

Home-school relationships in one Russian school.

A case study

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Abstract

This paper summarizes the preliminary results of a study of home-school relations in Perm, Russia. The study was closely linked with the Tempus Tacis Project, which developed good working relationships with the Perm State Pedagogical University (PSPU). These links opened the door to an investigation of home-school relationships, an area of growing importance within education. This case study is the first part of an international comparative study on home-school relationships in Russia and Hungary. This paper is focusing on Russia, and highlights the teacher's perspective on home-school relationships. It offers some examples of the different fora and patterns of interaction between the home and the school in one primary school in Perm. The study investigates the existing home-school relationships and looks into modes of interaction between the teacher and the parents. It points not only to similarities in the thinking and practice of teachers but highlights differences in the intensity of communication. The paper focuses on issues that emerged during the preparation and execution of the study. It briefly examines methodological issues of the research. This is followed by the main part that deals with teacher's perspectives and activities in the field of home-school relations. The paper concludes in pointing towards issues that will be pursued at a later stage of the research project.

Introduction

The research was conducted as one part of a comparative study of home-school relationships

of Hungary and Russia. The study is closely linked with a Tempus Tacis Project. As a project member I had visited Perm, Russia twice before I started to investigate the relationships between home and school. The Tempus Project allowed me to explore already existing links and relationships with the Perm State Pedagogical University and its 'pilot' schools. During previous visits to Perm, the Tempus pilot schools introduced me to Russian schools, their organization, the circumstances they have to work in, staff and school life in general.

Focus

Looking at the issue of home-school relationships, it seemed necessary to clarify its meaning within the given context. I was able to use the contemporary debate in Russian publications to gain an initial understanding of the topic. Home-school relations, however, need active involvement of all parties, which is why I decided to investigate different angles on this subject. Interviews on parental choice expressed a variety of views on the issue. There seemed to be a common understanding that teachers provide an important part within home-school relations. I therefore was seeking to investigate teacher's perspectives and views on communication between the home and the school. The following questions were used as a structural device to guide the researcher through the process of investigation.

- What is the understanding of home-school relationships from the teacher's perspective?

- What are some of the examples of the different fora and patterns of interaction between the home and the school?

These questions reflect the main direction of the interview schedule and influenced the selection of documentary sources for the study. Within the following, an overview of methodological issues will be given.

Methodology

Last year I spent two weeks in Perm to collect data focusing on home-school relationships in one of the Tempus Tacis Pilot Schools investigating teachers' perspectives on home-school relationships and their practice concerning communication with the family. As my research had an exploratory aim, a qualitative approach and research design was developed to reflect this. The main data collection method was semi-structured interviews, but as supplementary data source I also used documentary evidence, observation and field notes (Yin, 1994). I interviewed 14 out of 25 primary school class teachers, two psychologists, the social pedagogue and a deputy head. All of my interviewees were female and the interviews lasted between 25-40 minutes.

During interviewing an interpreter was present to help with the language although simultaneous translation was rarely done, as I have a good passive knowledge of Russian. The questions were always asked in English allowing the interpreter to translate, to avoid misunderstanding but the answers were translated only in case of a need for clarification. The interpreters were students of PSPU in their final year and studying translation and interpretation skills as special interest. Stress was put on discussing the aim of the research with them and getting to know them before they got engaged in the work. This was essential in order to minimize possible misunderstanding of educational jargon as well as introducing them to the research in which they would play a vital role. In addition to helping with the language the interpreters also provided

useful information about the culture, and about the Russian way of thinking. Using interpreters raises questions as to the extent to which interpreters interfere with the process of the interview, but far more they drew attention towards issues of professional language skills versus contextual understanding of the interpreter.

The school

The school, which accommodated my research can be characterized as a 'typical' Russian primary school in Perm, yet with unique qualities. It is a state school with a non-selective admission policy for children between the ages of 6 and 10 and as such does not charge tuition fees. The pupils come from different backgrounds, and their families differ in their financial situation, in parents' schooling, in the family structure and so on. The school caters for all abilities, including classes for able children and compensatory classes for slow learners. The school has a highly qualified and committed teaching staff. They are supported and advised by a social pedagogue and psychologists, who, despite economic, social and political difficulties in the last few years, have stayed in the profession.

The student body numbers 625 children in 25 classes. There are 48 teaching staff working in the school. They are all women except for three male teachers. The teaching staff include the school head, the deputy head for upbringing, the deputy head for educational methods, 24 class teachers, four retired teachers, school psychologists, the aforementioned social pedagogue and specialized teachers, for example for PE, IT and language teaching. Because of the high number of children and the limited size of the school, children go to school in two shifts. Each shift has six 35-minute lessons. The first starts at 8.30 a.m. and finishes at 12.55 p.m.; the afternoon shift lasts from 1.15 to 5.40 p.m.

The school educates children for their first three or four years at school. Few of its classes follow a four-year primary compensatory education

programme (traditional programme), the majority of classes work according to a three-year developing education programme. Most of the class teachers are involved in voluntary experimental work led by PSPU academics. Within these initiatives teachers are free to develop their own teaching programme in addition to the national curriculum. Teachers can choose to develop areas of special interest for their class such as drama, health and art. At the same time the school has to deal with real financial limitations. It must very often rely on the generosity of wealthy parents who offer the school financial help in purchasing textbooks for their children's classes. As a result of the school's good reputation and its programmes for developing education, parents from other school districts are interested in sending their children there.

Some of the school's unique features made it easier for me to conduct the research. First, the school is one of the Tempus-Tacis (Technical Aid Programme) pilot schools. This means that apart from accommodating regular foreign visits, it allows and welcomes researchers and, where it can, makes the most of these. The school head and a few of the staff traveled to Western Europe within the Tempus Project, where they visited schools, LEAs and university departments. These visits add to the good reputation of the school and through the experience gained abroad it has an impact on teachers' thinking and practice. Secondly, the school built up a very close link with Perm State Pedagogical University, its teaching staff and researchers. The school and the majority of the staff are involved in experimental work stemming from the university. Thirdly, the school is located in a residential area close to the city center and offers easy access for national and international delegations to visit the school. This has also a positive effect on the allocation of resources from the city council. Fourthly, within the school's catchment area there are no opportunities for children to attend clubs and societies, e.g. there are no sports facilities and no

House of Culture nearby. For the school this means providing different after-school activities according to interest to occupy children during their free time. This puts the school under considerable pressure. For these reasons the school has built up good working relationships with outside agencies, for instance, with the swimming pool, puppet theatre, museums, hospitals, etc. The school itself commented on this as a special feature, unusual in the Russian context, suggesting that other schools do not have to deal with this type of problem.

This school was selected for the study, because all the qualities described above paved the way to a successful research endeavor. Another important element in choosing this school was that during previous visits I already established good personal contacts with the school head and some of the school staff. This certainly helped when gaining access, since I only had limited time for the fieldwork.

Findings

The review of Russian periodicals such as *Nachalnaja Shkola* and *Director Shkoli* suggested a heightened awareness of effective communication on good home-school relationships (Manisheva, 2000; Orlova, 1998; Alexeeva, 1997). It seemed, therefore of interest to investigate the view of teachers as active participants on this issue. The research centered around two main questions, answers to which are investigated in turns.

What is the understanding of home-school relationships in School A from the teacher's perspective?

The interview questions on this issue targeted the class teachers' practice and thinking, findings are based on teachers' reporting. Several teachers described home-school relationships as a co-operation between the school and the family, as one teacher pointed out: 'We have to work together, the teacher, parents and pupils.' Although this is a broad definition for the

terminology, it helps to identify relevant examples of home-school relationships. These include parental involvement in educational issues, such as homework and grades; others are connected with free time or social activities, like school trips or celebrations. A wide range of activities involve teachers, parents and children. It is however, interesting to note that teachers have different attitudes and feelings about ways to initiate and maintain the contact with the home. In general they all felt it was important to involve parents and to listen to them. They often praised the advantage of a relaxed relationship with the parents that leads to a happier and better performing child. Teachers emphasized that:

If the child sees that his/her parents take part in school celebrations, different events, they get on well with the teacher; it is already a pleasant experience. The children consider it as something good and it reduces the 'gap' between the child and the teacher.

I think that parents should be interested not only in children's learning [...] but also what is happening in the class. The child feels this and his attitude to school gets better.

It was often difficult to separate perspectives and feelings about home-school relationships. Although teachers felt that it was essential to create a warm and friendly atmosphere, they also pointed out that many qualities are needed to achieve this goal. Some mentioned a lack of professional training in this area at university and emphasized that they had to rely on their own practical experience in communicating with parents. Related to this issue were communication barriers such as age, gender, and qualification. They were perceived as initial causes for problems in dealing with parents. Many of the interviewed teachers admitted feeling anxiety before meeting with a group of new parents. This is exemplified in the following quote:

I am worried how much I will find a mutual agreement with the parents, how much we will have common interest in the child's upbringing. To start with I feel fear but when I get to know parents I feel lucky and even years later I keep in touch with them.

Parents are seen in different roles. During the interviews, the majority of teachers focused on parental assistance with homework. This function was actively targeted by special meetings where teachers instructed parents in how to help their children at home. Although parents are not expected to help within the classroom, they are encouraged to participate in certain curricular and social activities. In one instance I was able to observe a short lesson on dogs. As part of the science lesson, two parents brought their dog into the classroom and talked about their daily routine and habits.

Parents are also encouraged to assist the class teacher, when it comes to organize social, cultural and sport events for the class. It, however, depends on the teacher's style either to initiate or to comply with parents' wishes to organize events themselves.

While discussing parental involvement in class activities, issues arose naturally, which highlighted the complexity of the home-school relationships teachers have to deal with. Comments made by teachers suggest their awareness of a growing gap between poor and rich parents as reflected by changing social circumstances. These were mentioned by teachers because they felt that these had an effect on their everyday practice. Some teachers observed that affluent parents tended to interact with parents from the same background, thereby creating a social division within the class. Parents with lower income were often described as overloaded with work and less able to devote sufficient time to their children, as one teacher pointed out

Parents have got more problems - not with the school but with life itself. Children have less of parent care, have become less looked after.

As shown, the interviews provided me with information on the different levels of parental involvement in the class's matters, and also touched on other issues, which have an effect on this relationship. It is important to note that teachers have different feelings about working together with parents, which very much depend on their personality, teaching and personal experience. But there are strong similarities in their attitudes towards parents. Teachers showed considerable interest in building up a good relationship with parents, enthusiasm in involving parents, and many of them valued the parents' information about their children. The collected data strongly suggest that the teachers play a leading role in the evolution of home-school relationships in this particular school. Most of the time the teacher is the initiator of contact, trying to involve parents in their children's education and the class's social life. Parents can initiate activities and changes, given that they offer help.

It has to be pointed out that these findings are restricted to the teachers of the school, leaving out other aspects of parental involvement within the school.

Having discussed general issues of teacher's understanding of home-school relationships, I now move on to a more specific area. The following paragraphs illustrate and analyze the interaction between home and school as seen from the teachers' perspectives. The guiding question here was as follows:

What are some of the examples of the different fora and patterns of interaction between the home and the school in School A?

The analysis of interviews and documents suggested a range of different types of interaction between the class teachers and the parents. Part

one of this section deals with the interaction during meetings of groups of parents and the class teacher; the second looks at examples of individual interaction between the home and the school.

Examining the data, I found two *fora*, where the class teacher meets a group of parents to inform or discuss whole-class-related issues, namely parental committees and meetings.

A parental committee is set up in every class. It is usually a strong group of parents organizing class celebrations, cultural programmes, class trips. Its activity also includes involving parents who are not very active. The committee has one leader who co-ordinates the activities, involves other parents and keeps close contact with the class teacher. Although the parental committee's main activity is to organize out of school events for children and their families, it can also be responsible for handling the class budget. All class teachers from the school keep close contact with the parental committee but their involvement varies from acknowledging and taking part in social, cultural events to offering ideas and actively taking part in the organization of these events.

Very often the suggestions made by the parental committee and the class teacher are delivered and discussed at the parental meeting by the whole group of parents from the class. The agenda and aim of these meetings might be different in each class and their frequency can be regulated by the teacher as necessary.

Parental meetings are four times a year. These are the main meetings. But in the first year I organize it more often, if I have some difficulties I can call a parental meeting. But I try not to bother parents. If I need a meeting I ask the children to inform their parents and we meet. They help me. I have a plan, I work according to it. At the parental meetings we never talk about children's upbringing. I talk

about children to individual parents. Children's progress I also discuss only in private. At parental meetings we talk about general issues. I invite the psychologist, I invite people who make presentations on what are better ways to help and bring up children. How to develop memory, thinking - so I invite people from outside.

As seen in the quote teachers sometimes call for a meeting if they deem it necessary. From interviews it emerges that teachers feel these meetings to be an effective way of transferring information to parents. It has to be pointed out that agenda and style always depend on the individual teacher. Most class teachers discuss whole class related issues during these meetings, such as upcoming social events, visits to the theatre as well as information concerning method of teaching, textbooks, achievements, changing daily routine etc. Class teachers expressed different views on talking about individual achievement, some felt it was acceptable to mention names in a positive context, others rejected the idea of talking about individual children at all. All interviewees seemed to consider very carefully the number and length of meetings not wanting to put parents under unnecessary pressure. As one teacher said:

I organize regular meetings once a month, which last between one and two hours. Not 100 % attend. Because of different reasons. It's hard to find an appropriate time.

Meetings and committees are but one pattern of interaction between the teacher and the parents. Another way of communicating with parents is written notes. All interviewed class teacher use the school diary ('*dnivnik*') to send messages to parents. These messages have various purposes, they can ask for money for a theatre visit, invite parents to meetings, inform about future events. Some teachers expect parents to reply in this diary or use it for general information flow between teacher and parent.

In the following I will highlight modes of one to one interaction between the teacher and the parents. Often class teachers would want to discuss personal issues with individual parents concerning achievement, learning difficulty, behavior. These meetings can take place in the school or in children's homes. Telephone conversation is widely used to keep in touch with parents and to solve problems. All interviewed teachers had telephone at home and they do not mind if parents contact them with their problems in the evening. In certain situations parents are even encouraged to ring the class teacher at home. Also teachers use the telephone to contact parents. If a parent has not got telephone at home, the parent would be phoned at his/her work place. This practice seem to be generally accepted in the school.

The following quote demonstrates how one teacher employed different methods of communication when dealing with a problematic situation:

Well, if it is behavior - and there are such cases as well -, if the problem is serious it's better to go and see parents in their home. I have a pupil, this child is completely out of control. He is intelligent and learning, but lacks self control. He had a tragedy in his life before he started school and this affected him very much. And this child on the first day, on the 1st of September, beat everybody. I keep in touch with the mother, we agreed that she would come and see me every week, we exchanged telephone numbers, she would come to see me and we tried to solve the problem.

It seems to be common that parents come to the school and approach the class teacher. At the beginning of the primary school children are seen to the school and parents often take this opportunity to approach the class teacher; asking questions or discussing previous days happenings, behavior and learning issues. Most class teachers let the parents know when they are available for

discussion and when they can be approached before or after the school day.

Home visits are a topic where teachers' views differ considerably. It depends on the class teacher's style and personality. Very few amongst the interviewees conduct regular home visits. Some reject it completely and consider it as an intrusion into privacy. These teachers find other ways to communicate with parents. Some teachers allow for occasional home visits provided there is a 'good reason', but recognize the difficulty.

This can be inconvenient for the family especially if they have problems - there is an alcoholic in the family or they are in a difficult financial situation. I try to inform them if I want to go and go only to families where there is a problem with the child. For example: I have a child in the class who could achieve better than he does. I tried to ring the parents but no success, so I visited them. Mum got depressed, dad drinks. ... I try to help ...

In conclusion, there is lively interaction between the class teachers and parents in the school. They both initiate communication and discuss issues of a personal character, the learning, behavior or health of the children. Teachers, like parents, have their own preferences of using the written or oral form of interaction, which differs from class to class. Whereas clear similarities can be detected in the ways class teachers interact with the parents, examining the teachers' examples it is also clear that every teacher uses different means of communication in different situations. The school diary (*'dnevnik'*) is used daily, and it is also supported by the school management. The telephone is generally considered as a quick and efficient way to solve urgent problems, and both the teachers and parents use it. Personal meetings at school are initiated by either the teacher or the parent.

Conclusion

This paper reports the first findings of a research project mainly with the intention to provide information on the follow-up research endeavor. It gives an account of fieldwork undertaken in one primary school in Perm, Russia. It is suggested that teachers and other school staff consider home-school relationships as important and, consequently, they all spend a significant amount of energy and time on improving the relationship between the home and the school. It is also evident that some teachers find it easier to work with parents than others.

Teachers in this school seem to think very similarly about home-school relationships. According to teachers' reporting changing social and economic - city's, school's, family's - circumstances introduce them to new professional challenges within this relationship. Teachers showed an open-minded attitude when dealing with the new situations, although some expressed their wish to receive professional advice on issues related to working with parents.

Although the project was conducted as a single case study and the findings are not directly generalisable to other primary schools in the region, it offers information about the state of home-school relationships with its complexity and difficulty as teachers in the school see it. Keeping this in mind and within the limitations of this research project, the findings can, however, contribute to an understanding of the cultural context and home-school relationships in Russia. The research findings also offer orientation for a planned international study. Not only do they point towards methodological issues that have to be considered, they furthermore offer a framework for the structured investigation of teachers' views on home-school relationships. Another, and equally important, issue is the views of parents. A preliminary investigation into parental choice highlighted some interesting questions, which will be the subject of future

research. At this point, first impressions suggest that parents in the school have relatively clear ideas about their legal rights and clearly defined

demands and sources of information on a suitable school for their children.

References

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