

Parental Engagement in Two Maltese State Colleges: A Case Study.

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Abstract: In 2006, *The Act to Amend the Education Act Cap. 327* (Laws of Malta, 2006) made provisions to sustain and augment the then-existing school-parent partnership. This study examines the current partnership between schools and parents in two Maltese State Colleges and the perceived challenges to nurturing, enriching, and sustaining collaboration between the schools and the parent community. The history of Education in Malta reveals a pattern of fragmented initiatives between schools and parents. For example, the establishment of the College Board of Governors, a tenet of the aforementioned Act, was never implemented after its enactment and is not even mentioned in the Education Act, CAP 605, ACT XXIX of 2019 (Laws of Malta, 2022). The data were collected through questionnaires administered to teachers and parents. Convenience and purposive sampling methods were used to recruit participants. We explored educators' and parents' positions on parental involvement and participation in their children's education, as well as the issues and challenges they encountered in sustaining such partnerships. The study seeks to advance understanding of these issues and challenges and to propose a way forward to address the missing link in the structure contemplated by the 2006 and 2019 Acts.

Introduction

Over the past decades, the role of parents as partners in their children's education has gained increasing recognition within educational policy and practice. International literature consistently highlights that meaningful school-parent partnerships contribute positively to students' academic achievement, social development, and overall well-being, while also

strengthening school effectiveness and accountability. In this context, legislative frameworks are often designed to formalise collaboration between schools and families, translating the rhetoric of partnership into structured participation and shared responsibility.

In Malta, the 2006 amendments to the Maltese Education Act [*The Act to Amend the Education Act, Cap. 327* (Laws of Malta, 2006)] served as a vital restorative follow-up to the 1988 Education Act, further strengthening the parent-school partnership by reinforcing School Councils and mandating active parental participation. The Act envisaged a more inclusive governance structure within State Colleges, notably through the establishment of College Boards of Governors, intended to give parents a defined voice in decision-making. This legislative initiative reflected a broader shift towards decentralisation and community involvement in education, aligning Maltese educational reform with current European and international trends.

However, the historical trajectory of education in Malta reveals a persistent pattern of fragmented and inconsistent initiatives in school-parent collaboration. Despite the 2006 Act's intent, key provisions – most notably the establishment of the College Boards of Governors – remained unimplemented and were discarded in the Education Act CAP 605 ACT XXIX of 2019 (Laws of Malta, 2022). This gap between policy and practice raises important questions about the realities of school-parent partnerships within the Maltese State education system and the structural, cultural, and practical challenges that may hinder their development and sustainability.

Against this backdrop, the present study examines the current state of the partnership between schools and parents in two Maltese State Colleges. It explores how educators and parents perceive parental involvement in children's education and identifies the challenges they encounter in nurturing, enriching, and sustaining collaborative relationships. By drawing on data collected through questionnaires with teachers and parents, the study seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of key stakeholders.

Through this examination, the study aimed to contribute to the limited empirical research on school-parent partnerships in Malta and to shed light on the *missing link* between the legislative intent of the 2006 Act and the institutional practice it envisaged. Ultimately, it proposes a way forward to

strengthen collaborative structures and practices, supporting more coherent and effective partnerships between schools and the parent community within the Maltese educational context.

Literature Review

The notion of parental participation

Based on the literature reviewed in this article, the authors can affirm that the family unit can be an efficacious actor in the partnership between the school and parents/legal guardians. In this study, 'family' and 'parent/s' will be used interchangeably.

Contemporary family structures vary across dimensions such as sexual orientation, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and religious background (Clay, 2007; Adler & Lenz, 2023). We find that working parents, single parents, young mothers, divorced or separated parents, same-gender parents, grandparent/relative guardians, parents of different nationalities and religions, and step-parents and foster parents effectively constitute family units.

Educators are increasingly called upon to look beyond the traditional conception of the family centred on a male father and a female mother. Contemporary educational contexts require educators to engage impartially and collaboratively with the diverse family structures within which children are raised. This presents important professional considerations, particularly since children inevitably bring to school the experiences, values, and realities shaped by their home environments. Consequently, sensitivity towards the child's familial and social context becomes an essential dimension of professional educational practice.

Furthermore, educators are encouraged to reflect critically on their own cultural backgrounds, assumptions, and dispositions when communicating and collaborating with families from diverse cultural contexts, a reality that is increasingly prevalent in Malta's schools. It is important to avoid essentialist assumptions about families, as no single set of characteristics can adequately represent all members of any particular family type, whether traditional or non-traditional. Rather, educational practice benefits from an awareness of the broader cultural, social, and ideological contexts that shape individual and

family experiences, ranging from more conventional formations to increasingly postmodern and fluid social realities.

Within this context, school leaders and educators are encouraged to cultivate an open, reflective, and inclusive disposition towards the complexity and diversity characterising contemporary family life.

Failure to engage meaningfully with this complexity may limit educators' capacity to fully understand the diverse realities shaping children's lives. While certain dimensions of diversity are often acknowledged in educational settings, others may challenge established assumptions and underscore the need for a more nuanced understanding of children's social and cultural backgrounds. In the contemporary Maltese context, educators are increasingly encouraged to reflect critically on and move beyond gendered, racial, ethnic, religious, or social prejudices to foster genuinely inclusive educational environments in which no child is marginalised.

The literature (Härkönen et al., 2017; Parche et al., 2024) shows that outcomes are strongly associated with family functioning and socioeconomic conditions, not simply with family structure. Hence, family structure alone does not consistently determine children's outcomes. That is, children's outcomes are more strongly influenced by the quality of parenting, family relationships, and the stability of the home environment. Porter, as early as 2008, highlighted the complexity of this issue by arguing that "The conclusion from examining these diverse families is that it is not the type of family that influences children's outcomes, but the quality of the parenting the children receive" (p. 39). Similar literature (Rogoff, 2003; Bornstein, 2012; and Lansford, 2025) emphasises the importance of understanding the cultural contexts within which children develop, particularly since parenting attitudes and practices shape the home environments that influence children's learning and socialisation.

This perspective suggests that school leaders, counsellors, and educators benefit from approaching children's experiences holistically rather than through fragmented or reductionist interpretations. A broader understanding of family diversity is essential if educational institutions are to meaningfully uphold principles of inclusion and strengthen collaborative relationships between schools and families. Conversely, limited or selective understandings of diversity risk creating barriers to effective school-parent partnerships. More broadly, recognising the significance of the family environment deepens

appreciation of the influential role parents play in children's educational development. Parents and caregivers often possess valuable insights into their children's emotional, social, and 2024 needs, positioning them as important partners in supporting children's learning and overall well-being.

Building on Cutajar's (2016) observation that "today we are living in an era of partnerships, networking, and collaboration as a result of the globalised culture that modern and post-modern society has embraced" (p. 45), contemporary educational practice increasingly calls for collaborative and relational approaches rather than isolated modes of working. The traditional model of educators operating independently is becoming less compatible with the social and educational realities of the twenty-first century, in which interconnectedness, shared responsibility, and community engagement are increasingly significant (Decuyper et al., 2023; Gourvennec et al., 2024).

Within this context, educators are encouraged to recognise the importance of building meaningful partnerships with parents and caregivers throughout children's educational journeys. As Debattista (2008) argues, parents should be regarded as important partners in children's educational development. Additionally, Goodall & Montgomery (2014) state that parents should not simply be active partners in children's learning and educational development. This concept stems from their *continuum* theory, which moves beyond basic parental involvement toward parental engagement, in which parents and schools collaborate to support children's learning. Such collaboration enables a more holistic understanding of children's needs, experiences, and learning contexts, while strengthening communication, trust, and mutual support between schools and families. Increasingly diverse and complex educational realities in Malta further reinforce the importance of collaborative engagement among educators, families, and wider communities in fostering inclusive and supportive learning environments.

Acknowledging this means appreciating the significance of the three essential actors in a child's educational journey (the learning process): the family, the school, and the community. Each plays a significant role in ensuring an equitable educational experience for all students. Collectively, they contribute to students' adjustment to school life and provide them with "practical and emotional resources" (Christenson, 2004, p. 3). Christenson further claims, "an overriding rationale for collaborating with ... parents ... is to coordinate these sources of support" (p. 3). Christenson's claim, which underscores the need for

schools to collaborate with students' parents/legal guardians, is reinforced by Paccaud et al. (2021) and later by Woodhouse et al. (2024), who argued that meaningful school-family partnerships are essential to orchestrate efforts focused on facilitating children's learning and developmental needs.

An effective school-parent relationship requires educators and parents/legal guardians to nurture and sustain mutual respect, understanding and commitment (Porter, 2008; Paccaud et al., 2021). Furthermore, Porter concurs with Christenson (2004) and Woodhouse et al. (2024), who asserted that schools and parents need each other because they share a common responsibility: the child's achievement and educational improvement. Porter (2008) also ascribes to the mutual need of parents and schools when she manifestly declares that "educators accept the responsibility to communicate with parents about their child's education, while parents are expected to support the school" (p. 7). The cognisance of the reciprocal need of both educators and parents/legal guardians in the education of a child accentuates the notion that educators have to acknowledge that parents and the family environment are said to be the first significant educators of their children, regardless of whether these years of informal teaching can have a lasting positive or negative impact on the children's demeanour, disposition, or mindset towards future formal schooling (Christenson, 2004; Jose, 2022).

Another important consideration supporting the recognition of parents as significant contributors to their children's educational development is the growing acknowledgement, across various educational systems internationally, of the central role families play in children's learning and wellbeing (Bachman et al., 2024; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Martinez-Yarza et al., 2024; Stoll & Fink, 2003). In the Maltese context, successive governments since 1988 have introduced policies and legislative frameworks intended to strengthen parental involvement and encourage greater participation in children's educational experiences. Reflecting broader international trends, Middlewood (1999) observes that "most developed countries have enacted some legislation in recent years, which affects parent-school relationships" (p. 113). More recently, Paseka et al. (2025) showed in their study that multiple developed countries have parent-school partnerships within their educational legislation. Similarly, contemporary European educational policy reviews indicate that in most European countries parental participation in schools is legally recognised and sustained through regulatory frameworks governing

parent-school relationships and decision-making (European School Education Platform, 2024).

Within this evolving educational landscape, educators are increasingly encouraged to recognise parents not only as caregivers during children's early years but also as ongoing partners throughout the various stages of children's educational development, from childcare and compulsory schooling to post-secondary education (Debattista, 2008). Research by Anne Henderson (1987) and Henderson and Berla (1995) further highlights the importance of home environments that encourage learning, maintain realistic and supportive expectations, and foster children's aspirations regarding education and future careers. Such forms of parental engagement, widely associated with positive educational outcomes and academic achievement, are corroborated by Yang et al. (2023), who contend that home environments rich in learning opportunities, combined with supportive parental expectations, positively influence children's educational development and aspirations.

Furthermore, the involvement of parents, legal guardians, and wider communities in school processes is often linked to improved school effectiveness and enhanced student achievement. Studies by Joyce Epstein and Dauber (1988), Fan and Chen (2001), Georgiou (1996-1997), Leithwood et al. (2004), Porter (2008), and Stoll and Fink (2003) collectively suggest that strong school-parent partnerships contribute positively to students' educational success and broader school development. Similarly, Ihmeideh et al. (2020) indicate that parental participation in children's education is frequently associated with higher academic performance, improved attendance, and more positive behavioural outcomes.

More broadly, collaborative practices and partnership models have emerged internationally as important mechanisms for strengthening communication, encouraging shared initiatives, and fostering networks of mutual support among schools, families, and communities. Such approaches may serve as important foundations for sustaining meaningful parental engagement in education. In this regard, a school-parent partnership appears both practical and educationally valuable, particularly given that schools and families share a common commitment to supporting children's learning and development. As Graham-Clay (2005) argues, schools and families both seek "to meet the needs of the children they 'share'" (p. 117).

This perspective aligns closely with the family-centred philosophy discussed by Porter (2008) and also Ovesen et al. (2023), which emphasises parental acceptance, collaboration, and shared educational responsibility. Referring to Adams and Christenson (2000), Porter highlights the importance of the child as the central point of connection between schools and families, noting that “they (Adams & Christenson – authors’ clarification) uphold that schools and families share the common task of educating young people” (p. 7). From both an ethical and educational standpoint, the development of strong school-parent partnerships may therefore be understood as a constructive and mutually beneficial dimension of children’s educational development and achievement.

Unpacking the concept of parental partnership

A partnership is a loosely defined association of two or more people who agree to work together. This is not a new phenomenon. Partnership can be broadly defined as an extended group of organisations or individuals that share interests and concerns. The Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners (Rundell & Fox, 2002, p. 1033) defines partnership as a relationship between two or more people, groups, or countries that work together on an activity. Additionally, according to Paseka et al. (2025), educational partnership in many countries is associated with the family-school relationship.

Understandably, the school-parent partnership has been at the centre of debate in many countries and has become a challenging and controversial concept. In essence, it created and provoked divergent stances amongst stakeholders because of the complex nature surrounding the notion that educators embrace and commit to a joint working venture with parents. Middlewood (1999) very eloquently presents a congruous argument as to why the idea of a parent in partnership with educators is rather challenging when she writes:

The role of the parent in the partnership varies by country, depending on the concept of the parent as defined by the country’s legislation. ... At one possible extreme is the notion of parent as ‘co-educator’; at the other is that of the parent as ‘consumer’. (pp. 113 -114)

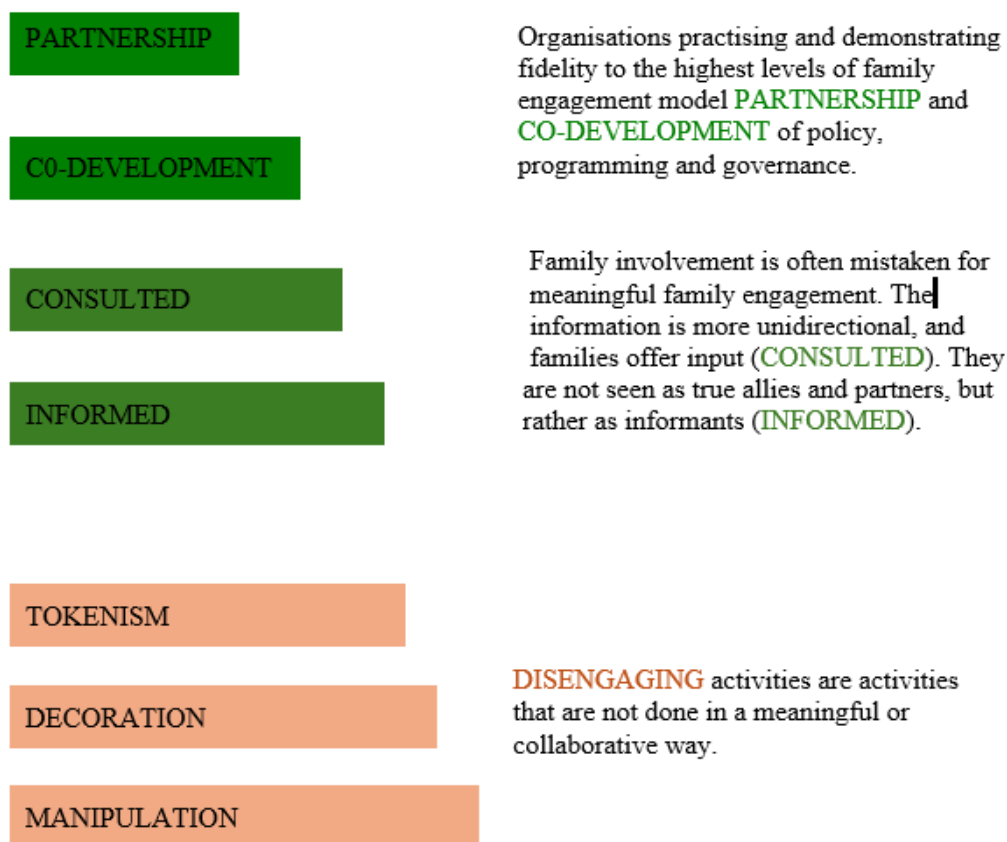
Furthermore, considering Middlewood’s (1999) claim that partnership is synonymous with the relationship between parents and the school, one might ask: What do we understand by school-parent partnership/family

engagement? What does it entail? According to Dostaler and Canon (2011), family engagement in schools is an active partnership between parents and schools. Such an engagement involves schools and families listening to one another and fostering two-way communication. Parents are considered allies and not enemies. Such a claim may be considered by many, especially sceptics who oppose parental engagement/partnership, as non-viable and unfeasible. Some cautious educators are willing to collaborate with parents, but on their own terms. A few are willing to sustain Dostaler and Canon's (2011) proposition of an active partnership in which parents are considered allies. Dostaler and Canon's claim is supported by Hart's Ladder of Participation (Hart, 1992, 1997), which is central to family engagement in schools. The sum and substance of the argument is that all levels of educators need the skills of working with parents in a flexible parent-professional partnership (McConkey, 1985). McConkey's claim finds concurrence in the contemporary study of Burke et al (2024), who argue that educators need explicit training and professional competencies for family-school partnerships.

When conceptualising family engagement, it is appropriate to consider it along a continuum. Figure 1, *the ladder of participation*, adapted from Hart's Ladder of Youth Participation (Hart, 1992, 1997), illustrates the continuum of family engagement from the highest to the lowest levels.

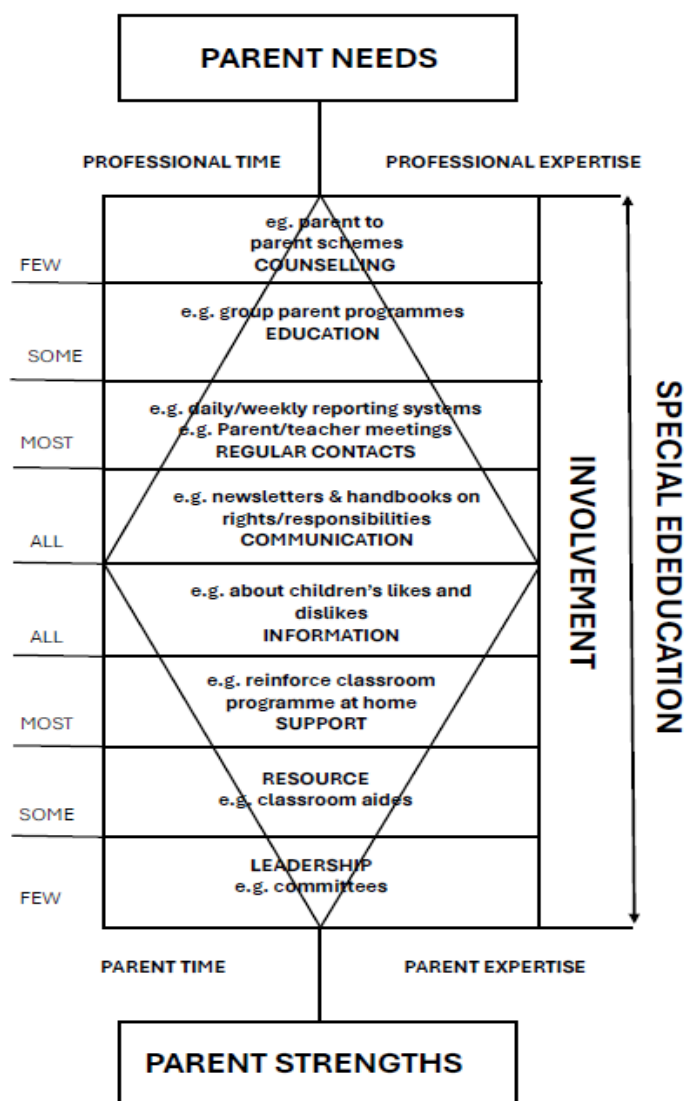
The understanding of the above continuum, as presented in Hart (1992, 1997) and central to family engagement, posits seven levels grouped into three sections. The continuum ranges from low-level participation in school activities to in-depth involvement in the school curriculum, decision-making, and social governance. The top two levels in Figure 1 may be viewed as rather idealistic. Here, school-family engagement at the partnership and co-development level involves granting parents some degree of authority and power in education (Bauch & Goldring, 1998). Many an educator would consider this somewhat problematic (Barge & Loges, 2003). Lawson (2003) may offer a reason for the tension around school-parent partnerships in the claim that educators' views of the meanings and functions of parent involvement vary from those of parents. Mitra (2008) and Barker and Harris (2022) underscore this mindset among educators, noting that they are accustomed to controlling the process and do not consider parental voice. Additionally, educators may be apprehensive about the power of the parent voice, as "it can undermine them and hold them more accountable" (Brown et al., 2020, p. 91).

Figure 1 *The ladder of participation* (Hart, 1992, 1997)



Parent participation has acquired tremendous importance and visibility in both the educational literature and the educational arena. For example, Hart (1992, 1997) and academics have developed models of parent participation. One such academic is Gary Hornby (2011), who developed a theoretical model of parent participation in special education, which implies that parental engagement should also be available to parents of children with some form of impairment. Hornby (2011) claims that the *Parent Involvement Model* “focuses on meeting parents’ needs and on using their contributions to offer guidelines to teachers on the way of working with parents” (p. 161). The graphic and textual content of the model suggest that it places the parents as the point of convergence. Hence, at both ends of the model, one finds two triangles, one converging towards PARENT NEEDS and the other denoting PARENT STRENGTHS. One also notices that the participation (Time and Expertise) of the PROFESSIONALS (in this case, the teachers who work with children with some form of impairment) is set against that of the PARENT, suggesting that the model considers both parents and professionals as complementary.

Figure 2 *A Model for Parent Involvement* (Hornby, 2007, 2011)



The model also suggests that the needs and strengths of parents are of various degrees and range from the 'FEW' to 'ALL', and that the amount of time that professionals need to spend with parents varies accordingly. If the model is to function well for parents and, consequently, for students, professionals should allocate more time to the small number of parents (i.e., those in the model, referred to as the FEW) whose need for guidance is essential. On the other side of the coin (the bottom point of the pyramid in Figure 2, *A Model for Parent Involvement*), we also find the word FEW, which refers to the small number of parents whose contributions to parental involvement would be substantial and comprehensive. According to Hornby (2011), fostering and sustaining parental

involvement in inclusive schools serving children with special educational needs will benefit all stakeholders (educators, parents, and children). Hornby maintains that “making full use of parents’ knowledge of their children helps to improve professional practice and makes parents aware that they have been listened to and that an active interest has been taken in their child” (p. 161).

In essence, the concept of partnership entails joint working and interaction between individuals and organisations. In this monograph, "parents" and "schools" refer to parents and schools, respectively. Interactions between parents and organisations may be challenging in the Maltese context of the divide between parents and schools. However, this interaction can be established under a utilitarian communication framework between the school and the family. The implication is that a context in which the ‘actors’ communicate and work together must be established. Consequently, the members and even the organisations (in this instance, the parents, teachers, and heads of schools) are connected through the participating individuals and the children.

School-Parent Involvement: The Maltese Context – A Review

Parental Involvement in Maltese State Schools has been evident since the 1970s, when the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) was introduced in several Maltese State Primary Schools. In the 1980s, the concept of the PTA spread to other Maltese schools (mainly church and independent schools). The notion of involving parents in state schools was enshrined in the Education Act of 1988 (Laws of Malta, 1988), which amended the Education Act of 1974 (Laws of Malta, 1974). Zammit Mangion (1992) claims that “in many ways, it was a completely new Act which departed substantially from the 1974 Education Act² and its concepts” (p. 154)

The Act recognised the legitimacy of School Councils in State Schools, and parents became more involved in school activities. However, the involvement of the parents in State schools was curtailed since:

Notwithstanding anything contained in sections 21 and 22 of this Act, the Head and teaching staff of a scheduled school shall be responsible for teaching and the maintenance of discipline in the school. It shall therefore be accountable to the Minister. (Laws of Malta, 1988. Part IV, Section 23, p. 283)

Parents were meant to have a more direct and official participation in schools. The Maltese Government (with reservations) continued to support the School-Parent Involvement concept through the Legal Notice 1993, which sanctioned several School Councils Regulations. However, the School-Parent Council was never granted any executive powers, as the legal notice indicates: “The Council may not interfere in matters of teaching, discipline, or school administration, these being the areas which are explicitly reserved in the Education Act.” (Ministry for Justice, Culture, and Local Government, 1993)

The above section of the law may support a portion of the argument explaining why most parents appear reluctant to participate in the School Council’s elections. Borg Axisa (2020) cites this in her paper, which appears in the Ministry for Education and Employment (MEDE) publication, 2019.

The most recent elections were held in January 2019, showing an overall increase in parents’ participation compared to the 2017 elections, but they still marked a low turnout among parents, given that the elections were held in only 28 schools (Borg Axisa, 2020, p. 54).

Bonello et al. (2000) compiled a report (based on a questionnaire sent to Maltese Schools). This report, which appeared in the publication National Curriculum on its Way – A Conference on the Implementation of the National Curriculum (Giordmaina, 2000), addresses the lack of parental involvement and offers a strategy to alleviate this rather demoralising reality. Bonello et al. (2000) wrote:

In reviewing this varied evidence, however, we were struck by the lack of parental involvement in more important aspects of school life, such as pupil learning and educational provision. ... we recommend that the central authorities and schools take steps to provide opportunities for parental involvement in these areas. What we have specifically in mind are structures for interaction between teachers and parents, such as Class Parents’ Forums, Parents’ evenings, and Class Helpers, particularly in relation to reading and the supervision of children’s work. (p. 407)

This statement underscores that parents should be involved in their children’s learning and in the curriculum. Such advocacy, which aligns with Borg’s (2000) proposal, finds concurrence with the study of Jones and Palikara (2023). Borg (2000) suggested that the National Minimum Curriculum consider action research as the fulcrum of curriculum development in schools, linking research

to parents' knowledge, who are considered primary partners in the educational process. The author suggested that parents should be involved and participate in research projects.

The 2023 situation seems to suggest that both the strategy of Bonello et al. (2000) and Borg's (2000) proposition seem to have been ignored not only by the educators but also by the authorities, who have reduced the function of the Maltese School Councils to simply serving as helpers and organising activities to generate funds (Hornby, 2000). Such an approach may have led Maltese parents, whose children attend State Schools, to "shy(ing) away from School Councils, missing the possibility to contribute more as governors" (Borg Axisa, 2020, p. 55).

This is so true as matters stand in 2026! The education authorities seem to have missed the opportunity to establish distributed governance in Maltese State schools by involving parents in areas beyond fundraising and the organisation of social and cultural activities. Evidence of this is the Education Act CAP 605 ACT XXIX of 2019 (Laws of Malta, 2022). Part IV, Article 42 of the Act stipulates that the Minister will formulate the functions, duties, powers and procedures (authors' bold) of the School Council and the Students' Council (Laws of Malta, 2022). This implies that the upper echelons of the Ministry of Education are not prepared to change course and move away from the top-down management stipulated in the Education Act 2006. Evidence of this is that, in the 2019 Act, there is no mention of the College Board being sanctioned under the Education Act, CAP 327, ACT XIII of 2006, Part V, Articles 54.1–54.5 (Laws of Malta, 2006). This College Board was never introduced, and any reference to it was deleted in 2019 (13 years later). The suggestion is that not even the Education authorities are comfortable fostering and sustaining a School-Parent Partnership/Involvement. Although "the call for parental involvement comes from policymakers..." (Borg Axisa, 2020, p. 35), the upper echelons need to walk the talk and not just enact laws and establish policies, which may be considered to be just lip service. The upper echelons of the Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation and the Education Division need to understand that actions speak louder than words and move towards a more decentralised education system that underscores parental involvement in schools. We, the authors, believe that this can be done by taking on board what Borg Axisa (2020) concludes in her article:

To translate the call for parental involvement from policy to practice, there needs to be a gradual paradigm shift in the general approach

toward parents as valued contributors to the education of the younger generation. (p. 60)

Unless this recommendation is taken on board and all educators and leaders in the education sector commit to it, school-parental partnership/involvement will not materialise. One here asks, could it be that, like other professionals (lawyers, doctors, architects and engineers), educators have developed the conservative mindset of professionalism, that they are the professionals, and they know it all? Furthermore, when considering the local environment, teachers may become defensive about perceived intrusions stemming from their professional status. Could it be that educators may view parental partnership/involvement as a threat to their professional status, and that committing to such partnership would be challenging?

The theory of Beare et al. (1989), which suggests that when educators sideline parents and ignore their beneficial contribution to students' achievement, they can communicate the notion that learning is the realm of a small number of people with specialised knowledge and interests, is endorsed by Barker and Harris (2022). Additionally, Beare et al. (1989) are very eloquent about this when they state:

The parent body of any school constitutes a rich fund of skills and expertise, knowledge and experience, which goes well beyond the capacities of its teaching staff...When the resource is unused, the school may signal to its public that it sees learning as cloistered, esoteric, and bound by teacher possessiveness. (p.199)

The requirement for parental involvement, partnership, and collaboration between communities of learning and parents has, in 21st-century Malta, extended beyond the long-established compulsory school age bracket (ages 5-16). Subsequently, since 2004, because of the ongoing transformation in the economic, social and political Maltese environment, parental involvement has been recognised as the precondition for the child's educational achievement from as early as the first years that the child is introduced to some form of education away from home; that is, childcare centres. The noteworthiness of an effective partnership between parents and childcare centres and robust parental involvement emerges from the research of Debattista (2008), where she concludes that:

According to the National Standards, parents should be involved, and, as some service providers and specialists informed the interviewer throughout the research, when parents are more involved and have a good relationship with the child carers, children trust the child carers more and achieve more accomplishments. (p. 88)

The rationale for a partnership with parents

Undeniably, it has been recognised that parents/legal guardians matter and are primary actors in shaping children's dispositions and commitment to learning. Fullan (2007) recognises the significant role of parents/legal guardians and that they matter when he claims, "They have vested and committed interest in their children's success, and they also have valuable knowledge and skills to contribute" (p. 190). Parents can provide invaluable information about their children (Hornby, 2011; Jones & Palikara, 2023).

Fullan's (2007) statement appears to support Stoll and Fink's (2003) claim that schools need to remove barriers to foster and sustain communication among them, the outside community/ies, and parents/legal guardians. They had contended that:

Schools exist within a context of parents, community, school districts, other educational organisations and institutions, and levels of government. ... Schools can, as many do, isolate themselves to maintain control and avoid criticism. In so doing, they not only erect barriers to potential partners; they also contribute to the incoherence of pupils' lives. (p. 133)

Stoll and Fink add that, conversely to conventional practice, schools need to extend beyond the school environment, collaborate with individuals, and form partnerships to help them remain connected to the realities around them. In forming partnerships, schools would establish communication links with the external school environment that may serve as sources of external scrutiny. Such sources, which are external to the school's day-to-day operations, may offer impartial and constructive criticism and advice. Hence, schools can benefit from outsiders looking in (Brown et al., 2020). "Schools need critical friends" (Stoll & Fink, 2003, p. 134) because critical friends can offer feedback to learning communities. According to Curry and Williams (2022) and Costa and Kallick (1993), a critical friend is a trusted person who asks questions and offers proactive and constructive criticism. Costa and Kallick (1993) add that a

candid, critical friend will strive “to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes the person or group is working toward. The friend is an advocate for the success of that work” (p. 50).

Tensions and Challenges Around School-Parent Partnership and Relationships

Not all perspectives fully acknowledge parents as significant participants in their children’s formal schooling, with some approaches maintaining that parents contribute most effectively through their primary caregiving and parenting roles. Such perspectives raise an enduring question frequently encountered within educational discourse: why should parents be actively engaged in schools and collaborate closely with teachers? The answer is far from straightforward, particularly given that, both historically and in contemporary contexts—locally and internationally—school-parent relationships have often been shaped by misinformation, misunderstanding, unequal power relations, and institutional politics.

This complexity is reflected in Borg Axisa’s (2020) observation that “the teachers’ and parents’ understanding of parental involvement may not be congruent, creating a sense of suspicion that conditions the possibility for collaboration” (p. 53). Such tensions suggest that parental involvement cannot be approached as a simple or universally agreed-upon concept. Rather, it requires ongoing dialogue, mutual trust, and a willingness by both educators and families to negotiate roles, expectations, and responsibilities in increasingly diverse educational contexts.

Stoll and Fink (2003) posit the idea that the way forward only lies in a change of mindset and culture when they quote from the Halton Board of Education (Ontario, Canada) report, which states that: “The traditional approach to parents is no longer satisfactory” (Halton Board of Education, 1993, pp. 20-21 as cited in Stoll and Fink, 2003, p. 135).

The concept of parental participation and involvement, charged with differences and divisions, is not new. The cultures and mindsets of various players (governments, educators, their unions, and parents), and the perception of their roles in the educational endeavour for children, have rendered the fostering and success of a school-parent partnership rather challenging. Bryk and Schneider (2002) acknowledge that building a culture of partnership, collaboration, and mutual trust between schools and the outside communities will not be as straightforward as one might hope. Generating a

working relationship between schools and parents, who historically lived on opposite sides of the fence, eyeing one another with some distrust and antagonism (Waller, 1932 as cited in Hargreaves, 2000), has been deemed by Fullan (2007) to be a rather taxing legacy, which Stoll and Fink (2003) describe as one charged with caution and suspicion. Their argument offers a probable rationale for the controversial historical divide between home and school. They maintain that:

Parents have often become the scapegoats for unsatisfactory school performance. ... Conversely, parents have often seen schools as places to be feared, especially by those who were unsuccessful in their own school experiences. (p. 135)

This scenario reflects the complex realities that continue to characterise school-parent relationships across many educational contexts. School leaders seeking to bridge this divide are likely to encounter tensions arising from differing expectations, values, communication styles, and understandings of educational roles and responsibilities. Such relationships rarely develop smoothly or organically and often require sustained dialogue, trust-building, and deliberate collaborative effort.

It is also important to recognise the broader cultural and social contexts within which school-parent collaboration takes place. In both modern and postmodern societies, schools and families increasingly operate under significant economic, political, and social pressures, including changing family structures, demanding work schedules, time constraints, and heightened expectations regarding children's educational performance and wellbeing. These realities inevitably shape the nature and quality of school-parent interactions.

Research by Datnow et al. (2002), Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider (2002), and Neuenschwander (2020) further suggests that tensions between schools and families are often embedded within broader societal conditions rather than simply resulting from individual misunderstandings. In this regard, Stoll and Fink (2003) argue that productive school-parent partnerships require parents and educators to be "reading from the same page" (p. 135), implying a degree of shared understanding, communication, and common purpose.

At the same time, achieving such alignment is not always straightforward. Even where schools and families appear to share similar goals, interpretations, expectations, and priorities may still differ considerably. Consequently,

meaningful collaboration requires ongoing negotiation, openness, and mutual recognition of the diverse perspectives shaping educational relationships.

Knowing this should not demoralise anyone from working towards a more wholesome relationship between schools and parents. Bringing external communities into the equation and sustaining a collaborative mindset in schools requires a game-changer. This calls for a paradigm shift in the value systems, beliefs, norms, attitudes, and skills of all stakeholders. Datnow et al. (2002) recognise that the external community affects educators' stance on reform. They state that "educators' perspectives and responses to reform can be deeply embedded within a larger societal context... Events outside schools profoundly affect what happens inside them" (p. 31).

Cooperation between schools and external communities, particularly parents, is often associated with the development of trust, effective communication, and voluntary commitment (Thomas Sergiovanni, 2006). Efforts aimed at fostering such collaborative relationships may contribute to greater mutual understanding and help reduce feelings of mistrust between schools and families. Within this context, meaningful collaboration is frequently linked to broader shifts in institutional culture and mindset. Such cultural and attitudinal changes are more likely to emerge where there is shared understanding, support, and a sense of collective engagement among the different stakeholders involved.

Benefits of a school-parent partnership and relationships

Bryk and Schneider (2002). Coleman and Karraker (1998), Hargreaves (2000), Gonzalez (2002), and Neuenschwander demonstrate that establishing relationships with the external community, particularly parents, is critical to students' progress and educational development. Dolan (1994) argued that "to educate children without a deep partnership of teacher and parent is hopeless" (p. 159). Parents are the child's first teachers, and the informal education they provide lays the foundation for formal compulsory education. Wallace (1996) stresses that:

It seems trite to remind ourselves that parents are the first teachers of their children. The topic cannot, however, be glossed over when one reflects on the powerful influence of the formative years on subsequent schooling. (p. 81)

Tapping into the influence of parents should underpin any formal or informal partnership and should enable parents to “become knowledgeable partners in their children’s education” (Epstein & Dauber, 1988, p. 12). Parental involvement in curriculum content reinforces and elevates the partnership between schools and parents. This involvement can alter parents’ perceptions of their children’s teachers. Rosenholtz (1989) claims that the teachers who strove to include the parents in planning the curricular programme managed to bridge the “learning chasm between home and school” (p. 152, as cited in Fullan, 2007, p. 192).

Literature (Hopkins, 2000; Sergiovanni, 2006; Liebermann et al., 2023) contends that when school practitioners work in isolation, they become detached from the current realities. Educators who prefer to remain detached from school communities need to ride the waves of change and align with their global counterparts, who are building partnerships with external communities, particularly parents. Taking on board the contribution of parents is both crucial and beneficial to the educational development and achievement of the children because, as Fullan (2007) argues, “parents ... have assets and expertise that are essential to the partnership. They have knowledge of their children that is not available to anyone else” (p. 190). Acknowledging parents' contributions in a school-parent partnership encourages educators to commit to the partnership. It consolidates efforts to achieve a common goal – the educational success of students and the prevention of no one being left behind.

Costa and Kallick (1993) maintain that schools need to form partnerships with the outside community because they need people who mean well and are not directly involved in the planning and execution of the school programme to look in. They can act as critics, offering constructive feedback. Stoll and Fink (2003) refer to them as “critical friends” (p. 134) who “help schools raise their expectations because critical friends are concerned about schools and want the best for them” (p. 134). The right balance among schools, families, and other community members is a motivating factor for students (Fullan, 1997, 2007). Fullan (1997) demonstrates that an established parent-school partnership positively impacts children, particularly by enhancing parental respect and appreciation for the school.

In conclusion, school-parent partnerships remain complex and, at times, contested arrangements both locally and internationally. The forms such relationships take, together with the roles and responsibilities attributed to parents, vary considerably across different educational and cultural contexts.

These differences are often shaped by broader understandings of education, professionalism, authority, and participation.

While much educational discourse highlights the positive contributions that parental involvement may make to children's learning, school development, and educational outcomes, other perspectives continue to emphasise the professional autonomy of educators and express reservations about the extent of parental participation in formal schooling. These differing positions reflect the broader tensions that continue to characterise school-parent relationships. Within the Maltese context, the growing recognition of parents as important contributors to children's educational experiences increasingly positions schools and families as interconnected participants in children's development and well-being. In this regard, collaboration between educators and parents may be understood less as a transfer of authority and more as a process of dialogue, shared understanding, and mutual support centred on the child's educational interests.

Methodology

In this study, we selected State Colleges as the data collection domain because this area is in flux regarding the school-parent relationship and warrants exploration; it is more oriented toward participation than toward school-parent partnership. According to the *Family Engagement - Hart's Ladder of Participation* (Hart, 1997) and Hornby's *Parent Involvement* (2007, 2011) models, the concept of the school-parent partnership highlights the *modus operandi* of a shared vision as equal partners. Considering the school-parent relationship in Church and Independent Schools, one can boldly claim that it appears to be thriving. However, we must admit that if one were to measure the current school-parent relationship in Church and Independent schools against Hart's (1997) model, we would place it on the middle rung of Hart's ladder. This means that parents in the institutions mentioned above are not considered partners but rather as informants and members of a consultative group (Hart, 1997). Although their relationship with the school may not have reached the level of partnership, it is stronger than that of their counterparts in state schools. In state schools, parents' voices are represented by three elected parent members on the school council (which comprises eight members). The school council is dominated by educators (the chairperson, nominated by the minister, the head of school, and three elected teachers). Hence, we would place the state schools' parent partnership on the lowest rung of Hart's ladder (1997), where parental engagement is neither meaningful nor collaborative. Furthermore, it is worth

noting that in certain state schools, the School Council is non-existent because no parents come forward to be elected as members (Borg Axisa, 2020).

The quantitative method was adopted for this research. The quantitative data were collected through self-completed questionnaires distributed to teachers, LSEs, and parents of the two selected State Colleges for this study.

We targeted only two of the existing ten state college networks in Malta and Gozo because we intended to conduct a small-scale case study. Since the research was small-scale, we opted for the 'non-probability convenience sampling' procedure. Hence, the two participating state college networks in our study were selected via convenience sampling. Although this was a purely convenience sample, the two college networks were geographically distinct and could be described as representing somewhat well-defined populations. The specific college networks were selected because we had a strong working relationship with their heads. We sought and obtained approval from our institutional research ethics committee and permission from the Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability (DRLLE) at the Ministry for Education and Employment (MEDE).

During meetings with the two heads of the state college network, we explained the aims. We explained that we would seek assistance from the heads of school in distributing and collecting self-completed questionnaires from teachers, LSEs, and parents. The two heads of the state college networks invited us to meet the heads of school during their respective college council of heads meetings. We provided the heads of school with relevant information about our research and their role in distributing and collecting the self-completed questionnaires. All the heads of school, except two from the same college, accepted our invitation and were prepared to assist in collecting questionnaires from teachers, LSEs, and parents.

Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed to the respective heads of college networks, the heads of schools, educators, and parents, so that no college, school, or respondent would be identified in the monograph's written content. No participant names, colleges, or schools were requested on the questionnaire. For the transcription and analysis of the collected quantitative data, we employed two research assistants.

The heads of school distributed the self-completed questionnaires to 261 educators. The distribution of these educators is presented in Table 1, the teacher and LSE respondents.

Table 1 *Questionnaire Respondents (Teachers and LSEs)*

Gender	Educators	
	Teachers	Learning Support Educators (LSEs)
Male	36	0
Female	105	120

The respective heads of schools distributed the questionnaires to parents, whom they identified as the most likely to complete them. The distribution of the parent cohort is presented in Table 2.

Table 2 *Questionnaire Respondents (Parents)*

Gender	Parents/Legal Guardians		
	Parents	Legal Guardian	Other
Male	36	0	0
Female	255	1	2

Teachers, LSEs and parents were asked about the tenets of the Education Acts of 1988 and 2006, including several principles central to the theme of a working relationship between parents and schools. ‘Articles’ in the 1988 and 2006 Education Acts were attached to the questionnaires, so that teachers, LSEs, and parents had the relevant knowledge before completing their questionnaires. Here, the researchers note that although the establishment of the College Boards was one of the ‘Articles’ (Part V, Article 54, Education Act of 2006 (Laws of Malta, 2006)), this provision was never implemented.

Questions were also asked about the State School Councils introduced into the Maltese Education System by the Education Act 1988. Certain items of the questionnaire were central to respondents’ views on the way forward for a stronger collaborative partnership between schools and parents, including curricular and disciplinary issues.

The researchers drew up a coded Excel template for the questionnaire data. This identified the themes for the questionnaire items, enabling the research assistants to enter the data into the specified template.

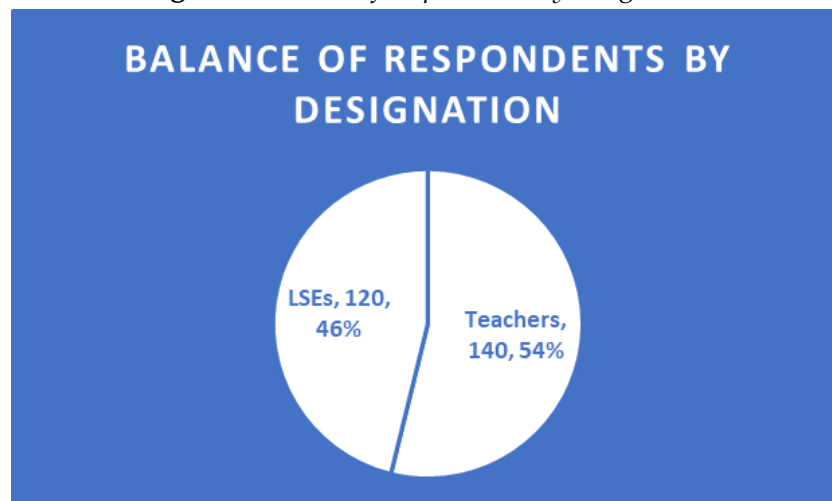
Findings

Educators and LSEs - Respondents' Characteristics

Two hundred sixty respondents returned the educator questionnaire, of whom 242 (93 per cent) answered all items. Two hundred and twenty-four were female educators, and 36 were male. The educator questionnaire was completed by respondents aged 20-65, with a median age of 41-45 years. Of the 206 respondents, 140 were teachers, and 120 were learning support educators (LSEs), as shown in Figure 3.

When queried about how well informed they were about the three Education Acts, the median score indicated that they had an idea of the relative importance of the Education Acts, but were not familiar with them or knew them well. An independent-samples t-test comparing teachers' and LSEs' responses found no significant difference in their levels of familiarity with the three Education Acts.

Figure 3 *Balance of respondents by designation*



The vast majority of teachers held a bachelor's degree (69%) or a master's degree (13%). The majority of LSEs possessed an undergraduate diploma (62%) or a bachelor's degree (28%).

Respondents' Views

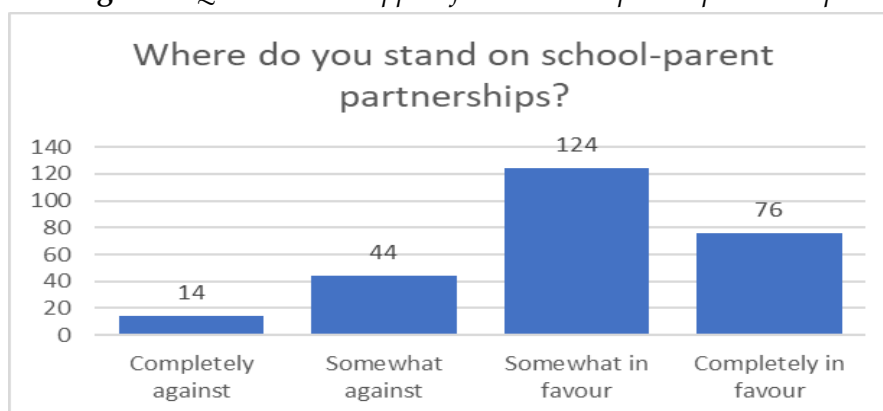
Given the issues regarding increased parental participation in the school system and the widening of the school council remit, as suggested by Bonello et al. (2000), quoted above, we asked respondents the following nine questions, all of which were related to these issues. Respondents were asked to respond on a four-point Likert scale, ranging from "1 = completely against" through to "4 = completely in favour". In question 3 only, respondents were also asked, on a four-point scale, whether there are any benefits to school-parent partnerships, ranging from "1 = no benefits" to "4 = definite benefits".

1. Where do you stand on school-parent partnerships?
2. Where do you stand on the school council exercising jurisdiction over educational matters?
3. Are there benefits of school-parent partnership?
4. Where do you stand on schools narrowing the divide between parents and educators?
5. Where do you stand on school councils being involved in Benchmark or SEC exams?
6. Where do you stand on school councils being involved in absenteeism?
7. Where do you stand on school councils being involved in discipline?
8. Where do you stand on school councils being involved in policies at the school level?
9. Where do you stand on school councils being involved in social welfare?

School-parent partnership

The median score for this question was 3, which indicated that most respondents were somewhat in favour of a school-parent partnership. In this section, 22.5% were against or somewhat against this proposal, while 77.5% were somewhat in favour or completely in favour.

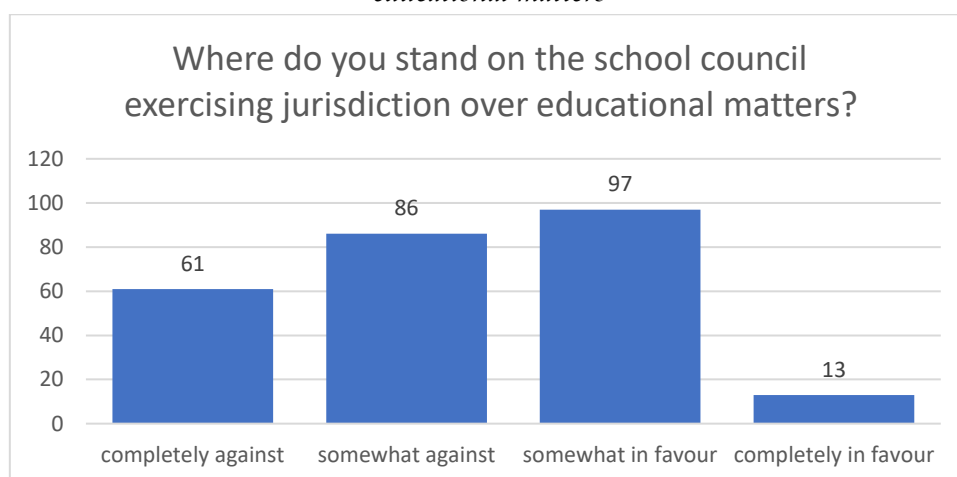
Figure 4 Question 1 - Support for the school-parent partnership



School council jurisdiction over educational matters

A median score of 2 indicated that most respondents were somewhat opposed to the school council's jurisdiction over educational matters. Indeed, 57.2% of educators were opposed to or somewhat opposed to this proposal, whereas 42.8% were somewhat in favour or completely in favour of the school council having jurisdiction over educational matters.

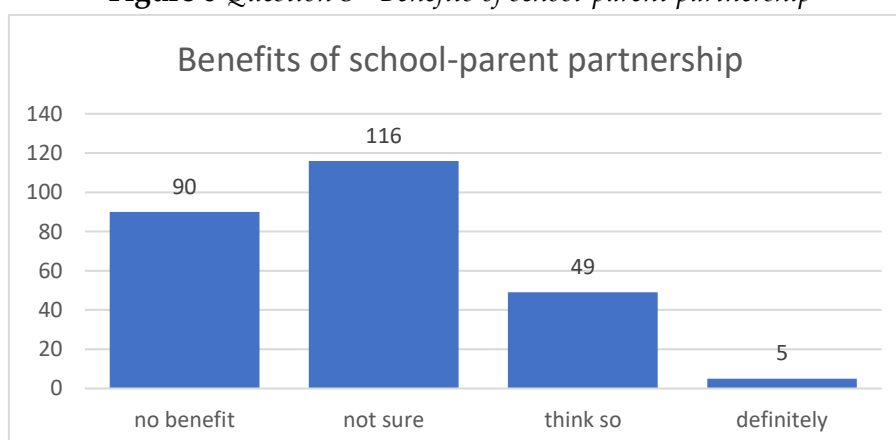
Figure 5 *Question 2 - Support for school councils exercising jurisdiction over educational matters*



Benefits of school-parent partnership.

The median score for this question was 2, suggesting that the majority of respondents saw little or no benefit in a school-parent partnership. A large majority of educators (79.2%) reported no or few benefits from this partnership, whereas only 20.8% reported some or significant benefits.

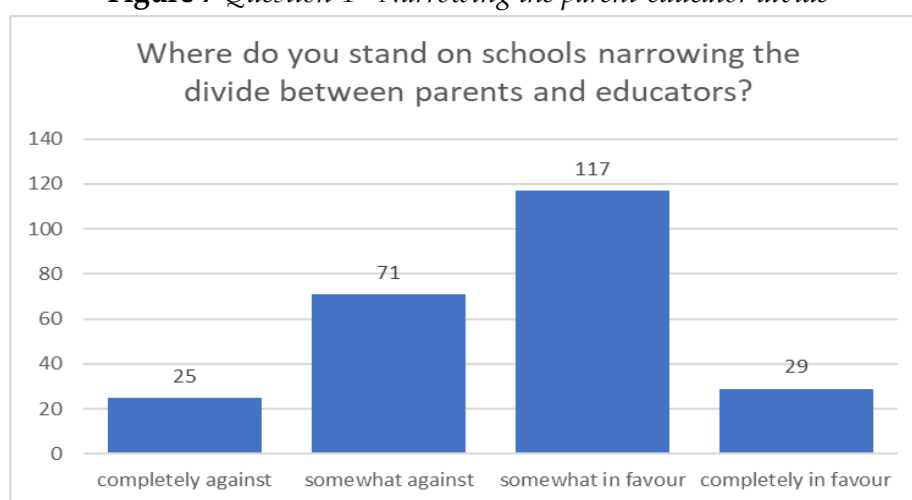
Figure 6 *Question 3 - Benefits of school-parent partnership*



Schools are narrowing the divide between parents and educators.

The median score for this question was 3, indicating that the majority of respondents were somewhat in favour of narrowing the parent-educator divide. About a third of educators (39.6%) were opposed to or somewhat opposed to this proposal, while 60.4% were somewhat in favour or completely in favour.

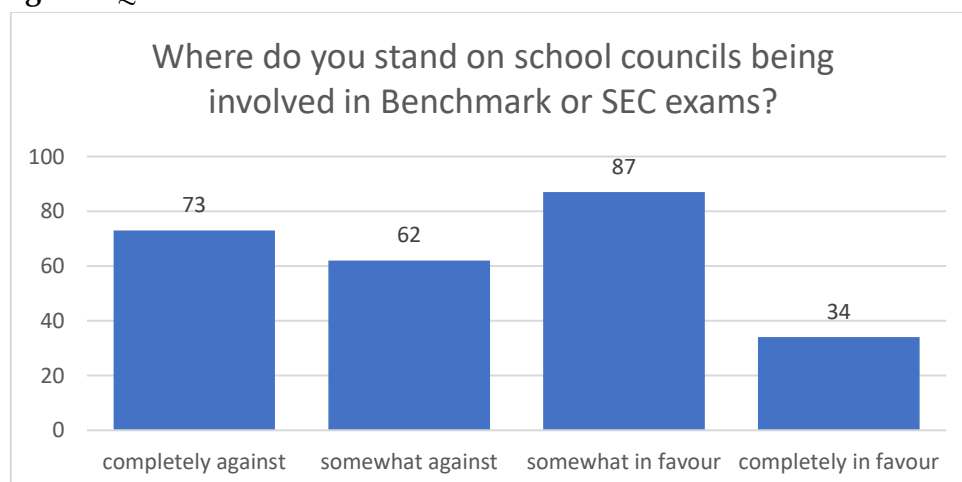
Figure 7 Question 4 - Narrowing the parent-educator divide



School councils involved in Benchmark or SEC exams.

The median score of 2 indicated that a marginal majority of respondents (52.7%) opposed the school council's involvement in benchmark examinations. Only 47.3% of educators favoured this proposal.

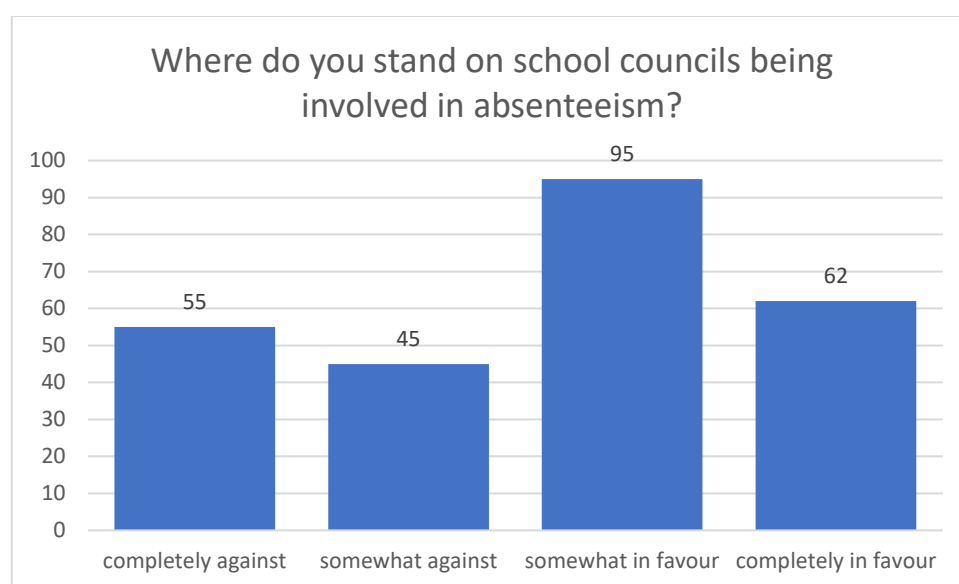
Figure 8 Question 5 - School councils involved in Benchmark or SEC examinations



School councils' involvement in absenteeism.

The median score for this question was 3, indicating that the majority of respondents were somewhat in favour of school councils' involvement in pupil absenteeism. While 60.1% were slightly or entirely in favour of this proposal, 38.9% were against or somewhat against it.

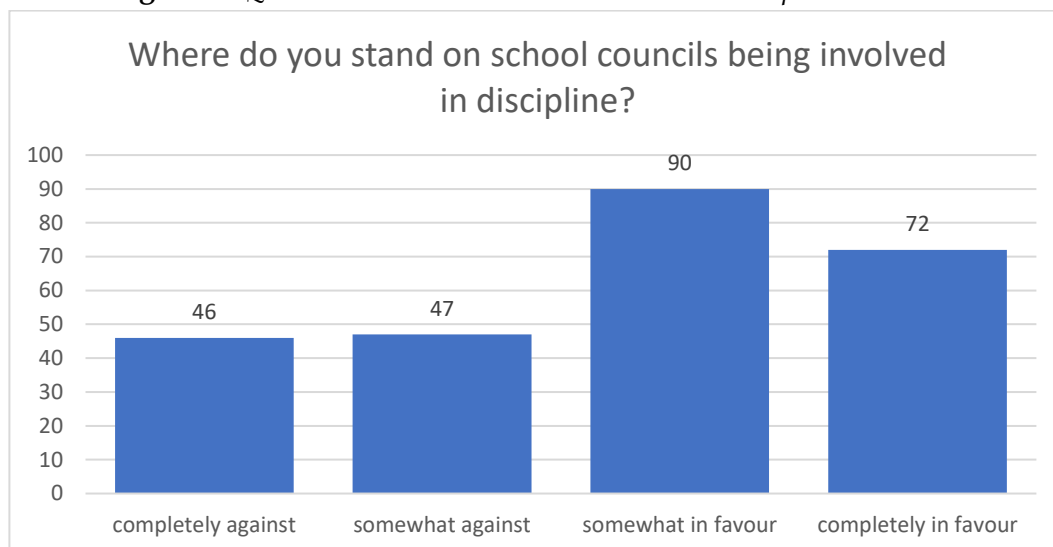
Figure 9 Question 6 - School councils involved in absenteeism issues



School councils' involvement in discipline.

The median score for this question was 3, indicating that the majority of respondents favoured the involvement of school councils in pupil discipline. While 63.6% were in favour of this proposal, 36.4% were against it or only slightly in favour.

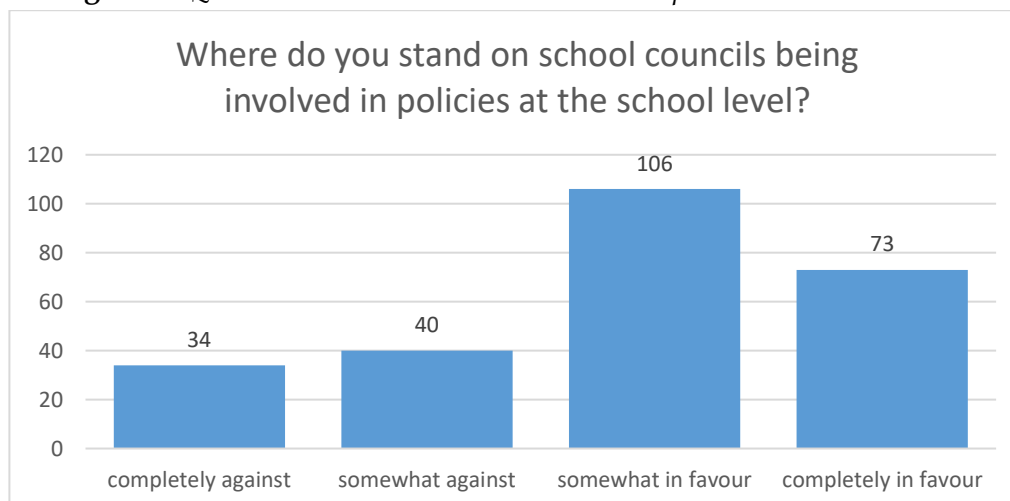
Figure 10 Question 7 - School councils involved in discipline issues



School councils' involvement in school-level policies.

The median score for this question was 3, indicating that the majority of respondents favoured school councils' involvement in school-level policies. While 70.8% were in favour, 29.2% were against this proposal.

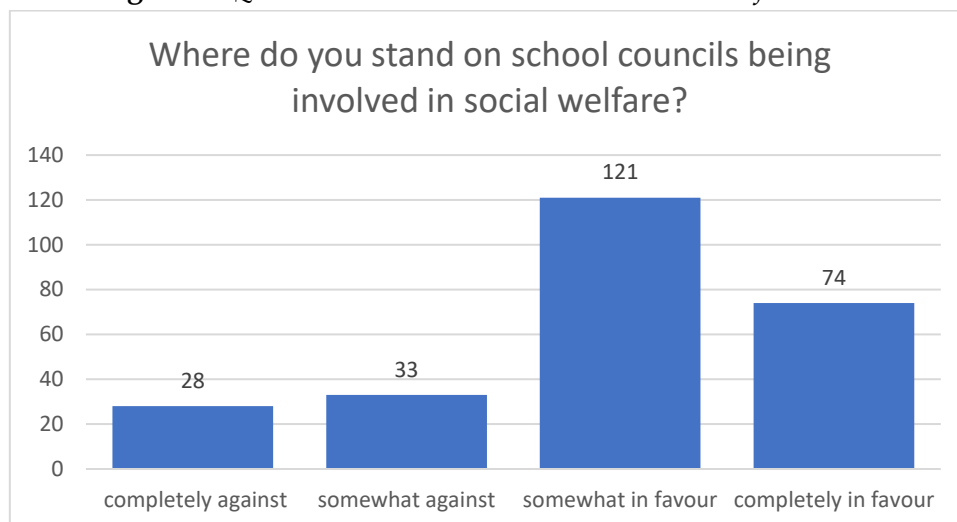
Figure 11 Question 8 - School councils involved in policies at the school level



School councils' involvement in social welfare.

The median score for this question was 3, indicating that the majority of respondents favoured the involvement of school councils in social welfare. While 23.8% were against this proposal, 76.2% were in favour.

Figure 12 Question 9 - School councils involved in welfare issues



Role and age differences in the responses obtained

Role differences

The authors examined whether there were statistically significant differences between groups of educators by role (teachers and learning support educators), sex (male and female), and age (40 years and under vs over 40 years). It was possible to balance the groups by role and age, but not by sex, due to the small number of males participating in the study. Possible sex differences are treated separately.

There were statistically significant differences between teachers' and LSEs' responses to questions 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, and 8 in section 3.2 above. Differences in the responses of the teachers and the LSEs to the question of whether they were in favour of **school-parent partnership** were analysed using an independent-samples *t*-test. The responses of the 138 teachers ($M = 2.88$, $SD = .88$) compared to the 119 LSEs ($M = 3.17$, $SD = .73$) demonstrated significantly higher scores for the LSE group, $t(255) = -2.77$, $p = .006$.

Differences in teachers' and LSEs' responses to the question of whether they favoured the school council exercising jurisdiction over educational matters were analysed using an independent-samples *t*-test. The responses of the 138 teachers ($M = 2.08$, $SD = .91$) compared to the 118 LSEs ($M = 2.44$, $SD = .79$) demonstrated significantly higher scores for the LSE group, $t(254) = -3.37$, $p = .001$.

Differences in teachers' and LSEs' responses regarding the benefits of school-parent partnerships were analysed using an independent samples *t*-test. The responses of the 138 teachers ($M = 2.88$, $SD = .89$) compared to the 119 LSEs ($M = 3.17$, $SD = .73$) demonstrated significantly higher scores for the LSE group, $t(257) = 2.21$, $p = .028$.

Differences in teachers' and LSEs' responses regarding the school council's involvement in Benchmark or SEC exams were analysed using an independent-samples *t*-test. The responses of the 137 teachers ($M = 2.09$, $SD = .95$) were compared with those of the 118 LSEs ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 1.05$), yielding a significantly higher score for the LSE group, $t(253) = -3.97$, $p = .001$.

Differences in teachers' and LSEs' responses regarding the school council's involvement in discipline were analysed using an independent-samples *t*-test. The responses of the 137 teachers ($M = 2.58$, $SD = 1.05$) were compared with those of the 117 LSEs ($M = 2.93$, $SD = 1.04$), who obtained significantly higher scores, $t(252) = -2.65$, $p = .009$.

Differences in teachers' and LSEs' responses regarding the school council's involvement in school-level policies were analysed using an independent-samples *t*-test. The responses of the 134 teachers ($M = 2.71$, $SD = .97$) compared to the 118 LSEs ($M = 3.04$, $SD = .97$) demonstrated significantly higher scores for the LSE group, $t(250) = -2.72$, $p = .007$.

Teachers and LSEs were equally in agreement that the parent-educator divide should be narrowed (question 4) and that school councils should be involved in addressing absenteeism (question 6).

Age differences

To account for potential differences between younger and older age groups, the authors balanced the sample by age, grouping participants under 40 and those 40 and older to obtain two balanced groups. There were significant differences between the age groups on questions 1, 3, 4, 5, 7, and 8 in section 3.1 above.

The responses of the 127 younger educators ($M = 3.20$, $SD = .80$) compared to the 131 older educators ($M = 2.84$, $SD = .82$) regarding their opinion about increased school-parent partnership were analysed through an independent

samples t-test, indicating significantly higher scores for the younger group, $t(256) = 3.543, p = .001$.

The responses of the 128 younger educators ($M = 1.73, SD = .77$) compared to the 132 older educators ($M = 2.02, SD = .76$) regarding their opinion about the benefits of school-parent partnership were analysed through an independent samples t-test, indicating significantly lower scores for the younger group, $t(258) = -3.05, p = .003$.

The responses of the 120 younger educators ($M = 2.81, SD = .79$) compared to the 122 older educators ($M = 2.43, SD = .82$) regarding their opinion about narrowing the divide between parents and educators were analysed through an independent samples t-test, indicating significantly higher scores for the younger group, $t(240) = 3.60, p = .001$.

The responses of the 127 younger educators ($M = 2.48, SD = 1.02$) compared to the 129 older educators ($M = 2.16, SD = 1.02$) regarding their opinion about the school council being involved in Benchmark or SEC exams were analysed through an independent samples t-test, indicating significantly higher scores for the younger group, $t(254) = 2.50, p = .013$.

The responses of the 126 younger educators ($M = 2.90, SD = 1$) compared to the 129 older educators ($M = 2.57, SD = 1.01$) regarding their opinion about the school council being involved in discipline were analysed through an independent samples t-test, indicating significantly higher scores for the younger group, $t(251.84) = 2.52, p = .012$.

The responses of the 125 younger educators ($M = 3.03, SD = .92$) compared to the 128 older educators ($M = 2.70, SD = 1.02$) regarding their opinion about the school council being involved in policies at the school level were analysed through an independent samples t-test, indicating significantly higher scores for the younger group, $t(249.72) = 2.76, p = .006$.

There were only two possible instances in which an interaction effect between age and role was possible: support for school-parent partnerships and support for the school council's involvement in school-level policies. The combined effects of age and role on respondents' support for school-parent partnership were examined using a factorial ANOVA. A 2X2 ANOVA was conducted with age (younger and older) and role (teacher or LSE) as between-subject factors,

which revealed a main effect of age, $F(1, 253) = 8.65, p = .004$, and role, $F(1, 253) = 4.14, p = .043$. These main effects were not qualified by an interaction between age and role, $F(1, 253) = 0.1417, p = .733$.

In the second instance, the combined effects of respondents' age and role on their support for the school council's involvement in school-level policies were examined using **a factorial ANOVA**. A 2X2 ANOVA was conducted with age (younger and older) and role (teacher or LSE) as between-subject factors, which revealed a main effect of age, $F(1, 248) = 4.058, p = .045$, and role, $F(1, 248) = 4.712, p = .031$. These main effects were not qualified by an interaction between age and role, $F(1, 248) = 2.179, p = .141$.

Gender differences

Given potential gender differences in responses, the authors advise caution in interpreting these results, as the sample is heavily female (the overwhelming majority of participants). On two questions, question 6, "Should the school council be involved in absenteeism issues?" and question 9, "Should the school council be involved in social welfare issues?", males were significantly more likely to agree to a higher level than females. Differences in male and female educators' responses to the first question were analysed using an independent-samples *t*-test. The responses of the 35 male educators ($M = 3.11, SD = .88$) were significantly higher than those of the 221 female educators ($M = 2.56, SD = 1.08$), $t(254) = -3.28, p = .002$.

Similarly, for the second question, males were significantly more likely than females to agree to a higher level. Differences in the responses of male and female educators to the question "Should the school council be involved in social welfare issues?" were analysed using an independent-samples *t*-test. The responses of the 35 male educators ($M = 3.29, SD = .75$) were significantly higher than those of the 220 female educators ($M = 2.88, SD = .94$), $t(253) = -2.42, p = .016$. (POSSIBILITY OF TYPE 1/ TYPE 2 ERROR).

Qualitative analysis of educators' responses

Particular reference is made to three questions administered to teachers and LSEs, in which they were asked to indicate their level of agreement with these statements and to provide additional justification for their responses. The following were the three questions examined;

1. What is your position regarding the creation of a school-parent partnership?
2. Should the School Council (with the involvement of parents) have jurisdiction over curricular and discipline matters at the school, and not as currently stipulated in the Act of 1988 (where this jurisdiction is credited to the educators)?
3. Should schools narrow the divide through school councils?

School parent partnership

As shown in Figure 2, most educators responding to this question were somewhat in favour of the proposal; overall, 22.5% were against or somewhat against, while 77.5% were somewhat in favour or completely in favour. The reasons for opposing the proposal were that the administration of an educational institution should be left to professionals, since parents were deemed unqualified to make educational decisions. Parents were seen as being out of touch with school management issues. While parents may be involved in some aspects of education, the curriculum remains the teacher's domain, and, at best, parents may have only a consultative role. On the other hand, those who were somewhat in favour (the majority) or entirely in favour viewed this issue as a parental right, indeed a duty to contribute to their children's education. Additionally, parental partnership improves communication between parents and teachers. Those who were completely in favour mentioned reciprocity, power-sharing, and shared responsibility, and cited the experience as beneficial to students.

The School Council has jurisdiction over curricular and discipline matters.

Regarding the school council's jurisdiction over educational matters, the majority of respondents were opposed or somewhat opposed to the proposal. In contrast, a significant minority were somewhat in favour or entirely in favour. The main reasons for the objections to this proposal were that parents, as council members, were not professionally trained or competent in matters of school curricula or discipline. They may be biased in their views, even when

parents need to voice their opinions. Discipline and school issues were seen as the exclusive domain of educators. Those who were somewhat in favour (the largest of the four groups, albeit in the overall minority) stated that parents' views should be heard and that parents should be kept informed. Involvement was considered beneficial for feedback, communication, and collaboration. A small number of educators cited collaboration as the primary reason for their preference for a partnership.

Narrowing the divide

Regarding efforts to narrow the divide between educators and parents, most educators favoured this proposal. Those completely in favour cited complementarity and collaboration, mutual benefit, and parental voice. Others who were more guarded in their agreement (somewhat in favour) acknowledged that parents should have a voice and should be informed. However, some sought to exclude curricular and school matters, even as others were willing to involve parents in disciplinary matters. These cited the need for parents to adopt professional attitudes toward the enterprise. Even if specific important issues were withheld from parental jurisdiction, the overall effect would benefit the children attending the school. Those not in favour of narrowing the divide noted that the prevailing culture was not conducive to such an undertaking, that parents could harbour bias, and that the school's operations should be limited to educators. They also stated that parents should not be involved in disciplinary and curricular matters. Those who were completely opposed to the proposal stated that it is the responsibility of educators and other professionals, not parents, to manage the school, as parents lacked the requisite expertise. They also said that if parents were involved, they would be biased in favour of their own children's needs.

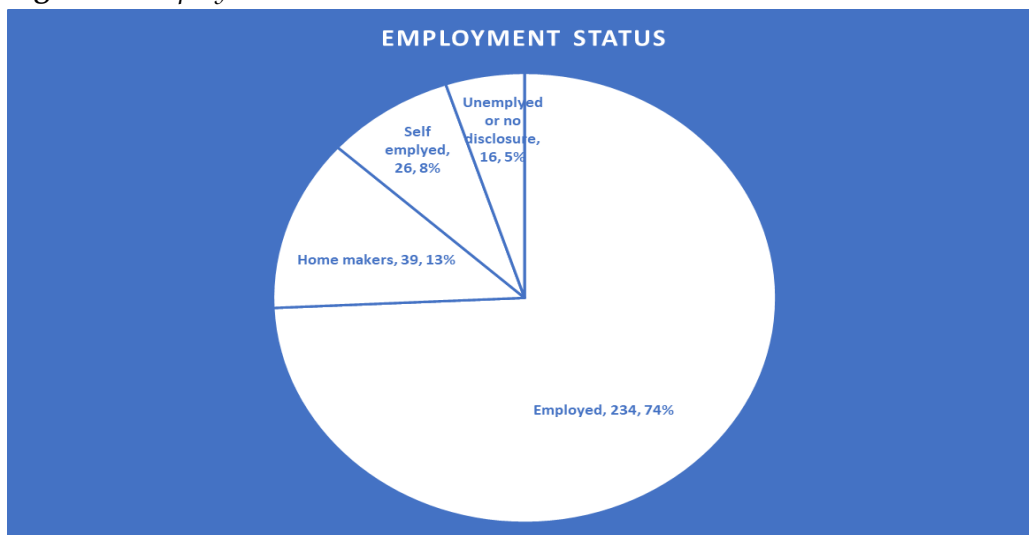
Parents Characteristics

Three hundred and fifteen respondents returned the parent questionnaire. Not all respondents answered all questions, and the number of valid responses ranged from 255 to 315, depending on the question.

The parent questionnaire was completed by respondents whose ages were bracketed between 20 and 30, and 50 and 60, with a median age of around 40 years. Of these, the majority were mothers (255), and the next largest group were fathers (41). One person described him/herself as a guardian, and two others described their role as "other"; sixteen respondents did not complete this question. The vast majority of respondents described themselves as

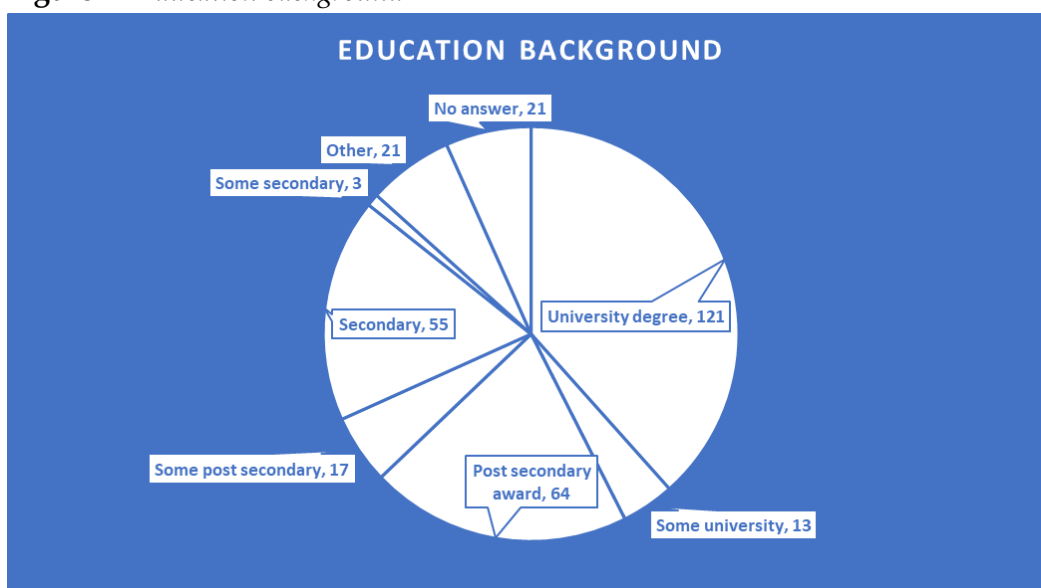
employed (234), with the next largest group being homemakers (39) and the smallest being self-employed (26). One respondent was unemployed, and 15 respondents did not disclose their employment status.

Figure 13 *Employment status*



The majority of respondents (121) had completed a university degree; the next largest groups had completed post-secondary education (64) and secondary schooling (55). Others reported having some secondary education (3), some post-secondary education (17), or having spent some years at university (13). There were two groups of twenty-one each who did not answer this question or listed their education as "other".

Figure 14 *Education background*



When asked whether they were familiar with the 1988 Education Act, the majority (191) replied no, and the remainder (104) replied yes. Twenty respondents omitted this question.

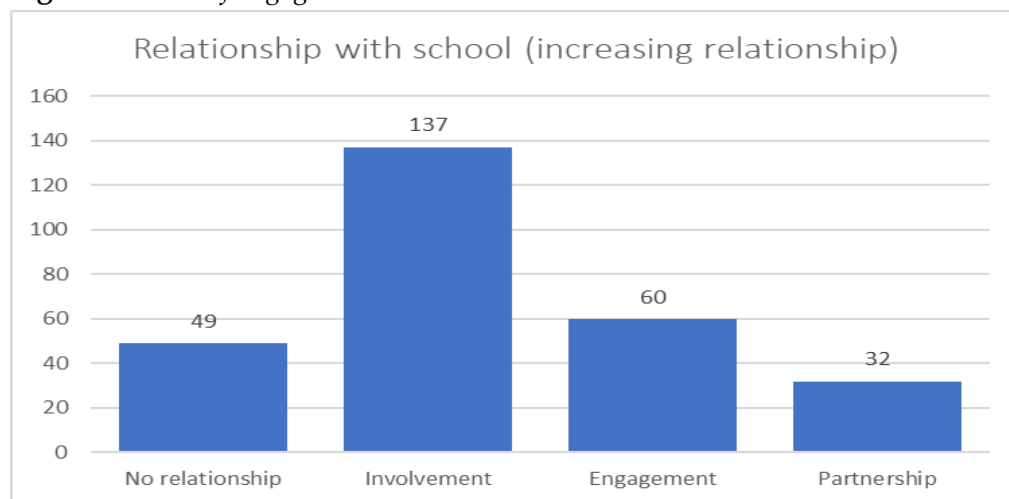
When asked whether they had voted to elect a parent representative, the majority (191) answered in the negative, the remainder (104) answered in the affirmative, and 20 omitted to answer.

When asked whether they had ever submitted their name as a candidate for the school council, the majority answered in the negative (265) and the rest (31) in the affirmative, with 19 omitting to answer this question.

When asked whether they had ever been a member of the school council, the majority answered in the negative (265); the rest (33) answered in the affirmative; and 17 omitted to answer.

When asked whether they were in favour of a College Board of Governors, the majority answered in the affirmative (150), the rest (105) answered in the negative, and 60 did not answer this question.

Figure 15 *Level of engagement with the school*



When asked whether they felt they were in an equal partnership with educators, the majority (148) replied affirmatively, 118 replied negatively, and 49 did not respond.

When asked to rate their relationship with the school on a four-point scale ranging from "no relationship" through "involvement" and "engagement" to

“partnership,” few reported a partnership, as shown in Figure 13 below. Forty-nine parents (17.6%) reported having no relationship with the schools their children attend; this is discouraging. However, 137 (49.3%) reported placing their relationship with the school where their children attend at the involvement level, which is encouraging. Also encouraging are the two statistics that follow: 60 (21.6%) reported some form of engagement with the school their children attend, and 32 (11.5%) reported considering their relationship with the school a partnership.

Of the thirty-three respondents who had served as members of the school council, four reported “no relationship”; the majority (13) reported “involved”; eight reported “engagement”; and six reported “partnership”. It does not appear that members of the school council experienced partnership to a greater extent than the general population of respondents. In fact, from the select group of thirty-three respondents who served as school council members, more than half (66.9%) reported “no relationship” or just “involvement”, and only 33.1% reported “engagement” or “partnership”.

Further analysis of this situation was undertaken. The respondents were split into two balanced groups. These groups comprised 126 respondents who reported a level of education not exceeding post-secondary, and 127 who reported a tertiary level of education. An independent-samples t-test failed to identify a statistically significant difference between the two groups’ responses regarding the degree of relationship with the schools; both groups reported a mean relationship with the school of 2.27. On the other hand, the responses of the lower-educated 118 respondents ($M = 1.69$, $SD = .47$) compared to the higher-educated 124 respondents ($M = 1.46$, $SD = .50$) regarding their feeling of being an equal partner in their child’s education indicated significantly lower scores for the higher-educated group of parents, $t(240) = 3.65$, $p = .001$.

Discussion

Educators’ Opinion vis-à-vis School-Parent Partnership

This study explored educators’ perceptions of school-parent partnerships in Malta and examined these perceptions in relation to existing international and local literature. The findings reveal a clear tension between conceptual support for partnership and reluctance to embrace its practical implications, particularly when such partnership challenges established professional boundaries.

At a general level, most educators expressed support for school–parent partnerships and for narrowing the divide between parents and educators. This aligns with a substantial body of literature that positions parents as essential partners in children’s educational success (Christenson, 2004; Fullan, 2007; Ovensen et al., 2023; Woodhouse et al., 2024). However, this apparent endorsement weakens considerably when partnership is operationalised as shared decision-making, governance, curriculum, or assessment. The finding that nearly 80% of respondents perceived few or no benefits from school–parent partnerships exposes a significant contradiction between principle and practice. This mirrors Borg Axisa’s (2020) observation that parental involvement is often promoted rhetorically but remains poorly embedded in everyday school practice.

Educators’ resistance appears strongly linked to concerns about professionalism, expertise, and control. Both quantitative and qualitative findings indicate that many educators regard curriculum, discipline, and assessment as the exclusive domain of trained professionals. Parents were often described as lacking the competence or objectivity required to engage meaningfully in these areas. This stance reflects a conservative professional mindset long documented in the literature (Blodgett, 1971; Ramey & Ramey, 1992) and reinforces Mitra’s (2008) and Brown et al.’s (2020) argument that educators may view parental voice as a threat to professional authority and accountability.

The Maltese legislative context appears to reinforce these attitudes. The Education Acts explicitly restrict parental involvement in teaching, discipline, and administration, effectively legitimising limited parental participation. As a result, educators’ scepticism toward expanded parental roles cannot be disentangled from a policy framework that institutionalises a top-down governance model. This may explain why educators were more supportive of parental involvement in areas such as social welfare, absenteeism, and school-level policies—domains perceived as supportive rather than intrusive. Such involvement corresponds to lower levels of participation on Hart’s Ladder (Hart, 1992, 1997), characterised by consultation rather than partnership or co-development.

Role-based differences between teachers and learning support educators (LSEs) provide important insight. LSEs consistently demonstrated greater

support for school–parent partnerships, perceived more benefits, and were more open to School Council involvement in educational matters. This finding resonates with Hornby’s (2011) model of parental involvement in inclusive education, which emphasises collaboration, shared expertise, and responsiveness to parental needs. Given that LSEs frequently work closely with families, particularly those of children with diverse or complex needs, their more favourable attitudes likely stem from their lived professional experience of the value of parental knowledge. This supports the literature’s claim that parental involvement can enhance, rather than undermine, professional practice (Fullan, 2007).

Age differences further suggest a generational shift in professional culture. Younger educators were significantly more supportive of school–parent partnerships, narrowing the divide, and extending School Council involvement into areas such as policy, discipline, and assessment. This finding aligns with Cutajar’s (2016) assertion that contemporary education increasingly values collaboration, networking, and shared responsibility. However, younger educators simultaneously reported perceiving fewer benefits from partnerships, possibly reflecting limited experience with effective collaboration or uncertainty about how to implement partnerships in practice. This highlights the need for professional development that moves beyond ideological endorsement to practical strategies for meaningful engagement with parents.

Gender differences, although interpreted cautiously given the predominantly female sample, indicated that male educators were more supportive of School Council involvement in absenteeism and social welfare. While tentative, this finding suggests that perceptions of parental involvement may vary according to how roles related to care, welfare, and discipline are conceptualised.

Qualitative data deepen the understanding of these patterns. Even among educators who supported narrowing the parent–educator divide, many favoured a consultative model that excluded curricular and disciplinary matters. This reflects Middlewood’s (1999) distinction between parents as “consumers” rather than “co-educators” and supports Bryk and Schneider’s (2002) argument that relational trust between schools and parents is difficult to establish and sustain. Trust appears conditional, shaped by fears of bias, interference, and erosion of professional status.

Crucially, the findings reveal a disconnect between educators' perceptions and the broader evidence base on the benefits of parental involvement. Research consistently links parental engagement to improved academic achievement, behaviour, attendance, and motivation (Kim et al., 2023; Ihmeideh et al., 2020; Leithwood et al., 2004). However, many educators in this study appeared to conceptualise partnership narrowly in terms of governance and power, rather than as a relational and pedagogical resource. This limited framing risks overlooking the "rich fund of skills and expertise" that parents can contribute (Beare et al., 1989).

In the Maltese context, these findings underscore the need for systemic change. Educators' ambivalence reflects not only personal attitudes but also a policy environment that constrains parental participation. As Borg Axisa (2020) argues, moving from policy rhetoric to meaningful practice requires a paradigm shift that repositions parents as valued contributors rather than potential threats. Such a shift would entail legislative reform, targeted professional learning, and opportunities for educators to experience successful partnerships firsthand.

In conclusion, while Maltese educators broadly endorse the idea of school-parent partnership, its realisation is hindered by professional anxieties, cultural norms, and structural constraints. Without deliberate efforts to address these barriers, school-parent partnerships risk remaining symbolic rather than transformative, perpetuating the divide they are intended to bridge.

Parents' Point of View concerning school-parent partnership

The parent questionnaire provides a valuable counterpoint to educators' perspectives by foregrounding parents' lived experiences and sentiments regarding school-parent relationships within the Maltese context. When interpreted through the lens of the literature review, the findings reveal a persistent gap between the theoretical endorsement of partnership and parents' actual experiences of involvement, engagement, and shared responsibility.

Demographically, the respondents largely reflect the diversity and complexity of contemporary family life described in the literature. The predominance of mothers, the wide age range, and the varied educational and employment backgrounds resonate with Clay's (2007) assertion that modern families cannot be reduced to a single, traditional model. This diversity reinforces the

argument advanced by Porter (2008) and Rogoff (2003) that educators must move beyond stereotypical assumptions about families and instead recognise the varied cultural, social, and educational resources parents bring to their children's schooling.

Despite this potential, parental participation in formal governance structures remains limited. The majority of respondents reported not voting for parent representatives, not standing as candidates, and not serving on school councils. This pattern aligns closely with the observations of Borg Axisa (2020) and Bonello et al. (2000) that Maltese parents tend to disengage from structures that offer limited influence over substantive educational matters. The legal constraints imposed by the Education Act, which explicitly exclude parents from teaching, discipline, and administration, likely contribute to parents' perceptions that participation is largely symbolic rather than meaningful. As Middlewood (1999) argues, when parents are positioned as "consumers" rather than "co-educators," the motivation to engage more deeply is inevitably weakened, a positional claim underlined by Jones and Palikara (2023) and Lowe and Sheldon (2022).

Interestingly, while formal participation was low, parents' subjective perceptions of partnership were more nuanced. Nearly half of the respondents perceived themselves as in an equal partnership with educators, yet when asked to place their relationship on a continuum, most placed it at the "involvement" level rather than "engagement" or "partnership." This discrepancy suggests that parents may conceptually endorse partnership but, in practice, experience it as limited, school-controlled interaction. Hart's Ladder of Participation (1992, 1997) provides a useful framework here: most parents appear to be positioned on the lower rungs, characterised by information sharing and consultation rather than shared decision-making or co-development.

The finding that even parents who served on school councils did not report significantly higher levels of partnership is particularly revealing. This challenges assumptions that governance structures automatically foster engagement and supports Bryk and Schneider's (2002) claim that trust and partnership cannot be legislated into existence. Instead, they require sustained relational work, mutual respect, and a willingness to share power – conditions that appear largely absent in the Maltese state school context.

Educational attainment further complicates the picture. While no difference emerged between lower- and higher-educated parents regarding the degree of relationship with schools, higher-educated parents were significantly less likely to feel they were equal partners. This may reflect greater awareness of what genuine partnership entails, informed by higher cultural capital and familiarity with participatory models discussed in the literature. As Lawson (2003) and Baker and Harris (2022) suggest, misalignment between educators' and parents' understanding of involvement can generate frustration, particularly among parents who expect a more active, dialogic role.

These findings sit uneasily alongside the strong body of international research demonstrating the benefits of parental involvement. Studies by Epstein and Dauber (1988), Kim et al. (2023), Leithwood et al. (2004), and Ihmeideh et al. (2020) consistently show that meaningful parental engagement enhances academic achievement, attendance, and behaviour. Parents in this study appear implicitly aware of their importance—evidenced by their sense of responsibility and interest—yet structurally constrained from contributing beyond narrowly defined roles. Beare et al.'s (1989) warning that sidelining parents signals that learning is “closeted” and professionally guarded is particularly apt for interpreting these findings.

From a Maltese policy perspective, the data suggest that legislative rhetoric supporting parental involvement has not translated into practice that empowers parents. The continued centralisation of authority and the marginalisation of school councils reinforce a culture of limited participation, echoing Stoll and Fink's (2003) critique of schools that isolate themselves to maintain control, a finding corroborated by Curry and Williams's 2022 study. Parents' lukewarm engagement may therefore be less a reflection of apathy and more a rational response to structures that offer little scope for meaningful influence.

In conclusion, parents' sentiments reveal cautious goodwill towards schools but also a clear ceiling on partnership as currently enacted. The literature strongly supports parents as essential partners with unique knowledge of their children (Fullan, 2007; Hornby, 2011; Paccaud et al., 2021; and Woodhouse et al., 2024), yet Maltese parents remain largely confined to low-level involvement. Bridging this gap will require not only policy reform but also a cultural shift among educators and leaders—one that recognises parents not as

peripheral helpers, but as indispensable collaborators in children's educational journeys.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the nature of school–parent relationships in Malta by listening to both educators and parents and by situating their views within the wider body of educational research. What emerges is not a lack of goodwill or concern for children's learning, but a system in which collaboration is cautiously endorsed yet tightly contained. Partnership is widely acknowledged as desirable, but rarely experienced as authentic or influential. As a result, school–parent relations tend to remain functional yet uneven and limited in scope.

Educators generally accept the importance of maintaining contact with parents, particularly in matters related to student welfare, attendance, and behaviour. However, there is a strong reluctance to extend collaboration into areas perceived as core professional territory. This hesitancy is reinforced by long-standing institutional arrangements and legal frameworks that clearly delineate authority and responsibility, leaving little room for shared ownership of educational processes. The Maltese legislative framework reinforces this stance by explicitly reserving key educational domains for professionals, thereby normalising a consultative rather than collaborative model of engagement. While such structures offer clarity and control, they also risk reinforcing distance and limiting families' potential contributions.

At the same time, the study identifies important nuances within the educator cohort. Learning support educators and younger teachers demonstrated more openness towards partnership, suggesting that proximity to families, inclusive practice, and generational shifts in professional identity may serve as catalysts for more collaborative approaches. However, the fact that younger educators perceived fewer benefits from partnerships underscores the need for structured opportunities to develop the skills, confidence, and experience required to work effectively with parents.

Parents, on the other hand, appear willing to support schools and engage with their children's education, yet the system's own boundaries often constrain their participation. Many parents perceive their involvement as passive or peripheral, characterised by information exchange rather than dialogue or influence. Even when formal opportunities for participation exist, these are not

always experienced as meaningful. This has resulted in a sense of restrained engagement, where parents remain interested and supportive but hesitant to invest time and energy in structures they perceive as having little impact.

A central conclusion of this study is that the current model of school–parent interaction in Malta prioritises order and professional autonomy over shared responsibility. While this model may reduce conflict and uncertainty, it underutilises the knowledge, experience, and commitment that families can offer. The consequence is not open opposition but a quiet disconnect. Educators protect their professional space, parents adapt to limited roles, and partnership remains more aspirational than real.

At the same time, the study points to signs of possible change. Differences in professional role and generational outlook suggest that more collaborative ways of working are both feasible and desirable. These emerging perspectives indicate that resistance to partnership is not inevitable, but rather shaped by experience, training, and organisational culture.

Recommendations

In light of the above conclusions, we are proposing the following interrelated recommendations:

1. *Legislative and policy reform*

There is an urgent need to revisit the Maltese legislative framework governing parental involvement. While safeguarding professional accountability, policy should explicitly enable parents to participate meaningfully in school governance, curriculum dialogue, and decision-making processes. Moving away from a strictly top-down model towards distributed leadership would signal a genuine commitment to partnership rather than consultation.

2. *Professional development for educators*

Initial teacher education and ongoing professional learning should include structured training on working with parents as partners. This should move beyond abstract advocacy and focus on practical strategies for communication, conflict resolution, co-planning, and trust-building. Drawing on models such as Hornby's (2011) framework could help educators recognise parents' strengths and contributions as complementary to professional expertise.

3. *Create meaningful entry points for parents*

Parents are more likely to engage when they can see that their input matters. Schools should design opportunities that allow parents to contribute insights, perspectives, and feedback to inform practice, without positioning them as adversaries or passive observers.

4. *Strengthening school-level practices*

Beyond formal councils, schools should create multiple, accessible avenues for meaningful parental engagement, including collaborative forums, curriculum discussions, and joint problem-solving initiatives. These spaces should prioritise dialogue and shared understanding rather than information transmission.

5. *Building a culture of trust and reciprocity*

Finally, a partnership must be approached as a relational process rather than a structural arrangement. School leaders play a critical role in modelling openness, valuing parental voice, and fostering a school culture where collaboration is seen as enhancing, rather than threatening, professional practice.

This study demonstrates that while the foundations for school–parent partnership in Malta exist in principle, realising its transformative potential requires systemic, cultural, and attitudinal change. Moving forward will require a deliberate rebalancing of roles, expectations, and power. Only by aligning policy, practice, and professional identity can schools and parents move from parallel roles to a shared educational endeavour centred on the success and well-being of every child.

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