

Greek Mothers' Narratives of the Construct of Parental Involvement

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Abstract

The present study provides a brief overview of the 'narrative turn' in counselling and adopts a narrative perspective and analysis to explore Greek mothers' experiences, and meaning making of involvement in their children's learning. Data were collected via ten narrative interviews (life-history/biographical narrative). Participants portrayed a variety of conceptions and practices regarding children's learning and parental participation. Mothers' stories depicted parental engagement as a complex, multifaceted, flexible and multivoiced construct which can take various forms and is open to change. The findings can inform and enrich counselling practice and prevention efforts including parenting training programmes, family community programmes and home-school link initiatives. Of particular interest for counsellors and therapists are stories of functional and dysfunctional parental involvement practices, school expectations and cultural scripts, the working mother, identity and the process of change.

Keywords: narrative, dialogic, counselling, therapy, Greek parental involvement

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Introduction

The field of study on parental involvement in children's learning has grown significantly since the 1980s and has been largely supported by extensive international research (Desforges & Abouchar, 2003; Epstein, 1995, 2001; Georgiou, 2007; Jeynes, 2003, 2007; Williams, 2011). Parental involvement has been defined across studies as representing various behaviours and practices at home or school that directly or indirectly influence children's cognitive and social development and achievement. These include: good parenting in the home such as listening to children read, supervision of homework, parent-child discussion, attending parent education workshops or school based activities such as parent teacher meetings, participation, and volunteering in school events, and so on (Desforges & Abouchar, 2003; Williams, 2011). Overall, research on parental participation has shown a positive relationship between parents' engagement in their children's learning – especially in the form of 'at-home good parenting' – and educational achievement (Desforges & Abouchar, 2003; Epstein, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2007). Student educational outcomes are assumed to be influenced or caused by parental involvement, which itself is often assumed to be influenced by sociodemographic variables, parental attitudes or factors related to schools (Desforges & Abouchar, 2003; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Peña, 2000).

The literature on parental involvement, however, is not uniformly consistent (Anderson, 2007, as cited in Williams, 2011; Fan & Chen, 2001, as cited in Georgiou, 2007). This finding has often been attributed to the vague and multifaceted definition of the construct (Hong & Ho, 2005), methodological issues (Christenson, Rounds, & Gorney,

1992) or the differential understanding of 'involvement' by parents, teachers and students that can lead to a lack of communication and cohesion (Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004; Lawson, 2003). Along these lines, uncertainty often persists regarding goals, practices and desired outcomes of various parent participation programmes and activities, and many authors are sceptical about the effect of parenting programmes that use an "one size fits all" approach without taking into account different perspectives and socio-cultural contexts (Auerbach, 2002; Desforges & Abouchar, 2003; Fine, 1993).

Another important issue raised in the literature has to do with the difficulty to construct an account of parental involvement that goes beyond demographics (Georgiou, 2007) or "a laundry list of things that good parents do for their children's education" (Barton et al., 2004, p. 3). Parental participation tends to focus primarily on "what parents do" to engage with their children's learning, and in what way that fits or does not fit with the needs of the child or the goals of the school (Barton et al., 2004; Desforges & Abouchar, 2003; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). A shift from focusing mainly on *what* parents do, to also considering *how* parents understand the hows and whys of their involvement, and *how* this participation relates more broadly to parents' experiences, beliefs and actions has been proposed by scholars who recognize that parents had few opportunities to share their unique and valuable insights on the subject (Auerbach, 2002; Barton et al., 2004; Peña, 2000; Sebolt, 2010).

This article proposes that narrative approaches to parental involvement (to our knowledge neglected in the research literature) can help us address the issues raised above contributing to the ongoing discussion on the subject. Narratives can capture ambiguity, complexity and multiplicity; they can illuminate a great deal about the personal but also the social and cultural (Bruner, 1986, 1990; McLeod, 1997; Riessman, 2008) and are concerned with representation and voice especially with ordinary (e.g. parents) or marginalized people (e.g. minority parents) whose voices might otherwise go unheard or unnoticed (Auerbach, 2002; Sebolt, 2010; Smith & Sparkes, 2008b).

Within this framework, the present study adopts a narrative perspective and analysis to explore Greek mothers' practices and meaning making of involvement in their children's learning. This inquiry aims primarily to inform and enrich counselling theory and practice taking into account experiences and issues of parental involvement within the Greek context – treating parents' stories as valuable resources for counsellors, therapists, school counsellors, educators, parenting training programmes, family community programmes, home-school link initiatives, and so on.

Theoretical Framework

The study draws mainly from the theoretical and epistemological perspectives of social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1985) and narrative knowing (Bruner, 1986, 1990; Mishler 1986; Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 2008).

Social Constructionism — Social constructionism has developed over the last 20 years as one of the most popular theoretical and research approaches in the social sciences. It was influenced by a variety of disciplines and intellectual traditions and traces the origins of knowledge, meaning and understanding to human relationships. The term constructivism is sometimes used interchangeably with constructionism but the writings associated with constructivism place the origins of people's construction of the world to processes residing mainly in the individual mind as opposed to human relations (Gergen, 1999). Our study is influenced by the constructionist scholarship of Kenneth Gergen (1985, 1999, 2006) which was especially influential within the field of psychology. A central idea emerging from the social constructionist dialogues is that what we take to be knowledge of the world and

self finds its origins and is sustained in human relationships – within specific socio-cultural and historical contexts. Within this framework, the meanings we attach to social phenomena such as parental involvement are developed, sustained and transmitted through social interactions, and may be conceptualized and experienced differently by different individuals or constructors (e.g. parents, educators, students, researchers), in various socio-cultural contexts.

Narrative Knowing — Bruner (1986, 1990) distinguished between “paradigmatic” and “narrative” forms of thought and knowing, which he maintained are both fundamental and irreducible one to the other. Paradigmatic knowing is reached through logico-scientific modes of abstract, impersonal thought while narrative knowing can be obtained through the stories that people tell about their experiences, in a social world known to teller and audience. The key idea in narrative is that people largely make sense of their experience, and communicate their experience to others, in the form of contextualized stories. Narratives help us examine how experience –in this study parental involvement – is assigned meaning, and is linked to identity, social structures and culture (McLeod, 2001; Mishler, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1988).

Barthes (as cited in Riessman, 2008) stresses the universality of the narrative and notes that under almost an “infinite diversity of forms” (e.g. myth, fable, tale, epic, history, tragedy, drama, conversation, life stories), it is present in every age, in every place and in every society (p. 4). Historically, it was Aristotle in his *Poetics*, who began to articulate what the narrative form is, in his examination of Greek tragedy. Narrative theorizing has evolved from classical poetics to the postclassical, and has shifted from structural to more contextualist models in the poststructural and postmodern period (Riessman, 2008). In contemporary times, narrative researchers carry different traditions forward and the term “narrative” carries various meanings in different disciplines.

The Narrative Turn in Psychology and Counselling — The narrative turn in social sciences and psychology has been altogether supported by various shifts in Western thought, epistemology, technology, and social practices. An increasing interest in narrative as a form of knowing in psychology, began in the 1970s and gained pace in the mid-1980s with challenges to realism and positivism, and influences by postmodern, cultural and constructionist forms of analysis (e.g. Bruner, 1986, 1990; Gergen, 1985; Howard, 1991; Mair, 1989; McAdams, 1985; Polkinghorne, 1988; Sarbin, 1986). The earliest writings focused on general philosophical issues but more recently narrative ideas have been applied to practical areas such as counselling and psychotherapy practice and research method (e.g. Angus & McLeod, 2004; Avdi & Georgaca, 2007; Cochran, 1990; McLeod, 1997; Savickas, 2001; Schafer, 1980; Spence, 1982; White & Epston, 1990), and education (e.g. Trahar, 2009).

Significant contributions to narrative research methodology and more specifically to narrative analysis of ‘life histories’ – which is also adopted in the present study – are attributed to Fritz Schutze (1977, as cited in Riemann, 2003), Elliot Mishler (1986) and Catherine Riessman (1993). It has been argued that narrative research inquiry can be conceived as being on a continuum with the type of knowing involved in counselling practice when we listen for meanings and patterns in what clients say about themselves and their lives (Hoshmand, 2005). Overall, theoretical and methodological shifts in psychology and counselling took place reciprocally as narrative “forced the social sciences to develop new theories, new methods and new ways of talking about self and society” (Denzin, as cited in Riessman, 2008, p. 16).

Functions of Storytelling — A story conveys, among other things, meaning about experience, and is an expression of subjectivity, intentionality and identity. Moreover, it communicates the teller’s understanding of his/her social

world, personal goals, values, decision making, feelings and actions (Czarniawska, 1997; McAdams, 1985; McLeod, 1997; Smith & Sparkes, 2008a). It is important to note that storytelling is not only a form of representing individual experience and information but is also a form of social and interpersonal action. Narratives are themselves constituents of ongoing and often institutionalized patterns of societal conduct, and function both to reflect and to create values. In this sense, they function as to generate, sustain and sometimes disrupt cultural traditions (Bruner, 1990). Overall, the telling of stories is both an individual and a social product (Riessman, 2008). As observed by McLeod (1997), the focus on narrative can combine an emphasis on cultural analysis on the construction of meaning alongside an image of the person as an active reflective, responsible agent, striving to achieve meaning, control, empowerment and fulfilment in life (p. 106). Moreover, scholars have pointed out the embodied aspects of storytelling (i.e. we tell stories out of and through our bodies) and their connection to the narrative structure of emotional life (e.g. memories, emotions etc.) (Sarbin, 2001; Smith, as cited in Sparkes & Smith, 2008).

Narrative Self and Identity — As part of the 'narrative turn', there is a wide-ranging literature arguing that narratives – to a great or lesser extent – are important in, and for, the construction of self and identity (e.g. Bruner, 1990, 2002; Gergen, 1994; McAdams, 2005; Polkinghorne, 1996; Sparkes & Smith, 2008). It has been noted that “personal stories are not merely a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one’s life: they are the means by which identities are fashioned” (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992, p. 1), and identity “is structured through the textual resources of narratives” (Atkins, 2004, p. 350). Overall, narrative inquiry implies a relational world and views self and identity in non substantialist terms, as multidimensional, and connected to larger social, historical, political and cultural contexts (Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001; Gergen, 1994).

Yet, given the plurality of narrative, and the many positions within narrative inquiry in psychology, there are also various ideas of what narrative selves and identities are and how they should be studied (Smith & Sparkes, 2006, 2008a). For example, social constructionist literature places greater attention to relatedness, plurality and the social aspects of narrative in identity construction (e.g. Gergen, 1999; Somers, 1994) in contrast to constructivist scholarship that generally favours the interiority and the active engagement of the individual in constructing identity (e.g. Crossley, 2003; McAdams, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1988).

Along these lines, Smith and Sparkes (2008a) identified five perspectives of narrative identities and selves taking into account the emphasis given by each conceptualization to both the individual and social in creating selves and identities. These are, the psychosocial, the intersubjective, the storied resource, the dialogic and the performative perspectives. Even though their boundaries are often blurred and fuzzy, they are organized along a continuum with conceptualizations that adopt a ‘thick individual’ and ‘thin social relational’ focus to the self and identity at one end, and a ‘thin individual’ and ‘thick social relational’ emphasis at the other.

For our purpose, the dialogic perspective in Smith and Sparke’s (2008a) typology of narrative selves – based mainly on Bakhtinian dialogism – is of particular interest for the notion of ‘*self-in-dialogue*’ which is reflected in the research findings of our study (see research findings section in this paper). According to Bakhtin (1970), human beings are profoundly dialogic beings, and the self “is not a substance or essence in its own right but exists only in a tensile relationship with other selves” (Clark & Holquist, 1984, p. 65). Moreover, human existence is indeterminate and unfinalised, and like Dostoevsky’s heroes, human beings have the capacity “to outgrow” and “to render untrue any externalizing and finalizing definition of them” (Bakhtin, 1984/1929, p. 59). Overall, Bakhtin’s work on dialogism has provided a source of significant influence and inspiration for narrative scholars exploring relational

and dialogical conceptions of self and identity (e.g. Hermans, Kempen, & van Loon, 1992; Shotter, 1999, 2003; Taylor, 1991).

Methodology

Taking into account key themes on narrative discussed above, the present study aims to explore Greek mothers' experiences and meaning making of engagement in their children's learning. More specifically, it considers mothers' constructs of learning; parenting involvement practices and insights; how these are linked to identity, actions, and change overtime. In this section we describe research methods and we draw on narrative analysis to interpret parent stories.

The Population Studied

The sample consisted of 10 Greek mothers, 32-44 years of age. All women were working outside the home, were married and had a least one child attending elementary school. The research participants were of medium educational and SES backgrounds and resided in the Greater Athens area. Informants were recruited through the snowballing technique and were chosen based on a 'convenient' but also purposive sampling taking into account mainly gender, working status and age of children. We included women given that in Greece, as it is the case also for other countries, mothers are more involved than fathers in children's schooling (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Sebolt, 2010). Moreover, we were interested in working mothers as we wanted to hear the stories of women who combine both work and family obligations. Finally, we chose mothers of primary school children as parental involvement in learning seems to be especially common for this developmental stage (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). Data were collected by a number of informants in order to obtain different experiences, patterns and insights related to parental involvement. The sample, however, does not give basis for broad generalizations. Narrative research is a form of case-centred inquiry; it interrogates cases of individuals (rather than population-based samples) and thus inference is of a different kind. Case studies involve "generalizations to theoretical propositions" (Bryman, as cited in Radley & Chamberlain, 2001, p. 324) which are to some degree, transferrable and can thus generate general concepts about a social process. It is worth noting, however, that as a general field, narrative study is "grounded in the study of the particular" (Radley & Chamberlain, 2001, p. 331), and can provide insight into specific contexts of social activities.

Data Collection

Data were collected via narrative interviews (life-history/biographical narrative interview). The term "narrative interview" was coined within German biographical research by Fritz Schutze (1977, as cited in Riemann, 2003) and is considered as one of the more established narrative genres (Mishler, 1986; Riessman, 1993). This form of interview is based on people's everyday competencies to narrate their own experiences and its main goal is to generate detailed accounts rather than brief answers (stimulus/response interview model), or general statements. As Mishler (1986) argued:

Looking at how interviewees connect their responses into a sustained account, that is a story, brings out problems and possibilities of interviewing that are not visible when attention is restricted to question-answer exchanges (p. 67).

A generative question was formulated that invited extended narration and encouraged mothers to begin relating their stories (chronological order optional) of involvement in their children's learning focusing on experiences, events and insights that were meaningful to them. Participants were informed that they would not be interrupted

and they could take longer turns at talk than are customary in ordinary conversations. The interviews were conducted by one of the researchers who tried to listen in an emotionally attentive and engaged way. Participants were interviewed in familiar surroundings (home) after giving informed consent. There was informal conversation (warm up) before each interview and an informal debriefing at the end. The 45-50 min narrative interviews were recorded and later transcribed verbatim into Greek. All the informants were affirmed of anonymity and pseudonyms were used for the interview transcriptions. In constructing the transcripts, there was an effort to capture, both the tone of voice and visual expressions of the participants as well as the interactional/dialogical context (speaker/participant – listener/questioner) which are important in analysing and interpreting the stories (Riessman, 2008).

Data Analysis

Narrative analysis refers to a family of methods for interpreting texts that have in common a storied form. The present study adopted a case-centred thematic analysis of individual stories placing primary attention on content (Riessman, 2008). It treated extended parental accounts analytically as units, capturing meanings conveyed by the story as a whole and preserving the sequential and structural features which are characteristic of narrative. The researchers worked with and analyzed a single narrative interview at a time, and then proceeded to identify common patterns and variations comparing the different cases. Certain cases were selected to illustrate common patterns and particularities – the case-centred analysis allowing for agency, and particularity to come to the fore.

Research Findings

Participants shared through their stories a variety of conceptions, experiences, practices and insights regarding children's learning and parental involvement within the Greek context. In this paper, interview material (segments or excerpts from the long narratives) is presented and quoted from cases that stood out as particularly salient for their content and function in relation to parental engagement, and which use accounts of experiences and encapsulate concerns that extend beyond the narrator's personal circumstances, echoing issues, beliefs and insights recounted by other.

In writing about the stories in our study, we are reminded that “a story is coproduced in a complex choreography”, as noted by Riessman (2008), “in spaces between teller and listener, speaker and the setting, text and reader, history and culture” (p. 105). Moreover, in presenting our ‘findings’ we realize that as researchers we cannot stand apart from the stories we generate (Bochner, 2001), and the texts we construct, as we analyze, interpret, select, emphasize or punctuate certain aspects of participants' narratives and experiences. Along these lines, it has also been suggested that researchers themselves are ‘storytellers’ who may write in different ways (Smith, 2002; Sparkes, 2002, as cited in Sparkes & Smith, 2008).

Stories of Parental Involvement in Early Preschool Years: Pleasant Memories

Narrative interviews allowed mothers to relate stories of engagement, sequentially, starting with the age of early childhood. These included warm and emotionally supportive interactions, playing, talking and reading to children and various activities that encourage psycho-social and cognitive learning.

The Case of Anastasia — Anastasia, is the mother of a 7 year-old boy – named Demos (D). Her storied account began with pleasant memories regarding her participation in the son's learning during early preschool years. Among other things, she proudly recounted a story about her son at the age of three “reading” a book to family

friends. As she explained, she used to read to him every night and he had learned all his little books by heart. Together, they engaged “in many fun activities, playing, singing, learning about shapes...” and so on.

Stories of Parental Involvement in Nursery School: Pleasant Memories & First Signs of Concern & Trouble

Anastasia continued her account describing ‘learning’ during the first 4 months in nursery school as pleasant and carefree. However, she recalled,

it was around Christmas that I got the first shock! when my son’s teacher told me that all the kids in the class knew the alphabet except for D.! I said to myself: ‘My son doesn’t know the alphabet? this is terrible!’ Since that time we started arguing: ‘Let’s learn the alphabet’ [mother to son]. ‘No! I don’t want to’ [son to mother] ... Finally, I stopped trying because he began to ‘hate’ me. Anyway, I could not force him to learn the alphabet, by heart, as a poem (alpha, beta, gamma...). It did not make any sense after all! I also asked a good friend of mine who is a teacher and she said to me: ‘Leave him alone. Next year in the primary school, he will be taught the alphabet ... anyway. There is no reason for you to pressure him now’ and I stopped pressuring him.

Anastasia in her account expressed strong feelings and described a proactive parent involvement. Moreover, faced for the first time with what she called a ‘school crisis’, she was able to resolve it, changing and adjusting her involvement practices to address the difficulties. Change came about as an interactive and dialogic achievement reflecting different voices including: mother’s agentic voice and internal dialogue; the child’s voice of resistance; advice from the teacher-friend.

It is worth noting that Anastasia reported minimum collaboration with Demos’ teacher, instead she turned for support to a teacher-friend. *Asking advice from* a person close to the family who happens to be both a friend and an ‘expert’ (e.g. teacher, counsellor, doctor), is not uncommon within the context of the Greek culture – the use of informal social networks being a typical cultural resource for social support (Georgas, 1993; Tsibidaki & Tsampanli, 2007).

The Case of Elena — In contrast to Anastasia, Elena, mother of 7 year-old Katerina, related constructive nursery school experiences, and gave a positive evaluation of her daughter’s school:

the school [public] had a very good ‘learning’ system... better than private school; good, conscientious teachers... learning through play but organized ... with love for children ... and good discipline rules. For example, the teachers did not give orders or shouted ‘sit down’ or ‘you’ll get punished’.... a democratic style of education with no pressure for the kids and experiential learning...

Within this context, Elena, who defined herself as a relatively ‘relaxed’ mother, attributed her style to some extent to the school climate. The school encouraged collaboration giving the opportunity for parents to attend special meetings with teachers, counsellors and psychologists and to ask advice regarding children’s learning and related issues. Finally, Elena recounted with joy how the school lending library became an incentive for her to start reading to her daughter regularly:

When your kid brings a book home to be read ... and you know that the teacher is going to ask questions... you know that you must read it – otherwise you might embarrass yourself – as it turned out it became a good habit that brought me closer to my daughter... it was fun for both of us and she learned a great deal... so did I. I learned many things from children’s books.

Elena's effective involvement reflects a process of *co-construction* in which the agency of the parent, the responsiveness of the child as well as the opportunities for participation provided by the school structures and other people that work with children (e.g. teacher, counsellor, psychologist) are important contributors.

Stories of Parental Involvement in Primary School: Monitoring & Supervision of Study and Homework

Overall, the transition to primary education seems to leave behind the relatively carefree times of nursery school. Mother's accounts of involvement emphasized efforts to provide an appropriate environment for learning including arranging space and time and supervision for study; good role models of psychosocial and educational values; positive academic outcomes and school achievement; issues of mother-teacher collaboration and participation in school and Parental Association of the School Activities.

Both for Anastasia and Elena – as for other parents – monitoring, supervision and help with study and homework became salient issues. Within this context, the two mothers related stories of more or less 'functional' or 'dysfunctional' parental involvement practices and how these were linked to identity and self, actions and change.

The Case of Anastasia — Anastasia continued her story regarding her son's transition from nursery to primary school:

When he started 1st grade, I almost began taking 'xanax'... I don't know... am I too demanding? Or are they [school] very demanding? I don't know what it is...I think that we all ... both the school and us [parents] have exaggerated demands for their age....

Anastasia tried to make sense of her involvement wondering about herself image as a 'demanding' mother, and pointed out that both family and school place exaggerated demands upon children. Along these lines, she talked about her difficulty to deal with her son's 'slow school achievement' and gave examples of his firm resistance to parental guidance:

'I am not making any changes to my writing... I like it this way...I am not correcting it'... my son insisted, and I thought that he was just indifferent. As it turned out, things got really bad... September, October, November were very difficult months. My son was crying...I was crying...He was anxious and did not want to collaborate... I wanted him to learn to work on his own... At some point just before Christmas, I realized that I was too demanding and had no empathy...I thought that things were simpler... that he could grasp them right away... He needed more time ...

When Anastasia tried to put less pressure on Demos, things got much better for both of them. However, she was not able to sustain the change for very long. During second grade, both mother and grand-mother got involved with Demos' homework and it became confusing for all parties:

In the afternoon when I go to work ...he completes spelling and writing with grandma and leaves the rest of the homework for me to supervise...My mother thinks that I don't pressure him enough... and Demos complains that grandma and I, often, give him different instructions...

It is not uncommon for Greek grandparents to engage in children's learning –especially when the mother is working.

Even though grandma's involvement often complicates things... it is helpful, and prevents Demos from spending a lot of time watching T. V... Working mothers have to compromise,

explained Anastasia with some hesitation.

A further complication came from the son's teacher – who placed upon the family the responsibility to scold Demos whenever he was not well prepared for school. In fact, she used to inform the family through the grandmother who picked up D. from school. Anastasia held a different opinion on the matter thinking that it was the teacher's responsibility to rebuke Demos.

During the interview, the mother struggled to make sense of the stressful and problematic involvement patterns drawing on specific home and school learning practices and taking into account different and conflicting voices and beliefs (her own, Demo's grandmother's, and teacher's). Her story expressed both explicitly and implicitly important concerns, dilemmas and questions –shared by most participants: Who is responsible for the child's academic learning and performance (parent? family? teacher? student? educational policies?) What is the role of the school, the parent or the extended family? What about excessive academic demands, issues of autonomy or support? Finally, Anastasia reflected upon the subject of parental evaluation (e.g. 'demanding', 'good' or 'bad' mother) which seems to be closely connected with children's academic failure or success.

It is midnight ...tomorrow, my son L. has a test. As much as I try to control it, I feel very anxious ... anxiety and fear ...Why? What is it exactly that I am afraid of ? Failure? Whose failure? And whose success? Mine or his? The whole family feels uptight...We are going to be evaluated as parents... Did we take care of him? Did we spend time studying with him? Did we pressure him? Yes, pressure was unavoidable...Was I a 'good mother'? Was I a 'demanding' mother?

The Case of Elena — In contrast to Anastasia, Elena described herself as a relatively 'relaxed mother' in relation to her fourth child, Katerina. As she recounted, she used to be different, and looking back, at the time when her first three children were going to school, she described her involvement (study at home) in terms of control and pressure. A series of difficult and negative experiences related to *over involvement*, led Elena to a biographical disruption followed by a search for more 'functional' parenting practices (biographical action scheme) (Schutze, as cited in Riemann, 2003). Elena reconstructed her identity in terms of relatively 'relaxed' participation, a position which was not static but fluid – oscillating between more or less 'relaxed' or 'pressure inducing' engagement practices – struggling to balance out school demands and 'functional' parenting involvement.

It is worth noting that Elena's successful adjustment was a product of interaction involving Elena's intention to change as well as teachers' support within particular educational contexts (i.e. nursery and primary school structures).

Stories Reflecting Greek Mothers' Constructs of 'Learning'

Mothers in their accounts expressed the need to differentiate between academic school knowledge and a wider view of learning which is associated with different dimensions of children's development and well-being. They stressed the significance of *psychosocial dimensions* for children's growth such as learning about oneself, learning about morality and social values (e.g. friendship, caring, respect, dignity, noble competition, politeness, discipline), acquiring problem solving skills, and life skills (e.g. 'strength of survival', endurance). Their accounts included examples of *mental and cognitive dimensions* such as the development of critical thinking and maturity of thought as well as themes that had to do with *physical competence and health* such as learning to keep a balance between physical and mental activity, getting involved in athletics, learning about health rules and nutrition. *Artistic and cultural dimensions* – learning about music, dance, art and civilization were also recurrent subjects. Finally, there

were themes related to *existential dimensions* such as achieving a life of equilibrium, free spirit and enjoyment (e.g. having fun with friends), inquiring about quality and 'essence' of life. A few indicative examples from mothers' accounts are presented below:

School is often limited to certain things. Children learn how to read, to count how to use a crayon in order to draw. Learning is more than that. It has to do with learning how to behave properly, to be social, to be able to be around people... I mean, I don't care if he is a good student... I don't care so much about school as about that... After graduation, children might forget, let's say, grammar or multiplication, but they will remember their teacher's encouragement to take care of their fellow students when in need (Anastasia)

Even if she does not acquire grammatical skills ...if she does not learn everything about verbs...she needs to learn to think critically...to have a free spirit.

It is not only the mind that matters. Too much information can give the child an overdose that will lead him to say 'I can't ...I've had enough'. I already see that my daughter's performance is affected because of a heavy school workload ... The child needs to play, to build friendships, to communicate...to learn to endure ... to keep a balance between physical and mental activity...I would like schools to be more experiential... (Elena)

Overall, mothers' accounts were critical of the Greek educational system and its predominant focus on cognitive building and acquisition of fixed and factual knowledge. They expressed preference for a well-rounded learning, and talked about their efforts to offer different learning opportunities – involving children in a variety of afterschool activities (sports, music lessons, dance, art, etc.) – to make up for the kind of knowledge which is not provided at school. Yet, there were also concerns that "too many" structured out of school activities may actually become an additional burden for students taking away playtime, and opportunities to be with family and friends.

Discussion and Implications for Counselling

The present study adopted a narrative perspective and analysis to explore Greek mother's practices and meaning making of involvement in their children's learning. Mothers' stories portrayed a variety of experiences, beliefs, practices, insights, dilemmas and concerns. The findings can inform and enrich counselling practice and prevention efforts including parenting training programmes, family community programmes and home-school link initiatives. Of particular interest for counsellors are stories of functional and dysfunctional involvement practices, concerns and dilemmas regarding school demands and the working mother, grandmother involvement, identity and self-evaluation issues, socio-cultural scripts that influence parental engagement, dominant educational discourses, practices and traditions, and the process of change.

Participant stories depicted parental engagement as a complex, multifaceted, flexible and multivoiced construct which can take various forms and is open to change. Successful or non-successful adjustment and change of non-functional and problematic patterns/stories of involvement were presented as a product of interaction. Of particular importance was the support provided by informal social networks such as: a. asking advice from a family friend who was also an expert (e.g. teacher, counsellor) and b. engaging in conversation with other parents from the same or different schools to share and compare information, concerns, and parenting practices (parent informal networks).

A sense of *self-in-dialogue* where *relatedness* and *alterity coexist* was reflected in mothers' narratives which portrayed parental involvement as an interactive process of co-construction resonating the voices and actions of different contributors (e.g. mother's dialogue with the 'other' – family, teacher, school, parental support network, cultural scripts and norms). We are reminded of [Bakhtin's analysis \(1984/1999\)](#) of the dialogical quality of human life and polyphony in Dostoevsky's novels:

A plurality of unmerged voices and consciousnesses ...What unfolds in his works is not a multitude of characters...in a single objective world illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a plurality of consciousnesses with equal rights and its with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event (p. 6).

Our findings support a dialogical view of mind and identity, a narrative self which is not interior based, fixed and monologic but interactive, polyphonic and unfinalized ([Bakhtin, 1984/1929](#); [Hermans, 2002](#); [Shotter, 1999](#)).

To continue, certain ways of involvement addressed more narrowly school achievement and outcomes while others a broader spectrum of learning which is not limited to school academic domains. Overall, the transition to primary education left behind the relatively carefree times of nursery school, and for mothers like Anastasia and Elena difficulties centered mainly around Greek school and family expectations for parental monitoring and supervision of study and homework.

Anastasia's and Elena's stories of participation relate personal concerns and circumstances but also echo practices and issues recounted by other participants in the study. Moreover, they reflect institutionalized patterns of social conduct and draw largely from Greek cultural scripts such as: a. a relational and dialogic conception of personhood and life ([Anastasiades & Issari, 2008](#); [Issari, 2002](#); [Issari & Anastasiades, 2010](#)), b. family involvement or over-involvement as a key source of support for children's much valued psychosocial development and academic achievement ([Georgas, 1993](#); [Vassiliou & Vassiliou, 1970](#)), and c. wider issues related to the Greek educational structures.

Counselling practice (e.g. postmodern approaches to counselling/therapy) and prevention efforts can work with parent's stories of engagement in order to co-construct, sustain and empower preferred and functional accounts and practices of involvement both at individual and collective levels. For example, narrative therapy concepts and practices ([Morgan, 2000](#); [White & Epston, 1990](#)) can help counsellors and mothers co-construct/co-interpret particular meanings or dominant plots of the involvement stories; deconstruct problem areas and co-construct alternative and preferred ways of parental involvement and forms of action. Narrative ideas and practices may be of particular use in externalizing conversations and renegotiating relationships with problematic patterns of engagement; exploring multiple descriptions of identity, unique outcomes and values; examining the socio-cultural scripts that influence parental engagement; making visible dominant educational discourses, practices and traditions within which parents, students or teachers may be enmeshed.

Concluding Remarks

Narrative is at the heart of counselling and therapy in the sense that all therapeutic work involves the telling of stories ([McLeod, 1997](#)). Within this context, stories are useful for what they say and portray regarding self and identity, relationships, social life and culture, personal and social change ([Riessman, 2008](#)). Moreover, it has been suggested that stories can also touch us where we live in our bodies and allow us to "to step into the shoes of

other human beings" to enter into relationships and to make connections across differences and in ways that do not finalize people" (Frank, as cited in Sparkes & Smith, 2008, p. 302).

Overall, narrative is valuable for counselling and therapy both as a way of telling about our lives and as a method or means of knowing. More research on counselling issues and therapy processes – using narrative analysis – is necessary which also takes into account the theoretical complexities and tensions (Smith & Sparkes, 2006) and the plurality within the field of narrative.

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