

School-Family Collaboration in Cases of Students with Emotional and/or Behavioral Disorders. The Perspective of Secondary Education Teachers

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Theofili Panagiota

M.Ed. Secondary Education Teacher, specialized in Special Education
giouligirl@hotmail.com

Pardali Maria

PhD, Special Educator, Scientific Collaborator European University Cyprus
parmar06@hotmail.com

Abstract

This research aimed to document the views of secondary education teachers on the issue of school-family collaboration in cases of students with emotional and behavioral disorders. Specific research objectives included understanding how teachers approach the concept of school-family collaboration, their strategies, and the factors they consider pivotal for school-family relationships. The researcher used qualitative research methods, and interviews were conducted with eight secondary school teachers who were experienced in managing students with learning difficulties. The findings revealed a notable trend: while there was a narrow and limited perception of the concept of school-family collaboration, indications of a desire to cultivate more profound and substantial collaborative relationships between schools and families also emerged. This finding signifies a promising trajectory towards creating genuinely open schools collaborating with students' families and local communities, aiming for students' overall well-being.

Keywords: school-family collaboration, emotional disorders, behavioral disorders, secondary education, teachers

Introduction

Emotional and behavioral disorders constitute a form of disability that is challenging to identify due to societal and subjective perceptions, differing scientific approaches, and co-occurrence with other disabilities or learning difficulties. Children with such disorders, however, face significant challenges in learning, socialization, and emotional expression, leading to social withdrawal, aggressive behaviors, and low self-esteem. Early identification and intervention are crucial to prevent extreme behaviors, while communication between school and family plays a central role in supporting these children.

Literature Review

Emotional and behavioral disorders refer to a broad spectrum of challenges and difficulties individuals face in managing their emotions and behaviors. Societal changes, scientific differentiation, and evolving approaches to these disorders have led to adopting a multifaceted perspective. Within this framework, emotional and behavioral disorders are typically categorized into externalized (e.g., aggression, delinquency) and internalized (e.g., social withdrawal, depression) types (Heward, 2011; Smith & Tyler, 2019; Kourkoutas, 2017).

The development of such disorders is influenced by both biological factors (e.g., genetic predispositions or neurodevelopmental differences) and environmental factors (e.g., family,

school, and societal influences) (Amaro et al., 2021; Azman et al., 2021; Behere et al., 2017). Research has demonstrated that these factors interact cumulatively (Walker & Sprague, 1999). For instance, genetic or neurological issues may predispose children to emotional or behavioral challenges (Heward, 2011) and parenting styles, school environment, and socioeconomic conditions can exacerbate or mitigate these disorders (Azman et al., 2021; Mackenbach et al., 2014).

Children with emotional and behavioral disorders often face significant challenges in forming and maintaining healthy relationships. These difficulties may arise from their struggles with emotional regulation, confrontational or aggressive behaviors, and inability to follow social norms. As a result, they may experience social isolation, rejection, and conflicts with peers (Heward, 2011; Smith & Tyler, 2019). These children often feel alienated from their peers, hindering their ability to build social skills. They may also experience impulsive behaviors that exacerbate negative interactions with others (Heward, 2011; Vallis, 2015).

Academically, these children are often characterized by poor performance due to difficulty concentrating or adhering to classroom rules, problems managing time or completing tasks (Reid et al., 2004) and behavioral problems (e.g., aggression or withdrawal) that disrupt the learning environment (Achilles et al., 2007). These challenges often result in disciplinary measures that further hinder their academic progress. Without appropriate interventions, children with emotional and, behavioral disorders are at an elevated risk of engaging in delinquent activities due to limited self-regulation and difficulty adhering to social norms (Doren et al., 1996; Dória et al., 2015).

Recent studies from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2023) and other researchers highlighted a rising prevalence of mental health disorders, including emotional and behavioral disorders, among children and adolescents (Sacco et al., 2022; WHO, 2021). The increased prevalence of mental health disorders is attributed to various factors, including societal changes and heightened stress levels. However, many of these disorders remain undiagnosed due to fear of stigma as parents and educators often hesitate to seek help because they fear societal judgment and difficulty recognizing symptoms; for instance, teachers and parents may lack the training to identify mental health issues, and limited access to resources since diagnostic and support services may not be readily available to all communities (Loades & Mastroyannopoulou, 2010; Reardon et al., 2017).

The relationship quality between parents and educators plays a pivotal role in a child's development. Research has shown that when parents and teachers understand the profound impact of their collaboration, the child's educational journey becomes academically enriching and emotionally and socially empowering (Barnard, 2004; Epstein, 2018; Hill & Craft, 2003). However, studies also indicated that during the transition from primary to secondary education, adolescents feel decreasing levels of support from both family and school. The above reduced perceived support correlates with diminished parental involvement and weaker school-family relationships during the secondary education years (Antonopoulou et al., 2011; Gonida & Cortina, 2014). Therefore, adolescents are particularly vulnerable to emotional and behavioral disorders due to significant developmental transitions. The lack of a supportive network during this critical period can lead to severe emotional dysfunction and deviant or aggressive behaviors (Kourkoutas & Thanos, 2013). This risk increases when adolescents associate with peers exhibiting similar delinquent behaviors.

Statement of the Problem

In the last twenty years, several studies have been conducted on the issue of school-family-community communication in the Greek and Cypriot education system, most of which either concern primary education (Angelides et al., 2006; Beazidou & Spathis, 2019; Mylonakou - Keke, 2017), or generally investigate the relationships between parents and teachers (Brouzos, 2002; Rembatsoulea, 2021), or concern the communication of teachers with parents

of students with disabilities or learning difficulties (Gioka & Salmond, 2016; Eleftheriadou & Vlachou, 2022; Tsimbidaki, 2022).

Helpful information regarding secondary education teachers' views and experiences on collaboration and communication with parents of children with emotional or behavioral disorders can enrich the scientific discourse and inform future research efforts that investigate relevant educational practices and policies. In addition, practical implications for educational institutions, especially in developing training programs related to communication issues - school-family cooperation.

Purpose of the Study

The primary aim of this research was to explore the views of secondary education teachers in Greece regarding the crucial issue of collaboration between schools and the families of students with emotional or behavioral disorders. Specifically, the study focused on the following three key dimensions.

The Concept of Collaboration

This study aimed to investigate how secondary education teachers understand and define collaboration with parents of students facing emotional and behavioral challenges. It achieved this goal by examining their interpretations, definitions, and perspectives on the nuances of collaboration.

Methods of Collaboration

The study aimed to explore the strategies and channels through which schools and teachers communicate and collaborate with parents in general, specifically with parents of students with emotional or behavioral disorders.

Factors Influencing Collaboration

This study aimed to identify and distinguish the factors that facilitate or hinder collaboration between schools and the families of students with emotional or behavioral challenges. It achieved this goal by highlighting challenges and uncovering facilitators for effective collaboration.

Research Questions

Based on the above dimensions, the following three research questions were formulated:

1. What are the views and experiences of secondary education teachers regarding the concept of school-family collaboration in the case of students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders?
2. What are the views and experiences of secondary education teachers regarding the methods of collaboration between schools and families in such cases?
3. What are the views and experiences of secondary education teachers about the factors influencing Communication and collaboration between schools and families in these situations?

Methodological Approach

Research Method

This study employed qualitative research to better understand teachers' perspectives on the issue.

Sampling Strategy

A flexible sampling strategy was used, employing the snowball sampling or chain referral method to recruit participants.

Sample Size

The sample size was not predefined. Recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was achieved.

Data Collection Method

Data were gathered through in-person, semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to express their thoughts freely while ensuring the collection of relevant information.

Challenges in Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

Several objective challenges emerged during the data collection process. Among these was recruiting participants who met the inclusion criteria—active secondary education teachers with experience teaching students with learning difficulties and emotional or behavioral disorders. This dual requirement considerably narrowed the eligible participant pool and necessitated a targeted and persistent recruitment strategy. The snowball sampling method was employed to address this, enabling access to suitable participants through existing professional networks and referrals. Even so, potential participants frequently encountered time constraints, felt overwhelmed by their professional responsibilities, or hesitated to commit to an in-depth qualitative interview, further delaying the recruitment process. Consequently, researchers conducted interviews after hours or during school breaks to accommodate participants' schedules better.

In addition, the sensitive nature of the subject matter prompted hesitation among some potential participants, even before the start of the interviews. Concerns about discussing personal experiences were common. To mitigate this, the researchers ensured strict confidentiality, emphasized the voluntary nature of participation, and conducted interviews in a respectful and psychologically safe environment. Participants received comprehensive information about the study's objectives and procedures, including their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Responses were anonymized using unique identifiers, and all data were securely stored, being used exclusively for research purposes.

A further challenge arose during the interviews due to the emotional depth of the narratives shared. Many participants recounted complex and personally significant experiences, which at times proved emotionally intense. The researcher responded by maintaining a neutral, non-judgmental stance and fostering a supportive atmosphere that encouraged authentic expression while avoiding any form of psychological pressure. These measures helped safeguard participants' emotional well-being and upheld the ethical standards and integrity of the research process.

Finally, although the emotional weight of the interviews enriched the data, it also required the researchers to manage the delicate balance between empathetic listening and maintaining professional neutrality. There was an inherent risk of researcher bias, particularly in interpreting emotionally charged narratives. Reflective journaling and peer debriefing were employed throughout the analysis phase to mitigate this. Additionally, the researchers remained mindful of emotional

transference, striving to create a compassionate yet ethically grounded interview environment.

Research Tool

The primary research tool was a semi-structured interview guide, which included open-ended questions to capture the complexities of teachers' views and experiences.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method for identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns (themes) within qualitative data. This methodology ensures a comprehensive and in-depth exploration of the research questions while providing flexibility to adapt to the nuances of participants' responses.

Key Findings

Sample Profile

The sample consisted of seven women and one man. The participants' specialties included philologists (Participants S1, S5, S8), a chemist (S2), an economist (S3), a mathematician (S4), a theologian (S6), and a physicist (S7). Four participants were special education teachers (S1, S3, S4, S5). Participant S1 held two postgraduate degrees, while S2, S7, and S8 had postgraduate qualifications in general education. Participant S8 also held two bachelor's degrees, and S6 had only an undergraduate degree. None of the participants had a doctoral degree. Participants S2, S5, and S8 reported attending relevant training programs or seminars regarding communication skills or school-family collaboration.

Concept of Collaboration

The analysis revealed three models of understanding school-family collaboration. The Hierarchical Model of Communication, the Partnership Model of Communication, and the Holistic and Collaborative Model of Communication. A synopsis of the findings for each model follows.

The Hierarchical Model of Communication

In the hierarchical approach to school-family collaboration, teachers perceive their role as the decision-makers regarding children and are primarily responsible for communicating with parents. On the contrary, they consider that parents play a secondary, supportive role, not participating in decision-making and acting as passive listeners. In this context, the teacher-parent relationship is strictly hierarchical. The primary function of parent-teacher communication is to serve the educational agenda determined by the teachers, with little importance given to satisfying the individual emotional and social needs of students and exploiting the information that parents can provide about the particularities, capabilities, and skills of each child.

The Partnership Model of Communication

In the partnership model of communication, teachers perceive the relationship between teachers and parents as a more dynamic and partnership-based relationship. The key characteristics of this relationship are shared decision-making, mutual support, and commitment to common goals. According to this approach, communication between teachers and parents is characterized by honesty, transparency, and mutual respect. It becomes the springboard for creating a supportive environment conducive to the holistic development of students.

The Holistic and Collaborative Model of Communication

Finally, the holistic and collaborative parent-teacher communication model represents a perception of the school-family relationship as part of a comprehensive interdisciplinary collaboration between all stakeholders involved in education. The aim is the all-round development of children and their effective support in all areas of development (cognitive, emotional, and social). In this model, communication extends beyond traditional boundaries, encompassing interdisciplinary collaboration and the substantial commitment of all stakeholders to support the holistic development of students.

Themes Based on the Above Findings.

Based on the above collaboration models, a stable equation of cooperation with the concept of communication emerged, as defined by Nwogbaga et al. (2015). On one hand, this fact indicated the recognition of communication as a fundamental aspect of practical cooperation and, on the other hand, it shows a limited and narrow perception of the concept of school-family cooperation, which is in line with the findings of other studies, which show that in Greece, cooperation between the family and school environment is typical and often problematic (Antonopoulou et al., 2011; Artinopoulou et al., 2016; Matsagouras & Poulou, 2009; Poursanidou, 2016).

Thus, the second conclusion of the research emerges that in the participants' responses, elements from all three aforementioned communication approaches coexist, confirming the view of the contradictory perceptions of Greek and Cypriot teachers regarding the issue of school-family relations. On the one hand, they recognize that it is important for schools and families to be in constant contact and interaction in order to achieve the greatest possible results for children. However, on the other hand, they adopt outdated attitudes and perceptions, according to which the teacher-parent relationship is considered either hierarchical, formal and strictly structured or a relationship between two partners who co-determine common goals and expectations for children, without, however, taking into account the opinion of other experts (Lazaridou, 2022; Matsagoura & Poulou, 2009; Beazidou & Spathis, 2019; Brouzos, 2002; Mylonakou – Keke, 2017; Repatsulea, 2021; Symeou, 2002).

Regardless of the controversy in the above finding, the overall indications about school and family cooperation are not entirely pessimistic. Adopting perceptions of school-family communication as a hierarchical and delimited process reveals a deficiency in the collaborative practices adopted in Greek schools. It highlights the persistent challenges of the Greek educational system. However, perceptions and attitudes regarding the partnership between parents and teachers signal a trend towards more participatory approaches to school-family cooperation. Moreover, the emergence of the holistic and collaborative communication model as an alternative way of approaching school-family communication issues shows that a new trend of expanding cooperation beyond the boundaries of the school is beginning to emerge in Greek schools, with the opening of school communities to both students' families and the wider society, as also shown by the research of Mylonakou – Keke (2017, 2019).

Methods and Channels of Communication Between School and Family

Nature of Communication

Regarding cognitive issues, a pattern was observed in the participants' responses, according to which communication with teachers and parents occurs mainly during the grading period, with increased parental interest usually before the end of the first four months. However, this interest tends to wane thereafter. On the other hand, behavioral issues emerged as the main discussion topics in the extraordinary teacher-parent meetings. Specifically, participants believe they should communicate with the student's parents when they observe significant changes in the children's behavior, unjustified absences, or violations

of school rules. Finally, some participants emphasized the importance of communicating with parents not only in adverse incidents but also in recognizing positive achievements and behaviors.

The above findings are consistent with the existing literature, which finds a tendency for teachers to communicate with parents to provide them with information about the curriculum, grades, and achievements of students and to inform them of incidents of “indiscipline” without seeking feedback from them (Matsagouras & Poulou, 2009; Beazidou & Spathis, 2019). Again, it is found that teachers have a limited understanding of school-family cooperation, within the framework of which any teacher-parent communication is transactional, focused mainly on the school performance of students and on disciplinary issues. Especially about the management of students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders, it seems that according to teachers’ perceptions, their role is simply to inform parents so that they can take on the responsibility of admonishing their children. In other words, teachers recognize the importance of communicating with parents of students with emotional and behavioral specificities, and they approach the issue in a way that falls far short of meaningful collaboration to help the children truly.

Ways of Communication

The investigation of teachers’ perceptions regarding school-family collaboration methods showed that participants mainly adopt formal forms of communication with parents and rarely resort to informal forms of communication (Mylonakou–Keke, 2019). Participants also tend to prefer direct communication channels with students’ parents, such as face-to-face meetings, telephone conversations, and email correspondence, which aligns with the findings of other studies (Matsagouras & Poulou, 2009). In addition, participants referred to teacher-parent communication through diary recording, a method of communication more appropriate for students with special educational needs and learning difficulties, and to the importance of parental participation in school initiatives aimed at preventing and managing children’s emotional and behavioral difficulties. These initiatives include various actions, such as comprehensive information meetings for parents at the beginning of the school year, parenting schools, information activities on delinquent behaviors, and other important social issues, such as gender-based violence.

These findings are in line with the findings of the study by Sidiropoulou (2016), according to which teachers in Greece prefer more forms of cooperation - communication with parents, through which parenthood is supported, two-way communication is cultivated, and a standard line is formed, and they choose to a lesser extent actions that expand cooperation between the school community - family - local community and actions that dynamically involve parents in the decision-making process. Again, it seems that teachers’ understanding of the concept of school-family cooperation is limited. They tend to choose one-sided forms of communication, through which they simply convey information to parents without developing an honest and meaningful dialogue with them.

Frequency of Communication

The qualitative analysis of secondary school teachers’ views on the frequency of communication between teachers and parents reveals a lack of standardized frameworks. While schools set specific times for parent-teacher meetings, participants expressed a willingness to collaborate with parents outside of these times, reflecting a more flexible approach to the issue, which recognizes the different needs and preferences of parents. The increased frequency of contact between teachers and parents of children with special educational needs and learning difficulties is also noteworthy, which is also found in other research (Tsimbidaki, 2022).

Therefore, teachers are aware of the special nature of school-family cooperation and that rigid schedules can hinder rather than facilitate communication. This finding is encouraging since, by recognizing and accommodating parents' diverse needs and preferences, educators demonstrate a willingness to adapt their communication practices to serve the interests of students and families better. On the other hand, however, this finding may simply indicate a potential discrepancy between the perceived level of collaboration and the actual depth of engagement between schools and families. While the increased frequency of contact between educators and parents may indicate increased parental involvement, it does not necessarily guarantee collaboration between the two parties or shared decision-making, particularly regarding students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders.

Factors Influencing Collaboration

Regarding family factors, the participants referred to the family's willingness to cooperate, issues of trust between teachers and parents, the issue of accepting children's difficulties, the issue of parental intervention, family structure and parents' time, as well as issues of educational level and cultural background of the parents. Regarding school factors, the participants considered that the school culture, the management, the school level, the type of education, and the accessibility of the school play a decisive role in the quality of school-family relations. Regarding factors related to the teachers themselves, the participants referred to the knowledge and skills of the teachers, their communication skills, and their overall personality. Finally, regarding social factors, the participants referred to the role of parapodia. They also underlined the influence that the local community plays in forming a positive or negative climate between parents and the school.

These reports are in line with the existing literature, which has highlighted the multifaceted nature of school-family relationships and the wide range of factors that influence these relationships (Ambroso et al., 2021; Bakker et al., 2007; Capps et al., 2004; Epstein et al., 2019; Guo & Kilderry, 2018; Montemayor, 2019; Petrone, 2016; Schmitz, 1999; Bonia et al., 2008; Brouzos, 2009; Mylonakou – Keke, 2019; Pnevmatikos et al., 2008). It is worth noting that the participants did not mention at all the role of the digital divide, which can separate teachers from parents, which has emerged as an important parameter in teacher-parent relationships in recent research (Dolan, 2016; Guernsey & Levine, 2017; Noguerón-Liu, 2017).

It is also important that the participants recognize, on the one hand, the complex interaction of factors that shape school-family collaboration and, on the other hand, the potential limitations of this collaboration, which depends on both individual factors and broader social factors, which can be the starting point for promoting authentic collaboration between school and family by developing strategies to remove communication barriers. On the other hand, it is observed that teachers tend to overlook their responsibilities and to be indifferent to the cultural gap that separates them from the parents. That is, they recognize that many parameters negatively affect their relationship with the parents of children with emotional and/or behavioral disorders. However, they seem not to realize that part of these obstacles is due to the cultural and social differences between them and their students' parents.

Additional Findings

In addition to the above findings, study participants consistently emphasized the importance of effective communication and collaboration between schools and families for the well-being of students, especially those with emotional or behavioral difficulties, which is also confirmed by the existing literature (Barnard, 2004; Epstein, 2018; Hampden-Thompson & Galindo, 2017; Hill & Craft, 2003; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Levin & Nolan, 2014; Smith et al., 2020; Smolkowski et al., 2017; Stavrou & Kourkoutas, 2017; Thompson et al., 2017; Vásquez-Colina, 2023; Wills et al., 2014; Mylonakou – Keke, 2019).

Furthermore, participants noted the emotional toll teachers experience when managing difficult situations and stressed the need for adequate support and information from the school and parents. Research on the psychological burnout of teachers working with students with special educational needs and learning disabilities has shown similar findings (Park & Shin, 2020).

Final Thoughts

Children struggling with emotional and behavioral disorders walk difficult paths within the educational landscape. They constitute a vulnerable group, constantly under the fear of isolation, low school performance, or even a turn to delinquency. In this light, it becomes imperative for schools and families to forge a strong alliance, a collaborative front aimed at helping and supporting these students.

Unfortunately, the investigation of secondary education teachers' views on school-parent collaboration of students/children with emotional and behavioral disorders revealed a disappointing reality. Despite recognizing the importance of collaboration, the research showed a dominant limitation in teachers' perceptions. Teachers often consider that their role, in terms of their collaboration with parents, is primarily informative on school performance and problematic behaviors. However, this perception cannot help teachers understand the deeper causes of children's problematic behaviors or identify possible underlying emotional insecurities, which put young students at much greater risk than directly observable problematic behaviors.

However, a ray of hope emerges within the shadows of this limitation. There is a discernible change in teachers' perceptions, a trend toward deepening communication, and an expansion of school-family cooperation. This development is underlined by teachers' increasing flexibility and receptivity to communicating with parents, combined with an increased awareness of the obstacles that hinder effective dialogue.

However, the question remains: What measures can be taken to translate this trend into tangible change? The answer lies in the adoption of appropriate policies, which are also the proposals of this study:

- Integrated teacher training programs.
- Initiatives to promote parental involvement.
- Interdisciplinary support groups.
- Community partnerships.
- Cultivating a culture of empathy and inclusion.

Future Research

The journey toward effective school-family collaboration to address students' behavioral and emotional challenges requires a collective commitment fueled by empathy, understanding, and determination to pave a brighter path for our most vulnerable students. Through this collective effort, we can not only mitigate the scourge of youth delinquency and violence but also cultivate an educational ecosystem where every child thrives. In this direction, exploring additional research topics that can deepen our understanding and strengthen our practices can provide valuable assistance. Thus, the following suggestions for future research are proposed:

- Investigating the long-term outcomes of school-family collaboration programs
- Investigating the effects of cultural and socioeconomic factors on school-family collaboration
- Investigating the effectiveness of teacher training programs
- Investigating the role of technology
- Evaluating the effectiveness of interdisciplinary support groups

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