

FAMILY-SCHOOL RELATIONSHIP IN BULGARIA: TWO POINTS OF VIEW

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Family and school are the two main factors of children’s education and they have influence of young people’s learning, personal and social growth. Between family and school are interactions needed, based on collaboration and actives involving of parents, other family members and school staff in the name of interest and successes of each child. Effective relationships means actually partnership between family and school, characterized by mutual trust, respect and shared responsibility for the education and development of the children and young people at the school. Research demonstrate (Wild, 2003; Hess, 2011), that partnership between both institutions is positive associated with school motivation and satisfaction, also with high academic outcomes. The present survey, conducted at the end of 2017, tries to explain what perceptions, representations and opinions the teachers (N=304) and parents (N=186) have towards the present status of the relationships between school and family in the socio-cultural context of Bulgaria. It was a part of the National survey carried out within grant from the Ministry of Education and Science. The analysis of the results confirms, that the relationships between teachers and parents as a key subjects in the interaction "school-family" are problematic. They are mutual negative attitudes and representations between parents and teachers and this indicate strongly reduced trust between them.

Keywords: family-school relationships, education, adolescent, parents, teachers

ВЗАИМОДЕЙСТВИЕТО “СЕМЕЙСТВО-УЧИЛИЩЕ” В БЪЛГАРИЯ: ДВЕ ГЛЕДНИ ТОЧКИ

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Абстракт: Семейството и училището са двете основни институции, призвани да осигурят социокултурната приемственост между поколенията, изпълнявайки ролята на фактори за духовно-ценностното формиране и личностно израстване на децата. Нужни са партньорски и координирани взаимодействия между тях, както и активно включване учителите, родителите и другите членове на семейството, в центъра на които активности са интересът и успехът на всяко дете. Ефективното взаимодействие означава партньорство между семейството и училището, базирани на високо доверие, респект, споделена отговорност по отношение на образованието и развитието на децата и младите хора. Изследванията показват, че партньорските взаимодействия между двете институции са позитивно свързани с мотивацията и постигането на високи резултати в образователен план от учениците. В края на 2017 г. беше проведено национално изследване в български контекст с водеща подкрепа от страна на Министерството на образованието, чиято цел беше да се идентифицира актуалното състояние на педагогическото взаимодействие „семейство – училище” през погледа на родители и учители. Анализът на резултатите от проведеното проучване показва доста висока

степен на проблематичност във взаимоотношенията между учители и родители в качеството им на ключови субекти на взаимодействието „училище – семейство“. Взаимните негативни оценки са налице в много отношения и това е индикативно за силно намаленото доверие между тях.

Ключови думи: взаимодействие „семейство-училище“, образование, подрастващи, родители, учители

INTRODUCTION

Nourishing adolescents' personality and supporting their socialization, social integration and professional realization is a priority and a permanently important aim for any prospering society. It's an unquestionable fact that family and school are two key institutions whose aim is to provide social and cultural succession between generations, them being in the role of factors for moral and personal growth of young people. In order for these institutions to fulfill such a calling, it is necessary to establish partner relationships between main subjects in them – teachers, parents, other family members. The disruption of optimal balance in the relationships between those subjects leads to some serious problems with negative consequences for young people and for society as a whole.

Effective cooperation between families and educational institutions (schools and others) should be built through proactive joint activities, which supports children and adolescents in their development as personalities and citizens, in their choice and walk down an individually rationalized and useful educational path.

Joint actions between family and school is a challenge that requires setting a partnership, openness and admitting all the existing problems, as well as combining resources in searching for constructive solutions. Such type of cooperation needs trust, a two-way and equal exchange of ideas and positions, a mutuality between teachers and parents in recognizing and respecting the authority and competency of others, along with sharing responsibility. Undoubtedly, mutual efforts and contacts between family and school require a lot of energy and time, but their effects are numerous and positive for both students and parents, and for teachers as well.

A lot of researches of problems in active school-family collaboration place an emphasis on several important points:

- Applied educational studies often state the problematic nature of communication between school institution and family. Recent researches in this field focus upon positive and proactive interaction strategies, which also state the idea that in order to have a partner-like and successful communication, both subjects must be perceived in their roles of experts. Pedagogical experts (teachers) have the competency to create a proper environment for learning, while parents have higher levels of sensitivity for social-emotional development of their children. Those strengths in subjects' expertise should be used in such a way, so trust, mutual respect and attitude toward cooperation can be built within the implementation of successful practices and forms of interaction between family and educational institutions (Tsvetanska, 2015)

- Cognitive abilities and personal traits of learners like Self-effectiveness and motivation for achievements are important determinants of school success, but students' social surroundings like family, peers and local community have a significant influence upon school performance (Binz, Schneider & Seiffge-Krenke 2010). This is also confirmed by a number of meta-analysis studies of PISA-results in different European countries like Germany, Austria, Switzerland (Hess, 2011). That's why close cooperation between educational institutions, families, and close social community is really important.

- Adolescents' motivation for success and their academic outcomes raise due to cooperative interaction and shared responsibility between school and family. Their desire to go to school strengthens, along with their satisfaction of educational process. Intensive interactions between educational specialists and family members have a preventive function regarding aggressive and opportunistic behaviour of students in school (Wild, 2003).

Additional benefits with added value, emerging as a result of equivalent pedagogical school-family relationships, are as follows:

Positive school atmosphere and learning environment for students is often achieved when parents are informed about their children's performance, achievements, and behavior. When relationships between those two institutions are set upon cooperation, school and education specialists have clear expectations toward students and their parents, which expectations are stated in an open and democratic dialogue. This is a precondition for active investment of efforts in educational development of students by themselves and by their parents and teachers as a result of mutual trust, recognition and respect.

A positive image of school is built in the wider social environment as a result of all the efforts of active and motivated students with high achievements, satisfied and included in school life parents, along with recognized and respected teachers and specialists.

School functions as a cooperative community due to transparent policies, having students' and families' need in their center, due to democratic procedures for creative participation of students, parents, community leaders in school management, due to a built community identity with perspectives and development goals, shared by all (teachers, students, parents), due to culture of dialogue and reciprocity and shared social responsibility.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND SCOPE

At this point, relationship between family and educational institutions in Bulgaria are not quite without problems and the development of highly educated, responsible and prospering young generation depends on raising their quality. This, among others issues, determined the implementation of a study about the specific of these relationships with emphasis upon the main family-school interactions. At the end of 2017 a team from Faculty of Education at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", with the main financial support of Ministry of education and science in Bulgaria, was given the task to study the actual situation of educational family-school interaction through the views of its main subjects – parents and teachers.

The main aim of the research was to identify specifics and problematic areas in family-school relations and to set and develop measures for overcoming the negative tendencies in such relations.

Research main target groups were parents and educational specialists in different institutions in preschool and school education system in Bulgaria, as they are considered the key participants in the studied interactions.

The total number of pedagogical specialists who participated in the research is 304 and they come from all range of educational institutions and educational levels in preschool and school education system (according to Law for preschool and school education, implemented since 01.08.2016). Most of the participating specialists are teachers in primary and in secondary stage of basic education, working in basic comprehensive schools (46,03%), followed by teachers in vocational secondary schools (31,79%), and teachers at secondary level of education in secondary schools (16,88%). The smallest group of participants are teachers in kindergartens (5,30%). Age distributions of teachers' sample includes teachers under 40 years of age (23,51%), teachers between 41 and 50 years of age (37,09%), teachers between 51 and 60 years (34,11%). Only 5.30% of teachers are older than 60 years. Most of the teachers live in cities, which are centers of a region – 49,34%, followed by the ones living in the capital – 25,83%. The rest of them live in small towns with population under 50 000 and villages – total of 20,53%, and in the so- called big cities with population over 50 000 people – just 8,61% of the sample.

The scope of the second group of participants – parents, includes 186 respondents. In this sample there is also a prevailing number of females (88,59%) over males (11,41%). Age distribution shows that over half of the participants are between 36 and 45 years old (64,13%), followed by parents under 35 years old – 17,39% and parents of 45 years or older – 18,48%. Parents of children in primary school are the most active respondents in the survey with a share of 76,06%, followed by parents with children in second stage of basic education (28,80%) and parents of children in secondary school – 23,91%. The highest share among parents are those living in the capital (89,67%) and then – parents living in regional centers (5,98%).

The survey is of a **descriptive design type** and separate questionnaires for the two target groups were developed for achieving research goals. Those questionnaires reflect certain specifics of respondent groups and were offered to the respondents at an online research platform. As both research tools contain evaluation scales of Likert type, before presenting research data and its interpretation, it is necessary to clarify that in 5-level range scale (continuum: 1 – least significant to 5 – most significant) the average value (mean) is 3. Such clarification is made because the direction of means' deviation from the average of the scale on different items makes it easier to compare and analyze the data. It is known that the specifics of range scale suppose that median should be used in the analysis. Anyway, the use of means is considered a common compromise when analyzing data, gathered with the method described above (Cohen, Brooke Lea, 2013, p. 11). In the present publication some main results about the essence, significance, and specifics of family-school pedagogical relationships will be presented and discussed, in the way they are perceived by parents' and teachers' points of view, attitudes and perceptions. As a result of the analysis some conclusions will be outlined and discussed along with some recommendations, relevant to educational policy and practice in Bulgarian context.

SPECIFICS OF FAMILY-SCHOOL RELATIONSHIPS – MAIN RESULTS

Full value interactions between parents and teachers in educational institutions can be achieved only through real efforts, will, and competency of both sides in the relationships.

One of the main aspects in the research is related to the way parents and teachers, as key subjects in family school interactions, evaluate the success of those interactions. For little over above half of all the surveyed parents (58,60%) the success of family-school relationship is sort of evasive in nature and is not a stable dimension. 11,83% of parents are more explicit in their positive attitude toward the relationship of those two institutions. As a whole, the group of sceptics regarding the character of family-school relations is relatively big (approximately 28,4%). The picture of teachers' opinions about their interaction with parents is similar to that of the parents themselves. However, there are some differences worth mentioning. One such difference is the considerably smaller share of teachers, who explicitly evaluate school interaction with parents as a successful one (only 2,30% compared to 11,83% of parents). Another difference is related to the fact that the percentage of teachers, who are moderate optimists, is relatively higher than the one in parents' group (68,09%), so they believe that school-family interaction is successful in some aspects and not successful in others. The share of teachers whose evaluations for the success of the interaction are mostly on the negative side of the scale is similar to those of the parents (28,95%). An interesting tendency can be traced within the result of both groups' opinions about the success of family-school interaction. Parents are realistic in their opinions about the successful and the unsuccessful aspects of these interactions, along with most of the teachers. The difference in their positions lays in the fact, that parents are more likely to be optimistic about their relations with the school than the teachers.

Besides being successful, a relationship needs to have a significance for the participating subjects. This is also relevant for family-school relationships and the key participants in them. Respondents from both samples had to answer the question: "How important for you, in general, is the active work with parents of your students (with teachers of your children)? Evaluate using the following scale – from 1- not important at all to 5- extremely important". Data gathered with this question revealed quite an eloquent results - for both teachers and parents the active work with the other participants in the relationship is quite important. Means for both samples are higher than 4,50. For parents the mean is 4,74 while the mean for teachers is 4,55.

Another research topics refers to the satisfaction with communication through the lenses of its two main subjects. Such a question is really important as satisfaction with interactions is an essential aspect of relationships' development. It is also important that the balance between parents' and public interests (governed by educational institutions, e.g. schools) is instilled within this satisfaction. The opinions of parents are somewhat inconsistent. For most of the parents (total of 67,74%) there is a partial or a complete satisfaction of their communication with teachers and other representatives of the educational institution. Still, the percentage of dissatisfied parents remain relatively high (32,26%).

Teachers' results regarding this aspect of communication seems more explicit. For 16,45% of teachers there is an absolute satisfaction with the results of their communication with parents. Another 68,75% of them state a partial satisfaction, because there is a balance between protection of parents' interests and the interests of educational institution.

One recommendation that can be made after a careful analysis of the above results is that teachers and other representatives of educational institutions can contribute to the improvement of parents' satisfaction about their communication with the school, if teachers undoubtedly express a readiness for cooperation, attention, openness, and understanding of parents (adults, providing family care) and of their abilities to provide supportive educational functions in best interest of children.

Among other things, in order to be a constructive one, a relationship between family and school should be intensive. Only then, in an open dialogue and readiness for mutual support, main problems and difficulties can be addressed and common solutions can be sought. Survey data about the intensity of contacts between Bulgarian parents and teachers show a moderate optimism. Mean value of intensity (on 5-levels scale from 1- very weak intensity to 5 – very strong intensity of contacts) in parents' responses is 3,54, while the mean for teachers' sample is 4,02. This leads to the conclusion that both subjects of family-school interactions assess the intensity of their communication with values higher than the median – 3. Still, teachers evaluate it higher than parents with almost 0,5. These results are encouraging and should be considered when concepts and programs for stimulation of more engaged interaction between subjects are created (at the level of centralized policies, as well as at the level of educational institutions and their autonomous polices).

One of survey's aspects is related to forms of participation and involvement of parents in their communication with school institutions and educational specialists. From parents' perspective, the most popular form of interaction are parent-teachers meetings. Teachers' opinions is quite the same. In other words, both key subjects agree that parents participate to the highest degree in the most common form of interaction, which are parents-teachers meetings. It is interesting that parents evaluate their participation in those meetings higher than teachers – means of 4,76 vs. 4,01. According to parents, the support of schools through volunteer work, with donations and sponsorship are also forms of interaction, although not so common as parents-teachers meetings, which are the main way to participate in an active interaction with educational institutions. From teachers' perspective, unlike parents, parents' participation in school management through parents' boards, community councils and parents' councils are really important forms of active interaction between family and school. From a comparative point of view it can be argued that teachers' mean value, given to the degree of parents participation in different forms of communication is higher than the mean value parents give (2,53 for teachers and 2,27 for parents). It should be pointed out that both mean values are quite lower than the median.

Another topic of interest for the research is to gather information about the atmosphere within and during communication between teachers and parents. That's why a relevant to this aim question was given to both respondent groups. Impressively, both teachers and parents think that communication atmosphere is calm, friendly, filled with trust, and in a businesslike manner. Still, communication is a little bit more intense (3,72 vs. 4,19) and a little bit more overwhelming (3,72 vs. 4,19) for teachers than it is for parents. When it comes to both groups' evaluation of some significant characteristics of their contacts and defining these contacts' emotional background, an interesting picture emerges. It seems that parents have a more idealistic and more positive evaluation about the climate of their communication with teachers. It is quite possible such data to be gathered due to the fact that the sample is a little bit skewed toward parents with children in primary education, where traditionally, communication with teachers is more intensive, somewhat more filled with trust and with expressions of intensive care from both sides. Teachers' image of their mutual and purposeful interaction with parents is more realistic and deprived of redundant illusions. This image comes as a result of their reflection on both high professional responsibility for such type of interactions, and on their complicated context.

Beside the interaction atmosphere, the study found out another aspect in teachers and parents, on which they agree – the one regarding the shared responsibility between family and school about developing the adolescents as socially competent and highly educated persons. Results show that both parents and teachers state that the responsibility for the development of over 10 basic socially and personally significant skills and attitudes in young people should be shared (presented for evaluation set of skills and attitudes included attitudes for acceptance of differences, respect for institutions, skills for being pro-social, professional-relevant competencies, quality education, nature-friendly attitude and others). Evidence for that can be found in high shares of responses in favor of shared responsibility (between 59,68% and 77,42% for parents and 58,22% - 85,53% for teachers), as well as in the values of means which are close to the maximum for the scale.

Without describing a detailed presentation, which can be a focus of a separate and a complete material in the future, we would like to mention that part of empirical data, gathered through this study, confirms a sustainable tendency for the past years in Bulgaria, a negative one in its nature. This tendency relates to mutual expectations and perceptions of main subjects in both institutions – family and school. On one side – there are lowered expectations of parents toward the role of the school and the functions of teachers regarding education and development of young people. On the other –no small number of teachers have the hardened idea that Bulgarian parents, although taking care for their children's health and material well-being, are not actively engaged in cooperation with schools and teachers in the name of children's educational support, and most of them don't have very good pedagogical culture. These and other similar results are indicative for the lowered trust between key participants in family-school relationships.

DISCUSSION

Analysis of survey results, related to Bulgarian context, shows a clearly visible problematic nature of teachers-parents relationships, considering their status as main participants in family-school interactions. Unfavorable evaluations and statements emerge in many aspects. Here are some conclusions regarding this:

- Despite that majority of parents and teachers evaluate their interactions as successful, the number of sceptics about this key element of interaction is not small in both groups.

- Parents' opinion about their satisfaction of interactions with school and teachers substantially differs from teachers' position on the results from their communication with parents. No doubt, educational institutions can do a lot about raising parents' satisfaction if they show more attention, cooperation attitudes, openness and understanding of parents.

- Both parents and teachers are unanimous in their opinion that active mutual work is of a significant importance. Despite that, there is a need of working toward raising the intensity of contacts between them.

- There are traditions in Bulgaria in implementation of certain forms of interaction between family and educational institutions. Such forms are parents-teachers meetings, parents' volunteer work, parents' participation in main organs for school management. Nevertheless, it is necessary for educational institutions to put more efforts in more purposeful motivation of parents for participation in different interaction and school activities, taking into consideration parents' needs and resources (time, personal attitudes, professional competencies, etc.)

- Both teachers and parents state that communication atmosphere is based on mutual respect and benefits. This atmosphere is more intense and more overwhelming for teachers.

- For the majority of teachers, Bulgarian parents have some characteristics which make them difficult partners and create obstacles for family-school interaction.

- Parents' opinions about teachers and school especially, are not very pleasing, either. Modern Bulgarian school, as a whole, does not respond to parents' expectations. .

In conclusion, the optimal relationship between educational institutions and families suggests the existence of a relevant communication culture, support and help when necessary, problem solving, etc. Some prerequisite for achieving effectiveness in this field are: raising mutual trust of key interaction subjects – teachers and parents; involving parents in special forms for raising parental competencies; providing teachers with special education for working with parents; and last but not least – a clear need for law changes, related to implementation of national standards for educational institutions' work with parents (similar to some European countries like Switzerland and Germany, also Australia and USA) with clearly defined goals, differentiated competencies and responsibilities, and measurable results.

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