

Marta Buk-Cegiełka  
ORCID: 0000-0002-0324-7418  
The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin

# The Unique Nature of School Cooperation with Parents of Children at the First Stage of Education: Opportunities — Difficulties — Needs

## ABSTRACT

The family and school environment influence the upbringing and development of every human being. The process of the proper preparation of a child for life is only possible when both parties – parents and teachers – find the common ground necessary for agreement enabling the mutual complementarity in this activity. The following elaboration will cover issues concerning the areas of cooperation between the early childhood education teacher and parents, and the difficulties connected with it. The theoretical foundations of this cooperation will also be discussed, which are: social integration theory, subject education strategy and accompanying pedagogy.

The aim of the study is to show the unique nature of parental cooperation with the school at the first stage of education. In the context of the subject of the study, the following research questions were formulated:

## KEYWORDS

cooperation, participation, early school education, student, teacher, parent

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- What are the expectations and needs of both parents and teachers in the field of cooperation?
- What are the ways to solve problems and overcome difficulties that arise in the area of teachers' cooperation with parents?

In order to answer the above questions, the analysis of the subject literature and the analysis of the results of participant observation conducted by the author of the study during long-term work as a teacher of early school education was made.

## Introduction

Wincenty Okoń specifies cooperation as “the collaboration of individuals or groups of people who perform their partial tasks to achieve a common aim; cooperation is based on mutual trust and loyalty, and on the submission to the objective of which all the individuals or groups are properly aware”<sup>1</sup>. Czesław Kupisiewicz and Małgorzata Kupisiewicz define the term in a similar manner: “Cooperation is the collaboration of individuals or groups aimed at the achievement of a common objective which they find important, e. g. the cooperation among students during group teaching, or the cooperation between parents and the school in educating children”<sup>2</sup>. Waldemar Segiet<sup>3</sup> and Edmund Trempała<sup>4</sup> are of a similar opinion. Mieczysław Łobocki uses both terms: cooperation and collaboration to describe the actions taken up by the students and teachers to achieve the good of particular students, the class, or the whole school community in the process of teaching and upbringing. Such actions are taken up for the achievement of the common objectives<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> W. Okoń, *Nowy słownik pedagogiczny*, Warszawa 2007, p. 465.

<sup>2</sup> C. Kupisiewicz, M. Kupisiewicz, *Słownik pedagogiczny*, Warszawa 2009, p. 187.

<sup>3</sup> W. Segiet, *Rodzice i nauczyciele, wzajemne stosunki i reprezentacje*, Poznań 1999, p. 146.

<sup>4</sup> E. Trempała, *Szkoła a edukacja równoległa (nieszkolna)*, Bydgoszcz 1993, p. 195.

<sup>5</sup> See M. Łobocki, *Współdziałanie nauczycieli i rodziców w procesie wychowania*, Warszawa 1985.

The above mentioned definitions and descriptions indicate that cooperation often refers to the relation between the school/teacher and parents, and it is often defined in such a context.

Apart from the students and teachers, parents are one of the three most important subjects of the school. The regulations concerning education emphasize the special role and meaning of parents in the life of the school. In the act of 14th December 2016: *Education Law*, we read: “In schools and other institutions (...) there are parents’ councils which represent all the parents of students”<sup>6</sup>. Two issues deserve attention in this respect. First, the action of the parents’ councils were emphasized, which suggests an active participation of parents in the life of a given institution; second, it was written that parents’ councils represent all the parents of the students attending a given place. In the next part of the Law we read: “The parents’ council may ask the director and other organs of the school or institution, the supervisory body of the school or institution, or the supervisory pedagogical body, to consider its requests and opinions concerning all kinds of issues related to the school or institution”<sup>7</sup>. Not only do such broad competences of the teacher’s council emphasize the parents’ rights, but they also offer great opportunities to cooperate with the school or institution and act to the benefit of the school and its students. In the *Core Curriculum for Comprehensive Education in the Primary School*, the tasks of the school in terms of early education include those related to the cooperation with parents. Such tasks include:

- “collaboration with parents, different environments, organisations and institutions treated by the parents as the source of important values, in order to create the conditions that make it possible to develop the child’s identity;
- systematic complementation – upon the parents’ approval – of the educational contents with new issues resulting from the appearance in the environment of changes and phenomena important for the child’s safety and development”<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> The act of 14 December 2016, *Education Law*, Journal of Laws 2017, item 59, as amended, art. 83.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, art. 84, item 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Core Curriculum for Comprehensive Education in the Primary School*, Appendix no. 2, Journal of Laws 2017, item 356, p. 18.

While talking about the collaboration of the school with the parents at the first educational stage, we realise that such cooperation should take place in different areas of the educational reality, mainly in the area of upbringing, education, and the organization of the life of the school and the class.

The analysis of books and the author's own experience raises reflections, questions and dilemmas that refer to the cooperation with the parents of early education students. It is a very difficult (among many other) challenge for the teacher, especially the early education teacher, because, at this educational stage, both teachers and parents learn such cooperation from the beginning.

Teachers of 1st class students do not know their parents. The ways of building cooperation between the parents and the school are often worked out "blindfold".

Another problem that may occur in the cooperation between the school and the parents are different expectations of parents and teachers in this regard.

Participating in observations carried out for many years in early school education, as well as empirical research<sup>9</sup> performed in order to prepare the programme of the school's collaboration with the parents, makes it possible to determine that early education teachers indicate the organisational area as the main field of cooperation with the parents. Such cooperation would include the support in organising trips, events and celebrations in the class or school. According to early education teachers, didactic and upbringing cooperation would be mainly limited to informing the parents about the children's educational achievements, and to the possible involvement and support of the parents in case of the child's educational or upbringing difficulties.

The expectations of parents as for the cooperation with the school are slightly different. What is the most important for most parents is the information from the teacher on the achievements of their children (often through e-mail, and not traditional mail or telephone messages) or individual meetings in case of difficulties, as well as taking up common actions in order to overcome those difficulties.

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<sup>9</sup> The author carried out the research in the Primary School no. 7 in Świdnik.

The basic question is: Why are there discrepancies between the parents' and early education teachers' expectations concerning mutual cooperation? Perhaps each of those entities understands cooperation in a different manner, or maybe the attitude of expecting something is stronger than the willingness to collaborate with the other side?

In this respect, the model worked out in the project "Schools of cooperation" seems interesting. According to the model, in terms of the cooperation with the school, parents and teachers shall:

- "feel that they can influence matters that are related to them;
- take responsibility for the decisions they make;
- identify themselves with the school;
- get involved in the life of the school;
- be open to the remarks, ideas and needs reported by the teachers;
- eagerly take up their own initiatives and solve school problems,
- trust the directors, teachers and other employees of the school;
- more frequently act to the benefit of the local community;
- support the school in the didactic and upbringing work;
- help in the organisation of school events, celebrations, trips, etc."<sup>10</sup>

The above presented model of cooperation may be successfully referred to the cooperation of parents with early education teachers in each school.

## Theoretical bases for the cooperation with parents

Each pedagogical action, which also includes the cooperation of an early education teacher with the parents, should be built on specific theoretical foundations.

The author has worked as an early education teacher for 24 years and analysed a lot of pedagogical books. Her knowledge and experience indicates that such foundations include:

- theory of social integration;
- strategy of subjective education;
- pedagogy of accompanying.

<sup>10</sup> <http://szkolawspolpracy.pl/wp-content/uploads/pdf/poradnik-nauczyciela.pdf> [access: 11.09.2018].

## Social integration as a factor that makes cooperation possible

The basic condition and aspect in which the cooperation between the teacher and parents takes place is the integration of the two entities. In *Encyklopedia aksjologii pedagogicznej* [*Encyclopaedia of Pedagogical Axiology*] we can find the following definition: “Social integration, perceived as a feature of a social system or the process of creating and improving its consistency, is the property of a social system as a separated whole consisting of different kinds of elements that, as constituents, are mutually interdependent and collaborate for the achievement of clearly specified objectives”<sup>11</sup>. In the context of the topic of this work, the elements of the system are teachers and parents who take up common actions (cooperate) for the good of the students.

Integration is constitutive through its objectives and tasks in which particular values are rooted, through the action for keeping and reinforcing the internal consistency, building good relations with the environment, as well as eliminating tensions and solving conflicts<sup>12</sup>. In the cooperation of the parents with the early education teacher, formulated objectives and tasks to be fulfilled shall be related to the person of the student and their good.

We can distinguish cultural, normative, functional and communicative integration.

Cultural integration is reflected in the compliance and harmony between the values and cultural norms of a different degree of diversity. A characteristic feature of this integration is equality, community, becoming someone for others and with others.

In early school education, such compliance and harmony between the cultural values and norms of the family and the school is very important, because it introduces the child into the world of culture, it teaches respect for what is different, it shows how to build a consensus, and it provides the patterns of efficient action in order to achieve the common goals of the child’s education at the first educational

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<sup>11</sup> F. Lis, R. Lis, *Integracja społeczna*, in: *Encyklopedia aksjologii pedagogicznej*, ed. K. Chałas, A. Maj, Radom 2016, p. 435.

<sup>12</sup> See *ibidem*.

stage. Such tasks taken up at this stage shall bear fruit in the child's life at further stages of development.

Normative integration is strictly connected with cultural integration which refers to social values and norms. The difference consists in a different placement of emphases. In the cultural integration, the emphasis is mainly put on the connections among different elements of culture, and in the normative integration it is moved to the relations among the values and norms of a given system and the personalities and behaviours of its members"<sup>13</sup>.

Referring this type of integration to the cooperation of an early education teacher with the parents, we mainly aim at giving the children the opportunity to build and fulfil their own, proper hierarchy of values, so that the independent system of values and norms could be created. In this respect, the cooperation with the parents shall constitute a significant factor that makes this process dynamic. Thus, it is important for the family and the school to aim at the common system of values and norms.

Functional integration is expressed in the fulfillment of the system of values through the optimization of organizational conditions for the tasks to be carried out<sup>14</sup>. The cooperation with the parents may/should facilitate the creation of such conditions. Thus, it is necessary to answer the questions: what conditions should be created to optimise the chance to fulfil the values by the children; what tasks should be taken up; how should the structure of those tasks be built? The tasks aimed at the fulfillment of the system of values by the children (as well as teachers and parents) seem to be crucial in this respect.

Communicative integration plays a very important function in the cooperation of the teacher with the parents. It boils down to skilful and efficient communication, exchange of ideas and establishing them in a certain community through different forms of interpersonal communication, its codes and information systems that include particular values and norms<sup>15</sup>.

Using information codes with positive emotions constitutes communicative integration. An important task placed in front of

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<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, p. 438.

<sup>14</sup> See ibidem, p. 439.

<sup>15</sup> See F.J. Lis, *Integracja społeczna a wartości*, Lublin 1987, p. 8.

educational entities: teachers and parents, is building good interpersonal relations based on mutual respect, the need to become a gift for others, to build the community of tasks and the community as a task, and the involvement in building task structures in the perspective of the optimisation of the conditions for the fulfilment of the supreme objective of the school – the student’s integral development.

### Subjective education as the objective and task

The development of a democratic, civil society, implies a new educational strategy – subjective education. In the context of the topic of this article, such education offers the opportunity to cooperate for two subjects: early education teachers and parents. Such collaboration should be oriented at the person of the child – the early education student<sup>16</sup>.

According to Tadeusz Lewowicki, “subjective education takes into account the full rights of all the participants of educational processes to co-decide as for the objectives of education, its contents, strategies of the process fulfilment, methods, means, organizational forms, and all the conditions for educational activities. In this paradigm of education, special place and function is ascribed to the relations among the people taking part in a broadly understood change”<sup>17</sup>. In the light of this statement, parents have the right to co-decide about the curriculum, handbooks, forms in which lessons are organized, as well as detailed didactic tasks. As it was emphasized in the first part of the article, the education law clearly indicates that.

Functional, normative and cultural integration influence the strategy of subjective education, its contents and range, as well as effects.

Subjective education combines the idea of humanism; the fulfilment of the needs and expectations of three subjects: the teacher, children and parents; the dialogue between the teacher and the parents; innovations, changes and committed action that takes into account the subjectivity of the teacher, students and parents.

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<sup>16</sup> See T. Lewowicki, *W stronę paradygmatu edukacji podmiotowej*, “Edukacja” 1990, No. 2, p. 6.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem.



Lewowicki emphasizes that “in this paradigm, the person who participates in education becomes important”<sup>18</sup>. The strategy of subjective education must be oriented at the person of the student at the early education age – at his/her subjectivity.

The issue of the child’s subjectivity deserves attention in this respect. It is, by nature, immersed into the world of values. According to Teresa Kukołowicz and Ewa Całka, “the man’s subjectivity is improved through learning about the truth, perceiving and fulfilling good, and creative actions, and the source of such tasks is the man’s existential structure. Thus, being a subject is an initial subjectivity that was given to each person. And the physical subjectivity is the fruit of a long-term work on oneself, on the development of one’s cognitive abilities, on the right to choose good and take up creative actions. It is the expression of a long-term moral effort and the whole internal change based on the objective hierarchy of values”<sup>19</sup>.

Subjectivity perceived in such a way may be one of the objectives of the collaboration between the parents and the teacher. While considering the issue of the subjectivity of the child in early education, the presentation of the opinion of Józefa Bałachowicz seems justified. She writes: “It should be emphasized that subjectivity belongs to those specific categories which not only cumulate the knowledge of the man, but are also used to design the construction of the new reality”<sup>20</sup>. Further, she asks: “To which extent early education supports the development of the child’s subjectivity?”<sup>21</sup>. And Maria Nowicka-Kozioł distinguishes four groups of indicators of the sense of the student’s subjectivity:

- “the sense of the freedom of choice, conscious decision-making and management of one’s behaviour,
- the sense of causativeness and influence on the occurrence or non-occurrence of external situations,
- the sense of responsibility for one’s own actions,

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, p. 8.

<sup>19</sup> T. Kukołowicz, E. Całka, *Podmiotowość wychowanka*, in: *Poza kryzysem tożsamości*, ed. F. Adamski, Kraków 1993, pp. 82–83.

<sup>20</sup> J. Bałachowicz, *Style działań edukacyjnych nauczycieli klas początkowych*, Warszawa 2009, p. 33.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem, p. 36.

- the sense of partnership, dialogic and authentic interpersonal contacts”<sup>22</sup>.

Shaping the early education student’s sense of subjectivity should be accompanied by the parents and teachers who collaborate with each other. The early education teacher and the child’s parents should take up tasks while respecting the subjectivity of both sides.

### Meeting – dialogue – accompanying

The third theoretical basis for the early education teacher’s collaboration with the parents is the “pedagogy of accompanying” by Zbigniew Marek. His concept is the apology of the subjectivity of the participants of education and their self-determination. Educational relationship assumes active participation of its actors, and it rejects any attempts to impose authoritarian transfer of knowledge<sup>23</sup>.

The basis of the pedagogy of accompanying is the Ignatian pedagogy which assumes supporting the student in discovering the truth. Such support should mainly be provided by the teacher<sup>24</sup>. Within the context of the topic of this article, it is worth mentioning that, on the path to the truth, the student should be supported both by the parents and by the teacher, mainly through the witness of living in truth and showing the truth.

The above mentioned author says: “Experience, reflection, and action are the key moments for the Ignatian pedagogy”<sup>25</sup>. Those elements constitute the model of upbringing (which also takes into account the context of studying). Also, they may constitute the model of the collaboration between the parents and the early education teacher.

The first of the above mentioned moments of the Ignatian pedagogy is experience. “The advantage of experience is the fact that it makes people interested in different things, encourages them to ask

<sup>22</sup> M. Nowicka-Kozioł, *Odpowiedzialność w świetle alternatyw współczesnego humanizmu*, Warszawa 1993, p. 169.

<sup>23</sup> See the fragment of the review on the cover of the book: Z. Marek, *Pedagogika towarzyszenia. Perspektywa tradycji ignacjańskiej*, Kraków 2017.

<sup>24</sup> See *ibidem*, p. 43.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*.

questions and express opinions, gives them hope for the opportunity to change one's life, and makes them feel different kinds of anxiety"<sup>26</sup>. The common task of the parents and early education teachers is creating the conditions for gaining experience by the students at the first educational stage.

Another important model of the Ignatian pedagogy is reflection, i. e. "Finding the proper meaning of everything in which the man participates, what he learns, i. e. the meaning of the gathered experience"<sup>27</sup>. Referring the above to the issue discussed in this article, we should pay attention to two aspects of reflection. One of them shall be related to the reflection of the parents and the teacher on their cooperation for the good of the child. The other aspect refers to the tasks taken up by the teachers and parents together – the tasks aimed at the development of children's reflectivity.

The last of the main moments of the Ignatian pedagogy is action that "should inspire the student to make mature and responsible decisions that help to change the reality in which the man lives"<sup>28</sup>. In the context of our issue, action shall be the cooperation of the parents and teachers. Zbigniew Marek emphasizes that actions should be inspired by love<sup>29</sup> – in this situation it is the love of the student.

The main feature of the Ignatian pedagogy is accompanying. The teacher (and the parent) accompanies the child in searching for the truth. They help the student understand what it means to "be for others" and gain the practical ability to follow this principle in everyday life<sup>30</sup>. "Such accompanying should be full of kindness and optimism, and not sternness. The teacher (...) should not use the same methods with all the students"<sup>31</sup>. The guidelines resulting from the pedagogy of accompanying may be successfully referred to the collaboration between the parents and teachers of early education students.

To sum it up, we may notice that the analysis of the above theoretical foundations and their implementation in school practice as

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<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, p. 45.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, p. 48.

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, p. 52.

<sup>29</sup> See *ibidem*.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem, p. 59.

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem, p. 62.

for the collaboration of the early education teacher with the parents offers the opportunity to improve the quality of such collaboration, and even to make the parents involved in the educational process of the children at the first stage of education.

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## CORRESPONDENCE ADDRESS

Marta Buk-Cegielka  
The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin  
Faculty of Social Sciences  
Institute of Pedagogy  
e-mail: [marta.bukcegielka@interia.pl](mailto:marta.bukcegielka@interia.pl)