

PARENTAL AND EDUCATIONAL PERCEPTION OF MUTUAL RESPONSIBILITY AND THE INFLUENCE OF CERTAIN FACTORS ON SUCCESSFUL MUTUAL PARTNERSHIP COOPERATION

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Abstract

The partnership of educators and parents is in the centre of scientific interest and is one of the fundamental principles of good practice in kindergartens. Often the educators experience such a partnership as stressful in their professional mode of action (Epstein, 2013; Bleach, 2015). This paper seeks to highlight the need to strengthen the professional knowledge and skills of educators to build and develop partnerships with parents. They can be achieved in the course of their professional development, by means of active participation and altering of the existing practices. Therefore, the aim of this research was to examine attitudes and the opinions of parents and educators about their cooperation and partnership. The sample consists of 203 parents and educators from the institutions for early and preschool education from the City of Zagreb and Zagreb County. Hypotheses have been set that are related to the assessment of the importance of cooperation through the participants' own responsibility and also the influence of factors that influence a successful parent educator partnership.

Results suggest that respondents highly value mutual collaborative relationships, but do not recognize partnerships as a higher form of cooperation between educators and parents.

Keywords: cooperation, educators; lifelong education; parents; partnership.

INTRODUCTION

The cooperation of parents and educators¹ in institutions for early and pre-school education is a topic that does not lose its importance. Its relevance is reflected in the ongoing efforts to improve the quality of partnerships of its participants, and it is present in the educational policies of many countries (Pomerantz, Moorman and Litwack, 2007). Recent research has confirmed the influence of high-quality cooperation of parents with the institutions of early education on later academic and social achievement in children (Arnold, Zeljo and Doctoroff, 2008; McNeal, 1999; Powell and al. 2010; Serpell and Mashburn, 2011).

In addition to the various benefits that a child can have based on the successful interaction of parents and educators, adults also have the opportunity to learn and to get to know the value of their own influence and different educational procedures. Complementarities in

¹ In the paper the term *educator* is used for persons employed in institutions for early and pre-school education (kindergartens).

the upbringing of a child and his/her well-being are reflected in the mutual support of educational procedures. Educators and parents support their mutual influences during a child's development through information, understanding, participation and cooperation they support and strengthen parental efforts: educators expand and reaffirm parental support, while the parents support the educator initiative on education. The aforementioned strengthens and further develops coherent educational activities aimed at encouraging of the holistic development of children. Family is the primary educational community in which children's learning and development take place, so it is the most important to provide support for parents when fulfilling their educational function (Jurčević, Lozančić, 2011). It is also necessary to achieve continuous communication and dialogue (Ward, 2013) and to create advice and suggestions for their interconnection, joint participation of children and adults in various life activities and children's games (Westergård, 2013; Ljubetić, 2014). Through partnerships, educators and parents can more effectively help a child to create everyday situations for the creation of social relationships and the also for the development of social competences (Mlinarević and Tomas, 2010). Complementary interests and common goals form the basis of joint activities as a process that results in partnership cooperation. The emphasis is on the nature and quality of the relationship between educators and parents. This approach has a theoretical foundation in the theory of ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1989), which in a unique way explains the importance of the context in which a child develops and learns, and the complexity of interactions with different social systems. The child is observed in relation to the environment that surrounds him/her and succumbs to its influences: from those individuals that are close to the child and with whom he/she interacts directly to those that are approximately distant from him with whom he/she does not interact directly. This theory largely encompasses the key theses of contemporary understanding of child and childhood and can serve as a reference framework for understanding the concept of child and childhood, and institutionalizing childhood where parent-educator partnerships play an extremely important role. The theory starts from the child in the centre around which the layers of the environment spread in concentric circles: in micro, medium, exo, macro and the chrono system. All systems emphasize the importance of the interaction of the individual and the environment and it includes the elements of culture from the lowest levels to attitudes and ideologies. Of crucial importance to the stability of the medium system are the relationships of the immediate environment of the individual child (e.g., interaction of institutions and families, families and local communities, etc.). The overall context in which a child's development takes place significantly influences the course of development and developmental outcomes, while respecting the individual characteristics of the child. It emphasizes the communication (two-way movements) as nature of development where a child and the environment constantly influence each other. The child's development is the result of interaction between his/her characteristics and the environment in which it grows. When taking a cue on this theory, it has facilitated an understanding of contemporary approaches that place emphasis on a quality relationship and an understanding of the educator-parent relationship. Therefore, it is important to consider and respect the perspectives of both parties in this process. In this paper we also have taken a consideration, i.e. the approach that is based on a model of cooperation between educational institutions and families (Epstein, 1996; Fantuzzo, Tighe and Childs, 2000). In the paper, it's the cooperation of educators and parents that defines the structure of equal relations of people who have agreed about common goals, and which have equally distributed authorities in the process of decision making (Epstein and Sanders, 2002).

Cooperation and partnership

Orientation focused on partnership allows the creation of system and support for parents with the fundamental belief that all the families want the best for their children and

they work tirelessly to that matter. Therefore, the term “parental involvement” is replaced by the term “family engagement” (Mapp and Hong, 2010). While the involvement is based on individual parental participation, their involvement signifies joint, partnership work. Thus, the partnership grows into a higher form of cooperation. However, as opposite to the cooperation, in the form of partnership participants are equally involved in the creation process. Partnership and cooperation are different in the way of involving parents in the work of institutions, types of communication, initiatives of individuals, motivations and activities and also the set goals. Partnership is marked by the occasional involvement of parents in the work and activities of the institution; the hierarchy within the relations of the participants and the rare, superficial and insufficiently open, often one-way communication. The quality of the partnership is a two-way communication, the equality of participants, continuity, and openness, high level of intrinsic motivation to build and improve upgrading relations encompassing all the fields of educational work. The quality and reciprocal communication leads to the formation of trust and allows fuller insight into the child's development, and a partnership is based on the assumption that families, children and educators are doing the best they can. Instead of judging and labelling others as positive or negative by defining them as correct or incorrect, we are trying to understand the behaviour and intentions of the person. The partnership is based on equality, mutual trust and respect (Adams and Christenson, 2000). There are situations in which consistency and continuity in partnership relationships takes place easily or with little joint effort. But there are also cases in which due to the differences in expectations such successful processes can be hampered or stopped. Therefore, it is not enough to start building a partnership, but such relations should be further developed. This requires providing day-to-day opportunities to share the positive interactions of parents and educators that will contribute to the engaged relationships and promote shared responsibility for the partnership. Educational institutions that are sensitive and responsive to the needs of families respect them and treat them equally to create capacities for partnership. Through the partnership of parents and educators they are also in a better position to support the children.

The role of educators and parents in partnership

In addition to creating trust, one of the prerequisites for a quality partnership between educators and parents are the attitudes of educators about child development and the role of parents and the partnership relation. In the education work they are often present the educator's implicit pedagogy, as a set of educator's experiences, values, beliefs, knowledge, attitudes and skills about education. In order to better understand the educational process and individual procedures (activities) that the educator performs, it is necessary to understand his/her thoughts, emotional processes and decision-making mechanisms by which action is steered to. In order to be successful in educational work, the educator, first of all, needs to get to know him/her and the way he/she treats himself and others through the cognitive, conative and affective spheres (Kansanen, 2001). The educator's style of knowing is part of his/her cultural as well as professional heritage. Successful cooperation will be achieved by raising awareness of differences in the knowledge of parents and other parties and the constant development of their professional knowledge and skills. When an educator becomes aware of his own judgments that he/she makes (inwardly or outwardly) towards parents, he/she becomes aware that there is no correct or incorrect knowledge and hence opens him-/herself to differences with greater conviction. At the same time, he/she begins seeing a different self. By showing respect for different opinions, he/she is more willingly open to partner behaviour, and he/she becomes aware and accepts that each individual can control only his/her own behaviour (Glaser, 2000). The partnerships of parents and educators require continuous planning, development, and reflection. It is necessary to provide the necessary time and other resources to help parents and educators to fulfil their partnership roles. Facilities for early and pre-school educa-

tion should take a leading role in providing opportunities for the partnerships developed and maintained by providing a positive environment, timely informing, encouraging and further maintaining for open and constructive dialogue. It is the responsibility of institutions and educators to create conditions for the welcoming of the parents. This is achieved by consistently messaging them; acknowledging their contribution to the creation of effective partnerships. However, the initiative is not reserved for parents, it should be mutual and complementary (Ljubetić, 2014). Partnerships are determined by such cooperative relationships where responsibility and goals are shared and directed towards the well-being of the child. For the creation of the positive ambient in which the partnership is emphasized, it is important to create safe and stimulating environment of quality interactions. For a partnership cooperation with parents it is necessary to seek continuity, seek and use feedback (in addition to daily direct communication, it is necessary to provide other ways in which parents can contribute in their own way).

Each family is unique and faces different challenges. Therefore, they should be approached that way. It would be unrealistic and potentially harmful to apply the basic principles of communication and quality cooperation by applying them equally in mutual interaction. An approach encompassing a broad set of common goals with a series of sub-goals that are individually applicable ensures educators and parents to realize mutual raising of children. Partnership cooperation between parents and educators focuses on the development of quality relationships (mutual acceptance, respect) and the reciprocal communication in the (exchange of the information about the child, information about the education process), the inclusion of parents in the education process and ensuring parental support.

Factors of successful cooperation between educators and parents

The partnership between educators and parents promotes the upbringing and education of children in kindergarten and in the family. The existence of a partnership can be checked when the cooperating adults ask themselves what such relationship is like and whether they invest their energy into building it. Research has identified essential elements of a partnership (e.g., Albright and Weissberg, 2010; Ljubetić, 2014; Wilson, 2016) listing different factors. They most often include: honesty, respect, trust, open communication, flexibility, active listening, and sharing information and not judging people. It is believed that the key concepts defining a partnership are cooperation, shared responsibility and goals, good communication and energy invested in the realization of the set goals. For a healthy relationship between parents and educators, the most important are mutual trust, consideration, empathy and equality. The lack of one of these elements can render it impossible (Ljubetić, 2014). It is precisely the element of trust that is often viewed as the most critical element when considering interpersonal relationships, and the trust between educators and families is reflected on children's successful development. Children develop interpersonal relationships over time continuously and persistently (Dunsmuir, Frederickson, & Lang, 2004). To achieve this, it must be based on a series of repeated positive interactions (the predictability based on the reliability and stability of such interactions is essential here). By means of trust, we create the emotional security of educators and parents. Consideration, as a voluntary act, includes helping another person with empathy, support and the use of the so-called non-routine. Under the non-routine we understand activities that take place outside of routine (for example, educators can show consideration for the parents to allow the child to stay longer in kindergarten because a parent is late for the reason of business obligations; at the same time, parents can express their regards to the educator, so that he or she can make a request by phone or e-mail). Equality is the factor which, unfortunately, is not often present in the communication between institutions and family due to the present imbalance of power and authority which could result in the loss of a partner or of any of the partnership relations (Glasser, 2001). It can be avoided by focusing on a common

goal that is in the interest of a child's successful development. Because parents and educators possess certain knowledge about the child and his or her development, they can achieve effectiveness by joining forces. One should honestly, each for oneself, raise the question of whether one has respect for the interlocutor and whether it is mutual and whether there exists a common sharing of information, agreement and decision-making without condemnation and with mutual trust (Wilson, 2016). A key element of the partnership is the culture of dialogue, which can be carried out through joint discussions with the goal of improving of the educational process. The positive impact on the partnership can have it set up as a priority and also the planning benefits that the family and educator will be receiving. This way, the encouragement of pro-activity and persistence in maintaining cooperation will take place (Albright and Weisberg, 2010). It is important to keep in mind that both parties maintain focus on the child, their commitment to constructiveness, clarity and continuity in relationships.

Some of the more important determinants of the partnership relations are the level of quality and continuity, better and clearer definition of the goal that turns into a common one, and changing hierarchical roles with the development of sensibility of educational staff, for the need of children and parents. In creating a partnership with parents, the educator can create certain prerequisites. Beside recognizing and meeting the specific needs of parents, they should shed light on their own attitudes and views of the partnership and by constant questioning and the reflection create a foundation and development of everyday partnership relations with the parents.

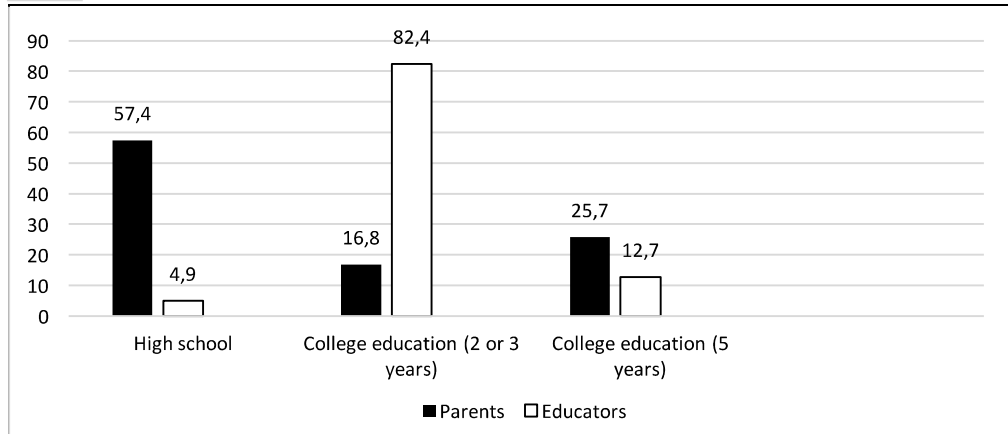
In accordance with the above mentioned, the main goal of this research is to examine the attitudes and opinions of parents and educators about their mutual cooperation and partnership relationships. Accordingly, we set the following hypothesis: we expect that educators and parents assess that there is a great deal of influence of factors that influence successful partnership cooperation on the relation parent-educator (H1), and is it expected that educators and parents highly assess the importance of cooperation through their own responsibility (H2).

METHODOLOGY

Sample

A total of 237 respondents have participated in research from the City of Zagreb and Zagreb County. For the data processing we have applied the total of 203 questionnaires with answers (101 parents and 102 educators). The difference refers to the incompletely completed questionnaires which therefore have not been used in the data processing. The average age of parents is 35 years, and of educators 38 years (parents are on average 4 years younger than educators ($M = 39,24$; $SD = 9,97$)). The youngest parent was 26 years old while the oldest 50, the youngest educator was 25 years old, and the oldest was 63. Just over half of the tested parents (52,5%) have two children, 26,7% of respondents have one child, while 20,8% of parents have three or more children.

The representation in terms of the level of education of parents and educators is visible in the graphical presentation (Graph 1). Individuals with high school diploma prevail in the parent group prevail (57,4%), while higher educated individuals (16,8%) and those with university degree (25,7%) were under-represented. Over four-fifths of educators have a university diploma (82,4%), while the higher level of education (12,7%) and secondary level of education (4,9%) were under-represented.



Graph 1 Representation of education level of parents and educators.

The greatest differences between parents and educators were observed in the field of secondary education that prevails in parents and higher education that prevails in educators. Apart from educators who have completed secondary education, 4,9% of them finished high school for educators.

About half of educators have 6 to 15 years of work experience in the profession (49%), followed by the educators with up to 5 years of work experience (21,6%), 16 to 26 years of work experience (17%), and finally those with more than 26 years of service (11,8%).

INSTRUMENTS AND METHODS OF DATA PROCESSING

For the need of this research, two identical questionnaires were created, and they were adapted for parents and educators, which, along with a number of independent variables, contain statements, i.e. elements conceived on the basis of a study of the relevant literature sources. The data were generated by the SPSS 25.0 program.

RESEARCH RESULTS, INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

Mutual respect for knowledge and skills, honest and open communication, understanding and tolerance, lack of labelling, joint planning and decision making, accessibility and mutual understanding, open and mutual exchange of information and coordination of educational influences made up eight factors that influence a successful partnership between educators and parents (adapted from Epstein, 1996; Fantuzzo, Tighe and Childs, 2000; Kunstek, 2007; Wilson, 2016). Respondents rated these factors on a Likert-type scale containing five basic points, ranging from 1 ("Extremely strong impact") to point 5 ("No impact"). Considering the possible range of average grades from 1 to 5 and the achieved highest average grade of 2,1, it can be concluded that both parents and educators consider all the above factors important (Table 1). For a partnership relationship to be of a good quality, all the above factors should be represented in it so that we can conclude that parents and educators are aware what the partnership communication i.e. the partnership relationship should look like. Parents rated honest and open communication as the most important ($M = 1,29$; $SD = 0,50$), which is the foundation of every interpersonal relationship, including this kind of professional partnership relationship.

Furthermore, it is followed by an open and mutual kind of information exchange ($M = 1,50$; $SD = 0,62$), which helps both parties to better sense the position and behaviour of the child in the group, or at home. The third place in accordance to the importance occupy understanding and tolerance ($M = 1,57$; $SD = 0,62$), which are necessary when the cooperation takes place, because each individual is specific for themselves and also distinguish themselves in accordance with their needs. Interestingly, educators have identified this factor as the most important one ($M = 1,34$; $SD = 0,61$). Educators ranked both sincere and open communication ($M = 1,39$; $SD = 0,65$) in the second place, followed by the absence of labelling and criticism ($M = 1,46$; $SD = 0,56$). The biggest differences between parents and educators were found in the factors of absence of labelling and criticism, which are assessed as more important by the educators. It is important that both parties understand the impact of all the above cited factors for the creation of a partnership relation, because if a single factor was absent it would lead to inadequate communication and disrupting relationships, therefore for children would not be exposed to an appropriate behavioural model.

The first hypothesis was tested by observing the responses to the claims about the influence of various factors on a successful parent-educator partnership as follows: the strong impact is demonstrated by answer 2; if for most claims participants respond on average with a score of up to 2,5, for them it should be obvious that they estimate that there was a strong influence of these factors. All claims have an average score of less than 2,5, which indicates a very strong influence of these factors that affect a successful partnership between a parent and an educator.

Table 1. Average grades and dispersing of the influence of certain factors on successful parent-educator partnership (parent-educator grades).

	Parents		Educators	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Mutual respect for knowledge and skills	1,74	0,78	1,74	1,04
Honest and open communication	1,29	0,50	1,39	0,65
Understanding and tolerance	1,57	0,62	1,34	0,61
Absence of labelling and criticism	2,12	1,06	1,46	0,56
Joint planning and decision making	2,14	0,94	1,79	0,84
Accessibility and mutual understanding	1,64	0,67	1,55	0,65
Open and mutual exchange of information	1,50	0,63	1,61	1,10
Coordination of educational influences	1,96	0,84	2,01	1,09

The respondents assessed relationship between parents and educators for the case of the mutual quality cooperation within the offered statements (Table 2). The statements offered claims were graded on the Likert type scale, where 1 was ("Strongly disagree") and 5 ("Completely agree"). From the obtained results it is visible that both groups of respondents consider the partnership important (parents - $M = 4,22$; $SD = 1,01$, educators - $M = 4,27$; $SD = 1,18$). However, as parents claim that educators are responsible for the quality of relationships with parents, they ranked it higher than average ($M = 3,07$; $SD = 1,23$), so it can be concluded that parents do not understand that partnership is a relationship in which parties should share the responsibility. Thus, it is evident that despite statements of knowledge of what a partnership is, parents still leave the role of an initiator in communicating about their own child to the educator. The reasons for this should be further examined. Namely, as explained in the theoretical part of the paper, to the opinions and assessments of educators and parents are influenced by their implicit assumptions about what education is and what their preferences in education

are. The statement "Parent is superior in this relationship" was rated relatively low ($M = 2,45$; $SD = 1,32$), therefore it can be concluded that educators believe that the relationship should be equal, but also on the basis of a different statement educators prove the insufficient knowledge of the concept of partnership. Namely, educators rate the statement "The educator is responsible for the quality of relations with parents" with a higher than average level ($M = 3,03$; $SD = 1,18$), which demonstrates that educators consider the level of educational responsibilities higher than the parental ones.

Table 2. Average grades and dispersion of respondents' opinions on statements related to the parent-educator relationship (parent-educator grades).

	Parents		Educators	
	M	SD	M	SD
a) The partnership between parents and educators is important.	4,22	1,01	4,27	1,18
b) The parent is superior in this relationship.	3,36	1,23	2,45	1,32
c) The educator is responsible for the quality of the relationship with the parents.	3,07	1,21	3,03	1,18
d) Parents are obliged to be informed about the course of their child's development independently, without the initiative of the educator.	3,94	1,16	4,04	1,07
e) I consider myself responsible for quality cooperation with the educator / parent.	3,96	0,93	3,74	1,17

To determine whether parents and educators assess the importance of collaboration through their own responsibility, Wilcoxon tests of the sum of ranks for one sample were conducted. Parametric t-tests for one sample were not performed because of the unfulfilled condition of distribution normality, that was verified by the Shapiro-Wilcoxon test for a group of parents ($W(101) = .802$; $p < ,001$) and educators ($W(102) = .820$; $p < ,001$).

Table 3. Wilcoxon tests of the ranks sum for one sample - deviations of the statements "I consider myself responsible for quality cooperation with the educator" from the mean value 3.

Subgroup	Shapiro-Wilk			Wilcoxon test	
	W	Df	p	T	p
Parents	,802	101	< ,001	3894,0	< ,001
Educators	,820	102	< ,001	3815,5	< ,001

Wilcoxon's test was conducted on a group of parents (Table 3) and it shows that parental agreement with the statement "I consider myself responsible for quality cooperation with the educator" was statistically significantly higher than 3 ($T = 3894,0$; $p < ,001$). The test conducted on a group of educators shows that educators' agreement with the statement was also statistically significantly more than 3 ($T = 3815,5$; $p = .001$), by which the second hypothesis has been confirmed.

CONCLUSION

The results of this research show that parents and educators understand the importance of cooperation and its possible impact on the child. However, even if the respondents highly value the mutual cooperative relations, it is evident that they do not know enough to recognize the partnership as a higher form of cooperation between educators and parents. Due to the importance of educators' role in understanding and the application of the partnership, there is a need for targeted individualized professional development. Everyday application in educational work can be ensured by promoting education for parents, especially because it can be linked to parents' understanding of the importance of partnership. Promoting the view of education as a shared responsibility between educational institutions and the families is not based on partnership. Such approaches should be replaced by a lasting partnership between educators and parents that lead to commonly set goals. When the interaction between the institution and the family is characterized by open communication, mutually agreed goals and joint decision-making, raising a child becomes a shared responsibility. In order to maintain such continuity it is necessary to obtain a constant two-way communication (Epstein et al., 2019). Successful partnerships focus on establishing coordination that take place with intent and consistency. Besides, we must not lose sight of the fact that partnerships are most effective when educators and parents adapt to every educational institution, that are comprehensively integrated into everyday activities and also that they are making continuous improvements.

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