

## Teachers' attitudes toward parents' involvement in school: Comparing teachers in the USA and Israel

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The purpose of this study is a qualitative comparison of Israeli and U.S. teachers' views and attitudes toward parents' involvement in school. Fifty-six elementary school and secondary school teachers in Israel and in the state of Maryland, USA were asked to define parents' involvement, their feelings towards it, and its challenges and strengths. The findings indicate that teachers in both countries mainly define parents' involvement through voluntarism, seem to be in favour of parents' involvement, and tend to be empowered by it. However, ambivalence was expressed more among the Israeli teachers, who mentioned more reservations, tensions, and challenges. Implications of the findings are discussed.

### Introduction

Family involvement in school is a central issue in recent studies of education. The term *parents' involvement* generally refers to parents' participation in the entire educational process (Cooper, Lindsay & Nye, 2000; Stevenson & Baker, 1987). More specifically, it is used to describe parental expectations and beliefs regarding academic achievement, and parental behaviour at home and in school, in order to improve children's educational performance (Epstein, 2001).

Over time, parents' involvement evolved to emphasise parents' participation in the policy setting process, parental volunteerism, fundraising, and information exchange (Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009). Most of the research done on parents' involvement directly refers to the parent's involvement in a child's schooling activities. They all emphasise the importance of collaboration between school and the family, to understand the unique dynamics in families, in order to improve the children's development (Johnson, Pugach & Hawkins, 2004).

The general picture derived from the research supports the assertion that family involvement in schools leads to better attendance, higher scores on standardised tests, higher motivation to study, lower absenteeism, and improved behaviour at home and at school (Epstein, 2008; Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005). However, despite its benefits, the research reveals that parents' involvement is rather limited in many cases, as teachers usually do not reach out to parents beyond annual or semi-annual teacher-parent conferences (Cullingford & Morrison, 1999).

Several reasons may account for the minimal attempt at contact on the part of teachers. One might be that the educational teams are not sufficiently trained for working with parents (Baum & Swick, 2007; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005).

Additional reasons could be teachers' negative attitudes toward cooperation with parents (Baum & Swick, 2007), contextual and cultural elements (Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009; Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006), and less parental involvement as children grow older (Berthelsen & Walker, 2008; Vaden-Keman & Davies, 1993). According to Ratcliff and Hunt (2009), to this day the term *home-school collaboration* between parents and teachers describes a wide variety of teacher-parent interactions. The absence of a uniform and accepted definition might explain, at least partially, the difficulties in its proper application. However, the research shows that with more investment of time, guidance, and planning of the collaboration between parents and school, schools can improve children's outcomes, and the entire community will benefit as well from these investments (Sanders, 1996; Sanders & Lewis, 2005). Epstein (2007, 2008) has contributed significantly to the definition of this term, in her six-dimensional model of family involvement – parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. This model encourages and trains teachers to direct all parents to cooperate. This is an important step in creating a meaningful link between the parents and the school. Such a link is necessary to provide positive outcomes for children, while creating better interaction between the home, the school, and the community (Epstein, Sanders, Simon, Salinas, Jansorn & Van Voorhis, 2002; Sanders, 2008).

### **Parents' involvement in schools in the United States**

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the USA educational system was characterised by bureaucratisation. Educators emphasised formality and viewed this formality, together with the teacher's knowledge, as the source of teachers' authority. In the 20th century, Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) began to emerge, encouraging parents and community members to increase their input and influence in schools (Cutler III, 2000). The 2001 program "No Child Left Behind" (United States Department of Education, 2001), strongly represented the view that parents are significant partners in the child's learning process, and that it is the state's responsibility to direct them to increase their involvement in their children's academic activities.

### **Parents' involvement in schools in Israel**

In the first three decades of Israeli statehood (1948-1978) the educational system, like that of the United States, was completely centralised, uniform, and bureaucratic, and parental cooperation with school was minimal (Friedman & Fisher, 2002; Noy, 1999). In the 1980s, as state funding of educational services decreased, parents were called upon to increase their financial support of the educational system, in turn encouraging parents to demand greater influence on curricular and funding issues (Noy, 1999). In the past two decades the Israeli Ministry of Education has declared a policy of home-school collaboration, but this policy has often been accompanied by a great deal of tension between teachers and parents as to the amount and nature of involvement. These difficulties, combined with poor performance on the PISA tests (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2010) have led the Israeli Ministry of Education to undertake a wide reform at all age levels of the Israeli educational system. In addition to structural reforms, this

reform calls for recognition of parents as significant factors in the children's formal education. It emphasises the educational system's commitment to communicate openly with parents on a regular basis, to work in collaboration with them, in order to define and achieve mutual educational goals (Ministry of Education, 2011).

## Research scope and objectives

Thus, from a historical perspective, it seems that relationships between teachers and parents in the USA and Israel have progressed in the same direction. "No Child Left Behind" and the Israeli Ministry of Education advocating a home-school policy, both provide evidence that cooperation between schools and parents has been part of educational reform and policy in both countries. However, while such relationships have been established for decades in the USA through the PTAs, in Israel they are not yet completely defined. This research therefore aims to identify the way teachers in the United States (in the state of Maryland) and Israel define, feel and experience parents' involvement and their perception of its strengths and challenges. A four-question research protocol was developed for that purpose.

This qualitative study has three objectives: first, to uncover the teachers' definitions of the term *parents' involvement*; second, to take a close look at teachers' views and attitudes toward parents' involvement; and third, to compare these first and second objectives between elementary and secondary American and Israeli teachers. Like in Epstein's six-dimensional model of family involvement (Epstein, 2007; 2008), the current study also refers to teachers as the active and the efficient factors in advancing parental involvement. By recognising the various benefits of parental involvement that help children succeed, this study focuses on teachers whose responsibility as professional educators is to promote significant parental involvement.

## Method

### Participants

For this qualitative study a total of 56 teachers, of whom 43 were women (72.4 % in the American group, 81.5% in the Israeli group), were interviewed (see Table 1). They taught in 13 different elementary and secondary public schools, and were all actively teaching at the time of the research. More specifically, the teachers in the American group ( $n = 29$ ) worked in 6 schools in Harford County (2 elementary and 4 secondary schools), in an area that includes a population of 246,433 residents, served by 33 elementary schools, 10 middle schools, and 11 high schools. The size of the schools was medium to large, with an average number of students of 561 in elementary level schools and 972 in junior high schools. The poverty rate in the area was last measured in 2008 as 5.7%, lower than the state of Maryland average of 8.2%. According to the United States Census Bureau (2009), 83.2% of the population is white, followed by 12.6% African-American, 2.9% Hispanic, 2.2% Asian, and 1.7% reporting two or more races. The American teachers in this study were middle to upper middle class, had a teaching tenure of 2-32 years, and their ages ranged between 23 and 54 years old.

The teachers in the Israeli group (N=27) worked in 7 schools (3 elementary and 4 secondary schools). School sizes were relatively medium (average number of students was 474 in elementary level schools, and 549 in junior high schools). Twenty one teachers from 5 of these schools worked in north Israel, in a relatively small town, that includes a population of approximately 40,000 middle class residents, of whom about 92% were Jewish. 27.8% immigrated to Israel after 1990, mainly from the former Soviet Union (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2008). This town is served by 14 elementary schools, 5 secondary schools, and 8 high schools. The other 6 teachers worked in 2 other schools (3 teachers in one elementary, 3 teachers in one secondary) in a middle class town geographically located in the centre of Israel. This town includes a population of approximately 32,000, of whom 99% are Jewish. 15.6% immigrated to Israel after 1990, also mainly from the former Soviet Union (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2008). This town is served by 11 elementary schools, 3 secondary schools and 5 high schools. In 2008, about 15% of the residents in those cities were financially supported by the Israeli government on the basis of unemployment, inability to work, or low income. This rate is higher than the state average for financial support, of approximately 11% (not including senior citizens). The Israeli teachers in this study were Jewish, middle class, had a teaching tenure of 3-26 years, and their ages ranged between 26 and 52. Most of them were born in Israel, except for 9 who immigrated to Israel (6 from the former Soviet Union, 1 from the United States, and 2 from South America). The number of children in classes in the American schools was smaller than in the Israeli ones (see Table 1). Most of the teachers in both groups were classroom teachers, 15 (52%) in the American group, 17 (63%) in the Israeli group, the others taught specialised subject matter. Special education teachers were not included in the selection. All the teachers, in both groups, stated that they were aware of the term *parents' involvement* to some degree. Some of them met this issue collectively through school activities (lectures, workshops, or seminars), or individually (through talking about it with other teachers, or reading about it).

Table 1: USA and Israeli schools demographics

Item	Level	Israel (N = 27)	USA (N = 29)
No. of schools	Elementary	3	2
	Secondary	4	4
Teachers' gender	Elementary	14 women	12 women
		1 man	3 men
	Secondary	8 women	9 women
		4 men	5 men
Location	Elementary	North and centre	Maryland Harford County
	Secondary	North and centre	Maryland Harford County
Mean no. of students	Elementary	475	561
	Secondary	549	972
Mean no. of faculty	Elementary	35.3	59
	Secondary	52.2	93.5

### **Sampling method, procedure, and data collection**

Prior to beginning the study, the research proposal was submitted to the Human Research Ethics Committee at Emek Yezreel Academic College in Israel, and gained Committee approval. Next, the two researchers, one in the USA and one in Israel, submitted a written application to school principals, asking for their approval to interview teachers in their schools. The requests were accompanied by phone calls, in which further explanation was given regarding the research. In the schools in which consent was given, the researchers attended a pre-scheduled teacher's meeting, explained the research to the teachers, and asked for their participation. Next, the researchers set a time for an interview with each of the teachers who agreed to be interviewed. With the exception of 14 American secondary teachers who participated via email (due to technical reasons), all other interviews were private, face to face, took place in school, and were recorded with the interviewee's permission. Confidentiality was guaranteed before starting the interview. Participants could elect to withdraw from participation in the study at any time.

### **Research instrument and data analysis**

The study used a qualitative approach. The research tool was a semi-structured open interview enabling the interviewees to expand their answers, and to give examples and clarification. The two researchers interviewed in their own countries, and in the local language (i.e., English and Hebrew). The interviews were carried out in accordance with the four-question research protocol designed for this study, aiming to take a close and profound look at teacher's personal views on parents' involvement at school. The questions were (1) When you hear the term "parents' involvement in schools," how do you define this term? (2) How do you feel toward it? (3) What are the main topics (if any) that you believe are the most challenging and difficult relating to parents' involvement? (4) What are the main topics (if any) you believe are the most empowering and strengthening regarding parents' involvement?

The interviews were analysed according to the constant-comparative method for qualitative data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In this process we wished to gain distinct themes regarding each of the questions that were proposed to the interviewees. We first searched for systematic, repetitive, visible, and direct content. Later we referred back to the content according to their frequency of appearance and according to our interpretation regarding their significance in the eyes of the interviewees. During the interpretation process we divided the content into groups and identified prominent themes. A title emphasising their nature was provided to each theme.

The research interviews were conducted in the USA and Israel, in English and Hebrew respectively. Each researcher suggested themes based on the accurate wording of the interviews. The main researcher and another professional researcher, both of whom speak English and Hebrew, read the full interviews from both countries and the themes suggested in them. The themes which were derived from the content of the entire interviews and were agreed upon by the researchers, functioned for internal reliability.

## Findings

The findings were analysed according to their content. For each interview question, the themes are listed in the order in which the questions were asked. The themes are accompanied by supporting quotations from the interviews, using pseudonyms for the interviewees. Table 2 presents the themes identified in every question, by each group of participants and age level.

Table 2: Summary of the research findings:  
Themes in each research question by each group and age level

Question	Theme	Israel N = 27		Harford County USA N = 29	
		Elementary n = 15	Secondary n = 12	Elementary n = 15	Secondary n = 14
Definition of the term	Volunteering	13 (86%)	11 (92%)	12 (80%)	12 (86%)
	Supporting the child's learning	11 (73%)	4 (33%)	10 (67%)	5 (36%)
Feelings toward	Positive attitudes	8 (53%)	8 (66%)	14 (93%)	8 (57%)
	Criticism, tension	12 (80%)	6 (50%)	2 (13%)	4 (28%)
Challenges	Getting parents to collaborate	11 (73%)	7 (58%)	4 (26%)	2 (14%)
	Miscommunication	6 (40%)	5 (42%)	2 (13%)	4 (28%)
	Helicopter parents	6 (40%)	7 (58%)		4 (28%)
	Disrespect and mistrust	9 (60%)	7 (58%)		2 (14%)
Strengths	Communication and trust	10 (66%)	8 (66%)	9 (60%)	8 (57%)
	Appreciation	5 (33%)	3 (25%)	2 (13%)	2 (14%)

Note: Most of the interviewees suggested more than 1 theme per question.

### Question 1: When you hear the term "parents' involvement in school," how do you define this term?

As shown in Table 2, two main themes were identified regarding this question: volunteering involvement by request, and supporting the child in the learning process.

#### *Volunteering - involvement by request*

The vast majority of the teachers interviewed (who taught all grades in elementary and secondary schools) define parents' involvement as volunteering and helping the teachers, especially when the involvement entails help with activities and chores initiated by the school. Fundraising, organising fairs, accompanying the class to outside school activities, participating in parents' committees and helping the team wherever possible, were the most common examples given by the teachers. Parents' involvement means to ask for the parents' help in different kinds of activities. This, according to these teachers, creates their involvement in school. Ruth, an Israeli elementary school teacher said:

Parental involvement [means that the parent] is being the teacher's right hand. In every activity that I plan, I always consider the way I can be enriched in different aspects by their support.

According to this definition, teachers mainly define parents' involvement according to parents' actual activity in school. They refer to activities that are defined as needed by teachers, in the school's daily routine.

*Supporting the child in the learning process*

Another theme in this definition was supporting the child in the learning process, through involvement with homework, supporting children in academic chores given by teachers, showing interest, and supervising their learning in general. According to Table 2, in both countries more teachers in elementary schools than in secondary emphasised this kind of parental involvement, though it was mentioned in both age groups. Sarah, an American elementary school teacher said:

Parents' involvement is when a parent takes responsibility; follows through with the child's homework, and comes in to help out.

Unlike the former definition of the term which involves an interaction between parents and teachers at school, this definition of parents' involvement includes an interaction between the parent and his child, and it usually takes place at the family home.

**Question 2: How do you feel toward parents' involvement?**

Two major and seemingly contradictory themes were identified in response to this question. The first was positive attitudes and the second, criticism and tension.

*Positive attitudes*

The findings in Table 2 indicate that, for the most part, teachers in both groups have positive feelings toward parents' involvement. Interestingly, almost all of the American elementary school teachers share these feelings. Among the other groups – American secondary school teachers, and Israeli elementary and secondary school teachers, the rate is lower. Some wished for more parents' involvement, and understood that it benefits children's progress. Many of them used descriptions such as "It's great," "I'm OK with it," and "I really think it is important." An American elementary-school teacher, Linda said:

We do need to work together because ultimately we have the same goal - to educate a healthy, well-rounded human being to be successful in this complex world.

It is apparent that when teachers were asked the general question, "How do you feel toward parents' involvement?", they claim to see it as a beneficial aspect of children's learning. They express identification with its goals, and hence express positive feelings towards it.

*Criticism and tension*

Along with the positive feelings toward parents' involvement, some of the American teachers and most of the Israeli teachers who were interviewed shared their hesitations and their tendency to be cautious while interacting with parents. It is interesting to note that many of the Israeli interviewees who expressed positive attitudes toward parents' involvement, expressed, in the same breath, reservations and hesitations. Table 2 indicates that among the American group, more secondary than elementary school teachers expressed tension and criticism, while among the Israeli group those feelings were more emphasised in the elementary school teachers' group.

The teachers mentioned parents who questioned the teacher's authority and professionalism. In some cases, parents do not trust the teacher's judgment, and this leads to inappropriate, contemptuous behaviour toward teachers. Being exposed to these kinds of reactions may cause tension and insecure feelings among the teachers. Rachel, an Israeli secondary teacher said:

Every day I'm surprised by parents' reactions and behaviour, and I don't mean positively surprised.

Overall, the findings reveal a note of ambivalence regarding teachers' feelings toward parents' involvement. Together with positive feelings, teachers also expressed their reservations and the difficulties that accompany parents' involvement. This ambivalence is more frequent among the Israeli teachers, but it was expressed in both groups.

**Question 3: What are the main topics (if any) that you believe are the most challenging and difficult relating to parents' involvement?**

In both groups four themes were identified (the highest number derived from the interview questions) regarding the challenges that teachers attribute to parents' involvement. The themes, as shown in Table 2, are getting parents to collaborate, miscommunication, "helicopter parents", and, disrespect and mistrust. In general the frequency of challenges was higher among Israeli teachers than American teachers in every theme in this question. In addition, two of these themes – "helicopter parents" and "disrespect and mistrust" – were represented highly by the Israeli teachers, moderately by American secondary school teachers, and were not represented at all among American elementary-school teachers. Following is a detailed description regarding these themes.

*Getting parents to collaborate*

Another challenge, for more than half of the Israeli teachers and for a few of the American teachers, was the difficulty in getting parents to volunteer and collaborate with school initiatives. The examples teachers gave regarding this challenge referred to school activities that were organised by school personnel (e.g., Parents' Day, teacher-parent meetings, lectures, group learning activities). The teachers criticised the parents, claiming that their low level of involvement could be due to parents' lack of free time, or having other priorities. As Shir, one of the Israeli elementary-school teachers put it:



I remember last year we organised a set of lectures for parents, discussing ways to improve parental authority. Only a few parents came...

#### *Miscommunication*

Teachers in both groups, but again, mainly Israeli teachers, mentioned miscommunication as a challenge regarding parents' involvement. For teachers, miscommunication referred to the difficulty of maintaining open and frequent communication with parents, especially with the parents whose children needed close and consistent attention. Ruth, an Israeli secondary school teacher said:

... One of our decisions was that the mother would call me regularly in the evenings to catch up on the day at school. But it's too hard for her to persevere, and she hardly calls.

#### *"Helicopter" parents*

Some teachers use the terms helicopter parent, overprotective parenting, or hovering parent. These terms are used to define parents who pay extremely close attention to their children's experiences, especially in school. In many instances, those parents will question the authority of the teacher, and will often side with the child in situations of conflict between the teacher and a child. The teachers spoke of these parents as a burden, and felt that some of the parents do not have sufficient trust in them. Also, hovering parents may be very involved in the class's daily routine, an involvement that is not comfortable for the teacher. Emma, an American secondary school teacher claimed that:

... helicopter parents can have a detrimental effect, because they are trying to protect their child, more than help the class.

Although the percentage of American teachers who suggested hovering parents as a challenge was lower than among Israeli teachers, it is apparent that in both the United States and Israel, the relationship with some of the parents can be a very challenging experience. Interestingly, none of the American elementary school teachers mentioned this aspect as a challenge.

#### *Disrespect and mistrust*

The theme of disrespect and mistrust was mentioned by a significant number of Israeli teachers, while it was not an issue for the vast majority of the American teachers who were interviewed. Israeli elementary school teachers mentioned feelings such as tension, disappointment, fatigue, disrespect, and ungratefulness. Some of the teachers felt negative attitudes from the parents, and said that the parents do not know their place, and do not appreciate their work. Sara, one of the Israeli elementary school teachers said:

I punished one of my pupils, and told him he couldn't leave the class during the break because of his behaviour. Then I got a phone call from the child's mother telling me that I obviously don't know how to control her son, and that she forbids me from punishing him in any way.

In general, teachers in both groups deal with parents who impose various demands and tend to side with their children. However, from the interviews and the examples teachers suggested, it seems that among the Israeli teachers in particular, this issue is more relevant as they sometimes sense disrespect, and even hostility from the parents.

**Question 4: What are the main topics (if any) you believe are the most empowering and strengthening regarding parents' involvement?**

Two main themes were identified regarding teachers who find parents' involvement at school to be empowering. The themes were communication and trust and showing appreciation.

*Communication and trust*

Over a half of the participants from both countries claimed that they can build trust and gain parents' cooperation with school personnel by keeping the parents informed and updated regarding their children's progress. Teachers claim it is their responsibility to nurture good communication. This leads to parents' more positive attitudes, and a higher willingness to participate in school activities. Meredith, an American elementary school teachers said:

One-on-one communication is very important. Be honest about strengths and weaknesses. Be proactive and build trust between parents and teachers.

*Showing appreciation*

This theme was proposed by Israeli teachers only (5 out of 15 in elementary, 3 out of 12 in secondary), who claimed that they feel encouraged by parents who do not take them for granted. They highly value parents' expressions of appreciation and positive attitude, and are encouraged to respond more positively to parents and to involve them more. Hanita, one of the Israeli elementary-school teachers said:

There are occasions (not as often, though), when I get a thank you letter or just a phone call saying I did well on something. That's when I know that there are those who see the good things as well.

In sum, the findings indicate that teachers from both groups share similar definitions of the term parental involvement, mainly through volunteering and supporting the children in their learning process. In addition, parents' involvement was valued by almost all the American elementary-school teachers who were interviewed, and by over a half of the American secondary-school teachers and Israeli teachers from both age levels. It seems that Israeli teachers, more than their American peers, expressed greater difficulties with parents' involvement. However, this does not deter both groups of teachers from being empowered by collaboration with parents.

## **Discussion**

The present study seeks to reach a deeper understanding of teachers' perceptions of parent's involvement in school. It compares American and Israeli teacher's feelings and definitions toward this issue.

The findings indicate that the teachers in both countries seem to be in favour of such parental involvement and are empowered by it. This is true especially for American elementary school teachers. Our findings confirm earlier studies that found positive attitudes of teachers toward parents' involvement while highlighting its importance to students' social, emotional, and academic performance (Addi-Racah & Ainhoren, 2009; Finders & Lewis, 1994; Tozer, Senese & Violas, 2006). It seems that teachers in the current study are also aware of the benefits that parental involvement has for children and they understand and identify with the importance of this issue. Along with the positive attitudes and empowerment which, according to the teachers, accompany parents' involvement, it is important to note that not one of the teachers interviewed suggested that parents' involvement include mutual engagement in decision making (as suggested for example by Epstein, 2001; Koutrouba, Antonopoulou, Tsitsas & Zenakou, 2009). In other words, the positive attitudes were only regarding specific aspects, such as financial and administrative (Fisher, 2009). The teachers find this kind of involvement helpful and beneficial, as long as the parents are compliant and are willing to respond to their instructions. Teachers from both groups did not seem open to discussing curricular issues with parents, as this would be usurping teachers' authority.

In addition to positive attitudes, teachers also expressed reservations and tension regarding parental involvement and mentioned the challenges it entails. Both groups of teachers mentioned the difficulties in getting parents to collaborate, miscommunication, disrespect, mistrust and dealing with over-protective parents. Other difficulties involve actually recruiting parents to school activities, teachers' tendency to avoid discussing professional matters with parents, and a simple lack of time. Epstein (2008) also found in her study that although the teachers believe that parents' involvement is important, at the same time 97% of secondary school teachers claimed that working with parents is one of their biggest challenges. Some teachers tend to avoid contact with parents (Cullingford & Morrison, 1999), and some tend to communicate mostly with parents of younger children (Tozer et al., 2006). Other possible explanations for hindered teacher-parent communications could be teachers' tendency to resist any type of parental involvement in areas they perceive as purely professional practice (Fisher, 2009), lack of time to communicate, lack of awareness of this issue, and cultural and language differences between teachers and parents (Sanders & Lewis, 2005).

Most of the challenges expressed here were more prevalent among the Israeli teachers than among their counterparts from the USA. In particular, helicopter parents were not mentioned by any of the American elementary school teachers, while American middle school teachers expressed difficulties in this area. In Israel, helicopter parents were a challenge to all teachers in both age levels. This finding raises a question – what is it that kept American elementary school teachers from experiencing difficulties with helicopter parents? Dockett and Perry (2007), who discussed pre-school transition policy and practice, may have offered an explanation. According to these researchers, teachers and parents in the USA are more directed to exchanging information and collaborating before school begins, and this flow of information is maintained in the lower grades. Having established the pattern, parents and teachers alike may exhibit a more trustful and respectful behaviour, which, in turn, explains the relatively more comfortable feelings

American elementary school teachers expressed in relation to their communication with parents. In addition, the American teachers in this study had students with relatively very high academic achievements (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2011), perhaps enabling them to appreciate the outcome of parents' involvement, maybe even become more empowered by it. Thus they find it more natural to see the qualities that accompany parental involvement, as a ground element in their own professional performance.

The socio-economic differences between the American and the Israeli samples may also play a role in attitudes toward helicopter parents. Sanders and Simon (2002) found low levels of family involvement in school programs and processes among low income families and minority parents. In the current study we met high to middle socio-economic background in the American schools, and a relatively lower socio-economic background in Israeli schools. Therefore, it is possible that teachers in the Israeli school were less convinced of the outcomes of parental involvement and were less empowered by it.

Moreover in Israel, as indicated by Fisher (2009), and in line with our findings, many of the teachers describe difficulties getting parents to collaborate, to handle parents who question their authority, who interfere and are over-protective of their children. The teachers also expressed difficulties with parents who do not show respect and trust, and who have reservations about the teachers' work. It is possible that they regard parents' involvement more negatively in comparison to the American teachers. As mentioned earlier, recent years have seen new challenges for the Israeli educational system – poor grades performance in international assessment tests (OECD, 2010), high levels of school violence, parents' and students' disrespect of teachers (Fisher, 2009), and the decline in the social status of the teaching profession (Friedman & Fisher, 2002). Previous research has shown that a significant number of Israeli teachers believe that parents are over-involved, critical, and disrespectful (Fisher, 2009). The erosion in the Israeli teacher's status, the growing feelings of helplessness brought about by the undermining of teachers' and parents' authority (Freidman & Fisher, 2002; Omer, 2002), together with parents' dissatisfaction with the education system and mistrust of it, are possible reasons for the sensitive relations between teachers and parents in Israel (Addi-Racah & Ainhoren, 2009; Fisher, 2009; Friedman & Fisher 2002). These evolving circumstances prompted, as mentioned earlier, the Israeli Ministry of Education to initiate an educational reform in 2008. However, the reform is only gradually implemented and its impact cannot yet be assessed. Against this background the Israeli teachers' greater ambivalence toward parents' involvement can be better understood, despite official efforts to promote this involvement.

When referring to the way teachers tended to define the term parents' involvement, this term is defined mainly through volunteering (by both groups and age levels) and supporting the child's learning process (mostly elementary school teachers, in both groups). By volunteering the teachers mainly meant parental help for teachers in various activities such as escorting the class to outdoor activities, helping in decorating the class or collecting money for parties. The teachers tended to see parents as involved when they fulfilled their expectations regarding special needs and requests. Previous studies (Finders

& Lewis, 1994; Tett, 2001) indicate that teachers seem to seek support from parents as long as the parents are compliant and willing to follow the teachers' instructions. Epstein (2001) suggested a wider perspective to the issue of volunteering, in which the teachers can see themselves as active partners, enabling and expanding the parents' possibilities to volunteer. Teachers can create surveys to identify all available talents, times, and locations of volunteers, and to provide a meeting place for volunteers at school. In this way ideas and projects can be initiated and developed, and the whole idea of parents' involvement may be developed beyond just being willing to help around when asked. However, to achieve such levels and quality of volunteering involves initiatives on the part of the teachers. For effective, on-going parental involvement, teachers must initiate and supervise, adding these to their workload and responsibilities. Our research indicates that teachers tend to engage parents' help on an ad hoc basis, but do not invest the time to create a data pool – even an informal one – of parents' abilities and availability.

Another definition that teachers suggested for parents' involvement was parental support in the children's learning process. By that, teachers mainly referred to parents who tended to be more involved and updated in the child's learning. These parents stayed informed of grades and special assignments, helped the child with studies when needed, and also showed interest in the subject matter. Once more, the teachers did not refer to any kind of initiative on their behalf, as suggested by Epstein (2001), such as guiding parents and instructing them on how to monitor and discuss schoolwork at home. Indeed, teachers encourage parents to support their children with their homework. Yet as Finder and Lewis (1994) demonstrated, and this finding was repeated in our study, such help often relies on parents' knowledge, skills, and intuition, and not on effective learning tools provided by teachers. Quite possibly, if teachers guided parents so that learning would be consistent at home with school, the results of parents' work with children would be more effective.

## **Conclusion and implications**

The study population is derived from two Western industrial societies, both of which acknowledge the benefits of parents' involvement. We hope that the qualitative approach used here provides teachers' honest answers to the interviewers' questions, and these authentic voices are a main contribution of the current study. The one-on-one interviews enabled a close look at teachers' views and feelings toward parents' involvement.

The findings indicated that teachers seem to be in favour of parents' involvement, understand the importance of their collaboration with parents, and are also empowered by parents' showing appreciation and gratitude.

Alongside acknowledging the benefits, teachers in both countries hold back and are somewhat reserved, expressing ambivalence about making parents participants in their children's learning. Looking at the positive attitude toward parents' involvement on the one hand, and referring to the feelings and obstacles teachers mentioned on this issue on the other hand, helps to understand the ambiguity and reserved attitude of teachers toward parents' involvement. Teachers may find it difficult to be forthcoming in their relations with parents, especially if they expect a cold shoulder or ungratefulness when

parents' expectations are not met, and hold involvement at arms length. Such reticence is more prominent among the Israeli teachers who were interviewed. It is possible that the reluctance to include parents in their work stems from the relatively low achievements of Israeli students, together with the other challenges the Israeli educational system is dealing with, and the teachers' fear that non-professional interference will hinder their attempts to rectify this situation. The American teachers in this study work in school districts with high academic achievements, and these achievements might make them more confident in their professionalism and more willing to open themselves to outside involvement.

Our study shows that much remains to be achieved in teacher-parent relationship. In order to obtain higher levels of meaningful relationships and to expand the possibilities of parents' involvement, teachers must feel more secure with parents, and more empowered by their superiors. Also, in both countries extra training programs for teacher-parent collaboration are required in order to enhance teachers' understanding of its possibilities and potential outcomes of parental involvement. Greater confidence and a deeper acquaintance with parents' involvement will enable teachers to initiate it and to find new options for collaboration rather than reject more parental involvement. A clear understanding of the boundaries of involvement could even enable a dialogue about curricular issues. Specifically, future work should examine the mechanisms employed by the education system to engage parents' involvement in schools. For cross-cultural studies, such as the present one, the suitability and applicability to each cultural setting should be clarified. Expanding opportunities for parental involvement could enable teachers and parents to reach new horizons of collaboration, such as combined decision making and building new mechanisms for implementing ideas, resources, and projects for the benefit of the entire community.

## Limitations

Some limitations of the current study should be noted: First as a qualitative research, the extent to which we can generalise our findings to the entire Western population is limited. Second, we interviewed teachers in a high to middle socioeconomic area in the United States and in a middle-class area in Israel. Thus, it is likely that interviews with participants in different areas, and from different social backgrounds, might have led us to other results and insights. It is important to remember that besides the different academic scores of the students in the two countries, there are probably some other variables, cultural or school characteristics for example, that might have led to the current research findings. To obtain a more accurate picture of the relationship between academic scores and teachers' attitudes toward parents' involvement, it is recommended to repeat this study with participants who share as many variables as possible, besides academic scores.

Moreover, all the conclusions drawn here come from interviewing teachers, and any collaboration requires two parties. Further research on this topic should also investigate and present parents' perspectives and their views on how better dialogue and collaboration could be promoted. Also, despite the overall definition of the USA and Israel as Western, industrial nations, there are vast differences between them. The differences and the similarities we found in this study should be addressed with caution.

Nonetheless, the teachers' cooperation with the researchers and the many examples they suggested present a significant opportunity for a deeper understanding of teachers' experience of parents' involvement, with its shortcomings and benefits.

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