

The Role of Professional Knowledge and Skills of Preschool Teachers in Building and Developing Partnerships with Parents

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Abstract

Partnership is considered one among the most important factors in educational work. For its formation and improvements, appropriate competences are expected. In this research we seek to highlight the need to strengthen the professional knowledge and skills of preschool teachers for building and developing partnerships with parents seen as a higher form of collaboration. Therefore, the aim of this research was to examine the perceptions and attitudes of parents and preschool teachers about their mutual cooperation and partnership. The sample consists of 203 parents and preschool teachers working in kindergartens in the City of Zagreb and Zagreb County. Hypotheses were set with regards to recognition or knowledge of cooperation and partnership concepts, the assessment of the role of preschool teachers as partners by parents and preschool teachers in mutual cooperation and partnership, and the assessment of the importance of cooperation through the participants' own responsibility. Once the data was analysed, the obtained results showed that both groups of respondents did not consider the role of preschool teacher as partner as one that was the most important. Also, the results of the research have shown that parents, but also preschool teachers, do not understand the difference between the concepts cooperation and partnership. Although both parties have agreed on the importance of a partnership or the collaborative relationship, there is also a small number of participants who consider such a relationship irrelevant or less important.

Keywords: *cooperation; lifelong learning; parents; partnership; preschool teachers.*

Introduction

The creation of partnerships between parents and preschool teachers is an important precondition for achieving a supportive environment that affects the development of a child. The greatest influence on a child's development comes from family and people in preschool education institutions, especially preschool teachers. Although they differ in modes of the impact on the child, compliance of their educational activity is of great importance for the continuity of giving the child a feeling of security (Slunjski, 2011). Together with changes in the recognition of the child as an active participant in their own learning and development as well as the interdisciplinary and holistic understanding of child development and learning (see Miljak, 2009, 1996; Petrović-Sočo, 2007; Slunjski, 2011) there comes a change of paradigm in relation to the role and function of the educational process, as well as the role of preschool teachers during the process of their own learning and development (see Fullan, 2007). One of the modern and comprehensive theories that explains the role and importance of environmental factors for children's development is the theory of ecological systems by Urie Bronfenbrenner where the emphasis is put on the transactional nature of development, where child and environment constantly affect each other in a two-way relationship manner, or the transactional way (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). Because of its integrity, this theory is a reference for the theoretical and methodological starting point in researches, monitoring and improvements of learning quality in early and preschool education. Thus, the perception of partnerships of families and kindergartens is one of the benchmarks for the quality of early and preschool education institutions, as its success affects a safe and stimulating environment for the child's growth and development (Antulić et al., 2016). In doing so, the perception of quality is understood as a cultural construction that changes with the change of perspective in a particular context here and under certain circumstances (Woodhead, 2006). It reflects the values, beliefs and interests of key stakeholders in early and preschool education, emphasizing the importance of continuous professional development of preschool teachers and other professional staff towards improving their research and reflective skills (Slunjski, 2011).

Through partnership relationships, parents act as equal participants and influence the educational process and are the main supporters in improving the quality of the educational institution. It gives parents a sense of security and support in fulfilling their parental duty by expanding their knowledge in the field of child development and creating a quality and optimal environment in their own home. In addition to the general well-being, when setting a quality relationship between parent and preschool teacher, the child is given the model of creating an appropriate social contact. Bronfenbrenner (1989) points out that the overall context in which child development takes place has a significant impact on the course of development and child developmental outcomes, and that projects that emphasize direct parental involvement in activities that will

promote child development will have a positive impact at any age, therefore the earlier such activities start and the longer the activities last, the more benefit the child will have. Therefore, in their professional learning, preschool teachers should pay particular attention to quality cooperation with parents that is based on the partnership.

Sometimes terms of cooperation and partnership are understood as synonymous, but there is a qualitative difference. In order to truly build partnerships between families and preschool teachers, it is important to realize that differences between collaboration and partnership do exist. Important elements for building a partnership are (e.g. Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Slunjski, 2011) mutual appreciation of knowledge and skills, honest and open communication, understanding and empathy, consistency when setting goals, joint planning and decision making, open and mutual exchange of information, accessibility and mutual understanding, absence of labelling and criticism, and joint assessment of progress. The partnership between parents and preschool teachers is based primarily on knowing and understanding of the expectations with regard to their individual roles (Ivšanić & Vrbanec, 2015). The role of the preschool teachers is to create trust which is possible only by recognizing and meeting the specific needs of the parents. A preschool teacher can ensure equality in partnership through his/her knowledge and skills; however, his/her attitude is of utmost importance, i.e. his/her view of the importance of partnership. This is also known as the implicit pedagogy of preschool teachers. If the preschool teacher's attitude towards partnering with parents manifests itself as positive, if the preschool teacher is honest, well-intentioned, accessible and open to communication and his/her beliefs and values are based on the modern understanding of the child, the grounds for building a partnership with the parent are solid. Sometimes the negative attitude of the preschool teacher is manifested as a result of ignorance and insufficiently developed professional competences. Awareness of this should emerge through the process of self-reflection. Equality in a partnership relationship is manifested in shared involvement and also in equal responsibility when achieving the goal. Interaction between parents and preschool teachers can provide children with more quality and more diverse incentives and allow for a better and more versatile communication and interaction. Peters and Johansson (2012, p. 57) emphasize that children are subject to "the way we view them, i.e. how we live with them, think about them, talk about them and how we behave towards them."

The most important determinants that distinguish partnerships with parents from mere collaboration are the level of quality and continuity, better and clearer definition of the goal that transforms itself into a common goal and changing hierarchical roles while developing sensibility of educational staff for the needs of children and parents. In order to create a partnership with parents, it is essential to meet certain prerequisites: recognizing and meeting the specific needs of parents; knowing (or something else – e.g. establishing, recognizing) the views of the preschool teacher, that is, his or her perception of the importance of partnership; constant questioning, reflection and evaluation of mutual relations. All the previously mentioned requires appropriate

professional competences as well as the preschool teacher's awareness of his or her own knowledge and skills in order to successfully implement them in educational work. Once the partnership has been established and continuously developed, it will have an impact on all the subjects of the educational process: children, parents, preschool teachers and the institution as a whole. Accordingly, the basic objective of this research¹ is to examine the perceptions and attitudes of parents and preschool teachers about their mutual collaboration and partnership. Hence, the following hypotheses were set: preschool teachers and parents assess the role of preschool teachers as partners in mutual quality collaboration (H1), most parents (H2a) and preschool teachers (H2b) do not recognize the difference between partnership and collaboration, and it is expected that preschool teachers and parents assess the importance of cooperation from the point of view of their own responsibility (H3).

Methodology

Sample

A total of 237 subjects participated in the research. For the purpose of data processing, 203 questionnaires were used. These comprised 101 completed questionnaires from parents and 102 from preschool teachers employed in kindergartens in the City of Zagreb and Zagreb County. The difference relates to incomplete questionnaires that were not used in the data processing.

Instruments

For the purpose of this research, the two contextually identical questionnaires adapted for parents and preschool teachers were created. In addition to the number of independent variables, the questionnaires contained values, i.e. items based on the study of relevant literature.

Results and discussion

First, the participants were asked to rank, on a scale from 1 to 7, the offered particular and individual preschool teacher's role in a quality cooperation with parents, with regards to importance. Hence, a higher average rank indicates the lower importance of the role. The following roles of preschool teachers containing a descriptive explanation were offered: informant, listener, instigator, partner, collaborator, friend and mentor. Data pertaining to individual roles of the preschool teacher can be seen in Table 1. Parents ranked the role of preschool teachers as informants the highest ($M = 2.69$; $SD = 2.10$) probably due to the need for daily information about the child's activities. Preschool teachers placed the role of collaborators, i.e. for providing support in education in the first place ($M = 2.52$; $SD = 1.44$). Indicative are the data according to which parents, unlike preschool teachers, ranked the role of mentor and listener as the least important.

¹ This research is part of a larger body of research conducted for the purpose of writing the graduate thesis: Mavračić Miković, I. (2018). Perceptions and attitudes of preschool educators and parents about cooperation and partnership relationship.

Table 1

Average ratings and dispersions of the importance of individual preschool teachers' roles in quality collaboration with parents (parent and preschool teachers' assessments).

Preschool teacher roles	Parents		Preschool teacher	
	M	SD	M	SD
Listener (be someone the parent can trust with their problems)	4.28	2.20	3.94	2.22
Informant (general information about the child's developmental status, day spent in the group, etc.)	2.69	2.10	2.66	1.61
Instigator (be someone who will strengthen the parent in decision making)	3.89	1.58	4.21	1.84
Partner (shared decision making and sharing of responsibilities in child care)	4.45	1.73	3.25	2.16
Associate (providing support in education)	4.09	1.77	2.52	1.44
Friend (we can say it all openly, because that is the only way to reconcile educational influences)	4.43	1.93	5.37	1.63
Mentor (someone who will teach parenting skills to parents)	4.52	2.30	4.66	1.89

In order to determine whether parents and preschool teachers evaluate the role of partners as important, the Wilcoxon rank sum tests for a single sample was performed. Parametric t-tests for one sample were not performed because the normality of distribution was not satisfactory, which was verified by the Shapiro-Wilk test for the group of parents ($W(101) = .934$; $p < .001$) and preschool teachers ($W(102) = .850$; $p < .001$). The Wilcoxon test (Table 2) conducted on the group of parents showed that parents' assessments of the importance of the partner role were statistically significantly greater than 4 ($T = 1845,5$; $p = ,012$), i.e. parents considered the role of the preschool teacher as a partner in the quality cooperation with parents as less important than the neutral mean values. The test conducted with the group of preschool teachers has shown that the preschool teachers' assessments of the importance of the partner role were statistically significantly lower than 4 ($T = 1511,5$; $p = ,001$), i.e. preschool teachers considered their role partners in quality cooperation with parents as more important than the neutral mean values. Therefore, the first hypothesis has been rejected, as it predicted that parents and preschool teachers consider the role of the preschool teacher as a partner of above average importance.

Table 2

Wilcoxon one - sample rank test - deviations from the ranking of the answer "partner" from the mean value 4 on the question about the Importance of individual roles of preschool teachers in quality collaboration with the parents for parents and preschool teachers.

Subgroup	Shapiro-Wilk			Wilcoxon test	
	W	df	p	T	p
Parents	.934	101	< .001	1845.5	.012
Preschool teachers	.850	102	< .001	1511.5	.001

KS - Kolmogorov-Smirnov test result, df - degrees of freedom, p - statistical significance of the performed test, T - Wilcoxon test results.

To answer the question regarding the distinction between cooperation and partnership, the respondents were asked what parental behaviours include successful cooperation between preschool teachers and parents through partnership (Table 3). Parents most frequently chose the answer “percieved them as the first educators of their children” (73.3 % of parents), and preschool teachers stated that “the parents informed themselves about their rights and obligations concerning partnership with preschool teachers “ (56.9%). These are also the biggest differences between parents and preschool teachers established in the frequency of choices of their responses.

Table 3

Parents and preschool teachers' responses to the question of what kind of parental behaviours involves quality parent-preschool teacher collaboration as a partnership.

Parents:	Parents		Preschool teachers	
	Fr.	%	Fr.	%
a) Perceived as the „first educators“ of their children	74	73.3	47	46.1
b) Perceived as the „other side“ in the education of their children	18	17.8	27	26.5
c) Occasionally involved in kindergarten activities	48	47.5	55	53.9
d) Involved in most kindergarten activities	47	46.5	46	45.1
e) They come to kindergarten upon call or at a specific time (e.g. bringing in and taking children out of kindergarten)	47	46.5	30	29.4
f) They come to kindergarten without limiting their stay	15	14.9	14	13.7
g) They are informed about their real obligations regarding partnership with preschool teachers	45	44.6	58	56.9
Total	277	-	294	-

Answers a), d), f) and g) were taken as a sign of recognition of partnership. Furthermore, answers b), c), and e) were taken as a sign of recognition of cooperation. Phi coefficients were calculated as a measure of the association between the two dichotomous variables (Table 4).

Table 4

Phi coefficients between the answers given to the question of what kind of parental behaviours involves quality collaboration between parent and preschool teacher as a partnership.

	a)	d)	f)	g)	b)	c)	e)
a)	-						
d)	-.199 *	-					
f)	.001	.057	-				
g)	-.044	.082	.018	-			
b)	-.186	.084	.242*	-.053	-		
c)	.127	-.570 ***	-.007	.104	-.081	-	
e)	.250 *	-.154	-.111	.282 **	-.123	.185	-

Legend: *p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.

In the first quadrant, there is only one statistically significant Phi coefficient that indicates a negative correlation between answers a) and d). It can be concluded that participants do not recognize the concept of partnership. In the fourth quadrant, there are no statistically significant Phi coefficients, leading to the conclusion that participants do not recognize the concept of cooperation. In the third quadrant, there are four statistically significant Phi coefficients, but of opposite signs. Such a pattern of Phi coefficients does not suggest a systematic relationship between the answers related to partnership questions (a, d, f and g) versus those answers related to cooperation (b, c and e). The conclusion is that neither parents nor preschool teachers distinguish between concepts of cooperation and partnership, which implies that the second hypothesis has been accepted.

Parents and preschool teachers were also asked to evaluate the agreement with various claims with regard to the parent - preschool teacher relationship. The listed items (Table 5) were evaluated on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 "I would not agree at all" to 5 with "I completely agree".

From the obtained results, it is evident that both groups of respondents consider partnership as important (parents - $M = 4.22$; $SD = 1.01$; preschool teachers - $M = 4.27$; $SD = 1.18$). Significant data were obtained from parents who consider preschool teachers sufficiently educated for their workplace ($M = 4.20$; $SD = 0.86$), which assumes that they consider them as competent partners and value them as professionals. Parents are also aware of the consequences, that is, the benefits of partnership according to the results for item "The quality of the parent / guardian relationship with the preschool teacher reflects on the overall development of the child" ($M = 4.04$; $SD = 0.97$), which they rated very high. However, the statement that says that preschool teachers are responsible for the quality of relationships with parents or guardians is ranked above average ($M = 3.07$; $SD = 1.23$), suggesting that parents do not realize that a partnership is a relationship in which participants should share their responsibility. This is complemented by their view that preschool teachers should initiate cooperation with parents or guardians ($M = 3.28$; $SD = 1.04$), which is again consistent with the previous results on knowledge or the ignorance of the parent- preschool teacher partnership. In order to establish better cooperation through partnership relationships, the reasons for such responses should be further examined. Similar to parents, preschool teachers rated item "I consider preschool teachers sufficiently educated for their workplace" as very high ($M = 4.25$; $SD = 0.88$). The interpretation of such results calls for caution as these answers can be interpreted in two ways: on the one hand, it is logical that preschool teachers do not want to deprive themselves of the competence for their position at the workplace, and on the other, there is the issue of adequacy of their previous education and preschool teachers' awareness of the need for lifelong education in their profession. To determine whether parents and preschool teachers assess the importance of collaboration through their own responsibility, Wilcoxon sum rank tests were conducted for one sample. Parametric t-tests for one sample were not performed

because the normality of distribution had not been verified by the Shapiro-Wilk test for the group of parents ($W(101) = .802; p < .001$) and preschool teachers ($W(102) = .820; p < .001$).

Table 5

Average ratings and dispersion of participants' opinions on various claims with regard to the parent and preschool teacher relationships (parent and preschool teacher ratings)

	Parents		Preschool teachers	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
a) The parent / guardian and preschool teacher partnership is important.	4.22	1.01	4.27	1.18
b) The parent / guardian is superior in this cooperation relationship.	3.36	1.23	2.45	1.32
c) The preschool teacher is responsible for the quality of the parent / guardian relationship.	3.07	1.21	3.03	1.18
d) The preschool teacher should initiate cooperation with the parents / guardians.	3.28	1.04	3.60	1.12
e) The quality of the parent / guardian relationship with the preschool teacher is reflected to the overall development of the child.	4.04	0.97	4.02	1.01
f) I think that preschool teachers are sufficiently educated for their workplace.	4.20	0.86	4.25	0.88
g) The parent expects help from the preschool teacher to solve problematic situations with his own child.	3.59	0.95	4.15	0.83
h) At the beginning of each kindergarten year, preschool teachers make it clear as what they expect from me as a parent.	3.61	0.95	4.12	0.87
i) Parents are obliged to inform themselves about the progress of their child's development independently, without the initiative of the preschool teacher.	3.94	1.16	4.04	1.07
j) Preschool teachers need additional training on cooperation with parents.	3.42	3.14	3.79	0.89
k) I consider myself responsible for quality cooperation with the preschool teacher.	3.96	0.93	3.74	1.17
l) Preschool teachers should assist parents in the upbringing of children (with advice, lectures, workshops, suggesting professional literature, etc.).	3.82	1.04	3.86	1.04
m) In kindergarten, very little consideration is given to what parents really think and want.	2.52	1.10	2.34	1.14

Table 6

Wilcoxon one-sample signed rank tests - deviation from assertion rating "I consider myself responsible for quality collaboration with preschool teachers" item from the mean value 3.

Subgroup	Shapiro-Wilk			Wilcoxon test	
	<i>W</i>	<i>Df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>p</i>
Parents	.802	101	< .001	3894.0	< .001
Preschool teachers	.820	102	< .001	3815.5	< .001

The Wilcoxon test conducted on the parent group (Table 6) showed that parental agreement with item "I consider myself responsible for quality cooperation with the preschool teacher" was statistically significantly more than 3 ($T = 3894.0$; $p < .001$). The test conducted with the group of preschool teachers showed that preschool teachers' agreement with the statement was also statistically significantly greater than 3 ($T = 3815.5$; $p = .001$), thus confirming the third hypothesis that most parents and preschool teachers did not actually recognize the difference between partnership and collaboration.

Conclusion

Although the respondents highly value relationships pertaining to mutual cooperation, it is evident that they do not recognize partnership as a higher form of cooperation between preschool teachers and parents. This raises the issue of importance of the preschool teacher's role in understanding and creating partnerships. Therefore, the role requires of the preschool teachers to have professional knowledge and skills that will ensure its everyday use in educational work. The complex process on which the parent-preschool teacher relationship is based is focussed on the mutual satisfaction and well-being of the children, which is how it should be viewed and aspired to. Although there is evident progress in the area of parent and preschool teacher partnership, primarily in clearer conceptual definitions, the partnership should further be developed. The results of this research have shown that parents and preschool teachers understand the importance of a quality partnership and its reflection on the child as it can establish a foundation for a child's further education. In addition to offering a demonstration and the explanation of the partnership process, it is necessary to direct it to expectations and apply partnership in real-life situations in everyday life. Children learn by observing a model, the models being parents and preschool teachers. Accordingly, one should have a realistic understanding that partnership is a challenge that requires time, understanding, tolerance and motivation.

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Uloga profesionalnih znanja i vještina odgojitelja u izgradnji i razvijanju partnerstva s roditeljima

Sažetak

Partnerski odnos smatra se jednim od najvažnijih čimbenika odgojno-obrazovnoga rada za čiju se izgradnju i unaprjeđenje očekuju odgovarajuće kompetencije. U ovom istraživanju želi se ukazati na potrebu osnaživanja profesionalnih znanja i vještina odgojitelja za izgradnju i razvijanje partnerstva s roditeljima kao višeg oblika suradnje. Stoga je cilj istraživanja bio ispitati percepcije i stavove roditelja i odgojitelja o njihovoj međusobnoj suradnji i partnerskom odnosu. Uzorak čini 203 roditelja i odgojitelja koji rade u vrtićima na području grada Zagreba i Zagrebačke županije. Postavljene su hipoteze koje se odnose na (pre)poznavanje pojmova suradnje i partnerstva, procjenu uloge odgojitelja kao partnera od strane roditelja i odgojitelja u međusobnoj suradnji i partnerstvu te procjenu važnosti suradnje kroz vlastitu odgovornost sudionika. Rezultati dobiveni nakon analize podataka pokazuju da obje skupine ispitanika nisu ulogu odgojitelja kao partnera procijenile najvažnijom. Također, rezultati istraživanja pokazuju da roditelji, ali i odgojitelji, ne shvaćaju razliku između pojmova suradnje i partnerstva. Iako su se obje strane složile o važnosti partnerskoga/suradničkoga odnosa, postoji i manji broj onih koji smatraju takav odnos nevažnim ili manje važnim.

Ključne riječi: odgojitelji; partnerstvo; roditelji; suradnja; trajno učenje.