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COOPERATION WITH PARENTS AS AN ASPECT OF THE TEACHER'S SKILLS AND TOOLS

WSPÓŁPRACA Z RODZICAMI JAKO ELEMENT WARSZTATU PRACY NAUCZYCIELA

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Summary: The purpose of this article is to look at the teacher's cooperation with parents as an important aspect of the skills and tools used by teachers from the perspective of practical activities. The basis for these considerations is the results of conducted research, including analysis of existing data resulting from the external evaluation carried out in the course of two school years (2017/2018 and 2018/2019) regarding the "Parents are kindergarten partners" requirement. In addition, plans for cooperation with parents for the 2019/2020 school year and the results of the NIK audit regarding cooperation of schools with parents in terms of the implementation of educational tasks were analyzed. Practical guidelines are important to help teachers build proper relationships, and thus provide the basis for good cooperation with parents.

Streszczenie: Celem niniejszego artykułu jest spojrzenie na współpracę nauczyciela z rodzicami jako składową warsztatu pracy z perspektywy podejmowanych działań praktycznych. Podstawę rozważań stanowią wyniki przeprowadzonych badań, w tym analiza danych zastanych wynikających

z przeprowadzonej w ciągu dwóch lat szkolnych – 2017/2018 i 2018/2019 – ewaluacji zewnętrznej w zakresie wymagania „Rodzice są partnerami przedszkola”. Ponadto analizie poddano plany współpracy z rodzicami na rok szkolny 2019/2020 oraz wyniki kontroli NIK w zakresie współpracy szkół z rodzicami w realizacji zadań wychowawczych. Istotne są wskazania praktyczne, które pomogą nauczycielom zbudować prawidłowe relacje, a tym samym dadzą podstawy dobrej współpracy z rodzicami.

Introduction

The teacher's skills and tools include the educational and didactic materials they have collected, their professional experience, as well as their ability to influence pupils' immediate and further environment, including their parents. This article presents an approach to the teacher's skills and tools that takes into account the interpersonal and communication skills necessary to pursue the teaching profession and the problems related to educating future teachers in this area. For this purpose, the following works were analyzed: research conducted by various pedeutologists regarding procedures, ways and methods of work, as well as legal and organizational documents; the results of external evaluation in the field of the teacher–parent relationship; plans of cooperation with parents in several kindergartens from various regions of Poland aimed to establish the common elements of cooperation with parents and the resulting tasks for teachers; and the results of an audit carried out by the Supreme Audit Office (NIK) in terms of recommendations issued to the minister of education and to directors of educational institutions.

Małgorzata Kabat believes that shaping the image of the educator as a committed, inventive person undertaking various tasks and challenges in their environment and implementing flexible crossing of the boundaries of pedagogical activity is a necessary condition for building one's own skills and tools (Kabat, 2017, p. 115). As a teacher develops, their skills and tools develop, too.

Since the first natural educational environment of a child is the family and the environment in which they are brought up, it is important to establish cooperation between the teacher-educator and the parents of the children

entrusted to their care. Cooperation and partnership are, if not a guarantee, then at least a good prognosis of the effectiveness of didactic and educational activities. Krystyna Ferenz states that “In a democratic society, the role of parents as important partners of the school in the educational process is and must continue to be taken into account” (Ferenz, 2017, p. 28).

Legal provisions regarding the requirements for kindergartens also impose on them the obligation to cooperate with parents (Regulation of the Minister of National Education of August 11, 2017, on the requirements for schools and institutions, Journal of Laws of 2017, item 1611, as amended). This is emphasized by Inetta Nowosad who writes that parents’ rights result from normative acts which oblige schools and educational institutions to “constantly consult parents on all matters related to the development of their children,” and thus transform “teacher–parent cooperation into everyday interaction filling the school space” (2001, p. 9).

Democratic education recognizes the right of parents to co-decide about the process of teaching and raising their children. It should be noted that the applicable law imposing the obligation to appoint parents’ councils thus contributes to the process of determining the rules of cooperation between teachers and parents. Nevertheless, a number of problems regarding such cooperation can still be noticed in Polish schools. According to Anna Błasiak (2017, p. 24),

In the name of cooperation, the school and the family should develop their own harmonized model of educational activity where appropriate ideas and assumptions are important, but the most crucial conditions for effective cooperation between the school and the home are openness and commitment, partnership based on dialogue, getting rid of stereotypes and prejudices, and employing various forms of cooperation and contact with parents, as well as their adequate adaptation to the needs and expectations of students.

Theoretical Background

The problem of the teacher’s skills and tools in the context of cooperation with parents has been the subject of research conducted, among others, by Mieczysław Łobocki, Barbara Surma, Jolanta Szempruch and Bogusław Śliwerski.

The *New Pedagogical Dictionary* by Wincenty Okoń asserts that “cooperation is based on mutual trust and loyalty as well as subordination to the goal, duly realized by all individuals or groups” (Okoń, 2001, p. 443).

Łobocki (1985, p. 37) defined the principles of cooperation between the kindergarten and the family; he decided that its effectiveness depends on the unity of interactions, a multilateral flow of information, partnership and positive motivation.

According to Surma (2017, p. 182),

[...] the teacher should develop the skill of communicating problems to parents, one that would lead to the advancement of unified interaction, cooperation and understanding [...]. Parents' perception of the teacher has an impact on their attitude towards the kindergarten, which is why direct contacts and establishing trust-inspiring relationships are so important.

In the very title of a subchapter in a pedeutology textbook – *Partner Relations between Teachers and Parents* (2013, p. 230) – Szempruch states that the relations between teachers and parents should be of a partnership nature. Apart from partnership, the author lists the following principles of cooperation:

[...] trust, complementarity, multilateral flow of information, unity of interactions, acceptance of both sides of the relationship – understanding one's individual characteristics and skills, loyalty and helping each other, positive motivation, active and systematic cooperation, compromise and social dialogue, variety of forms of interaction and their adaptation to educational activities at school or within the family (2013, p. 238).

Concluding her considerations, the researcher calls for the creation of an “educational community of responsibility” (2013, p. 243).

Śliwerski (2004) is in favor of the democratization of schools in which mutual relations between subjects are based on participation, openness to individual needs, formal equality before the law and respecting these needs in the system of cooperating subjects.

It is difficult to disagree with the quoted statements, but the problem lies in the method of educating future teachers who are not prepared to work with adults, with the consequence of such incomplete education being their inability to cooperate with parents. The system of educating future teachers does not explain how the relations with learners' parents should look, how to organize parent-teacher meetings, or how to use the potential of parents in the organization of educational and didactic work (Piotrowska-Gromniak, 2012, pp. 99–102). Even during student internships, teacher-tutors do not allow students to participate in their meetings with parents. Students are

educated in the field of substantive subject knowledge but are not prepared to build proper communication and cooperation with parents.

Method

The cooperation between the kindergarten – and thus the teacher – and parents is an integral part of the teacher's work. Establishing proper teacher-parent relationships is a significant challenge for both parties. The methodological difficulty in comprehensively reflecting these relations is related, *inter alia*, to their multidimensionality and diversity. The following empirical research is focused on the diagnosis of the ways and principles of cooperation with parents and their impact on the functioning of kindergartens. The research used the analysis of existing documents, desk research and logical analysis. As was already mentioned in the introduction, the research focuses on the results of the external evaluation of preschool institutions carried out throughout Poland during the two school years of 2017/2018 and 2018/2019, that is, after the introduction of new requirements. Evaluation as a form of pedagogical supervision was introduced in Poland in 2009. The current regulation of the Minister of National Education of August 25, 2017, on pedagogical supervision (Journal of Laws of 2017, item 1658, as amended) defines evaluation as the process of collecting, analyzing and communicating information on the value of activities undertaken by the school or institution. Evaluation results are used in the decision-making process aimed at ensuring high-quality organization of education, upbringing and care processes, and their outcomes in the school or institution. Currently, evaluations are conducted on the basis of the Regulation of the Minister of National Education of August 11, 2017, on the requirements for schools and institutions (Journal of Laws of 2017, item 1611, as amended). In the specification contained in the above-mentioned regulation, the requirement "Parents are partners of the kindergarten" reads: "Parents co-decide on the matters of the kindergarten and participate in the activities undertaken. In kindergarten, teachers and parents cooperate to ensure the proper development of their children. The kindergarten acquires and uses parents' opinions about its work." In connection with the above, this paper attempts to answer the following research questions: What decisions are made in kindergarten with the participation of parents? What is their participation? How do teachers work with parents to support children's development? The answers to these

questions came from the analysis of evaluation reports carried out in relation to the above-mentioned requirement.

The analyzed reports were prepared on the basis of a group interview with teachers, parents, principals and non-teaching staff, a questionnaire for teachers, parents and principals, and an observation sheet for kindergarten classes. Thanks to the triangulation of sources and various methods of obtaining information, the research material was collected taking into account all participants of the educational process. Research tools are posted on the pedagogical supervision internet platform (<http://www.seo2.npseo.pl>), which can be used by evaluation inspectors and persons authorized to do so (Borek, 2010, pp. 25–36).

According to Mirosław Krajewski, the adopted research method – namely, descriptive analysis of documents – is a classic analysis focusing on the content of documents (2006, p. 17). Due to the origin of the documents, for the purposes of this article, both pre-existing documents and source materials concerning the cooperation between kindergarten teachers and parents were included in the analysis.

The research also required the use of various Internet resources, in particular the websites of the Sejm, the Ministry of National Education, the electronic pedagogical supervision platform, the Supreme Audit Office and kindergartens. Regulations, reports, information, work plans and internal documents were analyzed.

Results

Writing about the teacher's skills and tools, researchers often point to classrooms and their equipment, including teaching devices and aids (Duraj-Nowakowa, 2000, pp. 35–38), as well as external (material and organizational), and internal (psychosocial) conditions (Kozłowski, 1996, p. 9). According to Kabat (2017, p. 116), however, “the factor determining the creation and development of skills and tools is the teacher himself/herself.” According to the author, the teacher's skills and tools consist of deliberately selected procedures, ways and methods of work, as well as legal and organizational documents regarding the teacher's – and their students' – activities during the school year. Kabat draws attention to the fact that “in deciding about the form of the teacher's skills and tools, their knowledge acquired during studies, internships and in the process gathering professional experience are crucial” (2017, p. 116).

On the basis of their research on the professional role of the teacher, Elżbieta Strutyńska and Maciej Karwowski focus on the differences between one's professional identity and professional role: "Professional identity focuses on personal views and ideas about oneself, while the professional role [focuses] on one's position based on expectations of the environment" (2019, p. 180).

External Evaluation. The results of external evaluation carried out in kindergartens lead to conclusions regarding the flow of information on the teacher–parent line in terms of the child's needs and developmental potential, the development of their passions and interests, solving difficult situations, ways of sharing information and the influence of parents on the functioning of the kindergarten.

Due to the nature of this study, the answers to only a few closed questions will be analyzed which were addressed to parents during external evaluations carried out in kindergartens throughout Poland between September 1, 2017, and September 30, 2019. A total of 2,921 respondents took part in the study (<http://www.seo2.npseo.pl>).

In the research area entitled "kindergartens cooperate with parents for the development of their children" three closed questions were asked about informing parents about the developmental needs of their children, regarding the developmental potential of their children, and cooperation with parents for the development of their children's interests and passions. The distribution of answers is presented in Tables 1–3.

Table 1

Do teachers inform parents about the needs and developmental potential of their child?

No.	Answer	No. of responses	Percentage of all responses
1	yes, very often	2246	76.89
2	yes, but it is rare	512	17.53
3	it happened only once – at the beginning of the child's stay in kindergarten	62	2.12
4	no, never	70	2.40
5	no answer	31	1.06
total:		2921	100

Source: own study based on: https://seo2.npseo.pl/seo_stats_quality [accessed: 10.10.2019].

The data presented in Table 1 show that the majority of the surveyed parents – 76.89% – stated that teachers inform them about their children’s needs and developmental potential very often; however, 17.53% of the respondents stated that it happened rarely, 2.12% of the parents indicated that it happened only at the beginning of the child’s stay in kindergarten, and 2.4% asserted that it never happened. The remaining 1.06% of the respondents abstained from answering the question.

Table 2

Do teachers cooperate with parents for the development of their child, including in difficult situations?

No.	Answer	No. of responses	Percentage of all responses
1	always, whenever there is need for it	2461	84.25
2	from time to time	265	9.07
3	once or twice we did not receive support despite the need	25	0.86
4	never	24	0.82
5	there is no need for it	125	4.28
6	no answer	21	0.72
	total	2921	100

Source: own study based on: https://seo2.npseo.pl/seo_stats_quality [accessed: 10.10.2019].

Based on the data in Table 2, it should be concluded that teachers usually cooperate with parents for the development of their children when necessary (84.25% of responses). More than 9% of the respondents stated that it happens “from time to time,” while 4.28% of parents said that there was no such need. The answer of 0.86% of parents who, despite the need, did not receive adequate support from the teacher is alarming, as is the statement of 0.82% of the respondents that teachers have never cooperated with them. The remaining 0.72% of the respondents abstained from answering this question.

Table 3

Do teachers work with parents to develop their child's interests and passions?

No.	Answer	No. of responses	Percentage of all responses
1	definitely yes	1814	62.10
2	more or less	855	29.27
3	not really	188	6.44
4	definitely not	36	1.23
5	no answer	28	0.96
total		2921	100

Source: own study based on: https://seo2.npseo.pl/seo_stats_quality
[accessed: 10.10.2019].

The data in Table 3 show that the vast majority of parents – 91.37% – replied “definitely yes” or “more or less” to the indicated topic. The opposite opinion was expressed by the 7.67% of parents who chose the answers “not really” or “definitely not.” The remaining 0.96% abstained from answering.

In the research area entitled “The kindergarten acquires and uses parents’ opinions about its work,” three closed questions were asked, one of which was a single choice, and two multiple choice questions. The distribution of answers is presented in Tables 4 and 5 with a commentary.

Table 4

Do parents' opinions have an influence on the functioning of the kindergarten?

No.	Answer	No. of responses	Percentage of all responses
1	definitely yes	1513	51.80
2	more or less	1193	40.84
3	not really	168	5.75
4	definitely not	20	0.68
5	no answer	27	0.92
total		2921	100

Source: own study based on: https://seo2.npseo.pl/seo_stats_quality
[accessed: 10.10.2019].

The data in Table 4 indicate that, according to the majority of parents (92.64%), they do have an influence on the activities of the kindergarten

(answers “definitely yes” and “more or less”). A different opinion on this subject (“not really” and “definitely not”) was expressed by 6.43% of the respondents, while 0.92% abstained from answering.

Table 5

Methods of sharing parents' opinions on the activities of the kindergarten

No.	Answer	Acc. to parents		Acc. to teachers	
		YES	NO	YES	NO
1	at parents' meetings	2662	259	553	13
2	through individual talks / consultations	2496	425	558	8
3	during meetings with the principal	1621	1300	not applicable	
4	on the occasion of celebrations and group events	2000	921	543	23
5	through a survey	1333	1588	450	116
6	during debates/discussions	573	2348	257	309
7	by voting on the kindergarten's proposals	720	2201	303	263
8	via e-mail	918	2003	214	352
9	in a different way (what is it?)	307	2614	273	293
10	I have not expressed my opinions	36	2885	no example	
11	I have no such possibility	6	2915	no example	

Source: own study based on: https://seo2.npseo.pl/seo_stats_quality [accessed: 10.10.2019].

When answering the multiple-choice question, parents most often indicated meetings with parents (2,662 responses), individual conversations with teachers (2,496), celebrations and events (2,000), meetings with the principal (1,621) and surveys (1,333). E-mail, voting, discussions and debates were also selected, while 36 respondents stated that they have not expressed their opinions, and 6 claimed to have not had such a possibility.

A total of 566 kindergarten teachers took part in the survey. They most often indicated individual conversations (consultations) (558 responses), meetings with parents (553), celebrations and events (543), surveys (450), and voting on the proposals by the kindergarten (303).

A comparison of the results of the surveys conducted among parents and teachers shows that most of the responses coincide. Both groups of respondents indicate meetings, interviews with teachers, school celebrations and surveys as the most common forms of sharing opinions.

At this point, it is worth quoting the results of research conducted by Łucja Reczek-Zymróż, who compared the cooperation between teachers and parents in Poland and Hungary. Her research showed that “The scope of cooperation between teachers from both countries in the education process mainly includes the organization of school events and celebrations [...]. The dominant forms of cooperation between teachers and parents are individual talks, but Polish respondents still prefer general meetings. [...] In both countries, open classes as a form of contact with parents are disappearing” (2018, pp. 123–124).

A Plan of Cooperation with Parents. Plans of cooperation with parents for the 2019/2020 school year of several randomly selected kindergartens from all over Poland were also analyzed for the sake of this research. The purpose of the analysis of cooperation plans was to determine for what purpose such a document is created and to what extent it helps teachers in shaping their relationships with parents.

All the analyzed plans contained both general and specific goals. The general goal in all kindergartens was the same and concerned introducing parents to close cooperation with the kindergarten and enabling them to participate in creating conditions for the comprehensive and harmonious development of their children. The specific goals are listed below:

- Striving for unity of educational and didactic interactions between kindergarten and the family environment;
- Comprehensive development of the child;
- Creating partnership relations between parents and teachers in terms of responsibility for the educational process of their children; having good contact with parents;
- Including parents in the life of the group and kindergarten; involving parents in useful work for the kindergarten;
- Cooperation with parents in recognizing children's developmental potential;
- Raising parents' educational awareness through pedagogy;
- Providing knowledge about the functioning of the child in kindergarten;
- Providing information on the results of the diagnoses of 6-year-old children;
- Participation of teachers and parents in solving existing educational problems;
- Learning about the parents' opinion on the functioning of the facility and their expectations towards the kindergarten (PP Błazowa, 2019; PM No. 27 Jaworzno, 2019; PP No. 17 Racibórz, 2019).

When developing a work plan, the kindergartens mostly defined forms of cooperation, tasks and deadlines. The forms of cooperation include group information meetings, individual contacts, celebrations, competitions and events with the participation of parents and relatives, a parents' corner, open classes, social and useful work for the kindergarten and the group, help for parents in the implementation of educational and didactic tasks, assistance in the organization of celebrations and events.

The analysis of cooperation plans with parents allows us to conclude that the above-mentioned forms of cooperation can be broadly divided into three groups: collective (working meetings, social meetings, meetings devoted to parents' development in the field of pedagogy, meetings with experts), individual (meetings during the so-called home visits, correspondence, telephone calls) and mixed visits (they can activate all parents, their specific group or individual persons depending on the purpose of the actions taken) (Bębenek & Mauduk, 2001, pp. 104–109). The tasks, as well as the deadlines for their implementation, resulted mainly from the work calendar of kindergartens and the core curriculum for preschool education.

Information on the Results of the Audit Carried out by the Supreme Audit Office. Another document examined was the information on the results of the control in the field of cooperation with parents in the implementation of educational tasks carried out by the Supreme Audit Office in 2018. In its conclusions, the Supreme Audit Office obliged the Minister of National Education to undertake informational activities aimed at parents regarding the competences of parents' councils and indicating what the funds from the parents' council fund may be spent on. In addition, the minister was obliged to take into account the supervision over the process of development and implementation of educational and preventive programs in schools and institutions by education superintendents in the directions of the implementation of the state's educational policy (as part of tasks in the field of pedagogical supervision) (NIK, 2018, p. 15).

The principals were obliged, *inter alia*, to ensure the implementation of the statutory competences of the parents' council regarding the following: consulting on the financial plans of the school; determining the assessment of the professional achievements of teachers applying for the next degree of professional promotion; agreeing on the conditions of the activity of associations and other educational organizations in the school (NIK, 2018, p. 15).

Although the provisions clearly regulate the principles of cooperation with parents, as the results of the NIK audit show, some issues require improvement. In this context, despite the passage of years, the previously quoted principles of correct cooperation with parents developed by Łobocki (1985, p. 16) remain valid; these are partnership, multilateral flow of information, unity of influence, positive motivation, and active and systematic cooperation.

Conclusions

The presented analyses show that teachers act mainly intuitively when developing methods of working with parents, largely, because their studies do not prepare them for it.

In connection with building relationships with parents, teachers point to the need to diagnose mutual relations, analyze difficulties, agree on expectations, establish rules of cooperation and develop an agreement in overcoming difficulties.

In kindergartens, individual contacts with teachers, kindergarten celebrations combined with children's performances and open classes are very popular. In particular, their children's performances and participation in classes allow parents to observe the child within the peer group.

Summing up, it is worth emphasizing that the teacher's skills and tools, apart from the developed substantive framework for conducting classes with children, consist of a number of activities related to cooperation with adults, in particular with parents. In this respect, the teacher's skills and tools should contain variable elements allowing for varied and creative ways of progressing, which will allow them to adapt to the requirements of preschool reality. When making a decision on improving their own skills, the teacher should strive to obtain such knowledge that will allow them to make real changes and give meaning to their work.

The subject requires further detailed analysis and additional research, especially in the context of recent changes in the education of future kindergarten teachers. More attention should be paid to the practical aspect, namely, introducing students to cooperation with parents already at the stage of teaching practice.

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