

“The oversensitive, demanding parent” vs. “the professional teacher”- the ongoing struggle for the common ground of parent-teacher collaboration in Poland

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The starting point for this article is the contradiction between research results and policy recommendations on the one hand and the school reality of collaboration between teachers and parents on the other one. My point is to underline the importance of parent-teacher cooperation and obstacles preventing it in everyday school life in Poland. Notwithstanding the obvious benefits of such collaboration, this area seems still to be neglected in the majority of Polish schools. In the article I will comment on the results of research conducted in Poland in recent years, which testifies to the discrepancies between the theory and practice. I will also share the results of my own qualitative action research, in which I work to overcome the existing boundaries – the resistance of teachers and schools towards parents on the one hand, and a lack of involvement of parents on the other.

Keywords: teachers, parents, collaboration, trust, Poland.

The Value of Parental Involvement

Parental involvement in education receives much attention in research as well as in policy makers' debates. It shows that parental engagement in education significantly contributes to students' academic achievement and their social and emotional development. The potential benefits for students, parents and teachers are well documented (Lipman, 2013; Epstein, 2002; Jeynes, 2010). Students' learning outcomes, well-being, and social relations with peers and teachers, attitudes toward school and work performance appear to change when parents become involved in their children's schools.

The outcomes of fruitful collaboration of students, parents, teachers, and the community is emphasized in the literature. Epstein, Gonzales and Gutstein found out that family involvement is an important factor affecting students' achievements (Epstein, 2002; Gonzales, 1995; Gutstein, 1995). Epstein argues that "there is no topic in education on which there is greater agreement than the need for parent involvement."

(Epstein, 2002: 1). This standpoint has also been present in Polish educational research (Mendel, 2007).

Parents also gain from their involvement because while collaborating with teachers, they have the opportunity to understand teachers' perspectives on the process of education as well as give them feedback (Erickson & Christman, 1996). The already mentioned studies underline a good atmosphere at school, and the quality of teacher-parent interactions as important contributors to improved parental involvement in education, regardless of their social and economic status, their ethnicity and race.

While research shows that parent-teacher collaboration is beneficial, in many schools teachers and parents do not have the same expectations and understanding of each other's roles (Kochanek, 2005). Many studies have shown that there are numerous barriers to attaining collaboration between teachers and parents (Mendel, 2007; Nowak- Dziemianowicz, 2001; Smolińska-Theiss, 2015). Mendel stresses the fact that teachers do not trust parents' intentions of collaboration, they feel underestimated and discouraged by parents' questioning their professionalism or preparation for classes. In fact, the problem of teacher-parent interactions causes

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growing frustration of both parties involved due to the lack of understanding and dialogue (Chętkowski, 2010) or, as Polak suggests, a different system of values resulting in an ongoing conflict (Polak, 2103).

Notwithstanding research findings on cooperation, this area remains neglected in Polish schools (Sliwerski, 2006). There appears to be a gap between research-based knowledge and the ongoing praxis in schools.

As a teacher, I observe many discrepancies between the literature and reality in schools. In schools where I have worked, probably the most common opinion about parents would be the one summarized by Nakagawa who claims that a "good parent is involved, but not too much involved, who supports but does not *challenge*" (Nakagawa 2000, 456). Parents are perceived as *clients*, and teachers have learnt to make their clients satisfied instead of focusing on inspiring and motivating their students. Last but not least, students have become *numbers* in the tables of their school's achievements (Rusnak, 2017). This has led to considerable imbalance and a lack of rapport between schools and families/teachers and parents resulting in asymmetric relationships. The aim of this paper is to investigate their construction as a major obstacle to fruitful cooperation.

Theoretical framework

I build on the concept of radical democracy as presented by Chantal Mouffe and Jacques Rancière. This paper proposes that education based on the assumptions of radical democracy focuses on deconstructing the dominant social order and patterns of identity in order to counter the marginalization of excluded groups and empower them as citizens (Popow, 2012). Mouffe emphasizes the excluding manner of democracy. She elaborates on Schmidt's division between "us" and "them", between those who constitute *demos* and those who remain outside. She coins the term "adversaries" which unlike "enemies" does not imply fighting against each other, rather a struggle with the opinion of the other. At the same time, "adversaries" do not question each other's right to a different standpoint (Mouffe, 2000:13). She argues that such understanding of democracy has a potential to fight against domination/exclusion without antagonisms. According to Mouffe acting according to the principles of rational consensus it would be impossible to create a political identity, especially a collective identity.

At the same time, Mouffe does not deny possibilities of consensus, which she refers to as *conflictual consensus*; it is based on the sense of belonging to the same community shared by the principles of liberty and equality. According to her, radical democracy "demands that we acknowledge the difference." (Mouffe, 2013: 95).

A pluralist democracy for her is one in which there is constant struggle and re-negotiation of social identity. Therefore, the ongoing confrontation/ or struggle "should not be seen in a negative light but as a marker of the vibrancy and pluralism of democracy." (Mouffe, 2013: 95). Rancière's theory is based on division of socially ascribed roles, places and functions, between *the police* and *the politics*. He describes *police* as a rule "that establishes a distribution of the sensible or a law that divides the community into groups, social positions, and functions. [It] separates those who take part from those who are excluded, and it therefore presupposes a prior aesthetic division between the visible and the invisible, the audible and the inaudible, the sayable and the unsayable" (Rancière, 2007: 3).

On the other hand, *politics* is connected with the people "Those who have no name, who remain invisible and inaudible, can only penetrate the police order via a mode of subjectivization that transforms the aesthetic coordinates of the community by implementing the universal presupposition of *politics*: we are all equal" (Rancière, 2007: 3).

One of the possible ways to understand Rancière's concept is to think of *police* as an "all-inclusive order" where everything has its own place, task and individual identity (Biesta, 2012: 14). Biesta argues that it does not mean that everyone belongs to a particular place but rather that *police* ascribe places to everyone.

The concept of *police* is understood by Rancière as a rule that maintains the desired functioning of society. It is so effective subjects do not realize that they act in a way that was described to them. Therefore, they do not rebel against being "invisible and inaudible", hence the political moment cannot not occur. On the other hand, Rancière offers a standpoint that allows this interruption to appear (Rancière, 1999). The interruption of *police* by *politics* occurs when "the part without a part" becomes aware of its position and demands equality (Rancière, 1999: 30). According to Baiocchi and Connor "to study politics in this way means one should give up presuppositions of where politics occurs and

instead look for moments when this disturbance of the community provides opportunities for the 'part without a part' to gain entrance into the community of equals" (Baiocchi and Connor, 2013: 97). In this article I argue that trust is an indispensable factor in fruitful parent - teacher collaboration, only then may it result in an interruption of the existing social order.

Methodological remarks

The article reports on preliminary findings from a qualitative study in which I follow Phillip's and Carr's understanding of action research. They define it as "a process of learning, in community with others, to think and act critically, to recognize and negotiate political systems, and to focus passion growing in one's identity as a teacher." (Phillip and Carr, 2014:8) This paper is based on the findings of the action research, which I conducted between September 2016 and May 2017. For the purpose of this article, I draw on the analysis of parent-meeting observation notes, notes from conversations with teachers as well as my journal.

I conducted my research in an elementary school located in a large city in Poland. The school has long educational traditions, as it was established in the last century. It is located in a neighborhood until recently described as rather well-off, with impressive residences with swimming pools and tennis courts. In recent years, an influx of newcomers has resulted in the appearance of large numbers of block of flats. The newcomers have changed the social landscape of the area – it is of mixed income with differential family status. At the moment, the school serves students whose family members have lived in the area for many generations as well as those who have recently moved here from other parts of Poland, as well as from other parts of the world. The majority of immigrants are of Asian origin, or come from Ukraine.

This school is recognized as good on the basis of national test results that students take at the end of primary education. Teachers and principals are proud to have constant newcomers from other schools. There are many cases where students come back to this school after attending another one. The school encourages parental involvement in fund-raising, class trips, and other extra-classroom affairs. Every year there is a big charity event prepared together by parents and children. The whole community is invited to raise money for

children who cannot afford school lunches or participate in school trips.

I put forward the idea of a research project of parent - teacher cooperation during a parent - teacher meeting in September 2016. I emphasized that parental participation would be completely voluntary and during the dissemination of the findings I would make sure that no personal data would be revealed and all names would be anonymised. Parents signed a formal consent form regarding recording of the in-depth interviews, and gave oral permission to use all the artifacts produced in the research (such as posters, PPT presentations, questionnaires, pictures etc.).

Cooperation and underestimated trust

Applying a radical democracy framework into the concept of home-school cooperation does not deny the existence of social inequality, rather it emphasizes the opportunity for questioning the social order in schooling.

In considering trust as an important feature of the parent-school relationship, we assume that effective collaboration relies to a great extent on the willingness of citizens to cooperate. Furthermore, trust seems vital as it works for the benefit of children instead of focusing on the ongoing conflicts between parents, students and teachers and the differences between them (Bryk and Schneider, 2002). In their work, Bryk and Schneider identified conditions for trust: "relational trust requires that the expectations held among members of a social network or organization be regularly validated by actions" (2002: 21). These judgments of actions are based on each individual's history, personal experience with schools, as well as their own beliefs and observed behavior. Kochanek interpreted it as "a product of the everyday interactions that affect person-to-person relationship in schools" (Kochanek, 2005: 6), while Schulz and Luet suggested that "trust becomes particularly salient if there is a power imbalance in a relationship" (Schulz and Luet, 2017: 122).

Barriers to cooperation

The Polish educational system has not laid foundations for cooperation between home and school. After the success of Solidarity over the Communist regime in 1989, the educational sector became the playground for endless systemic reforms through which each successive government attempted to prove its powers of

modernization and improvement. This uncertainty regarding education has caused anxiety and lack of trust, disabling meaningful cooperation. Moreover, the dominant discourse concerning education since the transformation of the political system in 1989 has been strongly connected to an obsolete, bureaucratic vision based primarily on the strong distinction between those who are experts and the others who need to follow their footsteps in order to succeed (Starego, 2012).

There is a considerable amount of research proving that a new curriculum, new textbooks, new educational policies often do not result in changing schools. For instance, Spindler's research illustrated that in similar circumstances "not much had really changed" in a German school (Spindler and Spindler, 2000: 217). Each reform has only resulted in slight rearrangements in schools, teaching methods, or learning outcomes, producing an effect to which Polish educational scholars refer to as "mock change" (Dudzikowa, 2013; Śliwerski, 2014). An area that proved particularly resistant to change has been the teacher-parent cooperation, a failure that I – like Schultz and Leut – ascribe to as a profound lack of trust. "Distrust – and the failure to recognize and address it – significantly accounts for the failure of school reform. In situations where distrust, rather than trust, predominates, teachers and principals are reluctant to transform their educational practice" (Schultz & Leut, 2017: 128).

The Educational system still makes use of the division into "us" versus "them", those who know better and those who are dominated as objects of constant pedagogization, or even upbringing, to adjust them to the new socio-economic conditions (Starego, 2012). Such an approach concerns the parent-teacher relationships in which teachers act as those who know better just because they are obliged to act according to the school procedures and rules. On the other hand, teachers themselves are subjects of constant top-down educational efforts as well. They are trained by other teachers how to cooperate with parents in a "proper way" by organizing parent-teacher meetings and open-house rituals. There are numerous schools where such meetings are supervised by their principals.

The ongoing struggle between parents and teachers has resulted in various workshops organized for school employees. During my conversations with a teacher from an elementary school, she recalled the last workshop, which was organized in her school. She was disappointed with its quality:

The woman told us to follow a scheme in conversation with a parent. We must start a conversation by emphasizing a good thing about a child. X (the name of another teacher) asked what if a child misbehaves and beats other children, which is the reason why we meet with a parent. She (the person conducting this workshop) answered: "You can always tell a small lie. It does not hurt anyone, but it will help build a good relationship." Can you imagine it? It is ridiculous. We also heard that when we meet an angry parent, we should just show our empathy. But you know, we have parents who shout at us. According to her, we should just stand and smile. We can begin talking when a parent calms down. (BL-N- 2017-04-11)

Schools create regulations, laws, mechanisms of discipline and oppression in order to "control and limit choices of the dangerous and threatening strangers of society" (Lightfoot, 1982: 99). Home and school often appear as overlapping spheres in research accounts (see e.g. Epstein, 2002), but much of the tension between parents and teachers is caused by the lack of trust. It is further complicated by the fact that it is rarely articulated, but usually remains smoldering and silent. From my practice as a teacher, I claim that there are few opportunities for parents to speak out, and for both parties to engage in a meaningful dialogue. Conversations are usually held under the guise of polite conversation and mock cooperation leading to mutual misunderstanding (Lightfoot, 1981). Parents must be able to talk to teachers and perceive opportunities to influence the education and/or well-being of their children at school so that they are not strangers at schools and engage in the life of the school community.

Dom and Verhoeven have argued, that "in each school, there is a field for which parents can and may be responsible and a field that the school – teachers and school head – controls" (Dom and Verhoeven, 2006:14). Conflicts escalate when one of the parties tries to cross the line. Instead of working together, parents and teachers stress their own efforts, underestimating the effort of the other side, which leads to the division into "us" and "them", those whom we trust and those whom we do not trust, resulting in struggling with each other. Teachers in the school where I conducted research have experienced countless attempts on the part of parents to question the way they work with children. In the last couple of

years, teachers from the school where I conducted my research, were threatened with legal advisors, lawyers, TV reporters, some of their conversations were recorded without their knowledge and then used for blackmailing them into improving the student's grade.

Society creates the standards for being a good parent through the normalization process. Parents are often assessed by families, communities and also schools. Lightfoot emphasized that "teachers, psychiatrists, welfare workers, and priests all rob the family of its privacy and autonomy and make it overly dependent on "expert" wisdom (Lightfoot, 1981:98).

The lack of trust and rituals of mock collaboration

The rituals of everyday practices shape everyday school experience, which Lightfoot referred to as "territorial wars"(Lightfoot, 1981:98). Auerbach elaborates on that maintaining that the teacher-parent relations are caused by mock action discussed above, lack of meaningful dialogue which leads to further struggles and misperceptions (Auerbach, 2007). Dom and Verhoeven indicated that school-parent conflicts result from power relations. At the same time the authors maintain that the social order is not fixed once and for all and it can be changed. (Dom and Verhoeven, 2006).

In Poland, elementary education is divided into two stages. From the first to the third grade, students acquire reading and writing skills with one leading teacher. From the fourth grade onwards, the teaching process is divided into subjects taught by different teachers. The class is supervised by a 'leading teacher'.

In the school where I conducted my research, before a meeting with parents the principal prepares a list of announcements concerning social events, fund raising, recruitment for the next educational stage, and dates of school holidays to be presented to parents. It is a leading teacher's duty to present the list to parents. Such a list of announcements is believed to be a great help to teachers in conducting the meetings, which are always minuted by one of the parents. The meetings in the early education stage which I observed lasted approximately two and half hours. The teacher stood in front of the parents who were squeezed into children's seats. The teacher spoke slowly and quietly, as if she was speaking to her students. All the meetings were conducted in a similar manner: she spoke at length explaining

tests, school policies, etc., while some parents were checking mails and social media accounts on their mobiles, or even chatting among themselves. The teacher occasionally asked them yes/no questions. At the end of the meeting a few parents approached the teachers to ask about their children.

The meetings in the second stage of primary education differed considerably. Although the teachers received the same list of announcements from the principal, the meetings varied in length: the shortest lasted only ten minutes. Out of respect for parents' time (most came straight from work), some teachers prepared PowerPoint presentations, others had additional notes. However, the main goal was similar: to report on students' behavior and read out the principal's letter. During the meetings questions were very rare – parents, whose numbers decreased with every meeting, just sat and listened. However, reading out the list of announcements does not create space for a dialogue, nor does it facilitate trust building. Each key actor (the teacher and the parent) does basic actions that are expected of them, but their interaction is an instrumental social exchange – not enough for trust building. Bryk and Schneider suggested that trust is the fulfillment of the expectations of the others, simply reading out the list of announcements does not create a space for a dialogue, neither does it facilitate trust-building (Bryk and Schneider, 2002). Such cooperation can be characterized as being an instrumental social exchange. Each key actor (a teacher and a parent) does basic actions that are expected of them. But is that enough to lay the fundamentals for trust? Bryk and Scheider claim "trust is built by contact (...) by showing concern" (Bryk and Schneider, 2002: 38). Without meaningful, open communication, there are no opportunities for trust to appear. Its lack leads to the reproduction of existing power relations depicting teachers as wielding power and parents as challenging them and their position. Only when parents feel listened to and respected, does it invite reciprocity and thereby strengthens the relational ties between them and schools.

The teachers, however, are not the only ones to blame for the situation. In 1991, the act of the Polish Ministry of Education enabled the formation of Parental Bodies and School Boards. The act guarantees them a very narrow range of accepted forms of involvement, for instance organizing various sports events, discos, games for Children's Day etc. Although they can give their opinion

about curriculum, they do not have any real influence on its choice. In general, Parental Bodies have so little impact on school life that they are treated as a justification for not forming or even for dissolving them (Mencel, 2013).

My observations show that in schools parents do not have many opportunities to influence their children's education. They are invisible and inaudible; they play a role that Rancière summarized as "the part without a part" (Rancière, 1999:30). Their responsibility is limited to making sure that properly prepared children get to school on time. Parental involvement in schools is seen as unnecessary and potentially damaging interference in the efficient education of children.

One of the parents presented this situation eloquently:

I expected school to give me some guidelines on how to be a good, inspiring parent and I constantly heard that my son is a trouble maker. He is expected to behave like Ala (his fellow student). He is punished because he asks questions. Schools are only for girls. That's why I stopped attending parent-teacher meetings. (KW-F, 2017-05-08)

During my research, all the parents to whom I spoke admitted that their children's education strongly affected their identity as parents, thus confirming that people learn from their lives how to be a parent and how their parenthood affects their lives, society and children (Mendel, 2015). Being a parent is not an easy task and it is often compared to an extreme experience such as a "rollercoaster ride" (Weille, 2014:27).

From my research

In this section, I will share an example from my research in which trust comes forth as a fundamental issue that enables further cooperation.

The year I became a leading teacher in a fourth grade class of twenty students, one of them constantly misbehaved. Teachers complained about his inattention during classes and aggression during breaks. However, what worried me the most were his relationships with other students in the class. A few weeks into the school year, children – especially girls – started to complain about his swearing. They felt uneasy when he kept on reporting to them inappropriate scenes, which he had seen in films for adults. The situation was getting worse and worse, so I talked

to his father, who picks him up from school every day. That marked the beginning of my research concerning meaningful collaboration with parents.

I organized a meeting for parents, children and teachers and analyzed what children find disruptive in their learning. We worked towards a plan of action for two hours. At the end I asked for anonymous feedback. I asked: "Do you find such meetings valuable? Would you like to continue working in this manner?" All the answers were positive, some of them had emoticons, and others added thank you.

One day the boy, referred to above, showed me a photo which depicted him with red spots on his body. He started to cry and admitted that his mother had hurt him with scissors. The rest of the story was even more horrifying: it turned out that the mother was abusive and both the boy and his father suffered from this situation. The school psychologist called the father and invited him in for a conversation. The man admitted that his wife was a nervous person, and that she sometimes shouted at the son and him. The next day during a conversation with me he started to cry and admitted that he had been a victim of home abuse for 23 years. He confessed that his wife swore at him, together with his son they had to hide themselves in the car in their pyjamas in the middle of night. He mentioned that a few years ago he had been looking for legal help but nobody believed him.

Later I started to think what made that man tell me the story of the nightmare he and his son experienced. I realized that instead of reporting the boy's misbehavior, I looked for reasons and solutions and took the boy's side during parent-teacher meetings, when other children blamed him for everything that did not go well. The father decided to break the silence because he believed I meant well for his son, and because I called him from my private phone. Since teachers usually use the school phone parents find it more difficult to contact teachers because they are either teaching, supervising children during breaks, or are otherwise busy.

Since then, legal steps have been taken to resolve the situation: the parents started separate psychological therapies, and the police supervise their home according to a schedule. I do not claim that they are a happy family but merely suggest that due to frequent conversations we managed to build the culture of trust. As a matter of fact, the father and his wife a few months later became very engaged in a collaboration with teachers.

They organized various events for children from the class and their families. They are no longer obedient, passive listeners.

Conclusions

In his book on Jacques Rancière, Todd May claims: "Ours is an age of political passivity. Not everywhere, nor among everyone. We are not utterly passive. After all, many (although not most) of us vote. We hold political opinions. We have expectations of our government. But we do not engage in political *action*. We do not organize; we neither create nor engage in political collectivities. We partake in politics as we do in sports, as fans rather than participants." (May, 2008:1). In a similar vein, it can be concluded that parents have expectations towards educational systems and teachers expect parents to support their efforts to achieve educational goals. However, parents and teachers rarely engage in actions that result in mutual collaboration. Distrust plays the key role in shaping relationships in which people behave as spectators rather than participants. However, as Lightfoot reminds us, "the sad irony is that education for the majority of children will only be successful when there is trust, accountability, and responsibility shared between families, communities, and schools." (Lightfoot, 1981:100)

My participatory action research, carried out in the framework of Rancière's and Mouffe's theories, is inclusive of all parties present in the educational process, including teachers, students and parents. Therefore, I do not conduct my research on parents or children but I understand parents and children as co-subjects, participating in the activity, which is being researched. The first year of my research ensured me that a school community based on trust and, reciprocity must be guarded and nurtured (Eriksen, 2005) and then it has beneficial potential. As a matter of fact at the beginning of my work towards cooperation with parents, other teachers commented on my efforts as a "scientific whim". But recently I have heard that parents from other classes initiated meetings with teachers similar to the ones I started organizing a year ago.

While there are differences between Rancière's and Mouffe's perspectives, they share an

emphasis on disagreement as a constructive feature of a society. My research shows that teachers can struggle together with parents in order to avoid a situation identified in Rancière's work as "certain persons are in society without being of society" (Rancière, 1999: 116). I hold the opinion that trust building enables open communication, hence can enable subjects to disrupt the Rancièrian order of police and politics. Rancière describes it in the following way: "the uncounted could make themselves count by showing up the process of division and breaking in on others' equality and appropriating it for themselves" (Rancière, 1995: 116).

Only in such circumstances can a member of the school community work to make school a better place that what Biesta describes as "a metaphor for exploration practice, which is based on the basic premise of inequality, manifested, first, in each attempt to describe how society should look, secondly, in the learning model and third, when emancipatory processes adopts a controlled form" (Biesta, 2010: 153-154). Radical democracy can result in a revolution in schools. For many teachers and parents a revolution would be realizing that meaningful cooperation based on a meaningful dialogue and respect, is possible.

This paper outlines the necessity for teachers to take responsibility for creating structures and initiating processes that promote cooperation and dialogue and therefore trust, and thus engage parents in their children's education. My year-long research project was challenging as it was based on appreciating the difference as well as not imposing a consensus on everyone. Even the consensus we managed to achieve did not always last. However, it offered us new perspectives and foundations for the culture of trust. It needs to be acknowledged that as long as schools close their doors to parents, schools "will continue to function in an atmosphere of misunderstanding and failure" (Babicka-Wirkus & Rusnak, 2016: 94). Despite the power asymmetry in parent-teacher relations, it is the professionals' responsibility to initiate actions that would introduce trust.

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