challenging to both parents and teachers (most of whom are themselves mothers) as well as to school administrators. Since the shift in learning environments wasn’t planned and organized well ahead of time, it led to tension, crises, and problems among all the school stockholders: principals, teachers, Ministry of Education policymakers, parents, and pupils. Parents experienced a lot of frustration, anger, and lack of cooperation. Consequently, they complained a lot to the head teacher and the school administration. Since the parents were not involved in the changes and the reasons why they happened, there was a gap between what the parents knew and the changes that took place every few days which caused a lot of stress and instability.

Our study indicates that the situation led to abnormal pupil behavior (absence, interruptions, entry into the virtual classroom without camera activation, etc.). Some parents lost control of their children, had difficulty requiring them to carry out the teachers’ demands, and lost whatever parental authority they had. As a result of the pandemic, several studies on children have found that the new situation has dramatically altered the regular social systems that accompany children’s lives (e.g., higher tension and conflict with parents and between parents (due to their constant presence at home), isolation from friends and wider family, fear of economic or health crises and even the loss of close ones (Bornstein, 2020; Presley & Spinazzola, 2020). All of these have led to an undermining of the children’s sense of well-being and an increase in various psychological disorders (Rabaglietti et al., 2021). Skinner et al. (2021), who studied samples of young adults from five countries, found that more than half of them reported an increase in anxiety or sadness during the pandemic, and nearly one-third of them reported increases in externalizing behaviors (Skinner et al., 2021). Regarding the loss of parental authority, the inability and unwillingness of parents to deal with their children’s behavior and obliging them to meet teachers’ demands, there

are similar findings from other countries (Bornstein, 2020; Bornstein et al., 2021).

These parents seem to have experienced a great deal of functional and emotional overload, especially those who have several children. During this period, they experienced economic and health uncertainty, which affected their physical and mental health (as well as the teachers) (Bornstein, 2020; Weißenfels et al., 2022). Many parents directed their frustration (some of which is justified) toward the school and especially towards the teachers. This was manifested in accusations, criticism, aggressive behavior, and in imposing sole responsibility on teachers regarding the child's behavior.

For the first time, the parent could "join" classes by seeing and hearing the Zoom lessons. As a result, parental involvement included criticism about the way the teachers managed the class, their demands, the way they taught and talked to the pupils, the way they behaved and encouraged/ discouraged their own son/daughter, etc.

It was difficult for teachers to hear or accept the criticisms (most of which were neither justified nor their responsibility) and this created alienation, mistrust, reduced cooperation, and significantly damaged relationships with parents. The interviews reflected the frustration and the emotional tension the teachers experienced regarding the intense, demanding, and critical parental involvement. D'Mello (2021), Weißenfels et al. (2022), who focused on teachers who taught pupils online during the pandemic, found that many teachers experienced stress, increasing burnout, depression, anxiety, lower self-efficacy, and even post-traumatic stress disorder.

Based on the insights from the study, the escalating crises since the beginning of distance learning are summarized in Figure 1. All partners in the learning process, teachers, pupils, and parents, were significantly impaired in terms of functioning and self-efficacy (as well as in terms of mental and physical health). Past skills in teaching, parenting, and learning did not fit the new reality, illustrating the crisis everyone went through.

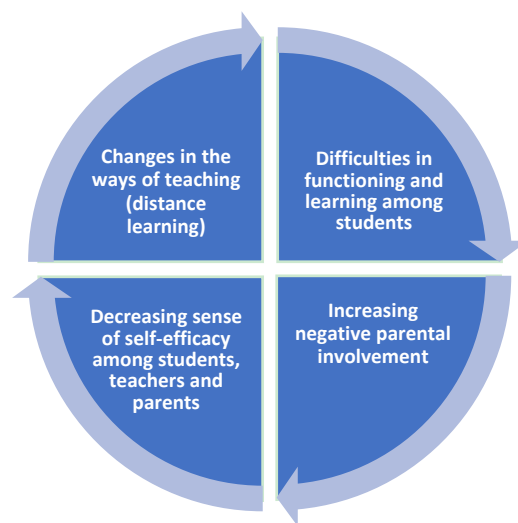


Figure 1. The circle of escalating crises since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic

From the findings, we can see that only mothers showed involvement and were in contact with teachers regarding their children's needs and problems and complained about different issues regards Zoom teaching and learning. The teachers interviewed in this study, all of whom were female (indeed almost all elementary school teachers in Israel are women) expected the pupils' mothers rather than their fathers to be in charge of their child's attendance, behavior, etc. It seems that the COVID-19 pandemic increased mothers' involvement and decreased fathers' involvement. We also see that most of the behavioral problems that the teachers experienced in the lessons came from boy pupils. Also, the parents' main authority problems were regarding their son's behavior.

In conclusion, the findings indicated that parental (mainly mothers) involvement increased dramatically during the pandemic, and they are more critical of the school staff. From the teacher's point of view, the new situation of distance learning escalated parental involvement and turned it into aggressive intervention.

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