

# 'Parents at School' programme as a perspective of partnership's orientation increase in Poland

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This paper is based on research work, which brought out the implications for practice on a field of school-home co-operation. The programme 'Parents at School' reflects many of them in its contents, and shapes a tendency of schools' and parents' partnership progress in Poland.

## **Research report<sup>1</sup>**

The method used was mainly qualitative investigation with three kinds of questionnaires (parents, teachers, principals), and analysis of school documents. The empirical study was carried out in Gdansk - one of the biggest Polish cities (ca. 500 000 habitants), in 1993, and incorporated 167 people.

The aim of the study concentrated around a much debated phenomenon in educational policies across the world: schools' and parents' partnership. This issue mirrors a context of political changes in Eastern Europe. Throughout the period of Communist domination, the school has been one of the most important agents of political control over the society. It operated rather against, than along the will of parents. During almost half a century of state-controlled education, schools managed to create an almost indifferent population of adults who tend to believe that schooling is a matter of teachers' sole concerns and responsibilities. The 1989 upheavals changed the system of political control and resulted in deep re-definitions of educational responsibilities. The 1991 Education Act in Poland empowers parents to take up control over the process of schooling, granting big competence to school boards and other parental and community-based bodies. It also opened up

the possibilities of school choice, making it possible for numerous social forces (parents' organisations, and local communities included) to set up schools, which - if meeting the didactic criteria set for public schools - can obtain partial public funding (max. 50%).

However, the legal changes are not followed by immediate changes in people's attitudes, beliefs, and actions.

The pedagogical orientations of parents ('orientation' is meant here as a generalised, not necessarily fully recognised by the subject, set of beliefs, values, attitudes, and behavioural tendencies) are one of the major factors investigated in the research.

The relationships between the factors of parental pedagogical orientations, school choice, and the attitudes of school principals and teachers were studied in analysing the forms of parental participation in the process of schooling.

The research sample covered one city area, in which parents of young learners (grades 1-3) had a choice between a huge public school, a small Catholic school, and a small parent-run non-public school.

The choice of school proved to be the major differentiating factor of parents' pedagogical orientations and forms of involvement in school life.

The explanation is twofold: on the one hand, parents choosing to send their children to non-public schools are better off (in non-public schools they have to cover at least 50% of schooling costs), on the other, they are more conscious about the goals of education. In the parent-run schools (they are set up, and to a big extent maintained, by groups of parents opting

out of the public school system) parental involvement is just part of the system.

In the Catholic school (which operates along the lines similar to those run by parents or private individuals) parents were not much involved in decision-making: they are not represented in the school board - which is a deliberate policy of the school.

Public school parents, who formally do have possibilities to influence the process of schooling, were not involved either. Their motif of choosing the public school was first of all the vicinity of the school, and - of course - free tuition. The public school parents proved least informed about the pedagogy employed by the school, and on their possible ways of influencing the schooling of their children.

Both public and Catholic school parents show dissatisfaction with their possibilities of control. However, as long as public school parents were in a way indifferent to (or ill informed about) pedagogical issues, the Catholic school ones did generally approve of the school's educational philosophy. The deepest, widest and most satisfying involvement was shown - not surprisingly - by parent-run school parents.

A large part of parental involvement concerns financial issues: the tuition fee in non-public schools, and the poverty in public schools, make the financial and technical support from the parents an obvious way of getting them engaged in school life.

The degree of parental involvement correlates with the attitudes of teachers and school principals. While declaring the need of deeper co-operation, public school teachers and principals seem to be happy with keeping parents at a distance from their pedagogical activities.

Of all schools investigated, the parent-run was most concerned with democratic participation of parents in all forms of school life (not merely with the money, but also with parental care, occasional teaching, and curricular decisions).

The teachers and parents called this school: '*good for the students and good for us*', all of them felt comfortable at this school and described it as their '*own*', some part of their identity.

### **Portrait of school 'good for the students and the parents'**

Ten years ago, in spring three mothers met: a doctor, a lawyer, and a psychologist. They had heard about the *Civic Educational Association* on TV. Being full of hope about new educational possibility for their children (TO LEARN AT NOT HUGE, AND NOT CLOSED FOR PARENTS, NICE SCHOOL), they made a decision that one of them should go to Warsaw and participate in a meeting of the first members of STO.

At the end of August they gained over 30 friends<sup>2</sup> - parents, who were ready to take a risk and send their children to a unique and unknown school. They were also ready to pay (a month's tuition was a half of an average salary) and work very hard. During the first three years the school changed its seat four times, because it didn't have its own place. In every new place, the parents and teachers together had to adapt everything for children, to make a school.

It was impossible during the research to learn how much these kind of experiences influenced the current state of school life.

To have the same goals at the beginning, and a will to co-operate; to have a small but important task working together; to realise all school problems and be responsible for solving them. These factors seemed to raise partnership at school and create the attitudes, which made people open to one another, able to rely on the rest of school community.

Among the main conclusions of the research are the following:

*What is shown by the elements of the parents' pedagogical orientation in the portrayed school?*

It appears that the parents were looking for a school, which offers their values and respects their needs. It is also shown that:

1. All of them appreciate the possibility of participating in school life, and treat school as a good place for their children (98% of satisfied people opinions).
2. The parents' responsibility for school life and future was connected with their identity - as a part of school community.
3. The parents knew the educational conception (also curriculum) of school. They presented a will to develop it together with the teachers.
4. The parents felt that they could influence every sphere of school life. They also knew the decision-making system at school and their own position in it.

5. The parents confirmed teachers' competence and admitted their priority in educational decision-making process. Parents expected the teachers to give initiatives of co-operation and to ask for parents' opinions about children.
6. The parents treated school values the same as their own.
7. They felt obliged to co-operate with the teachers and were ready to collaborate at school.

On the base of the study, the pedagogical orientations of parents at this particular school a generalised set of beliefs, values, attitudes, etc. - *on an active platform of partnership* can be observed. The following table presents the confirmation of this conclusion.

The pedagogical orientation of parents (set of the following components)	The facts recorded through investigation
<i>Beliefs</i> (about school and education)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Looking for a suitable school for a child is connected with the parents' own expectations, needs and values.</li> <li>2. Being sure that the school considers parents' opinions and expectations.</li> </ol>
<i>Estimation</i> (results of comparing school reality to the ideal state)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Positive results of school's estimation ('<i>This is the school, that I was looking for</i>')</li> <li>2. Sharing responsibility for school - now and in the future.</li> </ol>
<i>Knowledge</i> (about school)	<p>Being aware of:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. the legal rights of parents to co-operate with school;</li> <li>2. the forms of parents' influence in every area of school life;</li> <li>3. the main aims of educational concept of a child at school.</li> </ol>
<i>Values and attitudes</i> (to a child and its education)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Agreement between school (teachers, principals) and parents about the main values and attitudes to the children.</li> <li>2. Having a community of like-minded people.</li> </ol>
<i>Behavioural tendencies</i> (to active or passive behaviour in relation to school)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Desire to co-operate with teachers and other parents.</li> <li>2. Accepting home-school co-operation as a natural consequence of being a parent.</li> <li>3. Readiness for a partnership.</li> <li>4. Waiting for the teachers' invitation to co-operate.</li> </ol>

The last point shows an interesting role of teachers: *key-figures* in co-operation with parents.

*The teacher's opinions as an important part of the portrait.*

The teachers investigated were also satisfied about their work at school. Their opinions about parents-school co-operation can discover the most colourful part of the portrait.

During the study it was tried to recognise forms (shape) of parents influence into school life. The teachers described parents' participation, as a part of their own work with children, for example: Parents' assistance, preparing lessons together (the discussions - what we have to do, why, and how to do it? Preparing materials, places, etc.). There are two kinds of this activity: one is connected with parents' meetings (once a month) - the teacher presents monthly educational schedule and then together they prepare the exact timetable of individual tasks - for at home, and for school. The second one appears as daily co-operation between teacher and parents - when they create various activities for children in a very flexible way (out of the school, at student's house).

Parents as educators at school (some lessons are led by parents welcomed by teachers. In this version of co-operation the teachers become parents' assistants).

Parents as teachers' partners in diagnostic work about children (the teachers explained how important it is to obtain together an answer for the following questions: what kind of difficulties does the student have? Why do difficulties occur and what can/should we do to support / help the student?).

The teachers expressed their expectations in the field of co-operation with parents. When completed with the expectations of parents, they call out thoughts about the real partnership. The teachers showed also the daily school life **with** parents. They wish to have parents at school

as collaborators and feel delighted working with them together.

*From the Principal's point of view.*

The principal was glad to work at the parents-run school. Her opinions confirmed the teachers' approach to parents. The statements about parent's influence on school life show that she does not close any of its spheres for them. The important decisions she always makes up together with parents (*School Council*). It is common, she said, that she takes into consideration every parent's opinion about each part of school life. It is significant, that she indicated three groups of decisions, which can foster parents' influence and help the school to perfect itself. Some of them seem a little bit controversial, but one should remember that the principal presented them, thinking about her school. Every following group of decisions that were made with parents' participation has given everyone a high level of satisfaction at this school:

- Teachers' employment (who else should be employed, who to be dismissed; why?)
- Changes of school curriculum and time-schedule;
- Making the school offer wider (what are the current needs and possibilities of new subjects, evening activities, etc.).

The principal of this school appeared a person, who wants the parents still to have many possibilities to influence school life, and wish to continue this special way of co-operating with them.

Concluding, one can say that:

- Almost all the parents (98%) presented the opinion that: *It is a good school*. However, they have indicated many bad sides of school life (81% statements concerning faults), and they have also constructed various ways of solutions (73% proposals how to solve school problems). It shows that the parents' responsibility for school has obtained a high level. They treat

school as their own value and try to make this place optimal - especially for their children, which means also - for the teachers. The teachers clearly know parents' expectations shown by their activity in co-operation, and situate them on the same platform of values. Possibly parents' attitude like this influences the atmosphere positively and creates healthy relationships between parents and teachers.

- The teachers were glad being a part of school community. A reason that can be mentioned is that they could always count on the parents' assistance, and help in their work with children.
- The principal's attitude toward parents allowed them to feel as real partners in school management, and to create this school step by step in practice. The Principal was also satisfied to work at this school. She was delighted feeling her role in the field of social integration through family-school partnership model used at school. She could notice and she appreciates many good results of this partnership, for example: students' outcomes in comparison with other schools, good relationships between students, teachers and parents; significant and kind opinions about school in local community (much more candidates than school can admit every year).

*A good school* means a school, which is *good* for somebody, for real person or group of people. Here a school was described that is good for small groups of parents, teachers, and for the principal, who were concentrated in some place in Gdansk. Their enthusiasm and strong will TO BUILT A NEW SCHOOL TOGETHER have appeared fruitful. They were able to create real partnership, which conducted the school to a high level of effectiveness, and gave people most comfortable state of being together.

Now, we are ten years since the date of its establishment. Will this partnership exist longer, even without people's great enthusiasm

characterising the first years of this school's existence? Do they already have enough of democratic habits for being able to use parent's rights (guaranteed in Poland with law since 1991), to be active participants of their children's education at school? What about the parents and teachers from public schools (for 98% of total number of the students in Poland) - are they ready to create a real partnership and prepare the conditions for mental health in school?

There is some hope, that all the answers for these questions will be optimistic. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of September 1999 educational system reform in Poland has started. Its main assumptions concern change of roles in educational system. Polish school is going to become a center of community life, to be open for parents, representatives of local community, and to keep an open-door approach to neighbours - from the same and other countries (exchange programmes, social links via Internet, etc.). It seems to be the end of the Polish school as formal 'institution for learning'. The study indicated a current need for increased parents' and teachers' orientations to mutual co-operation, and offered the suggestions for teachers on how to develop a fruitful partnership with parents. They became the base of the 'Parents at School' programme, which is presented below.

In general, the research shows a great potential of parental involvement in the Polish educational system. In choice schools, especially those run by parental organisations, the involvement is naturally inscribed into the system. In the public and Catholic schools the level of parental dissatisfaction can also be understood as a potential for change. The data seem to support the idea of school choice policies and the models of school voucher financing.

However, the limited scale of voucher policy in Poland paradoxically seems to be one of the leading factors of reform in the school. Parents who pay for the tuition of their children feel

empowered to control the school also in pedagogical terms.

The educational reform in Poland bases on the decentralisation system, which increases the signification of local communities, and creates people's attitudes to the schools as the own, communities' value.

#### **About the origin of the 'Parents at School' programme**

In 1998 Polish government (Department of Education) had initiated researcher and teacher's work on a programme concerning parents involvement in school and local communities life. A group of two people working on it was supported by Prime Minister Office representatives (Premier's advisors', and the officials' assistance concerning social diagnosis, current materials, correspondence, etc.). At the end of 1998 government accepted the *Parents at School* programme, and it received some financial base for its realisation<sup>3</sup>. The process of turning it into practice starts in connection with other projects on the area of caring system, in 1999.

#### *Contents of the programme*

The goals of the programme reflect the needs of school-family-community partnership, which were indicated in the conclusions of the pedagogical orientations' study. The main assumption presents a way of partnership creation by increased parents' involvement in school practice, which will be able to obtain a big extent on the life of local community. It is shown in the title of this programme: *Parents at School*.

The orientation is meant here as set of beliefs, attitudes, and behavioural tendencies. Each part of this set is depended on individual experiences, conscious and non-conscious needs, etc. Then partnership orientation's increase has to be based on educational processes concerning the people, who play their partner roles in co-operation. In connection to this pre-assumption the programme includes two parts. One of them combines the

proposals of teachers', parents', and local authorities' representatives' in education.

There are exact curricula of:

- workshop's periods - as a proposal for schools (teachers, parents) on how to co-operate effectively;
- courses (60, 120-hours) - the certificates confirm, that participants have the abilities to foster school, family, community partnerships,
- post-graduate study: *The Animation of Community Co-operation* (220 hours, 2-semester course at the universities or high schools)<sup>4</sup>
- specialisation at colleges, and universities: *The Animation of Community Co-operation* (3-years study across social sciences, with vocational training at schools, local governments, and public institution in a set of national caring system)
- selected subjects, meant as a supplement of obligatory curricula at teacher-training schools (for example: *The Bases of School / Family / Community Partnership*)

The second part of programme concentrates many different ways how to provide the parents with information about their rights, responsibilities, and possibilities of support on solving their problems with children. There are the following conceptions:

- Family / School Advisory Center - in local scale
  - for the districts, small cities, and the villages. Both parents and teachers (principals) will be able to get piece of advice (how to help the children, and to increase the levels of students abilities, etc.), current messages about school and community life (culture, educational events, etc.), and the indications concerning the ways of efforts' integration, etc.
- *Parents' Radio Channel*
- *Parents' TV Channel* - both radio and TV channels should give advice to the parents (make them stronger with all their responsibilities for the children), and also

information, which is currently needed (for example: before school term will start - the messages about all the necessities for the youngest pupils).

- *Parents' Magazine* - edited in twofold ways: on local scale, as a magazine, which presents schools' offers (for example: curricula, optional and evening activities, role of parents in school life, environmental conditions). The edition in larger scale means a magazine for Polish parents in comparisons and co-operation with other parents across the world. There is place for the presentations of parents-teachers associations' achievement, their new ideas, and problems.
- *Parents' Home Page on the Internet* - programme includes an exact description of this 'page' organisation and contents. The following elements of its structure have appeared as most exposed: 'We all are the same, but...' - this window includes the list of parents' rights and responsibilities in comparisons of their situation with in particular European countries (on the basis of 'Eurydice' data, and other sources of information); 'The thoughts for parents' - the articles about parents as educators, participants of their children schooling, and the life of school, etc.; 'Parents' chat' - place for exchange of parents' experiences, questions, doubts.

The contents of *Parents at School* in its structure reflects the overlapping spheres theory by Joyce Epstein, and her *Six Types of Involvement*: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community<sup>5</sup>. Local peculiarities, which characterise the Polish reality, made all these types full of unique examples of practice. On some fields of the types mentioned above they expressed spontaneously and easy (communicating, decision making). On the others, especially *volunteering*, the creations of proposals had appeared as difficult in Polish reality (lack of exact rules and formal status of

the volunteers at schools, described and guaranteed by law, etc.).

Preparing the view of partnership, the Polish programme used Epstein's definition of school, family, and community partnership, which arises by theory of overlapping spheres of influence. This meaning of partnership (co-operation in agreement of the aims, and types of activities) finds adequate supplement in theory of educational partnership by Alastair Macbeth, and by Stanislaw Rogala.<sup>6</sup> Macbeth's definition of partnership exposes the fact, that it involves a mixture of interdependence and autonomy, where is mutual benefit for partners to co-operate and to influence each other's actions, but similarly there must be recognition of some independence and other responsibilities. Rogala's partnership means also mutual obligations, but with respect of individual's values, and works together with similar expectations about the results of co-operation.

In general the term 'partnership' is used in a programme after those three meanings, which compose - as Macbeth said - a mixture of interdependence and autonomy of partners.

The '*Parents at School*' programme grasps many aspects of partnership and it draws a prospective landscape of school / family / community co-operation in Poland. It combines the proposals, mentioned above with a project of turning them into practice. This project is based on the *method of cascade*, which let first educators to educate their *multiplicators* on the average short term (courses, workshops, etc.). Epstein's *action team* idea has appeared very useful in that part of the project, which described the functioning of 'cascade' in local communities<sup>7</sup>, making home - school - community liaisons.

Educational reform in Poland indicates great changes in the system of education (3 steps of compulsory education: primary school, gymnasium - junior high school, and lyceum -

senior high school), deep re-definitions of schooling, and teachers', parents' roles in its process (the idea of education as life-long learning process, not necessarily placed at schools; school as a center of social life, etc.). The reform relies on many programmes. *Parents at Schools* belongs to the most important issues, which determinate success of all the reform's intentions. Between the prospective tasks written down in this programme, now preparing teachers,

parents, and representatives of local authorities for partnerships seems most significant. The autonomous universities, colleges, and high pedagogic schools should take it into consideration. Any of them in Poland provides for students - prospective teachers the possibilities (courses, workshops, etc.) to prepare themselves to work with parents.

### Notes

- 1 Mendel, M. (1998), *Parents and the School. How to Participate in the Education of Children?* (Mendel, 1998).
- 2 During research work it was a primary school (6-15) with 144 students.
- 3 Mendel M. (Ed.) (1998), *Parents at School*, Ministry of Education, Warsaw.
- 4 *Post-graduate study The Animation of Community Co-operation* starts at the Institute of Education, University of Gdansk. There 36-people group will be studying since 1<sup>st</sup> of October, 1999.
- 5 Epstein J.L. (1987), *Toward a Theory of Family - School Connections: Teachers Practices and Parent Involvement* in: K. Hurrelmann, F.X. Kaufmann, F. Losel (Eds.) *Social Intervention: Potential and Constraints*. Berlin - New York, Walter de Gruyter & Co.
- Epstein J.L. (1995), *School / Family / Community Partnerships. Caring for the Children We Share*. 'Phi Delta Kappan', May.
- 6 A. Macbeth (1995), *Partnership between parents and teachers in education* in A. Macbeth, D. McCreath and J. Aitchison (Eds.): *Collaborate or Compete? Educational Partnerships in a Market Economy*. The Falmer Press, London - Washington, D.C., p.50-51
- S. Rogala (1989), *Partnerstwo rodziców i nauczycieli*. Ossolineum, Opole - Wrocław - Kraków, p.10-12
- 7 J.L. Epstein, L. Coates, K.C. Salinas, M.G. Sanders, B.S. Simon (1997), *School, Family, and Community Partnerships. Your Handbook for Action*. Corvin Press, Inc. Thousand Oaks, California, p. 13-17

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