Teachers and Parents – Partners with Different Expectations

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The purpose of the present study effected in 2007 was to explore the approaches to establishing cooperation between lead teachers and parents of third- and ninth-grade primary school students, and the quality of that cooperation. The study also sought to find differences and similarities in parent and teacher expectations within different areas of their cooperation. Data were obtained from a sample of 55 randomly selected primary schools from which 141 lead teachers of third and ninth grades and 810 parents of the students from those grades were included in the study. The study focused on the following areas of cooperation: school to home communications, parent influence on school decisions, and parent involvement in different school activities. The research indicated that the third- and ninth- grade lead teachers were mostly in agreement about the importance of parent involvement and as such represented a fairly homogenous group. The third-grade lead teachers were more open about actual involvement of parents in instruction than their ninth-grade colleagues who were more cautious and restrained. In contrast to the lead teachers that represented a relatively narrow professional group, parents' views were much more dispersed. Parent education was the best predictor of their readiness to get involved in the life and work of their children's school. This was especially the case with mothers who took part in formal school conferences more often than fathers. Whether the area in which the families lived was urban or suburban did not make any difference.

Keywords: lead teachers, parents, school to home communications, influence, involvement, cooperation, primary school

Introduction

Throughout the history of education, school and family collaboration has been recognized as an important part of schooling. The acknowledgement of the importance of school and family cooperation is understandable because school and home are two social institutions that are involved in the education of children and youth in the most complex way. Cooperation between family and school has always been under the influence of time, place and the demands of each era. In the last decade, the demands to increase parent involvement have been among the basic criteria for school reforms worldwide.

While other policy measures have been subject to considerable debate caused by disparity of opinion due to different philosophical, sociological, and political views, parent involvement has always received universal support. The reason for that is the knowledge that high quality cooperation between parents and school is closely connected with and can contribute to the achievement of educational goals (Sheldon & Epstein 2002).

When Slovene school distanced itself from totalitarian ideological concepts, a new mindset was established that education was predominantly parents' right.

In educational literature (Resman 1992; Štefanc 2004) a discourse developed that aimed at defining the family- school relations through a concept of partnership. Many authors have claimed that the partnership between teachers and parents is possible.

Epstein and Sanders (1998) suggested that the partnership depended on the kind of programs that the schools developed for parent involvement. Their research confirmed that the schools that created excellent partnership programmes could involve parents of all backgrounds productively as partners in the process of their children's education, regardless of their socioeconomic status, location of their home or family size.

On the other hand, a considerable number of authors have expressed their doubts whether such partnerships are possible. Researchers, sociologists in particular that deal with defining power relationships, are reluctant to understand partnership in such a way. Vincent and Tomlinson (1996) claim that this is due to thick symbolism used to establish political ideology. They define partnership as a group of mutually supportive members of equal rank participating in a dialogue.

Other authors (Heywood-Everett 1999; Marinšek 2006) came to similar conclusions with regard to the role of parents.

However, although some authors consider school, family, and community partnerships an illusion, family and community involvement in education has become essential for successful living together. This issue is related to the nature of successful communities and the nature of human achievement in general. The purpose of education is to enable young people to become functional and competent members of society capable of participating in research and discussion independently and without being subordinate to teacher authority. To achieve this goal, students need to develop appropriate capacities, and the same is true of their parents. It goes without saying that the ideas related to the question of culture have to be implemented in the spirit of respect for plurality. Consequently, schools and teachers need to pay more attention to the development of a culture of living together.

In the last twenty years, a number of studies have dealt with a question of whether and how family involvement influences student success in school. Their findings suggest that family involvement contributes to improved student achievement, school attendance, and increased responsibility for school work on the part of the students (Catsambis & Beveridge 2001; Sheldon & Epstein 2002; Simon 2004; Epstein & Rodriguez Jansorn 2004).

The implications of these findings for schools are that if they want to develop partnership with parents and thus improve student success, they need to initiate a new way of thinking about the role of family and community involvement. Schools need to plan effective partnership programmes to connect family and school in the activities that influence student success and growth in an encouraging way.

In Slovenia we have evaluated and changed certain elements of education system in the last decade, however, we do not have sufficient empirical evidence to make claims about the problems related to family and school cooperation. Although cooperation between family and school is partly required by law, the quality of partnership between these two institutions remains questionable. This is especially important now that the new social trends and changes going on in the country have placed both institutions in front of new challenges. If we want to determine the level of quality of school and family partnership, we need to define the criteria for quality appraisal by taking into account a sensitive combination of different factors. Total quality consists of objective and subjective qualities (Snoj & Mumel 2001, p. 123). The former is based on certain standards, and the latter depends on the customer's subjective perception of the quality of service.

Because the quality of cooperation is always a subjectively expressed individual perception, determining the level of quality is extremely difficult and demanding. The quality of school and family cooperation is not simply reflected in objective reality but is also an expression of feelings. The feelings of teachers and parents reflect emotional relationship between them and their construction of reality. The quality of their cooperation is therefore determined by the presence of mutual agreement and how much it is harmonized. School's planning of guidelines for family and school cooperation is usually based on the assumption of a shared value system.

However, if common values are not "internalized", which means that parents and teachers do not consider them part of their value system, the foundation for initial harmony is missing (Bučar, 2003). Without common agreement, it is virtually impossible to direct a system. The system lacking initial common agreement is always in crisis; it lacks the agreement about a desirable state that would make cooperation meaningful.

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Purpose and goals of the study

The purpose of our study was to explore the approaches to establishing cooperation between lead teachers and parents of third- and ninth-grade primary students, and the quality of that cooperation. The study also sought to find differences and similarities in parent and teacher expectations within different areas of their cooperation. The main areas of cooperation that we studied were school to home communications, parent influence on school decisions, and parent involvement in different school activities.

We set the following goals:

• to estimate the degree to which the expected cooperation and actual cooperation were in agreement between groups of parents and teachers of the third- and ninth-grade primary students;

• to identify the differences in feelings and actions related to the cooperation of teachers and parents of the third- and ninth-grade primary students;

• to enquire into the interconnectedness of latent dimensions of parent cooperation with school such as their sex, education, participation in formal school events, and location of their home.

We assumed that the evidence from this study would confirm the following hypotheses:

H1 - The degree of agreement between teachers and parents of the third-grade primary students is higher in expected than in actual cooperation.

H2 - The degree of agreement between teachers and parents of the ninth-grade primary students is higher in expected than in actual cooperation.

H3 - Differences in feelings and actions exist between parents and teachers in relation to their cooperation.

H4 - Sex and education of parents, their participation in formal school events, and location of their home all influence the quality of parent cooperation with school.

Methods

The survey for this study was conducted at the beginning of 2007. We surveyed the parents of the students that were enrolled in the third and ninth grades of primary school in the academic year of 2006/2007, and included the parent that was more actively involved in the cooperation with school. We also included the lead teachers of the third and ninth grades of primary schools with regular program in the academic year of 2006/2007.

Two separate questionnaires were used for the collection of survey data, one for the parents and one for the lead teachers. The questionnaires were designed so that the statements in basic sets were the same for parents and lead teachers. When designing the questionnaires, we partly used the existing instruments of different authors (Crozier 2000; Medveš et al. 2001; Sheldon & Epstein 2002). The questionnaires included all the key areas of our research – school to home communications, influence, and involvement – and also questions about parent and teacher feelings related to their cooperation.

Sampling was conducted in two steps. Firstly, we randomly selected 55 schools from the total of 793 public primary schools, i.e., from all the public schools in Slovenia that had a regular primary program in 2006/2007. All the lead teachers of the third and ninth grades in the selected schools were then included in the survey, i.e., 78 lead teachers of the third grades, and 63 lead teachers of the ninth grades, or 141 lead teachers all together. Secondly, we randomly selected 810 students of the 3rd and 9th grades out of the total population of 2,436 students of the 3rd and 9th grades in the selected 55 primary schools. With the above sample of students, we got a sample of parents (we selected the parents of the 810 students in the sample). Due to the described selection procedure of parents, it may be possible that one and the same parent was included in the sample more than once.

Nevertheless, this possibility is so small that it can be neglected. The sample of parents thus included 399 parents of 3rd grade students, and 411 parents of 9th grade students, i.e., 810 parents in total.

368 questionnaires were returned from the parents of the 3rd and 9th grades (170 from the parents of the 3rd graders, and 198 from the parents of the 9th graders), and 134 questionnaires were returned from the lead teachers (75 from the 3rd grade lead teachers, and 59 from the 9th grade lead teachers). The survey return rate was thus 45.5 percent from parents, and 95.0 percent from lead teachers.

Among the parents that participated in the survey, 17.3 percent were male and 82.7 percent were female. 56.5 percent of parents from the sample were from rural areas, and 43.5 percent were from urban areas. The highest percentage of parents that participated in the survey, i.e., 37.3 percent, had a high school diploma, 19.9 percent finished vocational school, and 30.5 percent of parents in the sample completed higher or university education. The remaining 10 percent of parents in the sample finished primary school or did not complete primary education. Among the participating parents, 49 percent were the parents of boys, and 51 percent were the parents of girls. Among the participating lead teachers, 75 percent were acting as lead teachers to the same generation of students for more than one year. Among the lead teachers in the sample, 9.8 percent were male and 90.2 percent were female.

The survey was conducted in such a way that we visited each school in the sample, and distributed the questionnaires for the lead teachers and for the parents together with instructions and a list of selected students to the 3rd and 9th grade lead teachers from the sample. The lead teachers distributed the questionnaires for the parents to the students from the sample who then took them home to their parents. The lead teachers filled in the questionnaires during our visit and returned them personally to the visitors. For the lead teachers that were absent or for those that taught in dislocated units as well as for the parents of the students, a self-addressed stamped envelope was distributed together with the questionnaire.

Initially, basic descriptive statistics were calculated for all the variables used in the study using the standard procedures. Next we compared the answers of both groups of teachers and both groups of parents, as well as those of parents and teachers. Chi-square and t-test were used for determining the statistical significance of the differences. For basic sets of variables the data structure was checked by means of the principal component method and factor analysis (maximum likelihood estimation and principal axis factoring). The number of dimensions was determined on the basis of a graphical representation of the eigenvalues by means of "scree plot". The effects of independent variables were ascertained by means of regression analysis. To make the data more transparent, variables were transformed in a 0 to 1 scale.

Results

Agreement Among Groups of Parents and Lead Teachers

Parents and lead teachers of third- and ninth-grade primary students agreed that cooperation was beneficial for their children / students. They both considered that it was important for the students to gain good education in school. Parents did not perceive cooperation with school as a burden.

They both agreed that school to home communications were the key to good cooperation (Table 1). Individual indicators used to measure that area showed that parents and third grade lead teachers rated highly especially the importance of mutual communication and conversation about their children's progress in school, their reaching or not reaching the expected outcomes, and problems they may have in school. Parents differed in their claims about the information they received regarding the areas in which their children were either meeting or exceeding the expectations. The parents of third-grade students differed from the parents of ninth-grade students in their views of the importance of receiving information about their rights, and about changes in school work planned by school. The parents of younger children provided higher rates in all their responses in the positive direction.

Both groups of parents and lead teachers agreed that school to home communications were appropriate. Greater discrepancies occurred in their responses with regard to the form of communication, such as the school's web page, brochures, e-mail, and lead teacher's home visit.

They considered e-mail, regular mail and especially phone calls as appropriate, but rated lead teachers' home visits much lower. The ninth-grade parents and lead teachers considered parent-teacher conferences as the most suitable form of communication. They both rated parent meetings highly. There were discrepancies in the ninth-grade parents' and lead teachers' responses with regard to most of the forms of communication, but not significant. It was interesting that both the ninth-grade parents and lead teachers considered home visits as a less suitable form of communication, the parents even more than the teachers.

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Table 1: Comparison of Expected Importance and Actual Situation

Population	Expected Importance			Actual Situation		
	School-home communications	Influence	Involvement	School-home communications	Influence	Involvement
Parents (3rd grade)	0.858	0.636	0.507	0.693	0.393	0.405
Lead teachers (3rd grade)	0.873	0.626	0.652	0.920	0.584	0.772
Parents (9th grade)	0.827	0.653	0.489	0.687	0.340	0.337
Lead teachers (9th grade)	0.870	0.658	0.596	0.923	0.646	0.661

There were also discrepancies between the third- and ninth-grade parents and lead teachers in their actual perceptions of school to home communication (Table 1). The discrepancies are statistically significant in most of individual indicators used for measuring the actual degree of communication. The third-grade teachers were much more optimistic about the provision of information to parents regarding the areas in which their children were either meeting or exceeding the expectations. The same applied to the school rules and regulations that the parents needed to be acquainted with. There was a great discrepancy between both groups in actual provision of information to the parents about the possibilities of exercising their own and their children's rights. The third-grade parents were much more critical in comparison to the third-grade lead teachers. 36% of the parents claimed that they never received any information on the subject. The third-grade parents expressed similar criticism with regard to the planned changes of school work and their involvement in school activities. Statistically significant discrepancies occurred in how the ninth-grade lead teachers and parents perceived the actual communication in almost all the indicators. The parents were again much more critical than the lead teachers. The majority of the parents claimed that the lead teachers did not provide them with key information about their children's success in school.

A relatively high level of agreement occurred with regard to the importance that the third- and ninth-grade parents and lead teachers assigned to parent influence on school work (Table 1). Both groups rated highly the statements about the importance of discussing the decisions that influence student success in school, taking into consideration parent opinion in broadening the programmes, selecting additional and above standard services, and defining the rules of student conduct in school. The third- and ninth-grade lead teachers were in agreement that parents could influence the rules of student conduct in school and classroom, as well as the choice of textbooks and other instructional materials.

Although both groups were fairly in agreement about parent influence on school work, the actual situation was quite different. The lead teachers maintained that parents actually influenced the work of school. 95% of the third-grade lead-teachers and 94% of the ninth-grade lead teachers agreed that they always consulted parents about the decisions that influenced student success in school. The only statistically significant difference occurred in the statement about the school's consideration of parent opinion about the broadening of the programmes; the third-grade lead teachers rated it much lower. Although the third-grade lead teachers maintained that parents could always express their opinion, the majority of parents did not agree with them. The statements about parent influence on the rules of student conduct in school and classroom also revealed an interesting situation. More than 45% of the lead teachers in our study claimed that parents could not exert any influence. 60% of the parents of both grades agreed with that claim, and 23% said that they did not know. The parents were therefore not only critical, but also not informed.

The ninth-grade lead teachers and parents also significantly differed in their opinion in most of the indicators that define the possibility of their influence on school work. The opinions of both groups were rather polarized, with the parents being much more critical. Greater discrepancy occurred in the statement that the school asks

parents for their opinion with regard to the activities for which they have to contribute financially. 62% of the parents stated that they could not influence the selection of additional and above standard school services, and 59% of the parents stated that they had no influence on defining the rules of student conduct. It is interesting that 36% of the lead teachers agreed with them.

Figure 1: Comparison of Expected Importance and Actual Situation
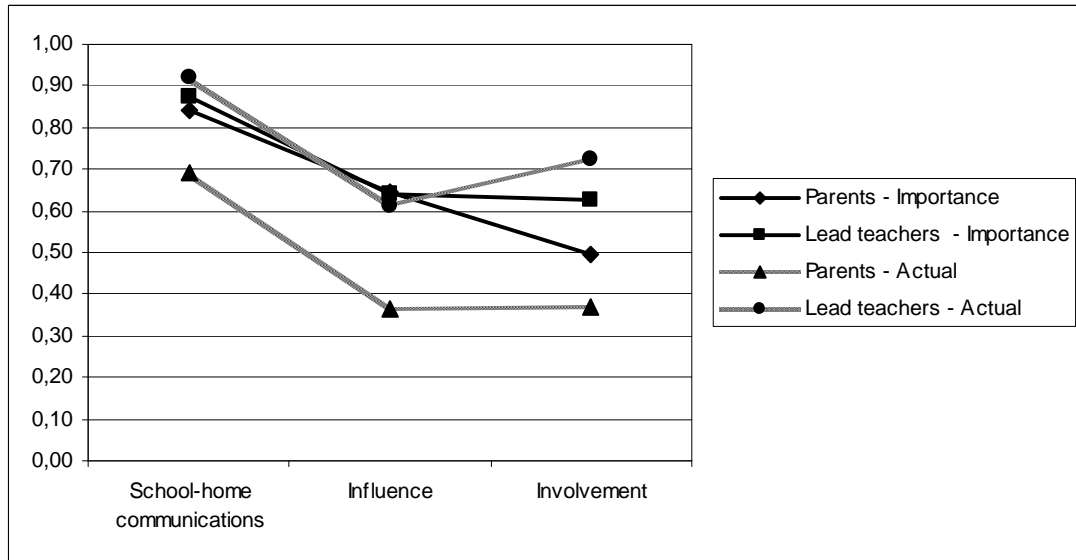
Parents and teachers of third- and ninth-grade students considered parent involvement in school work important, and they both verbally supported it. 76% of the third-grade lead teachers stressed that parents could observe instruction, and only 50% of the ninth-grade lead teachers expressed the same opinion. Both groups agreed that parent involvement in various school activities was important. They also considered that it was important that the school invited parents to various formal or informal meetings.

In spite of the general support to parent involvement in various school activities, 80% of the parents of third graders in our study had never visited classrooms to observe their children at work, and the situation was similar with the ninth-grade parents. There were significant differences between the two groups of parents in their involvement in their children's extracurricular activities, with the parents of younger students being more involved. 62% of the ninth-grade parents, for example, had never participated in their children's extracurricular activities, more than 80% had never taken part in an excursion, and 94% of the third-grade parents and 95% of the ninth-grade parents had never been on a field trip with their children or participated in an after school activity.

The actual situation regarding parent involvement shows that more than 50% of parents from both groups cannot observe or assist teachers in the classroom, and more than 30% of parents from both groups do not know if they are allowed to be involved. The statement that parents can be involved in various school activities is barely statistically significant. The percentage is higher for the third-grade parents, but almost 50% of the ninth-grade parents stated that they did not have that opportunity. Nevertheless, the parents were invited to attend formal and informal meetings organized by the school. The data about parents' willingness to be involved in and contribute to the school work is interesting. Especially the ninth-grade parents rated moderately high their readiness to participate in the School Councils. Both groups of parents expressed their readiness to be involved in school projects.

Difference Between Feelings and Actions Regarding Lead Teacher and Parent Cooperation

With regard to parent teacher communication we were interested in whether it was relaxed and without embarrassment on either side, if they listened to each other, trusted each other and were honest with each other, or to the contrary, if

they were scared, overly critical or maybe even offensive. The third- and ninth-grade lead teachers were quite a homogenous group in their claims – there was no statistically significant difference in their statements. They both perceived their relationship with parents as relaxed. They trusted their students' parents and were honest with them; they were not scared or embarrassed when they communicated with them. Similar feelings prevailed whether a lead teacher communicated with one parent or was in a meeting with all the parents. In the latter case, the third-grade lead teachers felt a little more embarrassed.

The third- and ninth-grade parents also claimed that they were relaxed in their communication with lead teachers and that they could trust them and be honest with them. They

were not scared or embarrassed. They also maintained that the lead teachers with whom they communicated were doing a decent job, that they did not criticize parents and their students, and that they listened to them and treated them as their equals.

There was more discrepancy between the third-grade parents and lead teachers in what they said about their communication than between the ninth-grade parents and lead teachers (Table 2). There were statistical differences in almost all their statements except in the statement about being scared when communicating with each other. It is obvious that the third-grade lead teachers are less relaxed in their communication with their children's parents. Although they trust parents more than parents trust them, they feel greater embarrassment.

Table 2: Differences in Feelings and Action Regarding Teacher and Parent Cooperation

Grade	Parents	Lead teachers
3rd Grade	4.50	4.21
9th Grade	4.44	4.25
Average	4.47	4.23

There were only two statistically significant differences in the statements provided by the ninth-grade parents and teachers. The lead teachers were more embarrassed and scared and trusted parents less than parents trusted them when they communicated with each other.

The Influence of Independent Circumstances on Assigning the Importance to School to Home Cooperation

Common variables determining the quality of school to home cooperation, especially in primary school, are sex of the parent, parent education, frequency of parent attendance of formal school events, and location of their home. Each of these variables without a doubt contributes to the quality of parent cooperation with lead teacher and with school. Taking into account the structure

of the approaches to parent cooperation with school and the quality of that cooperation that we had determined, we used regression analysis to investigate the effect of parent sex, education, attendance of formal school events, and the location of their home on their expectations for their cooperation with school, therefore the effect of these variables on the importance of school to home communication, parent influence on school work, and inclusion of parents in school activities.

The results show a connection between the approaches to parent and school cooperation and some of the independent variables (Table 3). In the table, regression coefficients of the correlation (Beta) are presented, and the statistical significance of the effect (sig.).

Table 3: The Influence of sex, education, and location – regression analysis (parents)

Independent variables	Dependent variables		
	School-home communications (sig.)	Influence (sig.)	Involvement (sig.)
Sex	0.077 (0.153)	0.048 (0.398)	0.128 (0.018)
Education	0.016 (0.767)	0.160 (0.005)	0.149 (0.006)
Parent attendance	0.129 (0.017)	0.054 (0.338)	0.143 (0.008)
Location	0.066 (0.224)	0.041 (0.471)	-0.062 (0.251)

In the area of school to home communications the regression model fits the data well although only 2% of the variability of dependent variable can be explained. Only parent attendance of formal school events has a statistically significant effect on the importance of school to home communication, meaning that the parents who more often attend formal school events (Beta = 0.129) rate the importance of home to school communications higher.

The regression model also fits the data well in the area of influence, but similarly to school to home communications, only 2.4% of the variability of dependent variable can be explained. In the case of influence, only parent education has a statistically significant influence on the importance of parent influence on school work, meaning that parents with higher education (Beta = 0.160) attribute more importance to parent influence on school work.

In the area of parent involvement in school work, 5% of the variability of dependent variable can be explained using the regression model. All independent variables have a statistically significant influence on the importance of parent involvement except for "location". Parent involvement in school work is rated higher by mothers (Beta = 0.128), parents with higher education (Beta = 0.149), and parents who more often attend formal school events (Beta = 0.143).

Discussion

The comparison of the third-grade parents' and lead teachers' opinion about the importance of school and family cooperation indicates that they are generally in agreement, although the parents are a more critical group. The situation is similar with the ninth-grade parents and lead teachers. They generally support the importance of cooperation between family and school, but when rating concrete activities parents are much more critical (Figure 1).

Why do teachers and parents represent two different worlds? How can differences in their views of the process of cooperation be explained? Why do they both agree that cooperation is important, but in practice their views differ? There are a number of reasons for that, with wider social reasons and arguments being the most decisive. Sociologists define social reality as a theoretical construct of social roles (Nipkow 1978). They maintain that society consists of a network of social positions that are based on a number of relatively well-defined tasks related to these positions, like, e.g., to educate, to bring up, to evaluate, to take care of, etc. Those who carry these positions are faced with demands, expectations, advice, and assumptions from their most immediate environment that more or less define the ways how they consider the performance of their tasks, and how they feel obliged to perform them. The expectations about the actions of the social position carriers are formed based on the assumption that it is not unimportant how their co-workers react to them.

The social position carriers' social actions are therefore directed and initiated in advance by their interaction partners. Social roles affect certain social interactions, for example parents as carriers of certain social roles are faced with teachers' social control of their children that are sanctioned from the position of power and legal aspects. Because the expectations and actions of different groups are rarely identical, social conflicts are inevitable.

As a professional group, teachers perform their work routinely within a defined framework, and cooperation with parents is part of their work. They are a rather homogenous group in their claim that their cooperation with parents is as it should be. They have good opinion about themselves and their work. As a relatively well-educated and professionally homogenous group, teachers have not been exposed to numerous risks like other professional groups. For example,

in case of teachers a risk that they may lose their job is lower, and it is harder to measure the effectiveness of their work. Consequently, they have not developed an awareness of the public character of their work that includes also their cooperation with parents. That is why they view this cooperation predominantly as an obligation that has to be performed, rather than as a partnership that needs to be developed for the sake of better quality of education that they provide for their students.

In contrast to teachers' views that are rather homogenous, parents' views are much more scattered. Parents are from different social groups, have different experience and expectations, and the success of their children in school varies. This is especially true of ninth-grade parents because ninth-grade-students' grades in certain subjects strongly determine the possibility of their enrolment in a high school of their choice, thus limiting their acquisition of good education and determines their future career path.

Most parents have a responsible attitude toward school. They understand that primary school education is a foundation for their child's professional and educational path. That is why they are interested in their children's school work, and prepared to take time to assist their children with learning activities at home. Because they consider cooperation with school important, they have high expectations and are highly critical of school to home communications. Parent involvement in education is starting to gain importance in Slovenia, too (Rener 2000, p. 109). In our survey we included a parent that was more involved in their child's school work, and we found that especially mothers played a key role in providing support to their children (83% of surveyed parents were mothers). They were also the ones who expressed the need for better cooperation with their children's school.

Our findings suggest that parents' interest in their child's school success and development is the basis for their cooperation with school. Other authors have come to similar conclusions (Resman 1992; Jowett et al. 1991). Because ninth-grade parents are especially interested in their children's school work, they are more critical of school to home communications, stating that schools do not inform parents well enough. The schools in our study used parent meetings (to supply information about the whole grade development to a group of parents) as the most typical form of school to home communication, followed by parent-teacher conferences (to supply information about an individual student to the parent). Other countries, like, e.g., Denmark, France, Germany, and Spain show their preference for the same forms of communication (OECD, 1997). Parents obviously value individual and less-formal conversations with their child's lead teacher.

Although parent-teacher conferences are a formal meeting, they offer an opportunity for informal parent conversation with their child's lead teacher about everything related to their child's school life (Resman 1992; Wolfendale 1989; Marinšek 2003). Other forms of communication used in schools are various written instructions, e-mail notes, and phone calls. Although teachers and parents support teacher home visits as a rule, neither are really enthusiastic about them, with the parents and teachers of younger children being a bit more open to this form of school to home communication. The situation is similar in other countries (Kelley-Laine 1998).

Frequent communication between lead teachers and parents is the key to the development of a trustful and responsible relationship between them. Sending messages and memos to parents from school is not enough. A teacher's visit at home is an opportunity for the development of a closer relationship, and for discussing children's progress at school in a more relaxed and informal way. However, teachers seem to have difficulties going beyond the traditional school framework, and parents still have negative feelings from the times of their own schooling, that is why they both feel reluctant about teachers' visits at home. Although teachers do occasionally visit a family, there is still a lot of unused potential here. Lead teachers' visits at home as a more frequent form of communication could contribute to the development of honest communication between teachers and parents about their children and their school work.

The situation is similar with regard to parent involvement at the school. Parents' presence in the classroom is in itself somewhat controversial. There are arguments in favour of their presence, and there are others that are against it. Parents' presence in the classroom can take many forms. They can, for example, make a presentation to the class and thus make the instruction more interesting, they can assist an overworked teacher or recognize opportunities or embarrassing situations in the classroom. Their presence is also an opportunity for them to familiarize themselves with teachers' approaches to instruction, and to monitor their child's development (Resman 1992; Vincent & Tomlinson 1996). But teachers often

perceive the presence of their students' parents as an additional pressure, increased responsibility, and more time for planning their instruction.

They often doubt that parents have good intentions when they decide to be present during the instruction, and have general doubts about the presence of non-professionals in their classroom (Resman 1992; Mayall 1990; Atkin et al. 1998). Teachers maintain that teaching is an autonomous profession, and the majority of them are not enthusiastic about having parents in the classroom. They remain doubtful in spite of research findings that have confirmed the beneficial effects of parents' assistance to teachers in the classroom on both, teachers and students, which is especially true for younger students (OECD 1997).

This problem should not be underestimated. Individual success in today's knowledge society depends on the capacity for life-long learning and adaptability to change. New social conditions require the development of social skills that enable fast adaptability to change, and consequently require from schools and teachers to go beyond their traditional framework and open up to the community so as to establish productive collaboration with its environment. It would therefore be advisable for schools and teachers to increase parent involvement and occasionally welcome parent assistance in the classroom because parents could add new and interesting perspectives to the topics covered in instruction. Many parents would probably be more than willing to work with teachers to improve instruction and connect it with real life, and would thus contribute to the development of a better classroom climate. However, this form of parent involvement does not seem to be taking hold in schools. It seems as if teachers consciously safeguard their position and hold parents at a safe distance from school by not including them in a "critical" education group (Vincent & Tomlinson 1996; Vidmar 2001).

Teachers are obviously not enthusiastic about involving parents in instruction and that is why they generally avoid inviting them into the classroom. They do allow them to participate in less important activities, though, such as different administrative technical chores, and adult supervision in field trips (Mayall 1990). Other researchers provide similar findings. Heywood-Everett (1999), for example, has found that teachers invite parents to be involved as partners in the activities that have no influence on school's effectiveness or its educational process. Their findings remind us of Apple's (2007) picturesque

description of the function of balconies in carnivals in Europe a hundred years ago.

According to his description, the representatives of higher social class "took part" in carnivals from a safe distance of their balconies, observing their sounds and smells. The balcony was a creative solution that protected them from noisy mass of common people and from losing control. Commenting on the activities from the safety of their balconies increased their excitement and a feeling that they were connected with the people in the street. An individual could thus be inside and outside at the same time, almost a participant, but predominantly an observer (Stallybrass & White 1986). Apple's (2007) vivid description provides a good analogy to the detachment of intellectuals that take the position of observers, analyzing the positions of others. Similar attitude is characteristic for home to school communications on the part of teachers in relation to parents.

Parent's influence on school work could be explained in a similar way. Although parents are invited to express their opinion about school work, they do not have any real influence on the development of school programs and policies. Let us consider the role of parents in co-creating "schools' educational plans" required by the legislation. In creating these plans parents are expected to be involved in conversations about school's values, what is important and why, and how to realize common goals for their children's life and work in school. However, especially the parents of older children in our study stated that they were not given the opportunity to be involved in the process of developing the guidelines for their children's life and work in school. Obviously teachers and schools are formally open to new concepts, but they hesitate to include parents in their operationalization.

The situation is similar in the area of parent involvement in school governing bodies. Although especially the ninth-grade parents rated their readiness to participate in School Councils moderately high, those that become involved usually remain silent at the meetings because of their fear that they lack professional knowledge for valuable contribution (Cullingford 1985; Deem et al. 1995). In addition, members of the School Council often perceive themselves as an integral part of the decision-making body, rather than as the representatives of certain interest groups. This is especially true of the parents (Deem et al. 1995).

The School Council is often involved in promoting general school interests defined by the principal (Radnor & Ball 1996). A closer look at how Parent and School Councils are formed reveals that those parents that support the school and teachers are often identified as the potential School Council members, and are then persuaded to accept their membership (Deem et al. 1995). We can probably conclude that the same is true for Slovenia. It is certainly true that our School Councils rarely discuss topics related to the process of learning and teaching.

Over the years, teachers' cooperation with parents has increased, and parents have been regularly taking part in formal meetings organized by schools. Schools actively support and announce the importance of parent involvement and participation. However, it seems that teachers are not overly enthusiastic about putting their claims into practice. They perceive parent involvement as an attempt to establish collaboration between professionals and non-professionals (Resman 1992; Vincent & Tomlinson 1996). While they formally support parent involvement, they also provide a number of arguments for keeping parents in a subordinate position.

For bigger changes to take hold in schools, the whole school needs to take the responsibility. To achieve that, the principal's leadership is the key. Individual teachers alone cannot start more profound changes in school without the support of the whole organization. We live in the times when continuous efforts are invested in the improvement of quality in every organization. Complex change has become unavoidable also in the field of education. Although education represented a relatively closed system until recently, with no danger for individual schools to be shut down, a competitive spirit has entered the field of education as well, which is partly due to a drop in student population, and partly to a broader supply of educational programmes. School administrators and teachers have to start perceiving change as an on-going process, and internalize the need for on-going change or nothing will really change in schools. True development can occur only within each individual school.

When those who are expected to implement change have the opportunity to experiment with it and evaluate it, they are more willing to change their own practice. By working their way through the problems of instructional practice, teachers can identify problems as their own, and develop new capacities for tackling with them. In this way an on-going process of development is established. Teachers' work becomes more transparent and recognizable, which has a positive influence on their self-esteem. Because they own the change, they take responsibility for its implementation. Experiencing success they are willing to open up and share their knowledge with their colleagues from other schools (Darling-Hammond 1992).

Our findings suggest that the third- and ninth-grade lead teachers feel a bit uneasy in their communication with parents. They are both tense and more or less embarrassed in the presence of parents. This is the case especially in more formal meetings. Teachers' uneasiness is probably caused particularly by parents' questions about their children's grades, and also by their own feelings of helplessness because of the limitations imposed on them by the school system. While Pušnik et al. (2000) confirmed that lead teachers had problems in their communication with parents, Resman (1992) found that less formal relationships between parents and teachers were important for establishing mutual trust that was necessary for honest conversations between them for the benefit of children.

Because the parents in our study who more often took part in formal school meetings rated the importance of school to home communications higher, it is obvious that the traditional, more formal meetings, like, e.g., parent meetings and parent-teacher conferences, are still the predominant form of communication. These formal meetings seem to provide the best opportunities for parents to find out about their children's success in school, and about the expected changes in education.

It is interesting that the third-grade parents and teachers are a much less homogenous group in how they perceive their cooperation than the ninth-grade parents and teachers. There is a discrepancy in almost all their statements. We would expect more uneasiness in the communication between the ninth-grade parents and teachers since the ninth-grade students' final grades have such a profound effect on their future career path. Grade report is among the key criteria that determines the selection of high school. Among the reasons for greater discrepancy in the third-grade parents' and lead teachers' feelings are probably differences in the grading systems used in the third and in the ninth grades. In the third grade, teachers use narrative grading, and in the ninth grade, teachers use numeric grades. Parents and teachers do not have the

experience of narrative grading from their own schooling, and consequently have more difficulties understanding their children's achievement described by narrative grades, while the numeric grades that were used while they were at school do not present such a problem.

The findings of a recent evaluation study (Razdevšek-Pučko et al. 2007) have suggested the same problem, with only half of the parents in the study agreeing that narrative grading is more appropriate in the third grade than numeric grading. The lead teachers in the same study (Razdevšek-Pučko et al. 2007, p. 92) expressed their uneasiness stating that the feedback provided by narrative grading is imprecise, and that parents do not understand this type of grading.

It is not surprising that parents with higher education are more aware of the importance of good education for their children, and that they consequently consider parent influence on school work and life important. They indicate this view by being more interested in how their children spend their time in school, by actively seeking cooperation with school, asking questions and giving suggestions. We can safely assume that the parents, usually mothers, who are most frequently in touch with school, have better communication skills. Our finding that mothers are more involved in their children's education has been confirmed by other researchers (McNamara et al. 2000). This phenomenon has not received enough attention.

Whether parents live in suburban or urban environment does not bear any significance. This is not surprising, although it is important to take the establishment of cultural and evaluative relativism characteristic of our times into account when analyzing social phenomena, and home location is no exception. Some authors (Gordon 1985) do not consider individual social economic status when analysing the communication between teachers and parents, but rather include the quality of relationships stating that it does not depend on where people come from. Parents consider their involvement and participation in their children's school activities important, regardless of the environment in which they live. They all rate the importance of their children's education highly.

Conclusion

The purpose of our study was to explore the approaches to establishing cooperation between lead teachers and parents of third- and ninth-grade primary school students, and the quality of that cooperation. The study also sought to find differences and similarities in parent and teacher expectations within different areas of their cooperation. The study focused on school to home communications, parent influence on school decisions, and parent involvement in different school activities.

Our findings indicate that the third- and ninth-grade teachers in our study represent a fairly homogenous group, and that their statements about the importance of the cooperation between school and home are mostly in agreement. The third-grade lead teachers are more open about actual involvement of parents in instruction than their ninth-grade colleagues who are more cautious and restrained. Both groups expressed similar opinion about the importance of parent cooperation in various school activities. The outcomes were similar for lead teachers and parents of both groups. They showed a high degree of agreement in their support to cooperation between teachers and parents. However, parents were a much more critical group in their perception of actual situation than lead teachers.

In contrast to the lead teachers that represented a fairly narrow professional group, parents' views were much more dispersed. The lead teachers in our study felt uneasy in their communication with parents. The reasons for that were especially parents' questions about their children's grades on one hand, and teachers' helplessness related to the limitation of the institutional framework of the school system on the other.

Parent education was the best predictor of their readiness to get involved in the life and work of their children's school. This was especially the case with mothers who took part in formal school conferences more often than fathers. Whether the area in which the families lived was urban or suburban did not make any difference. All the parents in our study rated the importance of their children's education highly.

We conclude that the parents and teachers in our study are in agreement about the importance of cooperation between family and school. Both groups have similar expectations. Although the lead teachers consider school to home communication and parent involvement more important than the parents, there is not much discrepancy in their claims. However, the parents and teachers differ in their perceptions of the actual situation. The teachers' views of their cooperation with parents are much more

optimistic than the parents'. This is true for teachers and parents in general, and for the groups of the third- and ninth-grade teachers and parents. Based on our findings we can confirm our first and second hypotheses.

Furthermore, due to a minimal but statistically significant difference in how the teachers and parents in our study feel about and how they rate the actual actions related to the cooperation between school and family (this is especially true of the third-grade teachers and parents) we can also confirm our third hypothesis.

When analyzing the influence of parent sex, education, attendance of formal school events, and the location of their home, we conclude that these variables do not have the same effect on how parents perceived their cooperation with school. Only parent attendance of formal school events has a statistically significant effect on how the parents rate the importance of school to home communication, and only parent education has a statistically significant effect on how much importance they attribute to parent influence on school work. The parents' rating of the importance of parent involvement in school work is under the influence of their sex, education, and the frequency of their attendance of formal school events. Whether parents live in suburban or urban environment does not bear any significance. Based on these findings, we can only partially confirm our fourth hypothesis.

In future, schools need to pay more attention to the development of partnerships with parents and local community. Such partnerships can be created by developing concrete programmes of cooperation with the activities that will connect family and school, and will have an encouraging effect on students' success in school, and on their development. Schools need help from suitable institutes with the development of such programmes, selection of the participants in these programmes, organization of action group, and definition of basic principles of cooperation. Only in this way, they will be able to design and implement effective partnership programmes to promote collaboration among school, family, and local community.

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