**PARENT’S VIEW ON COOPERATION AS PART OF SCHOOL CULTURE**

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**ABSTRACT**

Parents are the first and most important educators of their children. In order for children to succeed in school and later in life, parent- school cooperation is vital. Parent-school co-operation is also an indicator of the quality of school and teacher’s work. In high quality relationship between parents and school, co-operation is seen in socialization and respect for cultural differences among families, and therefore it offers different perspectives for creating positive school culture. All abovementioned requires time and patience, two-way communication and quality school management. The aim of this research is to assess parents’ attitudes towards school culture, which is divided into three parts: school management and relationships in school; educational work and support to learners, and attitudes toward teachers. Participants of the research were parents of lower school age learners from four urban primary schools in Croatia. The results have shown that parents consider school culture positive, but they still have a passive role in co-operation with teachers. Parent-school cooperation is a complex process in the school culture, which depends on a number of circumstances.

**Keywords:** cooperation, parents, school culture, teachers

**INTRODUCTION**

Parent school cooperation is a key factor in the life of every student but also in the life of each school. In order for cooperation to be realized, and potentially turned into partnership, it is necessary to consider the culture of the school, but also of the classroom. School culture is developed in collaboration between students, parents, teachers and all other members who participate in education. Implicit pedagogy of each teacher is seen through school culture and is “transferred” consciously or unconsciously to each student. The school atmosphere, ethos or culture can encourage or discourage parents from potential cooperation. The quality of school culture, seen through interaction among individuals, their association and the focus on achieving a common vision of the organization, may be characterized as positive or negative. Positive school culture is reflected in optimism, responsibility, belief in the purpose of work, interaction, dialogue, support and recognition of the efforts, success and innovation, while negative culture is determined by a low degree of connectivity, as well as passivity, pessimism, frustration, negative attitude towards teaching and learning, an insight into the institution through its failures, blame and lack of communication [1].

The first step in changing culture is to create a clear vision depending on the circumstances in which the school is located, issues it faces, the readiness of the staff, the support to children and parents. Cultural changes can also be achieved by appropriate activities, such as fostering communion, strengthening relationships, promoting mutual respect, etc. In stimulating school culture openness, honesty, the ability to express different opinions, as well as acceptance and cooperation prevail [2]. School culture is not easy to change because it is not prescribed by law or written in any legal document. It is created each day in the interaction of different people with a different set of experience, knowledge and views. The nature of cooperation depends on the local tradition and culture as well as socio-economic status of school district [3]. Contemporary school should be open to everyone, especially to parents who have a special place in it. School curriculum as a map of each school also contributes to school culture. It should be open to cooperation with the local community and other stakeholders [4]. Collaboration between parents and schools is a complex multi-dimensional process in school culture that depends on numerous factors.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

School culture is defined as a relatively permanent quality of the school environment that affects the behaviour of its members and thus determines the overall school lifestyle [5]. According to Vujičić [6] the culture of the organization encompasses beliefs, values, meanings and attitudes, and determines the way of behaviour and social rituals, affects the realization of managerial functions, defines what is acceptable/unacceptable and represents the glasses through which the organization sees its environment. Positive school culture is conditioned by a successful climate characterized by human relationships and trust in the teachers' group.

Some parents can be easily involved in educational system, but others, due to cultural barriers, lack of education or poor experiences that they had during schooling and some other reasons, are not positive about cooperation with school [7]. There are challenges that lead to redesign of the model of co-operation between parents and school. Some of the challenges are: parenting – the only “profession” without any prior teaching, changes in the lifestyle of families and children, shifting upbringing from family to school, developing cultural responsibility of parent- teacher- child triad.

Collaboration is a continuing process, which consists of informing, involving, engaging, and leading. Informing is defined as „students, parents, and community members are informed of decisions made by school staff“[8]. Involving assumed that „students, parents, and community members are invited to participate in the school“. Some activities at this stage are family dances, fundraising activities, or inviting parents to support classroom field trips. Next stage is engaging when „students, parents, and community members are actively engaged in the life of the school and community“[8]. Parents, students and school staff work together and take actions. Last stage is leading. It is defined as „staff members, students, parents, and community members have created a norm of community engagement“[8]. This stage assumes partnership as all members assume leadership roles within the school and community by working together on a shared vision. In order to go from informing to leading a lot of learning, will and motivation is necessary from both parents and teachers. To have leadership skills is to first learn about leadership and management, but it is also important to learn how to exchange information and engage in decision-making [9]. Most schools and parents are unwilling or have insufficient knowledge to turn cooperation into partnership.

Authors Gregorčić Mrvar and Resman [10] conducted a research on the opinion of teachers, associates and parents about the importance of their co-operation. Research results showed that both parents and teachers consider cooperation important and useful, but there are differences in educational status of parents. Parents with higher education attach greater importance to cooperation with teachers than less educated parents. Bæck conducted a research on teachers’ attitudes regarding home–school cooperation. Researcher used a mixed-methods approach combining survey and qualitative interviews among teachers in Norway. The results showed that teachers experience the interaction in a positive way, but „they try to limit parents’ influence through emphasising their own professionalism, thus leaving parents with the role as supporters“[11]. Teachers who work with well-educated parents are especially conscious of maintaining a distance towards the parents in order to keep them in their place.

In contemporary school parents engagement in school influences the power balance in the social field of the school. This power balance has an effect on the school culture. If teachers maintain distances with parents, the co-operation will be only formal, meaning individual contacts and parent-teacher meetings. From the perspective of social pedagogy, it is necessary to develop and work on social relations in school, both between teachers and students and parents and teachers. In that case, students receive a valuable message that by working together, they can create school they would like to attend.

**METHODS**

Qualitative and quantitative methodology was used in the research. The qualitative part involved the analysis of legal legislation, while **t**he quantitative part of the research was conducted by the method of an anonymous survey.

**Research aim**

The aim of the research was to examine the parents' attitudes toward school culture, which is divided into school management and school relations, educational work and support to students, and the relationship with teachers. All above mentioned components are part of school culture. Based on the research aim, the following hypotheses are set:

H1: There is no difference in the parent's assessment of the school openness for co-operation with regard to the child's grade.

H2: There is no difference in the parent's assessment of the school openness for co-operation with regard to parents’ gender.

H3: Parents evaluate co-operation with school positive.

**Sample**

Parents of the 1st and 4th grade students of four elementary schools in Osijek participated in the research. A random sample was used, as other schools were invited to participate, but only parents from these four schools agreed to participate in the research. The total number of parents participating in the study was 249, out of which 173 mothers and 76 fathers, 105 parents of 1st grade students and 144 parents of 4th grade students.

**Instrument**

For research purposes, a questionnaire, based on previous researches, was created. The questionnaire was divided into three parts. The first part refers to school management and school relations. The second part refers to educational work and support to students, and the third part is a relationship with teachers. Each part consists of 10 statements. Parents evaluated their agreement on a five-degree Likert scale (1-completely disagree, 2-mostly disagree, 3-neither agree nor disagree, 4-mostly agree, 5-completely agree). When it comes to socio-demographic data, parents wrote their gender and child’s grade. Prior to the statistical analysis of the data obtained, Cronbach alpha was calculated to verify the reliability of the questionnaire itself and its particles. The value of the Cronbach alpha coefficient is high (0.93) which means the instrument is reliable. Descriptive parameters such as arithmetic mean value, frequencies, minimum and maximum values, standard deviation and data distribution expressed in percentages were used in the paper. A t-test for independent samples was also used to verify whether there was a statistically significant difference between the observed sociodemographic parameters and parents' estimation of the school openness for co-operation.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Analysis of Legal Legislation**

The following documents were analysed in the paper: *Primary and Secondary School Education Act* (2014), *The National Framework Curriculum for Preschool Education and General Compulsory and Secondary School Education* (2011), *Primary School Curriculum* (2006), *Family law* (2015).

There are three articles (135, 136, and 137) in *Primary and Secondary School Education Act* [12], chapter XV entitled *Parents' rights and obligations* which state the exact rights and obligations of parents. Article 135 states that parents are obliged to enrol a child to school and make sure that child regularly attends classes. Furthermore, parents have the right and obligation to participate in child's education, as well as to be informed on time about the achievements of the child. In article 136, parents are obliged to make sure that a student regularly attends classes and carries out school duties and, in case of absence, must notify the school in due time. In case of neglecting their obligations, the school schedules a meeting with parents. If they ignore the invitation, the next step would be to inform social service which then acts according to law. Article 137 states the establishment of Parents’ Council. Each class chooses one representative among parents for the Parents’ Council, and then the Parents’ Council chooses the president and the deputy among them. The Parents’ Council gives opinion on the school curriculum, proposes a member to the school board and participates in other affairs in accordance with school regulations.

*The National Framework Curriculum for Preschool Education and General Compulsory and Secondary School Education* [13] insufficiently mentions parents, mostly in a well-known statement that "more frequent co-operation with parents/guardians" is needed (pp. 5) and that "the high quality of educational and pedagogical activities of preschool institutions and schools implies regular and permanent co-operation with parents / guardians in the sense of clearly shared responsibility for achieving the goals of education in the school" (pp. 17). NOK also states that parents/guardians will "have constant knowledge of school expectations and values of each grade" (pp. 207).

*Primary School Curriculum* [14] using the same sentence as in NOK states „regular and permanent co-operation with parents in the sense of clearly shared responsibility for achieving the goals of education in the school or in the teaching of each subject“. Chapter 13 *Integrative Educational Content for Primary School* mentions the need to include parents in the educational work of the school from the time the child starts school. Special emphasis is put on the promotion of healthy eating, the need for regular sleep and rest, the importance of moving and staying in the fresh air. Collaboration of parents and teachers focuses "on specific behaviours and problems of growing up in puberty and adolescence, and on risk behaviour" (pp. 22).

*Family law* [15] chapter 2 *Child’s rights and legal relations between parents and child*, article 94 states that parents are obliged to take part in meetings or invitations of an educational institution in relation to child’s upbringing and education. Furthermore, parents must not force a child into education that is inconsistent with his or her abilities.

The analysis of these documents shows that co-operation between parents and schools is important but it is marginalized and left to the school staff to design and implement co-operation programs. Given the scale of teachers' work and parents' employment, co-operation in most schools is reduced to official individual contacts and parenting meetings.

**Analysis of quantitative data**

In the first category (*School Management and School Relations*) a statistically significant percentage of parents completely agrees that good relations between school staff and students were built. The highest frequency of parents’ disagreement (23.3%) is with the statement that parents should take part in the election of the school principal. In the first category, it is possible to detect the parents' relative satisfaction with the school management and the relationships that prevail.

In the second category (*Educational Work and Support to Students*) statistically significant number of parents completely or mostly agree that their children receive an adequate amount of homework and that the evaluation is fair and the assessment criteria are well elaborated.

In the last category (*Relationship with Teachers*), there are significant differences between parents' answers. Only 26.1% of parents completely agree that parents should buy supplies for their child's classroom. Also, the results have shown that parents are not fully willing to attend classes and observe the work of teachers. Furthermore, only 41.4% of parents believe that the teacher should know the conditions and the culture of family life. From these answers, it can be concluded that parents are not ready for an active collaborative role in school life that leads to partnership. When offered to participate in teaching and contributing with their own ideas, most parents agree that they are not willing to do so, indicating their passive role. For this reason, cooperation with the tendency towards partnership is still prevalent in most schools.

Table 1 shows which statement parents rated the highest and which the lowest. With point 3 (neither agree nor disagree), parents evaluated statements about parental participation in teaching, purchase of consumables, on contemporary teaching, student participation in school decision-making. The frequency of parental agreement is the most significant in the statements that co-operation between parents and teachers increases mutual understanding and that cooperation has a positive impact on the student's attitudes toward the school. Furthermore, parents believe that better co-operation leads to better student success. Parents evaluate that they can talk freely with the teacher about the problems and difficulties of the child.

Table 1: Parents' estimates on cooperation - the lowest and the highest

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Statement | N | Min | Max | Mean | Std. Dev. |
| I find it useful that parents supply the class with necessary consumables (pens, paper…) | 249 | 1,00 | 5,00 | 3,3936 | 1,39329 |
| When our child has a problem, we can talk to the teacher about it. | 249 | 1,00 | 5,00 | 4,7631 | ,54262 |

With descriptive statistics, we checked the mean value of each category and obtained results which show that the openness of the school is most seen in the category *Relationship with Teachers* (Mean = 4.29), followed by *School Management and School Relations* (Mean = 4.21), while the lowest estimated openness is in *Educational Work and Support to Students* (Mean = 4.06). It can be concluded that parents evaluate the culture of school open for cooperation (Table 2) and are aware of the importance of co-operation for the well-being and success of their child. Furthermore, *Educational Work and Support to Students* could be improved especially in including students in decision-making.

Table 2: Assessment of the School Culture openness

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
| Average | 249 | 2,87 | 5,00 | 4,1909 | ,51508 |

Independent samples t-test results show that there is no statistically significant difference between the parental assessment of the openness of the school's culture and the grade of the child, thus confirming the first hypothesis (*There is no difference in the parent's assessment of the school openness for co-operation with regard to the child's grade*). The second hypothesis (*There is no difference in the parent's assessment of the school openness for co-operation with regard to parents’ gender*) is also confirmed. Results show that there is no statistically significant difference between parents’ gender and school openness estimation. The third hypothesis (*Parents evaluate co-operation with the school positive*) is confirmed because the mean value in the questionnaire is high (4.06).

**CONCLUSION**

Positive school culture can be beneficial for parent-school co-operation. The documents analysed in the research provide very little information on possible ways of co-operation between parents and schools. It is necessary to define more closely the co-operation and parental involvement in the school to help teachers in guiding parents. Results of the quantitative part of the research show that parents consider school culture positive, but their role is still passive. Parents are neither willing to actively participate in the teaching, nor to buy necessary consumables for the classroom. Participating in the choice of a school principal is one of the obligations of Parent council, but the results have shown that parents are not interested in that. However, school principal has an important role in building good relationship with teachers and parents as well as in creating positive school culture. Parents are aware that good cooperation with teachers is necessary and influences their child’s success and attitude toward school. Still, parents want teachers to initiate mutual activities. For that reason, it is hard to talk about partnership, where both parents and teachers are active and equally contribute with their ideas. In most schools, teachers are more active and invite parents to be part of everyday school life. Even though, teachers and parents work long hours and do not have enough free time, participating in mutual activities can help building better relationship, more open school culture but also increase satisfaction of teachers and parents. It is also important to encourage parents to give active contribution to school. Creating a detailed curriculum of co-operation between parents and teachers would help guide both parties and help them in creating better environment for co-operation. Most teachers still think that if something is not prescribed that it is not their obligation and it is hard for them to find time and ways to include parents in more diverse activities.

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