
“Syneducation” (Synekpaidefsis): Reinforcing Communication and Strengthening Cooperation Among Students, Parents, and Schools

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Research Background

Effective cooperation between school and family concerns not only the academic community but also the organizations responsible for global and regional education policies such as UNESCO¹ and the European Union (Delors, 1996). The interest of the European Union focuses on strengthening the collaboration between school and family to reduce the student dropout rate and to increase people's participation in lifelong education.²

Educators need to develop an effective synergy between parents and schools to promote student success. We use the term *syneducation* (*synekpaidefsis*;³ *synergy + education*) as the acquisition of a common educational experience (simultaneously and in cooperation) by individuals of different ages and educational backgrounds (Mylonakou, 2004). Our approach focuses mainly on how schools can give clear messages to parents about the necessity of their collaboration with schools.

Method

Our primary research question was “how can we encourage parents to participate in the education of their children?” The research was based on the methodology of collaborative action research (Elliott, 1991; Kekes, 2000) and was designed and implemented in three clearly distinct phases (see Figure 1).

Phase I

During the first phase we formed three separate research teams to assess the opportunities and challenges in school and family cooperation. All team members came from the same primary school in Athens, Greece. The authors of this paper and a trained coordinator acted as external facilitators. The following teams were formed:

- **A team of six teachers** who were entrusted with the responsibility to share their experiences concerning previous partnerships between school and family, take note of needs that were preventing cooperation with parents, identify the problems and the barriers that exist in developing cooperation, and explore feasible proposals for the improvement of the cooperation between school and family
- **A team of 10 parents** whose responsibility was to take note of and discuss their experiences concerning their communication with the school, suggest behavior and practices that would help their children to complete homework, and present their ideas about improving cooperation with their children and school
- **A team of 10 children** who were sixth grade students of the teachers and children of the parents who were members of the research teams, whose aim was to present and comment on the home environment that affects schoolwork and to identify their

¹ United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is an agency of the United Nations that promotes education, communication, and the arts.

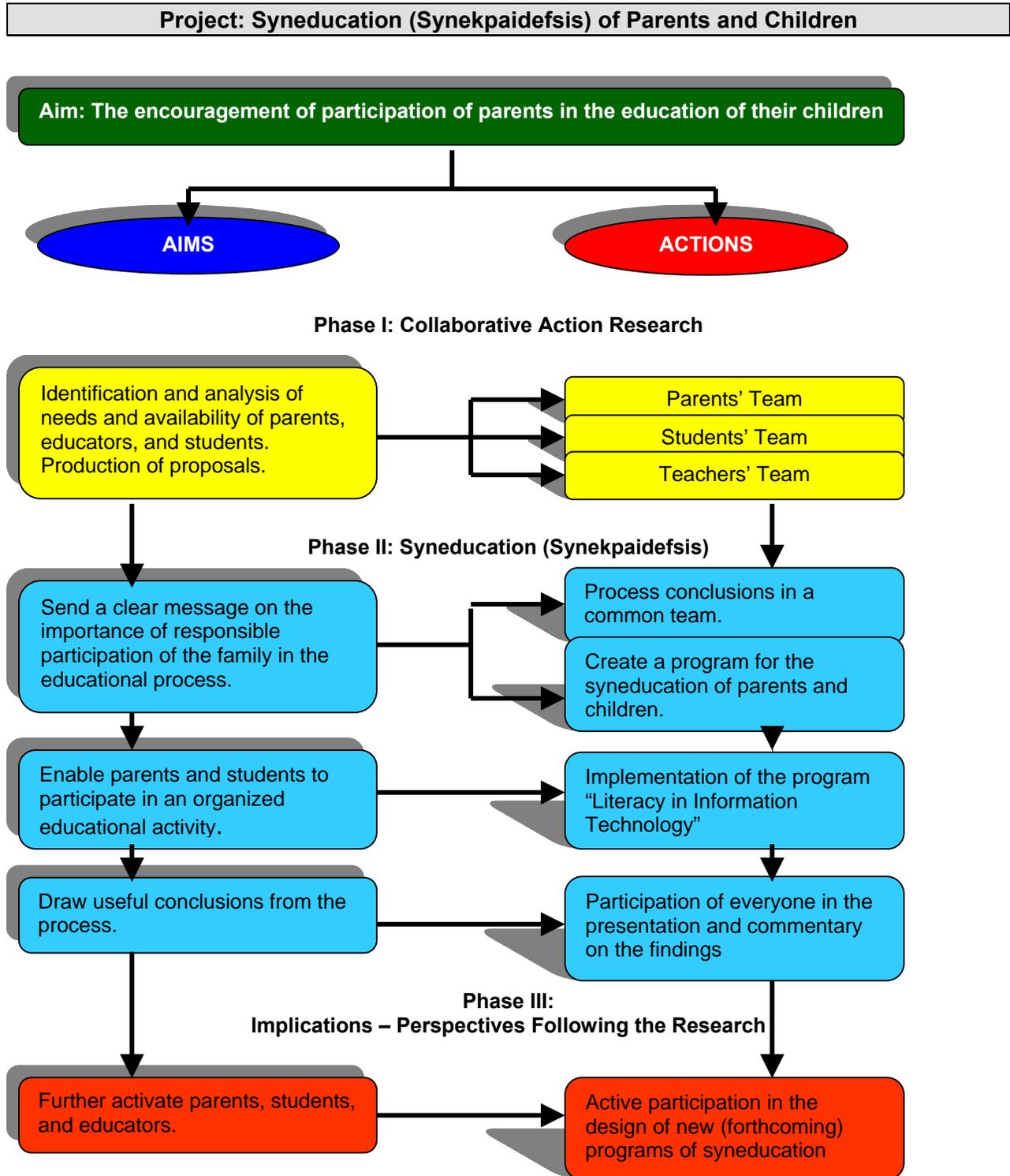
² This decision of the Ministerial Committee for Education in the European Union was adopted by the Ministers of Education of all European Union countries at San Patrignano, Italy, October, 3–4, 2002. The decision was made after a proposal submitted by the Italian Minister of Education Letizia Moratti.

³ This is the word for syneducation in Greek, which is the word the authors use in Greece.

needs and desires regarding school and family support of their schoolwork and other activities

All team meetings were held on a monthly basis for a total of seven meetings. Qualitative methods were used in the collection of data (self-observation, diary entries, questionnaires, and interviews).

Figure 1. The phases of the research



Phase II

During the second phase the results of each team were discussed at a 1-day meeting. We used creative techniques and methods to help teachers overcome their hesitation about the feasibility of the whole procedure. For example, approaches such as brainstorming, mind mapping, the Socratic approach, and illustrated stories were used to address issues of design, teacher training, program implementation, and sustainability.

We also used innovative methods to convince parents that their busy daily schedule could allow time for their participation. Specifically, illustrated stories and role play techniques facilitated a decision making process that determined the vision and expectations of participants, the opportunities and challenges of the project, and the project aims, strategies, and action plans.

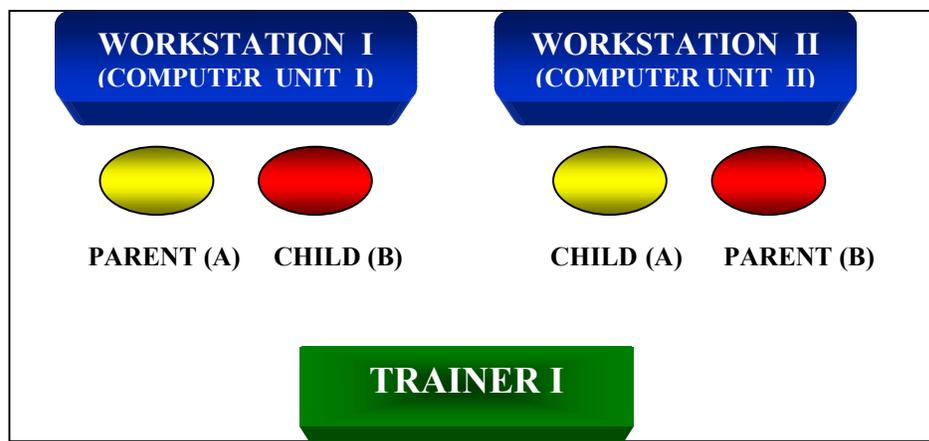
Following the discussion, a proposal emerged for the syneducation of students and parents in subjects that would be new to everybody. Through this procedure it was expected that

- The understanding of parents concerning the needs of students would be increased.
- The students could act as educators of their parents in certain issues.
- The teachers who were responsible for the organization and supervision of the procedure could significantly improve their knowledge and gain experience on the crucial issue of collaboration between school and family.

The parents and students chose Information Technology as the appropriate first syneducation subject, particularly because it seemed that students had an advantage in the assimilation of the relevant concepts and could adopt a leadership role.

A parent together with a student (not his or her own child) was given a computer unit and worked under the supervision of a trainer specialized in the subject area. Five trainers (postgraduate students specializing in the teaching of Information Technology) were each responsible for two independent teams (each team consisted of a parent and a child). The teams were organized in such a way that wider synergies could be made possible in the sense that every parent could participate in his own team, but could also participate in a wider team (under the same trainer), where his own child participated (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. The organization of the teams



The six teachers who participated from the start in the program were given the opportunity to observe, discuss, take notes, or even participate in the project of any team.

Data were collected in a variety of ways (e.g., diaries, interviews, videotaping, observations of the six educators) and discussed during a common meeting. The data were compared with what had come up during the first phase meetings, where the three teams operated separately (students, parents, and teachers). This process helped us identify possible changes in the attitudes, beliefs, and expectations of the participants. In particular, we noted the following changes:

- In Phase I teachers appeared quite skeptical and cautious about increasing parent involvement in school activities, fearing mainly the loss of control and criticism of their work. At the end of Phase II (with the completion of the syneducation program) they recognized that parents could become good “allies” and important “assistants” in their work. They also recognized the vital part that the students themselves played in attracting parents toward common activities between school and the family.
- During Phase I parents identified certain problems in cooperating with the school. These problems included a lack of time, a lack of knowledge to effectively help their children at home, and a lack of experience in dealing with the school. At the end of Phase II, the parents expressed an interest in close cooperation rather than superficial communication with the school. They also highlighted the increased understanding of their children’s needs as well as the ways that children and teachers work.
- In Phase I students complained about homework and their parents’ insistence to help even when they did not have the necessary skills to do so. At the end of Phase II, the students contributed their ideas to and eagerly participated in the cooperation between school and the family.

All the ideas and suggestions that came out of the discussion among the members of the three teams (teachers, parents, and students) in Phase II were coded in order to determine the content and the actions of Phase III. In this way the participants were able to study and comment on the changes that took place in their attitudes and beliefs after experiencing the program. They also created proposals for new activities, such as:

- The participation of some members of the teams in the design and implementation of other programs of syneducation
- The establishment of a school-wide 2-day annual event (Syneducation Day) for the syneducation of parents and students, choosing a different area of study every time (e.g., cultural education, creativity programs, environmental issues, first aid, road safety)
- The recording of how parents could assist in the operation of the school by making contributions (e.g., materials, premises, expertise) related to their professional activities and other interests

Phase III

The aim of the third phase was to make full use of the experiences gained, enabling the participants involved in the research to design similar actions for a wider group of students, parents, and teachers.

Research Findings

We organized our research findings around five main themes.

Teacher Resistance

Discussion in the first phase revealed that teachers often associate the participation of parents in the school affairs with attempts to control their teaching practices, which they resent. However, they looked forward to cooperating with the students' parents provided as long as parents did not intervene in their teaching. The teachers usually encountered difficulties in contacting parents and mentioned payment problems concerning their overtime work during the cooperation programs. Although they expressed certain doubts about the viability of long-term cooperation with the families, they seemed to be interested in the institutionalization of systematic cooperation between school and family, with the relevant administrative and financial support for programs designed to this end.

Parents Seek Support

Parents admitted that they have limited experience with systematic cooperation with school. They said that they lack the necessary time for such activities. Most of them (particularly mothers) participated in their children's schoolwork, although often pressuring children inappropriately. They all wanted their children to obtain at least one university degree and believed that if they pressed them to work hard, they would achieve this goal. They also expressed that their children are often unwilling to cooperate with them during homework and wished to have the support and cooperation of teachers.

Balance Between Home and School

Students did not want their home to turn into a second school. They wished to receive help in certain cases but only when they asked for it. They would not like their parents to supervise and pressure them about homework, and wished that their teachers mentioned this to their parents. The students also wanted their teachers to give them less homework, because they have no time for relaxation and play after participating in a lot of extracurricular activities.⁴ Although they desired cooperation between school and family, they wanted this to focus on enjoyable activities and not only on their academic performance.

⁴ In Greece students attend a lot of additional lessons outside school, although most of them are taught in school. Such lessons include music, gymnastics, dance, martial arts, and foreign languages (although a foreign language is taught at primary school, all children study at least one foreign language outside school and most of them two foreign languages).

Mutual Understanding

The common meetings resulted in the participating teams' understanding of their different viewpoints, the negotiation and agreement on certain issues, and the restructuring of some initial proposals from a different perspective. What was of great significance was the proposal coming from all teams concerning the syneducation of students and parents (with the participation of teachers) and the mutual agreement on the content focus of the syneducation program.

Value of Cooperation

During the syneducation process, participants gained a lot of experience in adopting effective collaboration methods, making decisions together with other group members, developing dialogue skills, and applying action research methodology.

All participants developed ideas about parental assistance during the learning process and the value of cooperative actions between school and family. Parents thought about and discussed how to help their children study effectively without exercising too much pressure on them. Students asked for learning opportunities that were more experiential and attractive to them (e.g., educational trips and visits to cultural sites), as well as a syneducation with their parents in subjects that would not only promote and reinforce their own interests and skills but also those of the parents. Teachers showed a particular interest in the dynamics of every family and how this influenced the way a child studies and learns. For all participants, a positive psychological atmosphere dominated the process of syneducation. Each participant assumed new roles, with parents and children becoming "classmates" and teachers becoming "observers" of the educational process. All enthusiastically tried to meet their new responsibilities after initial hesitation.

Implication for Practice

Create the conditions (prerequisites) for successful syneducation programs. The syneducation of parents and students, with the participation and care of the teachers, can produce noteworthy results.

Find opportunities for syneducation in your school. Many opportunities exist for syneducation. It is up to teachers to initiate the three-step process and identify opportunities in their school for parental participation in common experiences with their children.

Organize an annual Syneducation Day at the school. In this event try to involve as many students and parents as possible and focus on issues of social or cultural interest.

Organize parents, teachers, and students into action research groups. The co-existence of parents, students, and teachers in organized groups for collaborative action research aiming at the improvement of the cooperation between school and family is fruitful.

Train teachers in action research. Teacher training in the philosophy and methodology of collaborative action research is absolutely essential so that they can effectively support syneducational processes and promote the synergy (and not simply the cooperation) between school and family.

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