"I Feel Much More Confident Now to Talk With Parents": An Evaluation of In-Service Training on Teacher–Parent Communication

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Abstract

This paper describes a teacher in-service training program on teacher–parent communication in Cyprus and its impact on teacher trainees. Data were gathered through questionnaires completed by teachers prior to their training and after having tried, in real school settings, the communication skills and approaches taught during the course. The analysis of the data showed a considerable modification of teachers' perceptions about various aspects of communicating with parents and a positive appraisal of their competence in organizing and implementing communication sessions with parents. The findings provide evidence for the effectiveness of teacher training on communication skills.

Key Words: teachers, parents, in-service training, Cyprus, professional development, school–family communication, skills, conferences, active listening

Introduction

School–family communication appears to be the most prevalent practice initiated by schools aimed at linking them with their pupils' parents (Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Lightfoot, 2003; Martin, Ranson, & Tall, 1997; Symeou, 2002). Through their communication, teachers and families usually exchange information and ideas about the development and progress of the children in school and at home (Pang & Watkins, 2000; Wandersman et al., 2002). When

effective, communication between teachers and families provides the two parties with a deeper understanding of mutual expectations and children's needs, thus enabling both to effectively assist children and to establish the basis of cooperation (Epstein, 2001; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Wandersman et al., 2002).

Nonetheless, during their encounters with parents, schools and teachers are often criticized as sending out—either consciously or subconsciously—a message that parents are not welcome and that they should leave their children's schooling to the experts, that is, the teachers (Bastiani, 1996; Crozier, 2000; Epstein, 2005; Symeou, 2002). In addition, some evidence suggests that even though many schools attempt to establish a variety of practices in order to facilitate two-directional communication, it is more likely that the flow of information between school and families is mainly directed from the former to the latter and that communication and its content is likely to be controlled by the school (Cheatham & Ostrosky, 2011; Crozier, 2007; Epstein, 2005; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Reay, 1998; Symeou, 2010; Vincent, 1996). In this sense, schools themselves appear to be inhibiting collaboration with parents. Hence it has been argued that blaming parents for the lack of interaction with school is incorrect and pathologizes parents (Bakker, Denessen, & Brus-Laeven, 2007; Crozier, 2000; Symeou, 2009), especially socially excluded parents (Crozier, 2007; Lareau, 2000; Symeou, Luciak, & Gobbo, 2009; Tett, 2004).

School communication with families is usually written or oral. Written communication might take the form of memos, lists, forms, permission notes, report cards, calendars of the school year, and notices of special events sent to the home. It refers to individual children, the whole class, or the school community as a whole. Schools usually establish some formal ways for achieving oral school–family communication also, for instance, parent–teacher conferences and open houses. Finally, many informal ways of contacting and communicating with parents may provide opportunities in which teachers and parents gain insights into one another's perspectives, for instance, casual conversations before school, afterschool meetings, and telephone calls.

School–Family Relationships in Cyprus

This paper describes the implementation of a teacher in-service training program in Cyprus, more specifically, in the Greek–Cypriot educational school system, aimed at enhancing teachers' effectiveness in communicating with pupils' parents. (Note: For the purposes of this study, any reference to formal education in Cyprus applies to the Greek-Cypriot educational system; no reference is made to the Turkish-Cypriot educational system. The two systems have been distinct since the establishment of the Republic of Cyprus in 1960.) The Greek-Cypriot educational system is a highly centralized system, characterized

by centralized structures of educational administration, curriculum development, and policymaking (Karagiorgi & Symeou, 2006). Inspectors have a dominant role, being responsible for guidance, supervision, teacher and school evaluation, and teacher in-service training (UNESCO, 1997). Education is provided through pre-elementary and elementary schools, secondary general and secondary technical or vocational schools, special schools, institutions of tertiary education, and informal institutions and centers. Schooling is mostly provided in state-run schools, free for all students through age 18, but there is also an increasing number of private, self-funded institutions, the latter also being liable for supervision by the Ministry of Education and Culture.

School–family relationships in the Greek-Cypriot educational system appear marginalized in the agendas of policy and practice. The lack of any recent legislative action in relation to the issue is indicative of the lack of substantial relations between families and schools. Research in the field, which is mainly conducted within elementary education, is limited. Typically, any relationship between parents and teachers stops at elementary types of involvement (e.g., Georgiou, 1996, 1998; Phtiaka, 1998; Symeou, 2002, 2010).

Current school–family links are largely determined by the activities of schools' Parents Association (PA), formally named the Parents and Guardians Association. These are voluntary associations elected by an annual general meeting of each school's parents and guardians. The PA's responsibility is to fund school events and occasionally students in poverty using money they collect from events they organize during nonschool time. The PA does not participate in any educational decisions or policymaking. Parents' representatives at a national level, however, constitute a significant power group and manage to influence the official educational policy.

Schools also establish informal teacher–parent contacts, the extent and nature of which depend on the culture of the school itself and the initiatives of the families. Such relationships are the informal communication between parents and the school administrators or teachers, as well as parents' visits to the school to attend events and social activities. Moreover, there are opportunities for parents to volunteer in noneducational activities, for example, in offering breakfast to students, repairing and preserving school equipment, and so on.

A distinctive institution of state schools in the Greek-Cypriot educational system is the parents' weekly visiting period. Regulations specify that teachers in all school levels assign one weekly period on their weekly timetable when parents and guardians can visit their child's teacher to be informed about their child's school attainment and discuss with the teacher any relevant issues. Teachers would typically expect parents to come to the school for these 10- or 15-minutes conferences or briefings on a one-to-one basis. The aim of these

contacts is to provide families with information about their children's academic progress and behavior, about the schools' function, and about how families can support the school's work (Symeou, 2002).

Teacher Training on School–Family Communication in Cyprus

In the absence of specific requirements for professional development for teachers to maintain their jobs, agreed standards for training programs, or links between continuous professional development participation and promotions, training provision in the Greek-Cypriot educational system is mainly informal, individual, and voluntary. As with all other aspects of the Greek-Cypriot educational system, in-service training is centrally controlled by the Ministry of Education and Culture with limited school input. It is centrally determined, supply driven, and functions in isolation to identified individual and school needs (Karagiorgi & Symeou, 2006, 2007).

The Cyprus Pedagogical Institute, through which the training described in this paper was offered, is formally responsible for professional training courses for educators of all levels—pre-primary, primary, secondary, and vocational—during afterschool hours through a series of optional seminars provided in five training centers throughout the island. Compulsory courses are provided only to school leaders, due to the existing educational legislation and the service plans. Seminars offered by the Pedagogical Institute are initially suggested by the Institute and presented to the consulting and interdepartmental Committees for feedback (Cyprus Pedagogical Institute, 1999). They aim to meet the needs of all teachers, as identified by the Pedagogical Institute and the Ministry of Education, and focus on school subjects, social and psychological issues, educational research skills, and information technology. Certificates of attendance offered to course participants do not count towards promotions or salary increase. Moreover, school-based seminars are organized on specific topics of interest to the staff of a school after agreement with the Pedagogical Institute. Additionally, the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute offers seminars, one-day workshops, and conferences in cooperation with the teachers' unions and teachers' associations on specific subjects.

This paper reports on the impact of an in-service teacher training program on teacher perceptions about a number of skills for communicating with parents during conferences and about their competence in organizing and implementing such conferences by using the particular skills. The training was set up through the official process presented above and resulted as an initiative to respond to the general interest and concern of teachers in the Greek-Cypriot educational system regarding the absence of appropriate training on effective teacher–parent communication during teachers' initial studies and prior in-service training.

Implementation of Training for Effective Teacher–Parent Communication

Effective communication is an essential component of professional success, especially in contexts where the professional is faced with the necessity of problem solving and/or decision making (Malikiosi-Loizou, 2000, 2001). Teachers' professional environment with the diversity of students' family situations is such an environment, where the teacher is concerned with adult-to-adult interactions and needs to function and communicate in a multilevel system (Epstein, 2001; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Keyes, 2002) while communicating with families, during meetings, or when discussing sensitive issues (Conderman, Johnston-Rodriguez, Hartman, & Kemp, 2010). At present, there are few empirically validated interventions to address the communication skills of education professionals (Hertel & Schmitz, 2006; Lasky, 2000).

The use of counseling skills facilitates effective communication in which problem solving and decision making are concerned. Counseling and teaching present similar characteristics associated with becoming an effective partner in the school setting. Although counseling is relatively new as a profession, the services of counseling have been provided for many centuries. In classical antiquity teachers naturally and consistently held the counseling role, for instance, Socrates was Plato's teacher and counselor; Aristotle was the student and counselee of Plato; and Alexander the Great was the student and counselee of Aristotle (Gouleta, 2006). The use of counseling skills in teaching promotes, directly or indirectly, a number of parameters that assist students' learning, personal growth, and discipline (Malikiosi-Loizou, 2000, 2001). Use of these skills in teacher–parent communication could enhance understanding of teachers' and parents' expectations, ease problem solving and decision making, allow expression of feelings, and increase school–home collaboration (Friend & Cook, 1992).

Attentive/active listening is achieved by the use of basic counseling skills. Lasky (2000) suggested that by using active listening skills, education professionals can gain important information with which to work and at the same time communicate to a parent a sincere interest in understanding the parent's point of view. Active listening is the intent of the helper (teacher) to "listen for meaning," having as a main goal the improvement of mutual understanding (Ivey, Pedersen, & Bradford, 2001). The goals in active listening are to develop a clear understanding of the speaker's concern and also to clearly communicate the helper's interest in the speaker's message (O'Shea, Algozzine, Hammittee, & O'Shea, 2000).

Attentive/active listening is a structured way of listening and responding. Attending refers to a concern by the helper (teacher) toward all aspects of the client's (parent) communication. One could fully attend to a speaker by suspending his/her own frame of reference and judgment. The physical, emotional, and mental presence which communicate that the helper is listening to, interested in, and understanding what the client has to say comprises effective attentive/active listening. For active listening to be achieved it is important to observe the other person's behavior and body language. Having heard, the listener may then use a number of acts that will encourage the free expression of the client's ideas and feelings about their issues and build a sense of security for the client, thus leading to openness and trust. These acts are paraphrasing the speaker's words (without necessarily agreeing with the him/her—simply stating what was said), listening for and reflecting feelings, asking closed and/or open ended questions, using verbal and nonverbal prompts to encourage communication, summarizing what has been said and agreed on during one or more conferences, and providing closure (Cramer, 1998; Malikiosi-Loizou, 2000, 2001; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1990).

The counseling setting, where the teacher–parent conference will take place, should be one that would promote neutrality, assure confidentiality, and encourage communication. These will only be achieved if the helper (teacher) takes measures to organize the greeting context as such. In a school environment, this might be very difficult to achieve, but the teacher who acts as the helper is obliged to do the best he/she can towards the preparation of a safe greeting context (Bayne & Horton, 2001; Bayne, Horton, & Bimrose, 1996).

Recognition of the importance of active listening has resulted in systematic investigations of the use of active listening skills in the helping professions. In a study examining the communication skills of nurses as they worked with families experiencing a medical emergency, Duhamel and Tabot (2004) reported that the use of active listening skills helped nurses to establish a trusting relationship with family participants. Mansfield (1991) used supervised role plays to teach active listening skills to medical students; based on a videotape analysis of their pre- and post-instruction performances, the medical students who had received training were judged to be more skilled in their use of active listening skills and in developing appropriate management plans for their patients. Paukert, Stagner, and Hope (2004) reported that 45 hours of training in active listening and counseling skills produced positive changes in the active listening skills of helpline volunteers as determined by supervisor ratings.

The training presented and discussed in this paper focused on training teachers in organizing the context for teacher–parent conferences and in the use of basic counseling skills in real school settings for teachers to effectively communicate with pupils' parents in implementing the school aims and objectives.

The Content of the Training Course

The training course was covered in five training sessions (four weekly, then a four-week break before the fifth session), each three hours long. During the first four sessions, the theoretical aspects of the training were taught using an interactive teaching methodology, including discussion, role play, and feedback. Through these four sessions, trainees were guided to play roles in order to deconstruct their usual practice during meetings with parents and familiarize themselves with the use of the communication skills taught in the training course. Each weekly session aimed to give teacher trainees both a theoretical and a more practical component; the content is further described below.

During the first session, teachers were introduced to theoretical frameworks regarding:

- parental involvement in children's education
- the effects of parental involvement on parents, teachers, and students
- different theoretical approaches to school–family relationships
- factors that influence the relationship between family and school
- school–family relationships: gender, social class, family diversity
- different ways of communicating with parents—oral communication

This first session concluded with a brief introduction to the concept of communication and the use of communication skills.

The second weekly session started by defining communication and indicating the effects of its good practice on the teaching process. A distinction was further made between the use of communication skills and that of counseling skills. A definition of counseling skills was elaborated with an emphasis on the meaning of nonverbal communication, in general, as well as its meaning in a supportive context. The factors underlying effective teacher–parent communication before and during the teacher–parent conference were discussed. Apart from the factors that facilitate a conference, those that might impede it were also discussed. The teacher–parent conference has to have an apparent aim. Possible aims were discussed with the participants followed by proposing steps for successfully conducting a conference.

The third session focused on how the helper (teacher) could prepare for the parent–teacher conference. It then proceeded to describe and discuss the different stages of a professional interview: the initial investigating phase, the diagnosis and elucidation of feelings phase, the goal setting and action planning phase, the searching for solutions phase, the implementation of agreed upon solutions phase, and the closure and follow-up phase.

In the fourth session, active/attentive listening was analyzed and what it takes to achieve was explained. In that respect, the fourth session was dedicated to the discussion of the use of closed- and open-ended questions, how

the helper (teacher) could paraphrase the client (parent), the use of verbal and nonverbal prompts to encourage parents' expression of thoughts and feelings, how to listen for and reflect feelings, how empathic understanding is achieved, and lastly how a session might come to closure by summarizing what has been said and agreed on by the parties up to that point.

More specifically during the fourth session, the following counseling skills were taught:

- Nonverbal communication and particularly the importance of certain cues such as eye contact, posture, gestures, and nonverbal prompts: The teachers were trained to directly, but not in a threatening way, face the person and maintain eye contact. They were taught how to open their posture and lean towards the parent and were given examples of how to interpret the parents' body language.
- Posing questions in conferences with parents: The trainers stressed the importance of the use of questions and how questions should always be used with caution and that one should not ask too many questions, especially when the answer of a question cannot be used. The training program also included teaching the different types of questions used in counseling. Although closed-ended questions have their place, teachers were taught to avoid asking too many closed-ended questions that begin with "does," "did," or "is." They were encouraged to use open-ended questions which are nonthreatening and encourage description, namely, questions that require more than a simple yes or no answer, which start with "how," "tell me about," or "what."
- The process of paraphrasing as being the restating of a message, but usually with fewer words: The purpose of the use of paraphrasing is to test the understanding of what the teacher heard and to communicate that he/she is trying to understand what is being said. Teachers were also taught that during the process of listening they should consider asking themselves what the speaker's basic thinking and feeling message is.
- Reflection of content and feelings as a primary step to empathetic understanding: This skill was taught to help teachers show parents that they understand parents' experience and to allow teachers to evaluate and acknowledge parents' feelings after hearing them expressed by someone else.
- Summarizing and session closing: This is pulling together, organizing, and integrating the major aspects of a dialogue, session, or sessions; paying attention to various themes and emotional overtones; and, moreover, restating key ideas and feelings into broad statements without altering meanings, facts, and feelings.

Between the fourth and last training session all teacher trainees designed, organized, and implemented at least two teacher–parent sessions in their schools with the same parent, where possible. A four-week period was provided between the last two sessions for teachers to have enough time to plan and execute the two meetings. They were guided to use a structured diary where they would note all information gathered about the specific parent and his/her child prior to their contacts, as well as information about the content of the actual meetings, in order for teachers to use the knowledge and skills practiced during the initial four training sessions in real school settings. Thus, they would have the opportunity to reflect on their experience with their co-trainers in the last session, during which the focus was placed on reflecting on the experience and the impact of using the newly learned skills during teacher–parent meetings on the parent, the pupil, and themselves. They were also guided to note in their diaries all other interactions with other parents that could allow fruitful reflection on the skills taught during the course. During the last training session, teachers presented and discussed with the rest of the teacher trainees their experience in using the acquired skills in their actual teacher–parent sessions held in their school context during the period of time that the trainers left in between the fourth and fifth training sessions.

The Trainers and the Trainees

The training was offered by the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute, the institution held responsible for professional training courses for state educators. The training was developed and offered by two trainers, namely the two first authors of this paper, who shared expertise on family–school relationships and counseling psychology. It was offered as an optional, after-school hours, in-service training course to teachers of all school levels, that is, early childhood, elementary, and secondary school teachers. The only incentive for attending was their internal motivation to learn, plus a certificate of attendance awarded at the end of the course. The certificate of attendance could be submitted through the school to the inspectorate in the teacher's annual activity report, without counting, however, as an official credential for his/her evaluation or promotion.

The training course was attended voluntarily by 111 early childhood, elementary, and secondary school teachers. Training took place in the five training centers the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute maintains across the country. Each training group consisted of 21 to 25 teachers. As demonstrated in Table 1, most teachers were female and university degree holders. More than 80% of them were primary school teachers. Only 7 trainees were pre-primary school teachers, and 14 were secondary school teachers. A percentage of 28.8% of them had up to 5 years of teaching experience; fewer (17.1%) had 6–10 years;

while 43.2% had 11–20 years of teaching experience. Approximately one-tenth of trainees (10.8%) had 21 or more years of teaching experience.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Trainees

Demographic Characteristic	Demographic Subgroups	Frequency (*N*)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	15	13.5
	Female	95	85.6
	No reply	1	0.9
Age of students	Pre-primary (3–6 years)	7	6.3
	Primary (6–12 years)	90	81.1
	Secondary (12–15 years)	14	12.6
Years in occupation	0–5 years	32	28.8
	6–10 years	19	17.1
	11–20 years	48	43.2
	21+ years	12	10.8
Academic qualifications	University degree	98	88.3
	Masters degree	11	9.9
	PhD	1	0.9
	No reply	1	0.9

More than half of the trainees had no previous training relevant to school–family relations or training on effective communication. Nearly one tenth of them indicated that they had attended a relevant course during their undergraduate degree studies, and four trainees attended such a course during postgraduate studies. A fifth of the trainees had previously attended an in-service course on school–family relations and six an in-service course on communication skills. Some trainees attended other relevant courses.

The Collection of Data

With the purpose of evaluating the impact of the training course on teachers' effectiveness in organizing and implementing meetings with parents and of assessing the relationship between perceived usefulness of communication skills with reported actual usage of these skills, a questionnaire was designed to gather data from trainees prior to the training and after having tried out in their schools the various communication skills and approaches taught during the course. Therefore, trainees completed the same questionnaire at the beginning of the first meeting before the delivery of the course and again in the last meeting of the course, in a one-group pre-test/post-test experimental design.

After requesting information on participants' demographic and training background, the questionnaire inquired as to (a) the extent to which trainees used specific communication skills during conferences with parents, and (b) their perceptions about the usefulness of these skills. Trainees were presented with the same list both at the beginning and the end of the course. They were asked to indicate, first, the extent to which they agreed that the use of each particular skill is useful when meeting and discussing with a parent, and second, the frequency they use these skills and practices during teacher–parent conferences. Table 2 presents the framework of the 48 communication skill items as they were presented on the questionnaire in seven dimensions of communication skills.

Table 2. Framework of Skills Presented on the Questionnaire

Communication Skills	**Item Numbers by Topic**
Setting the meeting's context	15–21
Nonverbal communication (eye contact, facial expressions, voice tone)	1–10
Appreciation of parent's pace	11–14
Verbal and nonverbal tips for encouraging the parent to elaborate	22–29
Paraphrasing	30–32
Reflection of feelings	33–40
Summarizing and closing the meeting	41–48

Each skill was presented in a structured Likert-type ordinal scale, from 1 to 5, with 1 corresponding to "Not at all" and 5 "Very much" in two sections: perceived usefulness of the skills, and usage of skills.

Factor analysis was employed to examine whether the questionnaire items clustered into factors according to the skills presented and developed in the course of the training and that guided the construction of the instrument. Scores on negatively worded items were reversed, such that all items had similar meanings. Following the factor analysis, new interpretable scales were extracted in order to be used for assessing the effectiveness of the intervention. The reliability of the new scales was calculated and, if acceptable, scores on these scales before and after the training course were compared using paired samples *t*-tests. Finally, the scores on the teachers' perception of the usefulness of each skill were compared to the scores on their self-reported actual usage of each skill both before and after the training.

Results from the Analysis of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire data obtained on teachers' perceived usefulness of the 48 communication skills before the training course were analyzed with a factor analytic technique in an attempt to extract empirical dimensions (subscales) of the questionnaire using only the items that contributed to interpretable and reliable (at an acceptable level) subscales. The Varimax rotation method was selected. The factor analysis output revealed multiple groupings of items. Only those that had 3 or more items loading on a dimension were kept. Six subscales, which will be called factors, were retained and can be seen in Table 3. The table includes a listing of the items on each factor and a subjective factor name that was chosen to communicate the common meaning of the items that clustered together.

Table 3. The Six Factors Extracted from the Questionnaire Data

I. Reflection of Feelings
33. When addressing the parent use the phrase "You seem to feel…."
34. When addressing the parent use the phrase "I am sure you feel…."
35. When addressing the parent use the phrase "I feel that…."
36. When addressing the parent use the phrase "I sense that…"
37. When addressing the parent use the phrase "What I understand is that you feel…."
38. When addressing the parent use the phrase "I understood from all you said that …."
II. Verbal Tips to Encourage the Parent to Elaborate
22. Using short expressions like "What?" "Why?" "Yes?" in order to encourage the discussion with a parent
23. Using short expressions, like "Ah!" "Is that right?" "And then?" "And..?" in order to encourage the discussion with a parent
24. Using the expression "What happened then?" in order to encourage the discussion with a parent
25. Using the expression "Tell me more about this." in order to encourage the discussion with a parent
26. Repeating the last words of the last sentence of the parent, in order to encourage the discussion with him/her
Table 3 continued, next page

Table 3, continued
III. Nonverbal Communication
6. The expressions of your face to remain neutral with respect to the content of the discussion with the parent
8. Changing the tone of your voice when talking to a parent according to the content of the message you want to communicate
9. The tone of your voice when talking to a parent remains the same regardless of the content of the message you want to communicate
10. The tone of your voice when talking to a parent reveals neutrality
IV. Facial Expressions During Communication
2. Not looking the parent in the eyes during your discussion
4. Changing facial expressions when talking to parent according to the content message you communicate
5. Changing facial expressions when talking to a parent according to the content message you receive from him/her
7. Changing facial expressions when talking to a parent according to your personal feelings
V. Accurately Paraphrasing the Meaning of the Discussion
30. Avoiding using hints (verbal and nonverbal) when briefing with a parent
31. Repeating what you understood that a parent said during a briefing with him/her in your own words
32. Repeating what you heard from the parent about his/her problem in your own words
VI. Sharing of Information
41. Hiding information from the parent if you think that such information will hurt him/her
42. Mentioning to the parent during your meeting all the information that relates to his/her child and which you think he/she must be aware of
45. Ending the meeting by asking the parent to recapitulate what was discussed

Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients were calculated for the overall questionnaire as well as for the six factors. The results appear in Table 4; note that each item was assessed by the respondents once for its perceived usefulness and once for the frequency of its usage, both before and after the course. Hence, there are four reliability coefficients for each scale. The overall reliability of the questionnaire was high. Factors 1-3 had acceptable levels of reliability, although not high in all cases. Factors 4-6 had lower reliabilities, a likely reason being that they consisted of only a small number of items. Therefore the results for the latter group of factors should be interpreted cautiously.

Table 4. Reliability (Alpha) of the Questionnaire and of the Six Factors

Scale	# Items	Prior to the Course	Post Course Completion
Usefulness of skills	**48**	**0.79**	**0.72**
Factor 1	6	0.87	0.61
Factor 2	5	0.78	0.56
Factor 3	3	0.70	0.74
Factor 4	4	0.57	0.33
Factor 5	3	0.61	0.49
Factor 6	3	0.55	0.68
Usage of skills	**48**	**0.76**	**0.82**
Factor 1	6	0.83	0.64
Factor 2	5	0.79	0.66
Factor 3	3	0.67	0.65
Factor 4	4	0.52	0.33
Factor 5	3	0.70	0.54
Factor 6	3	0.58	0.62

The analysis of the questionnaire data showed a considerable impact of the training on participant teachers' perceptions as to the usefulness of the various communication skills and a positive appraisal of their competence in organizing and implementing briefing sessions with students' parents. These findings show that trainees' experience during the training course had an impact on their perceptions about the usefulness and the use they made of a number of communication skills for effective communication with their pupils' parents.

Paired *t*-tests were conducted to compare teachers' ratings before and after the completion of the training course. Table 5 presents the results of the tests for each factor. Considering the factor "reflection of feelings," for example, the teachers rated differently their perceived usefulness or need for the use of this communication skill before and after the course ($t = -4.038$, $p < 0.001$). Higher ratings were given after the completion of the course. Their ratings were also significantly higher on this dimension when they were referring to their usage of this skill ($t = -5.466$, $p < 0.001$). Similar significant results were obtained for the factors "verbal tips to encourage the parent to elaborate," "nonverbal communication," and "accurately paraphrasing the meaning of the discussion." Pre- and post- differences were not significant for "facial expressions during communication" and "sharing of information," although it should be repeated that the latter factors had low reliability and any results should be interpreted with caution. The lack of significant differences in these two factors may also reflect reluctance on behalf of the teachers to significantly alter their practice; these two skills relate to the professionalism of the teachers, and they may prefer to keep some distance from the parents.

Table 5. Perceived Usefulness and Self-Reported Usage of Communication Skills Comparisons Before and After the Course (Paired *t*-Tests)

Factor	Perceived Usefulness Pre and Post			Self-Reported Usage Pre and Post		
	t statistic	*df*	*p*	*t* statistic	*df*	*p*
1. Reflection of feelings	-4.038	77	.000	-5.466	79	.000
2. Verbal tips to encourage the parent to elaborate	-6.331	80	.000	-6.392	82	.000
3. Nonverbal communication	-4.142	80	.000	-2.191	83	.031
4. Facial expressions during communication	-.513	82	.610	.000	84	1.000
5. Accurately paraphrasing meaning of the discussion	-7.336	76	.000	-8.044	79	.000
6. Sharing of information	.574	76	.568	-1.000	78	.320

Finally, the ratings on the six factors with regard to perceived usefulness of communication skills and their self-reported actual usage were compared. The scatterplots (see Appendix) demonstrate this relationship between perceived usefulness and self-reported usage of each communication skill factor before and after the training course. In all cases, a strong positive relationship is evident: the higher teachers tended to perceive the usefulness of a skill, the higher they tended to report use of that skill. The dashed diagonal line in each graph represents the identity line (Y = X). The pattern replicates across almost all the cases: the majority of the responses lie at or below the identity line. This reflects a tendency of the respondents to rate the perceived usefulness or need to use the communication skills more than they rate usage of the same skills. The pattern appears both before and after the training course. The graphs also demonstrate noticeably that the ratings for four of the six factors (Factors 1, 2, 3, and 5) after the course were significantly higher than the corresponding ratings before the course, as was presented in Table 5.

Conclusions

If the aim of schools is to establish stronger connections with families and develop a partnership with parents in an attempt to better educate students, then the primary requirement is to achieve a mutual understanding between them. Training teachers in communication skills (Denessen, Bakker, Kloppenburg, & Kerkhof, 2009; Epstein & Sanders, 2006), and particularly active

listening skills (Walters, Garii, & Walters, 2009), thus becomes indispensable. The findings of the evaluation of the impact of the in-service training course in Cyprus presented in this article provide promising ideas for invigorating teacher approaches and skills during their communication with parents, both at the specific local context which we have described, as well as at an international level; aspects of the teaching profession and school life presented in this article will appear familiar to other settings internationally.

Despite Cypriot teachers' unfamiliarity with the area of counseling and communication skills and the absence of similar training during their initial teacher preparation, and despite their initial doubts about the value of these skills, they appeared convinced as to their usefulness and reported an increased use of some skills after the training. Consistent with their increased confidence in both the expressed usefulness as well as capacity for such skills following their training, the findings from this article show that teachers report increased usage of communications skills with parents, such as reflection of feelings, paraphrasing the meaning of the discussion, and adopting verbal and nonverbal tips to facilitate interaction. Overall, the training sessions strengthened teacher beliefs about the usefulness of the skills, thus revealing that communication skills might constitute a useful tool in the hands of teachers when aiming to strengthen teacher–parent communication. While acknowledging the limitations of the self-report nature of the data in a one-group pre-post procedure which does not use a control group, the results of the effectiveness of training teachers on communication skills do concur with similar studies in other domains (e.g., Duhamel & Tabot, 2004; Paukert et al., 2004).

Aiming at a pedagogical value of teacher–parent briefings and for all families to be guided to successfully intervene in their children's schooling, communication skills equip teachers to recognize the diversity of the parent body and thus address the ineffectiveness of using an undifferentiated approach with all parents. Communication skills can support teachers in adopting approaches which aim at communicating effectively with each parent and meeting different families' needs, even families described as "hard to reach" (Crozier, 2007). Teachers who participated in this training course realized that what happens during any contact with their students' parents is of critical importance and that the vast majority of parents come to the school with high expectations of cooperation with teachers in order to enhance their child's schoolwork. To this end, teachers aimed to set the context of their meetings with parents and tried to understand the centrality of children's backgrounds and to become more aware of their various abilities and needs according to their family background.

Another conclusion stemming from the evaluation of this particular course is that through their training on communication and counseling skills, teachers

become more conscious of their professional space and their professional boundaries, thus redefining their professional image. By prearranging their conferences with their pupils' parents, setting the context for meeting the parents, and being conscious as to what works and what does not when trying to effectively communicate a message to a particular parent, participant teachers were made to feel more professionally confident or even professionally secure. As King (1999) would have suggested, teachers' use of counseling skills takes them into a style of relating that is beyond and more demanding than a traditional teaching role.

Nonetheless, it appears that teachers' ambiguous attitudes towards parents was reflected in how they evaluated the communication skills in which they were trained. Even though deciding to participate voluntarily in this particular course could suggest their determination to innovate in order to attract parental cooperation, they appeared hesitant in adopting skills that might threaten or cast doubt on their professional expertise, power, and status, and thus maintained a distance from parents.

Recommendations

Teachers appear to get little information about school–family relations. Parent–teacher communication, family educational processes, parental perceptions of education and schools, school perceptions of parents, or promising approaches to encourage home–school collaboration or home learning activities are not yet a part of teachers' basic training in Cyprus. The implications stemming from these conclusions link to teachers' concerns about the outcomes of teacher–parent meetings and could be of significant importance if increased efforts for teacher–family communication are desirable, particularly since effective communication skills are indispensable for problem solving and decision making (Malikiosi-Loizou, 2000, 2001). Educators and policymakers, both in Cyprus and in school systems elsewhere, might seek to introduce significant developments not only in policy but also in teacher and parent training programs by including topics and courses on school–family communication. It is well-trained teachers' task to offer *all* families the proper types of information and to communicate this information in the most appropriate manner for each particular parent so that all parents depart from the school knowing what they need to do to support their child and how they can do it.

However, any change in communicating with students' parents cannot rely upon the teachers' personal sensitivity and own initiative. It will take more than good intentions and empathy on the part of the teachers to provide meaningful support for parents. As far as the Cypriot educational context is concerned,

what is needed is, rather, a national/state policy which would aim at training teachers on how to effectively communicate with all parents in order for all pupils to benefit equally. The aim should be for teachers to be able to talk *with* parents instead of only talking *to* parents in order to cooperate and be in true dialogue. Thus schools will facilitate parents in fully supporting the development of their child's academic, personal, and social skills; frustration and conflict between teachers and parents may also be diminished. Teachers' ability to communicate effectively, listen carefully when parents talk, end the conversation graciously, and summarize any agreements and understandings are crucial skills which need to be developed. What teachers and parents say to one another influences parental involvement in their children's school life and parental engagement in school affairs. Within such a national framework, teachers will become well-equipped and highly knowledgeable about effective communication with parents and will receive ongoing support. Policy stakeholders should take steps to integrate this training into teacher education programs.

Moreover, staff development activities could provide significant experiences from which novice teachers can begin building their relevant professional bases. Any staff development, professional development, professional renewal, or continuing or in-service education must be the most important school–family activity a school system or a particular school could launch.

It is not only teachers, however, who must be trained in order to obtain communication literacy; it is parents as well. The aim should be for both teachers and parents to become literate in this aspect of their lives, in order to maintain a critical stance towards the information they exchange by distinguishing important and useful information from unimportant informing. In the case of parents, local or national initiatives on parental training programs could promote the development of parental skills and parental capacity by capitalizing on conferences and other institutional opportunities.

In the case of the teachers, how these ideas could be implemented may relate to a prospective reconstruction of teachers' professionalism. Teachers in Cyprus and elsewhere are desperately seeking avenues that will limit their workload. A possible reconstruction of their professionalism should avoid the paths that have already been followed related to a conservative view of professionalism. It should rather be founded on the well established knowledge-base that families are predictors of school achievement and aim at directing teachers' professional practice to create collaborative school environments, where teachers, children, and parents communicate in a tight network. Through establishing connectedness and interdependent relationships, children will strengthen their capital and build on their funds of knowledge, thus gaining educational resources in order to fully develop their potential within the school system.

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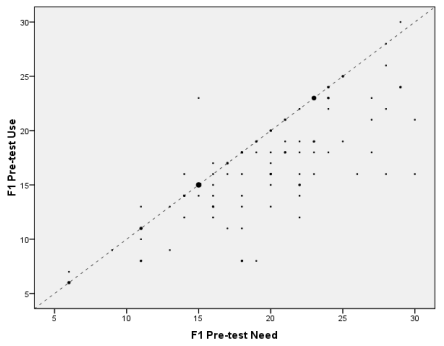
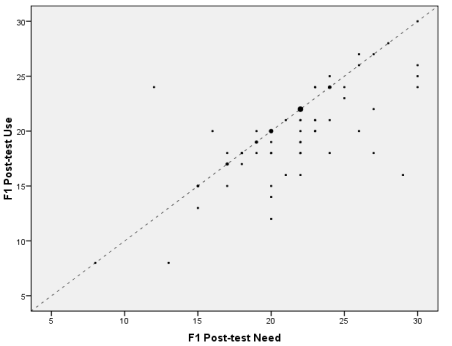
Appendix. Scatterplots Comparing Teachers' Perceived Usefulness/Need (Horizontal Axis) and Usage (Vertical Axis) of Communication Skills[1]

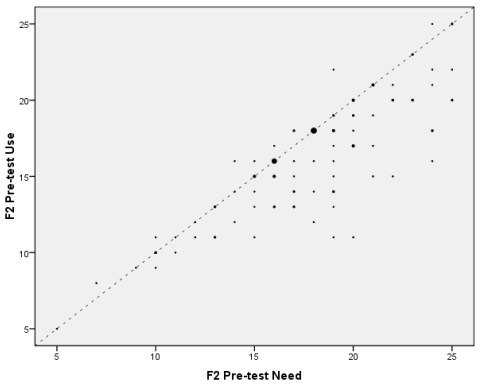
Prior to the course	After the course

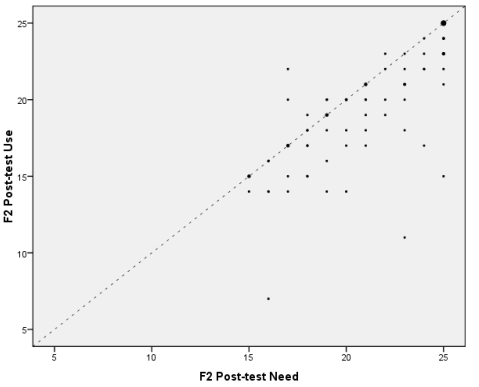
Factor 1: Reflection of feelings



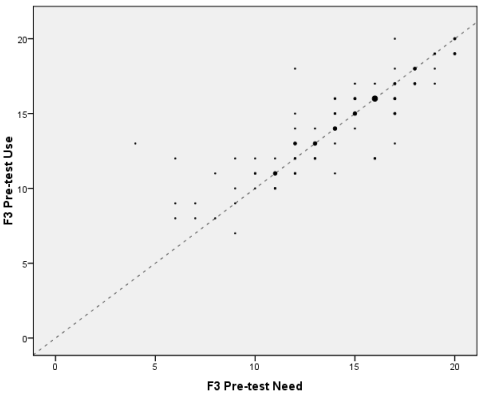


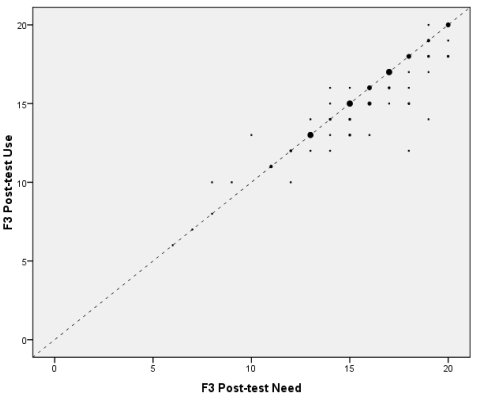
Factor 2. Verbal tips to encourage the parent to elaborate





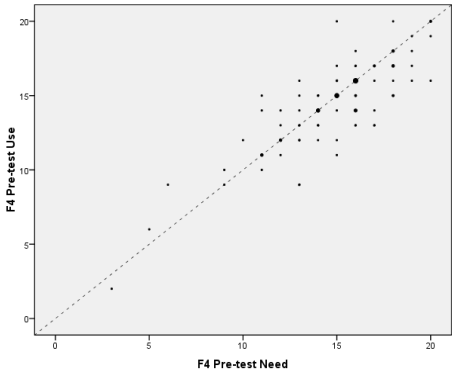
Factor 3. Nonverbal communication

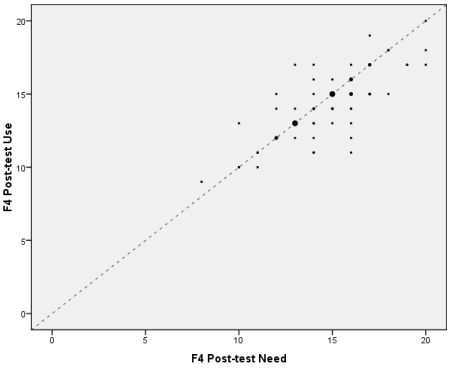




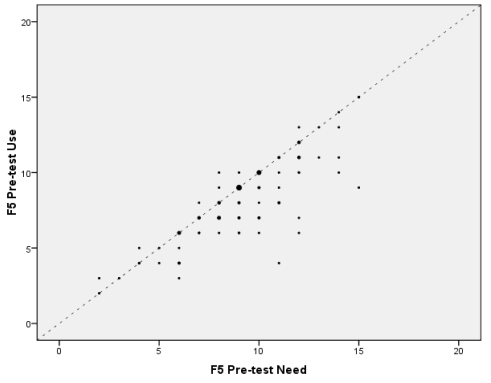
Appendix (continued)

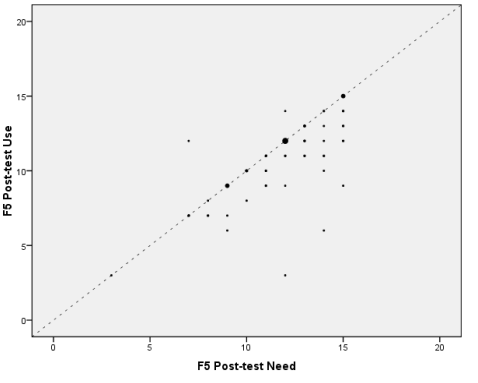
Factor 4. Facial expressions during communication



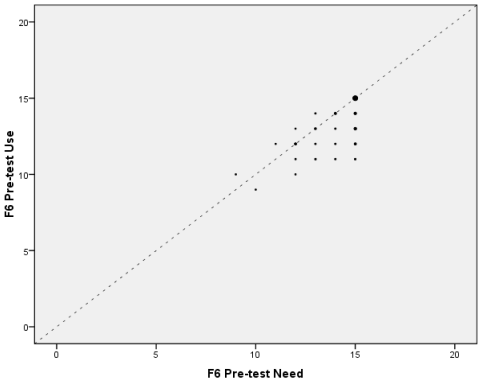


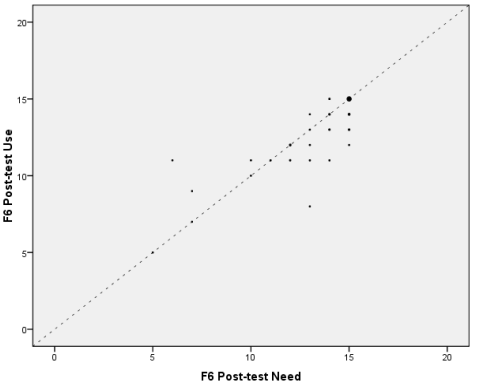
Factor 5. Accurately paraphrasing the meaning of the discussion





Factor 6. Sharing of information





[1]The size of the dots reflects the number of observations at that point.