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COOPERATION OF PRIMARY SCHOOL PARENTS AND TEACHERS – A RESEARCH REPORT

WSPÓŁPRACA RODZICÓW I NAUCZYCIELI SZKÓŁ PODSTAWOWYCH – RAPORT Z BADAŃ

Abstract: The modern school model includes students' parents as partners in building a modern educational system. Unfortunately, effective collaboration is often impossible. The aim of the research was to find out the opinions of teachers and parents about mutual attitudes regarding cooperation. The results obtained show completely contradictory opinions of parents and teachers about their partners, which constitute a barrier to achieving effective cooperation.

Keywords: parents, school, cooperation, partnership

Streszczenie: Model współczesnej szkoły uwzględnia rodziców uczniów jako partnerów w budowaniu nowoczesnego systemu edukacyjnego. Niestety efektywna współpraca jest

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często niemożliwa do zrealizowania. Celem przeprowadzonych badań było poznanie opinii nauczycieli i rodziców na temat wzajemnych postaw odnośnie do podejmowanej współpracy. Uzyskane wyniki ukazują całkowicie sprzeczne opinie rodziców i nauczycieli dotyczące wzajemnej współpracy, które stanowią barierę w osiągnięciu efektywnej współpracy.

Słowa kluczowe: rodzice, szkoła, współpraca, partnerstwo

INTRODUCTION

Man strives to achieve success in all areas of life. Nowadays, obtaining the expected result is mostly dependent on the ability to work effectively in a team, and thus – to cooperate with other people. According to J. Katzenbach and D. Smith (2001), the cooperation of at least two people makes up a team, whose results are definitely better than in the case of just one person. The success of a team's work results from the exchange of personal experiences, knowledge and skills. Solving problems together is conducive to new initiatives. Moreover, struggling with problems builds mutual trust, support and even increases the commitment of all team members. Cooperation also constitutes the basis of building social democracy. Right interactions make it possible even for the youngest children to experience a sense of belonging and community values, and thus have a chance to experience democratic practices (Zachrisen 2016, pp. 190–191).

The school – like other institutions – attempts at achieving success through its activities, which means the education and upbringing of children and adolescents. In this case, too, the implementation of the intended objectives is not based on the work of an individual, but on the cooperation of individuals making up the school team. For this reason, the model of contemporary – open – school includes pupils' parents as partners in building a modern educational system, as well. Even though a modern family struggles with many problems, it is still a foundation that protects the subjectivity of an individual. The family community constitutes a support in life choices and difficult moments (Kamińska, 2016, p. 86), hence it is the greatest ally in implementing the assumptions of the modern school. According to R. Zedan (2011, p. 25), parents can significantly influence the education of their children. They can develop a pupil's active attitude expressed through his or her diligence, creativity, openness and general commitment to learning. Therefore, it is important for the school to take measures to encourage parents to participate in their child's educational process.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Due to the value of cooperation in organizing the educational process of children and adolescents, the issue has been widely analyzed both in the area of theoretical

analyses of education development, as well as in terms of its practical applications. There are numerous handbooks for teachers, headteachers of educational institutions and parents, containing tips on mutual communication, possible forms of cooperation or other suggestions for joint activities. Actions to establish effective cooperation between the school and the family also include organizing different types of social initiatives aimed at promoting the idea of cooperation. What might serve as an example is parental organizations and associations which, through training courses, meetings, publications or workshops, bring both these environments together. However, the key element of activities improving the cooperation of parents and teachers is monitoring the effectiveness of the undertaken activities. Due to the changes that take place in the forms of the cooperation, these studies are constantly present in the educational reality. An example of such monitoring activities are studies on promoting parents' and teachers' cooperation with the use of digital communication. The diagnosis made it possible to define the attitude of educational entities towards digital communication, and further to formulate guidelines for teachers who organize mutual cooperation (Kuusimäki, Uusitalo-Malmivaara et al., 2019, pp. 1, 6).

In the light of the described examples of activities aimed at introducing and offering new ideas integrating all entities to work for the development of effective education, it would seem that the cooperation between the school and the family is effectively conducted and its quality is systematically improving. Unfortunately, despite numerous initiatives, the relationship between parents and teachers does not often constitute a model of effective school-home cooperation. An example of a discrepancy between the assumptions and the actual state of family-school cooperation can be the comparison of selected assumptions of the education system contained in legal acts with studies published by independent institutions and the results of the analysis of selected school documents by A. Olechowska (2017). The aim of the research undertaken by the author was to identify and expose the myths existing in the educational system concerning the cooperation between the school and the family by comparing the content of selected educational law provisions with the examples of their implementation. The analyses show that such assumptions as:

- parents' right to adopt, in consultation with the teachers' council, the school's educational curriculum and prevention program tailored to the developmental needs of students and the needs of a given environment, and
- parents' right, as the members of the parents' council, to express their opinion concerning textbooks or educational materials
- constitute a kind of cooperation "myths" as, on one hand, they allow parents to influence the organization of the educational process, on the other hand, they allow to ignore their opinions or significantly limit their possibilities of interference.

METHODOLOGY

Among the studies devoted to the discussed issues, a number of factors determining the quality of cooperation between the family and school environment can be found. One of them is communication between parents and teachers, which, due to the specificity of school work, encounters numerous difficulties (Jagielska, 2011). An important element of good interpersonal communication (conducive to proper cooperation) is mutual trust of the educational entities. According to E. Kiezik-Kordzińska (2004), communication should always be accompanied by agreement resulting primarily from understanding and acceptance of common goals that individual members of a given team intend to achieve. Moreover, the process of communication has a content and relational dimension: it depends not only on the content of the text and the information, but also on the way they are communicated, which is strongly influenced by emotions that shape mutual relations.

For this reason, the subject of the research was the state of cooperation between parents and teachers through the prism of their mutual views on commitment in the joint actions. The aim of the study was to find out the opinions of teachers and parents on mutual attitudes towards the undertaken cooperation. Obviously, as far as the effectiveness of mutual cooperation is concerned, the best would be a state in which both parents and teachers trusted each other and were convinced that the other party were fully involved in the undertaken activities. In order to obtain an answer to the question whether such a state of parent-teacher relations can be observed in Polish schools, the main problem was formulated in the form of the following question:

- What are teachers' and parents' opinions regarding mutual cooperation?

The following specific questions were the clarification of the main question:

- What are parents' views on teachers' involvement in joint educational activities?
- What are teachers' views on parents' involvement in joint learning activities?
- Are there, and to what extent depending on the educational stage, different teachers' opinions concerning parents' attitudes towards the undertaken cooperation?
- Are there, and to what extent depending on the educational stage, different parents' opinions concerning teachers' attitudes towards the undertaken cooperation?

In order to collect the research material, the diagnostic survey method has been used involving the questionnaire technique. The questionnaire consisted of closed questions with disjunctive answer choices. The research was conducted among primary school parents and teachers in the Silesian Voivodeship. A total of 528 parents of primary school students, including 196 parents of younger students and 332 parents of older students, provided responses. 130 teachers were surveyed at the

same time, including 79 from the first stage of education and 51 from the second stage of education. When analyzing the collected empirical material in terms of relationships, the chi square test was applied, which allowed for the examination of statistical significance.

RESULTS

In order to get to know the parents' opinions on the teachers' involvement in undertaking joint educational activities, three descriptions were suggested that define different teachers' attitudes. They read as follows:

1. Teachers encourage participation in work for the benefit of the school and the class; they take care to inform parents about all school life events systematically; they emphasize the importance of cooperation between parents and the school in children's education; they treat parents as equal partners.
2. Teachers ask parents to become involved in the school and class life only in matters of low importance; they do not inform fully about all the rights of parents at school; parents are not equal partners for them.
3. Teachers do not try to involve parents in the school and class life; they do not inform about the rights at school at all; they treat jointly undertaken actions as a necessity resulting from top-down regulations.

The results depicting parents' opinion on teachers' involvement in undertaking joint educational activities are shown in Table 1.

Parents' indications regarding teachers' attitudes showed their positive evaluation (see Table 1). Comparing the responses obtained from the higher and lower grades, a slightly more favorable opinion can be seen regarding the involvement of teachers in the case of older students' parents. Parents' opinions in grades 1–3 may reflect their increased expectations towards the school, concerning not only the teacher–parent relationship. According to the research conducted by M. Jurkiewicz (2007) on six-year-olds' parents' expectations towards school, parents of the youngest pupils have clearly defined expectations also in terms of the organizational arrangements of the school. However, the verification of the relationship between the student's educational stage and the parent's opinion on the teacher's attitude did not indicate any significant relationships between the studied variables. In spite of minor differences in the parents' assessment of teachers, it can be stated that the parents' attitude towards their partners is most conducive to the implementation of the idea of cooperation between both educational environments.

Table 1. Parents' opinions on teachers' involvement in undertaking joint educational activities

Descriptions characterizing the teachers' attitude towards parents and the cooperation with them?	Primary school				χ^2 test results
	The first stage of education		The second stage of education		
	N	%	N	%	
Teachers encourage participation in work for the benefit of the school and the class...	128	58.2	260	77.8	$\chi^2 = 41.955$ $df = 2$ $p = 0.001$
Teachers ask parents to become involved in the school and class life only in matters of low importance...	68	30.9	72	21.6	
Teachers do not try to involve parents in the life the school and class life...	24	10.9	2	0.6	
Total	220	100	334	100	

χ^2 – test statistics; df – degrees of freedom; p – statistical significance

The level of significance was set at $p = 0,05$. Which means that results $p < 0,05$ indicate significant relationships between the variables

Source: own study.

The next stage in endeavoring to learn the mutual opinions on the involvement in cooperation was getting to know the teachers' viewpoint. For this purpose, three descriptions of parents' attitudes were formulated, which defined their different levels of involvement. They read as follows:

1. Parents are very eager to get involved in school matters; when asked for help, they rarely refuse; they often initiate joint activities to improve the school's work.
2. Parents participate in meetings with the teacher only as an obligation; they do not show their own initiatives regarding participation in school life; they assume that it is the teacher's role to ask and encourage them to cooperate with the school.
3. Parents most frequently avoid any involvement in the life of the school and class; they do not follow teachers' instructions and advice on how to deal with their child; they very often treat teachers as enemies; they have a demanding attitude towards both teachers and the school.

Contrary to the parents' assessment, the teachers' views on parents' involvement in cooperation with the school show their completely different attitude. The vast majority of teachers believe that parents participate in school meetings only out of duty. In their opinion, parents most frequently do not show initiative in participating in school life. They all agree that it is the teacher who must request and encourage

parents to cooperate. Only a few respondents (teachers of the lower grades: 5.1%; teachers of the higher grades: 3.9%) highly rated the parents as involved in school matters and taking actions to improve the work of the institution (see Table 2).

Table 2. Teachers' opinions on parents' involvement in cooperation with the school

Assessment of parents' involvement in cooperation with the school?	Primary school				χ^2 test results
	The first stage of education		The second stage of education		
	N	%	N	%	
Parents most frequently avoid any involvement in the life of the school and class...	11	13.9	10	19.6	$\chi^2 = 0.788$ $df = 2$ $p = 0.674$
Parents participate in meetings with the teacher only as an obligation...	64	81.0	39	76.5	
Parents are very eager to get involved in school matters...	4	5.1	2	3.9	
Total	79	100	51	100	

χ^2 – test statistics; df – degrees of freedom; p – statistical significance

The level of significance was set at $p = 0,05$. Which means that results $p > 0,05$ does not indicate significant relationships between the variables.

Source: own study.

When analyzing the research results, it can be concluded that the negative opinions about parents result from the teachers' conviction concerning the lack of support and their negative attitude towards teachers. However, the teachers' belief about their low evaluation is wrong and leads to impeding the development of education. According to the 2013 *Report on the state of education*, teachers believe that they are not a professional group that enjoys social trust (Institute for Educational Research, 2013).

Meanwhile, according to the research conducted by the Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS, 2013) on the hierarchy of professions in terms of respect, teachers have been invariably ranked in the top ten for years. The verification of the dependence between the educational stage and the teachers' opinion on the parents' attitude did not reveal any significant relationships between the studied variables. Regardless of the educational stage, teachers negatively assessed the involvement of parents in joint activities.

A comparison of positive parents' and teachers' responses regarding the evaluation of their involvement in joint activities is presented in Figure 1. Basically, the difference in mutual evaluation shows two contradictions. The surveyed parents most often indicated that teachers encourage them to engage in work for the benefit of the school and the class, ensure that parents are systematically informed about all the events in the school life, emphasize the importance of parents' cooperation with the school in their child's education and treat them as equal partners. However, only

a few teachers expressed the view that parents are very eager to get involved in the school life, they rarely refuse when asked for help and often initiate joint activities to improve the school's work on their own.

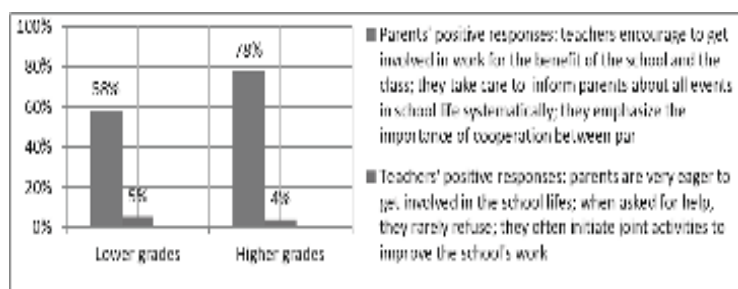


Figure 1. Positive parents' and teachers' responses regarding their educational partners

Source: own study

The analysis of mutual parents' and teachers' opinions concerning each other, which is one of the foundations of building good relationships leading to proper cooperation, shows one of the basic obstacles in the pursuit of the idea of school based on the principle of partnership between the school and the family environment.

A corresponding difference occurs in the case of negative responses, which are presented in Figure 2. The parents at both stages of education least frequently indicated the answer suggesting that teachers do not solicit parents' involvement in the life of the school and the class; they do not inform about the rights of parents at school at all, they do not treat parents as partners, but as a necessity resulting from top-down regulations. On the other hand, what the teachers indicated the most often was negative responses suggesting that parents participate in school meetings with the teacher only as an obligation; they do not show their own initiatives regarding participation in school life and assume that it is the teacher who must request and encourage them to cooperate with the school. It is worth adding that according to the research by B. Dusza (2018, pp. 151–152) on the cooperation of lower secondary school teachers with parents, the teachers indicated, among others, the need for parents' greater involvement in the school life, following teachers' recommendations and respecting the teachers' authority. Therefore, negative opinions about parents are not limited to primary school teachers.

The obtained data clearly indicate the teachers' opinion as a negative factor influencing the relationship between parents and teachers, and thus the quality of mutual cooperation, the creators of which should be mainly the teachers. It is them, as specialists with proper qualifications to conduct didactic and educational work, who constitute the basic subject of education, and who the most depends on (Żegnałek, 2016, p. 174).

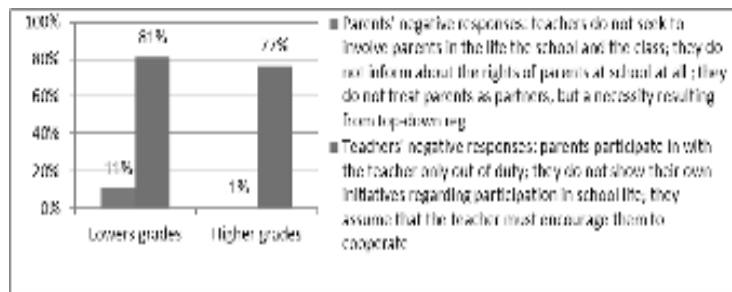


Figure 2. Negative parents' and teachers' responses regarding their educational partners

Source: own study.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The aim of the study was to diagnose teachers' and parents' mutual relations, which constitute the foundation of building a school based on cooperation. As mentioned earlier, the most advantageous situation, from the point of view of cooperation between both environments, would be when both parents and teachers trusted each other and believed in each other's full dedication to the undertaken activities. Unfortunately, such a state of affairs cannot be found in the case of neither lower nor higher grades of primary school. While in the case of parents, their attitude is mostly conducive to taking joint actions and initiatives, in the case of teachers, it is withdrawal, or even reluctance that can be clearly observed.

The types of pedagogical myths identified by H. Kędzierska (2002) seem to be helpful when trying to explain the reasons for the teachers' negative attitude towards parents. According to the author, one of them is the myth of the *teachers' room wisdom*, which says that there is a huge gap between the theory and the educational practice. According to the assumptions of this myth, the real knowledge is obtained from one's own experience or from observing the behavior of more experienced colleagues. The conclusion is that the pedagogical theories do not constitute a useful tool. The confirmation of the myth may be teachers' general awareness concerning the need to cooperate with parents*, accompanied by a negative attitude towards their partners. Another myth is the *us-them dichotomy*, containing teachers' defensive convictions in response to the evaluation of their performance. The consequence of such behavior is closing oneself within one's own professional group. It is reflected in the differences of responses chosen by the parents and the teachers. On one hand,

* Due to numerous provisions in the documentation regulating the work of school, top-down requirements regarding the need to implement the idea of cooperation with parents, as well as monitoring the implementation of these provisions, it can be concluded that teachers are aware of the need to undertake joint activities with parents.

there are the parents' positive opinions (*them*), on the other hand, the teachers' radically opposite views (*us*).

It is impossible to hope for the implementation of the assumptions of family-school cooperation in a situation when one of the educational entities is not convinced of the other party's full commitment, which is clearly visible among teachers. The cause of such negative teachers' opinions might be professional burnout, which – according to St. Tucholska (2003) – may result in emotional coldness, hostility, suspicion, severity and discouragement. The problem of teachers' oppositional attitudes certainly has various sources, which affect their overall performance, also in the area of relations with parents. It is worth mentioning that the difficulties in implementing the idea of a subjective school, in which parents have the right to co-decide, do not only refer to the Polish educational reality. Based on a research conducted on the inclusion of educational subjects in the decision-making process, N.C. Cranston emphasized the need to change both teachers' and headteachers' attitudes. These changes should aim at, among others, creating a friendly atmosphere conducive to taking joint actions with parents (Cranston, 2001 pp. 20–21).

When undertaking measures aimed at the real implementation of the idea of parent-teacher cooperation, it is necessary to work on changing the attitude of the teachers themselves, in the first place. As the study shows, despite the top-down legal regulations addressed to teachers' communities concerning the cooperation with parents, teachers' personal convictions prevent them from taking sincere actions. Therefore, steps should be taken to make them aware again of the importance of their work and the general respect that parents have for them, thereby changing teachers' negative attitudes towards their own work. As it was indicated by R. Oostdam and E. Hooge, it is important that teachers find a balance between professional distance and independence, and an open and positive approach to parents' involvement when pursuing educational partnerships (Hooge, Hooge, 2013, p. 348).

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