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# Home-school communication in Greek Secondary Multicultural Educational Settings: Parents' and Teachers' Perspectives

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## Abstract

*Although it is widely acknowledged that home-school communication, as an aspect of parental involvement, plays a decisive role in children's educational and socioemotional development, while it promotes social inclusion, especially in multicultural educational settings, the topic has not been adequately explored in Greece, especially in Lower High School. We qualitatively explored teachers' and parents' perceptions on home-school communication. The aims of this research were to examine (1) what kind of experiences teachers and parents have from home-school communication, (2) how does gender affects the entire process, and (3) which are the practical suggestions for improvement. The results of this research are the following: different perceptions of effective home-school communication, passive parental involvement, the immigrant status, structural obstacles, cultural and linguistic language diversity, stereotypes, and gender function as obstacles against effective home-school communication. Participants highlighted that possible solutions involve regular home-school communication, home-school collaboration, holistic and flexible practices, translators, and support toward families, especially mothers.*

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**Key words:** home-school communication; parental involvement; immigrant/refugee families; gender; intercultural school

## Introduction

Parental involvement (PI) has been advocated for a long time that is tightly connected to children's educational attainment and progress, while home-school partnerships have been dominant in the field of Education for over fifty years (Hamilton, 2013). The decisive role of parents, (Ha, 2021; Tan et al., 2020; Tan, 2018), along with parental attributes and other factors (Jabar, 2023; Serna & Martinez, 2019), which function as important determinants in students' academic performance and socio-emotional development (Hill, 2022; Schmid & Garrels, 2021), are already well-established. Research has proved that regular, two-sided, and interactive communication, which involves all parents and is built upon trust and sharing of values, ideas and expectations, can promote effective home-school collaboration (Gu, 2017), something that has proved to be beneficial for student's educational achievement, social inclusion (Terhart & von Dewitz, 2018) and upward social mobility (Schnell et al., 2015).

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The growing body of prior research suggests that PI is a multifaceted concept, that it demands the collaboration of all stakeholders (governments/states, schools, parents, teachers) in terms of policies and practices (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018; Rentzou & Ekine, 2017). In other cases, the already complex concept of PI in school settings has attracted an even more intense research attention, due to the ongoing and substantial influx of immigrants/refugees, triggered by political, economic and climate crisis (Stewart et al., 2022). Another part of research focuses on various states around the globe (Vrdoljak, et al., 2022; Cun, 2020), which are facing an increased demand for considering policies, strategies and interventions that will bridge home and school, foster effective home-school communication (HSC) and establish partnerships, to tackle the needs of the increasing culturally/linguistically diverse student populations (Stewart et al., 2022). More specifically, the concept of HSC has been researched either focusing on its various forms (Grodnick & Raftery-Helmer, 2015), through three different models of PI (Epstein et al., 2009; Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). Research focus has been drawn upon various characteristics or aspects of immigrant/refugee families that function as barriers against effective HSC, such as structural and contextual barriers Gross et al., 2022; Chappel & Ratliffe, 2021; Cun, 2020; Snell, 2018; Kim & Sheridan, 2015; Isik-Ercan et al., 2016; McWayne, 2015). Another aspect that has drawn attention is that of prejudice and stereotypes or bias against immigrant/refugee families, which are directly connected with racism, cultural/ethnic difference (Podadera & González-Jimenez, 2023; Sanders & Molgaard, 2019). While their effect on perceptions and misconceptions of "good parenting" have been equally explored extensively (Henderson et al., 2020; Antony-Newman, 2019; Rattenborg et al., 2019; Schneider & Arnot, 2018; Boliver, 2017; Merry et al., 2017; Wilder, 2017). Research has also examined the role of language as an important barrier (Gkaintartzi et al., 2020; Androulakis et al., 2018; McWayne, 2019; Bloch & Hirsch, 2017; Cline et al., 2014). The intersectionality of gender, in the case of immigrant/refugee mothers, with racism and other analytical categories, such as religion, socio-economic status and immigration status has also been examined by various studies, under a feminist perspective (González-Falcón et al., 2022; Holtmann, 2022; Al-Deen, 2019; O'Toole et al., 2019; Sime et al., 2018; Fleischmann & de Haas, 2016; Bürkner, 2012).

Finally, research has examined possible practical solutions against barriers toward an effective HSC and home-school collaboration, under a holistic and critical approach to HSC, which considers socio-cultural, linguistic, and structural factors as key determinants (McWayne et al., 2022; Melzi et al., 2019; Schneider & Arnot, 2018) and aims to enhance PI (Bardhoshi et al., 2016).

"Immigrants and refugees" are not a uniform and homogeneous category. In this paper we acknowledge the definitional differences and the different set of challenges faced by each group in relevance to their children's education (Stewart et al., 2022; Cun, 2020). As "immigrants" are defined individuals or family members who are willingly migrating across borders to improve their life conditions (socioeconomic) and are free to move again back to their countries of origin. As "refugees" are defined people who flee from their homeland to avoid persecution or conflict/war and are unwilling or unable to return to their countries of origin (Zholdoshalieva et al., 2022; Cun, 2020). In the present research we have selected to use the term "immigrants/refugees" as a unified term that refers to parents with cultural/linguistic diversity (Stewart et al., 2022). Participant teachers had teaching experience with both groups and additionally it was our aim to focus on HSC processes among groups affected by ethnocultural/linguistic diversity.

## Importance of the present research

In line with the above, as Greek schools are becoming ever-growing multicultural and communication between school and immigrant/refugee parents/families has not attracted extensive research attention, especially in high-school (lower and upper) settings. Concerning research upon HSC within the Greek context, the qualitative research of Gkaintartzi et al. (2020), which was conducted within the 'ISOTIS' programme funded by the European Union, focused on the support of first languages and cultures of students through home-based and school-based activities, family involvement and the use of ICT

environments in Early Childhood Education. The specific research did not exclusively explore HSC but approached it as a factor that could enhance home-school collaboration and PI with a particular focus on language and the use of ICTs. The research took place in preschool educational settings and did not involve any reference to gender as a decisive factor. The qualitative research of Androulakis et al. (2018) explored HSC as an important aspect of PI and applies a sociolinguistic approach, focusing on the communicative and language needs of Albanian parents and the importance of bilingualism, while HSC was also approached through the teachers' perspectives in Primary Education. The research did not involve the contribution of gender to HSC. In the Antonopoulou et al. (2011) quantitative research, HSC communication was not exclusively explored, but was approached as a crucial aspect of PI and parental roles, while it was highlighted that home-school cooperation was a determinative of adolescent academic and psychosocial development. The sample of this research did not involve teachers' opinions neither did not involve gender and although it was conducted in Secondary Education, it is not specified whether it was lower or upper.

Therefore, it is our intention to shed light and contribute to knowledge to this relatively unexplored area, through qualitative research that provides an in-depth exploration of both teachers' and parents' perspectives, by focusing particularly on HSC, and not in PI in a broader sense, specifically in lower High School settings, while considering, that according to prior research, PI and HSC are gradually diminished, as children grow older and become more autonomous (Dotterer, 2022; Ahmad et al., 2017). Finally, another important contribution of the present research is the fact that it highlights the importance of gender in HSC.

## Home-school Communication

The issue of HSC in all forms (phone calls, e-mail, notes, dialogue journals) (Grolnick & Raftery-Helmer, 2015), is considered to be a crucial aspect, central to the entire PI discourse, which has attracted scholar's attention through different standpoints (Epstein et al., 2009; Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). However, while some scholars consider it as an integral aspect of school-based PI, others, who do not share the same standpoint, avoid this classification (Hill, 2015; Whitaker, 2019) and support that communication and information sharing between school and home, notwithstanding its intrinsic value, should be perceived as a separate notion, as its main function is to connect the two separate spheres (Hill et al., 2018; Whitaker, 2019). The theoretical framework of this specific research is the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model (1995; see, also, Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005), where the concept of HSC is encapsulated in the first level. Parents' perception of contextual invitation to involvement involves the three following categories of invitations: general from the school, specific from teacher(s) and specific from the student (Whitaker, 2019, p. 422). It is also important to stress that parent-teacher communication is additionally located on the second level, as well, and is perceived as a form of active PI. Finally, we should also consider that as HSC can take many forms, it is crucial to differentiate communication as a simple transfer of information flow and dialogue between parents and teachers (Goodall, 2016)

## Barries to effective HSC

Empirical research on the topic suggests that immigrant and/or refugee parents experience hardships when dealing with their children's schooling (Cun, 2020; Antony-Newman, 2019; Kim & Sheridan, 2015). Structural and contextual barriers (Kim & Sheridan, 2015), such as scarce resources, poverty (Isik-Ercan et al., 2016), the status of illegal or undocumented immigration, relocations, and the fear of deportation (McWayne, 2015), unemployment or unsecured employment, long working hours (Chappel & Ratliffe, 2021), segregated or overcrowded housing, marital status (Gross et al., 2022), are some factors which impede effective HSC.

However, refugees are facing more intense problems, connected with their legal status, their deprivation of extended social peer networks, their insecurity for the well-being and safety of family

members and/or relatives left behind to their homelands, their deprivation of formal schooling in their countries of origin or during their long residence at refugee camps (Cun, 2020; Snell, 2018).

Furthermore, effective communication may be obstructed or disrupted, especially in racialized societies, even in those which are not structurally or formally built upon it, where racial or ethnic bias, prejudice, stereotypes, discrimination, violence, xenophobic policies, and every day attitudes render immigrants invisible, excluded and marginalized (Sanders & Molgaard, 2019).

Families -parents and students- are operating within a certain political, social and cultural context that is mainly dominated by Western culture, which is constructed upon normative, white, middle-class perceptions about ("good") parenting (Antony-Newman, 2019) and HSC (Schneider & Arnot, 2018; Boliver, 2017; Merry et al., 2017). Although there is an implicit impression that parents (families) and teachers share the same beliefs, perceptions, attitudes, and expectations about HSC and education (Henderson et al., 2020; Rattenborg et al., 2019), empirical data show a significant divergence among those perceptions and not only prove that in some cases this is impossible for all parents, but in some cases it is even not desired in the same form or degree (Henderson et al., 2020; Wilder, 2017). Research has shown that cultural diversity establishes a misconception between parents' and teachers' needs. Ethnic stereotypes, either positive or negative (Podadera & González-Jimenez, 2023), can largely construct teachers' perception, for example Polish students are considered diligent and successful as they are receiving intense parental support (Shalloo, 2015). Parental attitudes towards HSC and education may be shaped by the different cultural norms or different schooling type (teaching strategies, assessments, homework) experienced in their homelands (Antony-Newman, 2019). Traditional parental perceptions of teachers as the main representatives of authority are also a factor that intervenes in HSC, as in the case of Arab families (Stewart et al., 2022; Alisaari et al., 2020), something that highlights the inequitable distribution of power and control among "partners" (Rattenborg et al., 2019).

Furthermore, in some cases, the formal cultural context of the educational settings may not align and come into contrast with the cultural/knowledge capital of minority/ethnic families, which is based on interdependence, such as in the case of African American and Latinos in the U.S., thus creating a conflict between HSC and affecting the process of "belonging" or fitting in mainstream schooling, something that can pose psychological/emotional stress and disrupt peer interaction, causing even more harmful impact, especially upon students (Henderson et al., 2020; Sanders & Molgaard, 2019; Edwards & Kutaka, 2015).

Also, measuring HSC according to teachers' perceptual constructs of parental roles is even more difficult and ineffective, as in most cases they do not have access to information concerning home-based daily parental routines (such as helping with homework and extra-curricular reading) and children's lives, that sometimes are disregarded as inferior or remain unrecognized and unnoticed (McWayne et al., 2022; Vassallo, 2018). For example, Asian parents appear to be the less or the least involved parents compared to other ethnic groups or to the majority, especially when it comes to the frequency of attending school-based activities, while the same group is more active compared to other groups when it comes to home-based functions (Kim et al. 2018).

Also, the language barrier is another hindering factor which further disempowers minoritized groups, something apparent in empirical research (Gkaintartzi et al., 2020; Androulakis et al., 2018; Bloch & Hirsch, 2017), especially when there are no provisions of professional interpreters in schools or a

shared language (Cline et al., 2014) or of social workers (Csók & Pusztai, 2022). In this context, children assume this role and become interpreters for their parents, which disrupts traditional perceptions of agency, power and control shared among parents and children (McWayne, 2019; Bloch & Hirsch, 2017). These processes make parents more reluctant, unwilling, or even intimidated to communicate with school settings, which conveys a wrong message, often misinterpreted through oversimplified stereotypical generalizations and assumptions by teachers that those parents are indifferent towards their children's well-being (McWayne, 2019).

## Gender

HSC, as well as PI, are not a neutral term in terms of gender. Research highlights that mothers are more involved in their children's education, while, although fathers have a significant role in the educational progress of their children, they are absent regarding the facilitation of learning, and this has led the term 'mother' to become synonym with 'parent' (O'Toole et al., 2019). Inequitable power relations among gender lines pertain within families, but as research grows and societies evolve, feminist perspectives stress the importance to identify the reasons behind paternal exclusion or limited PI (O'Toole et al., 2019; Fleischmann & de Haas, 2016), in order to have a better understanding of educational outcomes and enhance gender equity within households (Fleischmann & de Haas, 2016).

The various manifestations of gender inequitable relations are a global issue, which effects the lives of many women around the globe. However, it is acknowledged that immigration inflicts women disproportionately with various structural inequalities (Holtmann, 2022). Gender adds more complexity to the process of home-school communication as gender, race, ethnicity, culture, and social class appear increased and multilayered intersectionality (González-Falcón et al., 2022; Bürkner, 2012). The effect of gender on home-school communication and parental roles of immigrant/refugee families is not a uniform phenomenon. On the contrary, it appears diversity that depends on many decisive factors, such as the ethnic group per se, its cultural norms and the religious restrictions posed to gender roles, which in some cases are non-egalitarian (Fleischmann & de Haas, 2016). Thus, such restrictions pose limitations or deprive rights, agency, access, and opportunities, confine women exclusively at home with time-consuming and exhausting maternal roles, hinder female participation in social life, thus, obstructing their literacy, employment opportunities, economic autonomy and social inclusion (Sime et al., 2018).

Additionally, religion, specifically Muslim, renders veiled women more visible and thus vulnerable to the host society, as Islamophobia has been increased after 9/11 and due to large immigration/refugee flows to Europe. Research has shown that Muslim women are depicted and perceived as oppressed, voiceless and not attached to mainstream Western values, something that may accentuate the feeling of alienation and obstruct effective home-school communication, inclusion and the sense of belonging within a certain community (González-Falcón et al., 2022; Al-Deen, 2019). Also, mothers, even with limited knowledge and language literacy in the host society (González-Falcón et al., 2022; O'Toole et al., 2019; Al-Deen, 2019) counterbalance the absence of home-school communication with increased home-based involvement (Fleischmann & de Haas, 2016). On the contrary, paternal roles are dominant in home-school communication, as mothers usually feel embarrassed and not confident to assume this role (González-Falcón et al., 2022).

## Improvement of HSC

The aforementioned have come to the spotlight of public educational policies in many countries around the globe, emphasizing the increased demand (McWayne, 2015) for applying holistic and critical approaches to HSC, which consider socio-cultural, linguistic and structural factors that

determine the educational reality and lived experiences of parents and students with cultural/linguistic diversity. Societal, political, and educational settings create in each case a different context of interaction that needs to be explored through further empirical research. Considering the importance of communication, meaningful, effective, and sustainable home-school collaborations and partnerships in multicultural settings can be promoted through a “transactional school-home-school communication model” (Schneider & Arnot, 2018, p. 11), which approaches school settings as a locus of shared goals, interests, perceptions, and insights, and aims at building strong and resilient school communities that encourage HSC and PI. This model, which is culturally and linguistically relevant and sensitive (McWayne et al., 2022) toward families, their structure and knowledge capital that is often devaluated (Melzi et al., 2019), calls the school to plan, organize, and support effective information exchange and communication, which will be built upon and sustained through interactive, spiral, dialogue, and fosters empathy (Schneider & Arnot, 2018).

Schools have to be more flexible, in terms of recognizing factors that inhibit parental participation, and also invent more creative methods. Bardhoshi et al. (2016), suggest arranging parent-teacher meetings according to parents' schedule to increase participation, the provision of childcare during those meetings, organizing parent-child centred conferences and enhance the role of school counsellors to further support families.

## **The Present Study**

The present qualitative research adopted the constructivist paradigm and was conducted as a case study (Creswell, 2014). The research aim was to approach aspects, such as processes, reactions, obstacles, the effect of gender and the improvement, of HSC in multicultural educational settings through teachers' and parents' lived experiences and perceptions (Creswell, 2014). Semi-structured interviews best allowed researchers to explore the following Research Questions (RQs):

- RQ1: What kind of experiences do teachers and parents have from HSC?
- RQ2: How does gender shape HSC?
- RQ3: Which are the practical suggestions from both sides that can lead to an effective HSC?

## **Method**

### **Design**

Research questions were formulated according to bibliography, and specifically according to the first level of PI of the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) model, which involves the crucial role of communication. Moreover, the questions explored the degree to which participants feel comfortable to take part in various forms of communication, their perspectives in relevance to the assessment of outcomes, as well as their insights about effective communication strategies. The contribution of gender was also considered in relevance to HSC. Semi-structured interviews (SSIs) were selected as a tool, as they are characterized by flexibility and reified through open-ended questions enable to elaborate on surfacing themes or clarifying valuable information and perspectives produced by the respondents (King et al., 2018).

## The Context

This research was conducted at the two Intercultural Lower High Schools located at Thessaloniki/Greece. Both schools address to students 12 to 15 years old. The selection of the specific schools was based on the fact that they host many students, from various ethnic/cultural and linguistic backgrounds, such as Russia, Georgia, Armenia, Albania, Turkey, China, Somalia, Afghanistan, Iran. Additionally, the specific type of schools endorses the values of pluralism and diversity, and the school staff display intercultural competences, awareness and sensitivity concerning multilingualism and multiculturalism. Also, the selection of the specific educational level (lower High School) was based on prior research, which, as already mentioned, supports that HSC and the overall demand for increased PI gradually diminishes, because as students grow older, they have embedded the notions of responsibility and autonomy (Dotterer, 2022; Ahmad et al., 2017).

## Participants

Bryman (2016) suggests that sampling process in qualitative research should reflect and be representative of the target population, while the selection should follow certain principles. In qualitative research the convenience sampling method may allow the selection of participants by the virtue of their accessibility (Bryman, 2016). Additionally, as schools form a circle of staff members, and one participant can suggest others who are willing to participate in the research, snowball sampling was also applied. Participant parents were approached through the teaching staff.

## Teachers

Twelve (N=12) teachers participated in the research. Concerning sociodemographics, five (5) participants are male and seven (7) females. Participants teach various subjects, 1 teaches foreign language (English), 6 teach Greek language, 2 teach Mathematics, 2 teach Natural Sciences, and 1 teaches Social and Political Education. 10 out of 12 have a MSc in their field of expertise and 10 out of 12 have a training in Intercultural Education either through seminar attendance or through a master's degree. Finally, their teaching experience with migrants and/or refugees, varies from 5 to 35 years.

## Parents

Eight (N=8) participants were parents and they all had children ranging in ages from 12 to 15 years, all attending Lower High School. Concerning sociodemographics, six (6) are male and two (2) females. The nationalities of participant parents are from: Georgia (2/P2, P6), Armenia (1/P3), Albania (1/P4/Female), Turkey (2/P1, P5), China (1/P7), Afghanistan (1/P8/Female) and their years of residence vary from eight months to four years.

## Procedure

Data collection begun in January and ended in June 2023. The first step was to ensure the participation of teachers. Interview appointments, were set, considering mainly the free time of the school staff. The interviews lasted approximately 40-45 minutes and were all conducted on school grounds. Parents were contacted by some of the teachers and their recruitment was based on the participants' literacy in Greek. All parents were not available because of their working hours, or it was impossible for them to communicate through telephone. Their interviews lasted almost for an hour and were all conducted on school grounds. Two interviews, one for each group, were pilot. Before the interviews, all participants were informed about the aims of this research and were reassured about the anonymity and confidentiality of their replies. It was stressed that this research gave voice and space to both groups to shed light to an unexplored area, and that their contribution would not only enrich academic

knowledge but would also be valuable, as it can be capitalized for further practical improvements on home-school communication and have a positive impact on educational policies. Written consent was obtained from both groups before any data collection started. Obtaining informed consent from the parents proved to be more difficult as they had limited or no literacy in Greek, something that lead to a negotiating discussion before the interviews, to make them feel more comfortable with the aim and importance of this research. During the entire process the ethical guidelines and principles of research were followed.

## Measures

Two measures were applied in the specific research: a teacher-reported and a parent-reported structured interview guide with 15 open-ended questions for each group. Open-ended questions, due to their flexibility, allowed participants to freely elaborate their own experiences and perceptions (Mills et al., 2017 [2011]). Questions, which were divided into three main axes according to the RQs, explored processes, experiences and obstacles in HSC, understanding the educational system of the host society, the gender effect, guidance with homework, possible solutions for the improvement of HSC. Due to parents' low command of Greek, the use of other languages, rephrasing and/or further elaborations, was necessary to retrieve answers and facilitate the entire interviewing process. Three interviews were conducted in English and five in Greek. Each group of participants reflected a variety of standpoints, even within the same group, as their own subjective views and experiences construct their shared reality from a different perspective.

## Data analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) was selected as the most suitable approach for data analysis, as it is acknowledged that it is flexible in data interpretation and can allow extracting valuable knowledge in qualitative survey data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). TA was employed in both data sets to explore parents' and teachers' perspectives on PI and home-school communication in multicultural educational settings. The researchers applied an inductive approach and followed the six stages outlined by Braun and Clarke (2012) for each dataset separately. Data were triangulated, to highlight shared or differing perspectives and standpoints (Natow, 2020). First, the recorded interviews were transcribed and carefully read three times. Second, initial coding was generated from excerpts, in relevance to the RQs. Third, after several steps, codes were carefully combined in overarching and meaningful themes and sub-themes, according to the literature review. Fourth, the emerging themes were revised and reviewed to eliminate the possibility of overlapping themes and to secure their coherence. Also, excerpts were reorganized. Fifth, emerging themes were finalized, were renamed in some cases and were also re-examined to secure that each theme generated different information. Sixth, the report was written. Interviews conducted in English were translated.

## Results

In the following section, we present the findings of the TA of teachers and parents' responses to the open-ended questions about HSC. All 20 participants described their experiences and perspectives about HSC. Our first task was to organize the main themes that emerged from the triangulation of responses, according to the RQs. In the following section, we summarize the major themes that emerged along with quotes. Findings from each group of participants (teachers, parents) are presented in the same section, under each theme. Interviews established the following six emerging themes, outline in Table 1:

**Table 1** Emerging themes from Thematic Analysis

| Theme # | Theme  |
|---------|--|
| 1       | Home-school communication processes                          |
| 2       | Valuing schooling and understanding of the school-culture    |
| 3       | Home-school communication and guidance with homework         |
| 4       | Challenges against effective home-school communication       |
| 5       | The importance/benefits of home-school communication         |
| 6       | Suggested strategies for improving home-school communication |

## Theme 1: Home-school communication processes

### Response to processes of home-school communication

All teachers stressed that they follow the formal school policy on the aspect of home-school communication policy, and explained how school provisions are working toward this direction. Teacher-parent briefings can be followed on a weekly basis, at specific hours, according to the schedule and free time of each teacher. Parents receive at the beginning of the schoolyear a specific schedule and they are also informed in case of changes during the semesters. During these meetings, parents can receive information about their children's progress and behavior, how to provide help with homework, the weak and strong points of students. Additionally, teachers communicate with parents through telephone, when issues of misconduct happen, in order to settle a meeting with parents, or through email regarding other secondary school operations. Ten teachers also highlighted that the most important problem they are facing is that parents are not responding to those briefings, and in most cases are absent or indifferent, and they do not have an effective home-school communication that is frequent, regular and expands beyond receiving grades. However, ten teachers further explained their statements and supported that response to home-communication is not a uniform phenomenon. In most cases this process is diversified among ethnic groups. Teachers reported that migrant families, specifically, who are settled in Greece for many years, and have been better integrated or assimilated with the majority society, have frequent home-school communication and during incidents of misconduct fiercely support their children to avoid school penalties. According to teachers, other factors, which shape parental response to home-school communication, is the parental educational level, the refugee status, and the absence of parents, as there are cases of unaccompanied children.

*T4: They look indifferent .... They are absent.... especially Afghani and Chinese parents. Most of the times we can't find them not even on the phone ...or when we send an email... they don't respond... and this is very difficult for all parts.*

*T5: Immigrants and refugees are not the same thing ... Refugees are in a worst position, you know ...face more difficulties. Some immigrant families, for example, are here for many months... uh, even for years, have proper jobs and children have been adjusted to the schooling culture.*

Four parents supported that they have some form of communication with the school, not on a regular basis with information relevant to the academic progress of their children, but mostly relevant to other topics, such as school grades, celebrations, school excursions absences or bad behavior. Also, parents who have experienced a form of communication, mentioned that they do not feel the need to communicate with the school, as they feel satisfied and rely on teachers for the progress and security

of their children. One parent also stressed that could not get in touch with the teacher(s), because of the school-schedule and expressed her disappointment.

*P1: I came once...wanted to ask about my son... if he is doing ok here (at the school). The teacher was not here ... her work (schedule) was over .... I didn't find her.*

*P2: They (the teachers) call us if (she) is not coming to school. More on the phone ... a few times at school was the communication.*

*P4: I always come when there's a problem.*

### **Children's active role in home-school communication**

The majority of participants from both groups expressed their reliance on the students as conveyors of messages or interpreters and translators, in order to accomplish a sufficient degree of home-school communication.

Teachers resort to students to convey important information and written messages to home settings. Seven teachers reported that they confined to this strategy and asked students to invite their parents to discuss school matters or become interpreters for their parents.

*T6: For those parents who never come I have found another strategy.... I write some comments in their notebooks... and I ask from them (students) to pass the information to their parents.*

*T2: Language is the most important problem.... It's a huge barrier! But we have to be resourceful! Children have become translators for their parents and for us too. They are bridging this gap.*

Six parents, especially those who do not have frequent home-school communication, also reported that they rely upon their children to become the main source of information about the entire educational processes and to translate messages, oral or written, assist them during telephone or face-to-face communication on school grounds.

*P8: My son translates me everything about school. Notes, school forms ... invitations .... the phone(call)...When I go to school, he helps me there ... I not speak Greek.*

### **The role of social workers in home-school communication**

Four teachers highlighted the contribution of social workers, professionals who have an intermediary role between schools and families. They are responsible for unaccompanied children, for registering children at school and assume the responsibility of the overall communication with parents, especially in cases of families who are under NGO care or are supported by social services.

*T9: NGO social workers are the only who come and get information about the unaccompanied children that they host. They ask information mainly about their progress and overall behavior with others.*

## Theme 2: Valuing schooling and understanding of the school-culture

### Valuing children's schooling and education

Nine teachers reported that home-school communication is an important parental role, a process that relates to the overall value placed upon children's schooling, education and academic performance. They connected this aspect with concepts of "good" parenting, which is overall constructed upon an active PI with children's education and perceives education as a vehicle for social inclusion and upward social mobility. Other factors affecting parental attitudes are the familial length of residence in Greece, parental future plans for relocation or immigration to other European countries and with parental educational status, especially in the case of parents with academic qualifications. Two teachers, however, stressed that parents try to do the best they can and cannot be judged only by their attitude toward home-school communication and schooling in general. Four teachers reported that most parents, although they are polite and seem to care about their children's well-being, do not seem to place high value on their schooling, but mainly about their conduct and avoiding misbehavior incidents.

*T1: Parents who usually take after their children make an effort to cover all their needs. Educating your children isn't important? Okey, I know that all parents don't share this view, but some effort has to be made! At least to help these children get integrated more easily in the society... and have a better future... a proper work.*

*T6: Its' not their top priority to invest in education here... Maybe if they are settled permanently somewhere, it will be different.*

*T2: You can't claim so easily that they don't care about their children's schooling ... or even support that they aren't good parents just because they don't come to school to get information about their children's progress .... This doesn't mean that they aren't caring parents who take of their kids at home.*

### Parents' understanding of school-culture

Concerning parents' adequate understanding of school culture, teachers' reports appeared to be contrasting. Seven teachers reported that parents who do not comprehend all processes and aspects of school life and culture, it is either because of socioeconomic, language, cultural barriers, or because of inadequate school efforts, as part of the official educational policy. The other five acknowledged that parents are not utterly disengaged from school culture but demonstrate some responses and urge their children not only to attend, be diligent with homework and participate in extra-curricular activities.

*T2: They can't understand the total picture... that schooling isn't only about physical attendance... it's a broader concept. It's about participation into the entire process ... and with the community, making an effort to get some education, becoming responsible with homework.*

*T7: The cultural distance is huge! Starting with the most obvious... some parents don't know that this a mixed school, that boys and girls sit next to each other... and don't want their girls to participate in all activities, especially extracurricular.*

*T10: We should make more effort to engage them... maybe, with more frequent meetings at the beginning of the schoolyear, to explain them what we are doing here and that their presence and role is important. They would better understand then...*

Four parents, on the other hand, reported that they are involved and want to be informed about their children's school life and receive all relevant information from their children. One parent stressed that adaptation to the school environment is a challenge and has to do with the period of residence in Greece. Three parents reported that school is a process that concerns mainly their children and the teachers.

*P4: I try to keep my child close to me .... I want her doing well. Be a good student and be happy with her classmates. Every day I ask my daughter about what happens at school, and she explains everything about her teachers and lessons ... I mean what they do at school, how they treat her.*

*P6: I not understand everything here about the school, because we (the family) are new here and first we (parents) have to know how to live here.*

*P8: School is for children.... my son knows better what they do there. Teachers are very responsible.*

### **Theme 3: Home-school communication and guidance with homework**

Five teachers reported that they do not guide parents with their children's homework assignments during home school-communication, apart from some general advice. Those respondents assumed that giving such instructions was rather unnecessary, since parents lacked in knowledge and had limited potentiality to effectively engage with such tasks. Five teachers also reported that fathers are the most involved with homework assignments as they have a better command of Greek, while mothers in some cases have a more intense daily routine and worst or no literacy in Greek. In cases where families have a long residence in the country and both parents can speak Greek, then it is mothers who are mostly involved with homework assignments. Two teachers supported that some parents encourage their children to study at home and respond to their text assignments alone. Moreover, four teachers pointed out that it is preferable to guide families to seek more structured assistance that will respond to their needs, especially concerning the most vulnerable and disadvantaged cases. In these cases, as well, students became the main conveyors of information.

*T12: The only thing that we can rely on is the work done here inside the classroom. These students are trying very hard to make some progress by themselves. I am certain that parents encourage their children to study, but they cannot actually help them.*

*T8: Some parents have received our guidance about NGOs that can help their children to improve their literacy in Greek. Many children attend evening lessons in such organizations and try to improve their language skills.*

*T5: When mothers speak the language, it's them who assist their children with homework.*

Six parents accordingly reported that they do not receive any instructions or guidance for home-based involvement during home-school communication. Their insufficient literacy and free time constrain their willingness to provide assistance to their children with their homework assignments and renders them incapable of responding to such tasks. Three parents responded that helping their children with homework is not necessary, as they rely on student/teacher effort inside the classroom and children seem to have a satisfactory progress.

*P7: I don't understand Greek to help my daughter with homework, to tell her what to write. I want my child to do homework, to help her. But I can't.*

*P2: He must write alone... it's his homework and he does everything okay ... he pays attention at school.*

#### **Theme 4: Challenges against effective home-school communication**

##### **The language barrier**

Eleven teachers indicated that linguistic diversity functions as the most important impediment against effective communication with parents, regardless the form of home-school communication (telephone, email, face-to-face). Respondents indicated home-school communication is largely dependent on students' role as translators and suggested that their work should be assisted by professionals.

*T11: The condition, I mean communication with parents, was much better when an interpreter was involved, because most of them don't know the language.*

*T12: We try to contact them through phone, but we can't reach them, and they don't call us back. And if you reach them, communication is not really an easy thing, because we don't speak their language, Turkish or Chinese, for example, especially if the children are not present at home during the phone-call to help with the translation.*

Seven parents shared a common view and prioritized the language barrier as the most significant obstacle against effective home-school communication. They stressed that even a common discussion with teachers is extremely difficult due to their poor command of Greek.

*P8: Language is a big problem! Is very difficult. Teachers not speak our language and no English ... we can't talk easily.*

##### **Socio-economic status**

Additionally, ten teachers reported parents' heavy working schedule as an important challenge, something that effects their unavailability. Six male parents reported the same thing and their inability to align working schedules to the schools' demands.

*T3: Parents don't come regularly, for different reasons. Fathers, for example, who are working long hours, day and even night for additional family income don't come to the school. It is very difficult for them.*

*P2: I must go to the bus very early and can't come here morning. I finish at afternoon. The school is closed then.*

##### **Gender**

Eleven teachers reported that fathers are more involved with home-school communication, mainly because they are the family members who are mostly engaging with activities outside the home and are socializing more often than mothers. Four teachers stressed that maternal roles are extremely demanding and restraint mothers at home. Eight teachers reported that cultural factors, such as religion, are shaping the gender of home-school communication.

*T1: Mothers have to stay home to take care of household responsibilities and they also have other younger children, who can't be left unattended. It is time consuming.*

*T10: In most cases we see fathers. It depends on the migrant group. If they are Muslims... They give the impression that they are exclusive representatives of the family... Mothers with veils don't feel comfortable coming here alone, they come with their husbands.*

Two participant females (mothers) reported their overload with household responsibilities and stressed that they do not feel comfortable to communicate with teachers as they have low or no literacy in Greek. Four male participants mentioned that they are responsible for home-school communication, because they have a better command in Greek and can better understand the school-culture.

*P8: I not speak Greek ... I not work ... I take care of my children at home ... (I) go out to buy food ... I have three children ... his father communicates with school.*

*P2: I know how to speak (Greek), because I work here ... it's more easy to talk to the teachers. I understand what they do (at school).*

## **Theme 5: The importance/benefits of home-school communication**

Eleven teachers reported that they assess home-school communication as an important aspect for all stakeholders, and especially students, while the positive outcomes and benefits can be traced in different areas. Six teachers reported that effective communication with the parents can enhance social inclusion, while six teachers argued that enhanced communication can ameliorate academic performance. Four teachers accentuated related psychological, behavioral, and emotional outcomes and connected them with effective adjustment and integration. Two teachers reported that home-school communication can function as a familiarizing process with students' backgrounds, though which they can better interpret student's overall attitude towards schooling. One teacher reported that home-school communication can help parents to better understand the entire school processes (rules, operations). One teacher, however, stressed that home-school communication does not have profound outcomes, but only a limited effect only on students' behavior.

*T3: There is no noticeable effect on their academic performance. The only improvement concerns their behavior, and this is temporary. This is why they (parents) come here.*

*T6: We can better understand our students' behavior and reactions, when we meet their parents.*

*T12: They will improve their academic progress and their attitude. Communicating and working along with parents can urge a child to be more responsible... They need a form of "pushing". These children face huge difficulties! It is a new country, and everything is different, and the language is difficult.*

Four parents reported that communication with teachers is important, as it is a form of behavioral control, to help their children adapt within the school community. Two parents mentioned that they can receive suggestions for the improvement of their children's academic progress and general well-being.

*P3: If we meet teachers, we know more things. If there is progress and about behavior... if he has problems in the school. In the beginning, he (the son) had difficulty with the language, it is very difficult. If I knew, I would have talked to the teachers to help him.*

### **Theme 6: Suggested strategies for improving home-school communication**

Eleven teachers acknowledged that regular (once a month at least) and direct meetings are the most effective communication process. Four teachers suggested that there should be invitations sent to parents more frequently, organize events especially addressed to parents. Ten teachers reported that there should be an investment in teacher-parent partnerships, based on mutual respect and communication should not be a superficial encounter, but an interactive process, during which both sides can take equally initiatives. Four teachers reported that parental participation in extra-curricular events (school events, Christmas bazaars) can foster bonds with the school community. Three teachers suggested a holistic approach which involves the contribution of social workers, legal advisors, the aid of NGOs and community involvement. Two participant teachers stressed the necessity of psychological support to families and specifically to the most vulnerable of them. Ten teachers highlighted the increased demand for interpreters in the multilingual school context.

*T7: Establishing a channel of communication, exchanging information and starting to build gradually a relationship are very important and should start from the beginning of the schoolyear. We, as teachers, have the obligation to inform parents about what to expect, about their obligations, school-life and how to help their children. This benefits all children. Building a parental community can might help.*

*T5: We have to overcome barriers ... When parents get the sense that they have an opinion, that they are respected and that you hear their needs ... they feel included as part of the community and then they transfer this feeling to their children.*

*T2: Maybe listening to their needs more ... and find alternatives, be more flexible rather than stick to traditional modes of communication.*

Similarly, six parents reported their suggestions for the improvement of home-school communication.

*P5: This school should have a translator. Here, in the school, someone who can speak our language (Turkish).*

*P6: We can have a meeting with all parents and teachers ... (an)other day without school, Saturday, and discuss with teachers (and) meet other parents.*

*P2: I want to see teachers face-to-face and tell me (more) how to help my child at home .... with exercises and tasks.*

## Discussion

The present research aimed at exploring home-school communication in multicultural educational settings.

The first RQ explored the experiences of teachers and parents during home-school communication. Participants' discourse revealed the critical role of teachers in organizing and enhancing home-school communication through intensified invitations toward parents, something that also effects parental perceptions of invitations, (Hoover-Dempsey & Sadler, 1995), as parents, especially those with low SES (Bardhoshi et al., 2016), want to feel that they are welcome and invited to school. Also, participants responses highlighted whether home-school communication is perceived as crucial, as it is linked with students' educational progress, the improvement of academic performance, socio-emotional development, effective adjustment and integration, and social inclusion, especially when it comes to culturally diverse students (Rattenborg et al., 2019; Ucus et al., 2019; Gu, 2017; Schnell et al., 2015). Participants' responses revealed a passive PI, which means that parents encourage children to study and respond to homework assignments, but they are not actually helping children with those tasks (Radojlović et al., 2015). Additionally, cultural factors and differentiated experiences of parents who perceive teachers trustful and as the exclusive authority, whose work has gained their respect, were determinants of not prioritizing the importance of HSC is supported by prior research (Stewart et al., 2022; Alisaari et al., 2020).

At the same time, participant teachers linked home-school communication with good parenting, valuing education and schooling, an opinion dominant within the normative and white Western cultural perceptions (Schneider & Arnot, 2018; Boliver, 2017). The fact that parents were negatively criticized as indifferent, absent and not valuing education is linked with stereotypical interpretations, prejudice, ethnic/race bias, misconceptions and generalizations about immigrant/refugee parents and an unequal distribution of power and authority (teachers), which eventually hinder effective home-school communication and collaboration and reinforce educational inequalities, something supported by extant literature (Chappel & Ratliffe, 2021; Antony-Newman, 2019; McWayne, 2019; Rattenborg et al., 2019).

Participants' responses also shed light to various factors, which function as impediments against effective home school communication. Parents' unavailability was the result of structural obstacles, such as long working hours and harsh conditions connected with low SES (Sanders & Molgaard, 2019; McWayne, 2015). The cultural gap (González-Falcón et al., 2022) or the cultural clash (O'Toole et al., 2019) was also suggested as an impediment. Although those two factors were acknowledged by teachers, they were approached either superficially or as a normalized behavior of immigrant/refugee parents. Prior research highlights that the above obstacles, along with a broad array of other factors, can influence negatively home-school communication and PI in general, can be traced to wider social groups/classes (Jabar, 2023). However, obstacles (economic, linguistic, cultural) faced by immigrants and refugees are stronger, as these groups are more vulnerable to structural poverty and exclusion in comparison to the natives (OECD & EU, 2018). Another important factor stressed by both groups was the linguistic diversity. It is widely acknowledged that the language barrier (Antony-Newman, 2019; Androulakis et al., 2018; Schneider & Arnot, 2018; Schnell et al., 2015) obstructs effective communication, creates misconceptions and misunderstandings (Cox et al., 2021) across home and school, but functions also as an obstacle against understanding the entire school culture, parental duties, responsibilities and behaviors (Chappel & Ratliffe, 2021), and renders immigrant parents more invisible, alienated, voiceless and marginal. The active role of children, who function as family representatives, ambassadors, and intermediates in home-school communication, something that was addressed by both groups, reinforces prior empirical research on the field (McWayne, 2019).

The second RQ explored gender issues in HSC. First, the male over-representation of participant parents signals male dominance, female subordination, inequitable gender relations and an unequal distribution of power, manifested within and outside households, which is a pertaining phenomenon

linked with patriarchy (Swart, 2015). Second, gender in our case intersects with other axes of oppression-ethnicity/race- and effects HSC among other things. The limited participation of females in HSC, their confinement at home with responsibilities attached to traditional female roles and motherhood (Sime et al., 2018) are connected with imposed traditional cultural norms, which shape inequitable gender relations, pose restrictions upon female agency and decision making, employment and literacy opportunities and hinder social inclusion of immigrant/refugee women (Holtmann, 2022; North, 2019). Third, we must also stress that this oppressive system expands to the lives of young women even in a new and different social context. Ignorance of equitable gender relations and roles between female and male students within school settings, in terms of school attendance, participation in school activities or extract-curricular activities, may be attributed to the cultural gap (González-Falcón et al., 2022; O' Toole et al., 2019), but it definitely poses barriers to future academic progress and life decisions (Ponthieux & Meurs, 2015).

The third RQ explored participants' opinions regarding the improvement of HSC. Teachers' responses were oriented more toward the "transactional school-home-school communication model" (Schneider & Arnot, 2018, p. 11), while they expressed a more profound and interactive two-way process that would involve structuring of a common ground, acquiring knowledge upon the living conditions of students, either structural or cultural, an approach that can improve educational outcomes and construct more objective perceptions, something supported by prior literature on the field (Gross et al., 2022; McWayne et al., 2022; Henderson et al., 2020; Schneider & Arnot, 2018). Also, according to participant teachers, effective HSC entails certain strategies, such as establish channels of communication especially at the beginning of the school year (Melnikova, 2022; U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Teachers highlighted that it should be frequent/regular, while both teachers and parents seemed to prefer face-to-face communication and more flexible and alternative approaches, such as participation in parental meetings and extra-curricular activities (Gross et al., 2022; Bardhoshi et al., 2016). The demand for holistic strategies, which will involve all stakeholders (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018; Rentzou & Ekine, 2017), not only parents and teachers, but social workers, translators, NGOs, legal advisors, and psychological support, something stressed by teachers and parents, are some proposals for effective home-school collaboration and partnerships, supported by empirical research as well (Licardo & Leite, 2022).

## Limitations

We have to acknowledge that this in-depth qualitative research has certain limitations. First, the size of participant parents was small. Parental unavailability was determined by their working hours and their low command of Greek. A larger sample would have provided further points of view and perceptions of HSC. Therefore, we cannot articulate any generalizations about all immigrant/refugee parents in lower High School settings. Also, the specific research could have expanded to more schools which are not officially Intercultural but facilitate large numbers of immigrant/refugee students and families. This could have provided the opportunity to compare results and draw more in-depth conclusions. Additionally, the specific research could have included quantitative data and draw conclusions through their triangulation.

## Conclusion

The present research can be capitalized for future research on the field and for educational policies, which aim to implement supportive interventions. Teachers' training can promote professional development and enhance interpersonal skills (Licardo & Leite, 2022) and critical awareness and responsiveness (Boonk et al., 2021) toward structural and sociocultural diversity (McWayne et al., 2022) and provide practical solutions toward the integration of immigrant/refugee families in school practices (UNESCO, 2021). National educational policies can re-examine multicultural pedagogical tools and strategies and intensify the involvement of translators or interpreters, psychologists, social workers, NGOs, the community at large and other public institutions (Licardo & Leite, 2022). State policies can also further draw from the paradigms of other OECD countries who implement a wide spectrum of actions to promote home-school communication, as an aspect of PI, in children's education and help parental literacy, i.e., France applies frequent meetings with immigrant parents to

provide them with translated documents relevant with childcare, their children's behavior and education. Canada involves settlement workers from community agencies to help immigrant parents understand the school culture, whereas the Australian government endorses community involvement. Germany implements frequent meetings that focus on literacy and language development, and parents are guided by other immigrant parents who have a higher language acquisition, while, finally, along with Austria, immigrant mothers, specifically, are strengthened through literacy and language development programs (OECD, 2021). The above policies are largely guided by formal state immigration policies. However, it has been suggested that effective strategies should be embedded in all stages (planning, implementation and monitoring) of policy making and expand to the entire schooling system (UNESCO, 2021), in order to be more effective and sustainable, in terms of social inclusion and justice, while promoting gender equity toward and within immigrant/refugee families, specifically under a feminist perspective, which seeks to empower both women and men, and draws data from the intersectionality of gender, ethnicity, PI and academic outcomes.

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