

Parent-School Cooperation as a Gender Sensitive Practice

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This article explores the thesis that parent-school cooperation is predominantly a domain of female engagement. Our considerations are based on the analysis of gender related data accumulated during two national survey studies and five research projects focused on different aspects of parent-school cooperation (carried out between 2006 and 2010). The results of the analysed studies show that women make up 68% of the workforce in the education sector, and that women in Serbia spend on average 5 hours per day doing domestic work and 3 hours looking after children. In the five analysed research projects women are the dominant participants – out of 519 of the teacher participants in three studies 77% were women; out of 87 parent participants in three studies 81% were mothers. The results of the analysed research indicate that: mothers attend parent-teacher meetings seven to ten times during the school year, while fathers attend one to three times; cooperation with parents for teachers and cooperation with teachers for parents is not on the list of important everyday tasks; one important problem with regard to cooperation with parent is the impossibility of time alignment between parents and teachers. Possible strategies for enhancing family-school cooperation are also discussed.

Keywords: Gender, time use, parent-school cooperation, public and private domain

Introduction

Parental involvement in educational processes and school life is a topic almost as old as the very concept of the school as an educational institution. Given the fact that family life and educational processes have never existed in a vacuum, both the manner and the circumstances of parental involvement have been evolving in tune with changes in the historical and socio-ecological matrices that have been imprinted onto the lives of different generations, as well as onto the functioning of the educational institutions in particular regions / societies. As a result, globalisation-process induced changes in all spheres of life, including education and family/parental functioning, also reflect on the framework of conceptualisation of family-school cooperation.

Over the past four decades, parental involvement in educational processes and school life has been discussed in the relevant literature in a way that emphasises the importance of continuous connection, while parents have been posited as allies and / or partners. Continuity in partnership is assumed to be a significant factor in higher-quality education, and the encouragement of different forms of cooperation (from the creation of a learning-stimulating

family atmosphere, to parent-teacher communication regarding the child's achievement and conduct, to participation of parents in school councils) is being put forward as an important task by both educational policy makers and schools (Farrell & Jones, 2000; Piórkowska, 2007). These assumptions have been supported by numerous studies indicating that good family-school cooperation leads to good outcomes: regular school attendance, better school achievement, development of educational aspirations and the strengthening of psychosocial factors that affect educational development (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004; Henderson & Mapp, 2004; Guskey *et al.*, 2006).

However, thirty years after the promotion of the new conceptualisations of family /parent and school / teacher partnership, there are many critical analyses and reviews (Mtingly *et al.*, 2002; Bakker & Denessen, 2007). Two strands of these reviews are relevant to the topic of our paper. The first develops along a line that is centred on the complexity of the cooperation phenomenon that includes many other, just as complex, phenomena, such as family structure, the educational-economic and cultural framework of family functioning, ethnic background, the child's age (class), school achievement and the gender of the child (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Scribner & Scribner 2001; Ferguson, 2005a, Davis & Lambie, 2005; Waden & Westat, 2006). It highlights the need for a differential approach in both cooperation conceptualisation and cooperation practices. The differential approach includes specifying different modes of

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cooperation that take into consideration socio-cultural and economic factors, the generation / age of the parent and the gender of both the parent and the teacher. In terms of socio-cultural and economic factors, Bakker & Denessen (2007) point out that many of the cooperation-identifying concepts have been marked in terms of the value thereof, and constructed according to the parenthood model created within the middle class. New generations of parents are more educated, more familiar with and more able to access information (by means of new technologies), which provides the basis for the assumption that it is parents who will, in the future, have the greatest impact on the educational system (Paige, 2008). Women constitute the substantial majority of teachers in elementary and secondary schools, and the findings of the studies have indicated that it is most frequently mothers who come to the school and communicate with teachers (Henry, 1996 according to Mattingly *et al.*, 2002, p. 552; Standing, 1999).

Another strand of the critical considerations deals with the discrepancy between the declared principles of and the offered models of cooperation (expert cooperation framework) on the one hand, and the development of practices in the field on the other. Such a discrepancy is expressed in several ways. One is the poor response of parents, and their unwillingness to accept the offered modalities of cooperation (Farrell & Jones, 2000; Piórkowska, 2007). Another refers to the evaluations of parent involvement programs. Evaluations of programs of parent involvement and cooperation do not occur very frequently and, when they are carried out, these studies often do not support the efficiency of the evaluated programs (Mattingly, 2002). Reported reasons for the insufficient response of parents include: differences in parents' and teachers' beliefs and practices regarding the parents' participation in the school; differences in the perceptions of key actors (parents and teachers) regarding their relationship with each other; the insufficient openness of educational institutions to parents. The list of explanations about the lack of response (on the part of the parent), and of lack of initiative (on the part of the teacher) should also include women's strategies for economising in terms of time and prioritising goals in everyday functioning.

Gender aspects of parent-teacher cooperation: general considerations

In this article, we determine gender in a comprehensive way (referring to both biological characteristics and the socially assigned set of roles, obligations and expectations) and we treat it as a contextual factor. We accept the tenets of Trotman Reid (2002) that gender is involved in social interaction and that it inevitably affects the

following: (1) conduct in professional practices that include working with people (women and men); (2) shaping of the professional self of experts in different activity domains. In addition, we accept the opinion that gender-inclusive studies cannot provide for the adequate explanation of their findings without reference to ethnic, cultural and social class related aspects (Trotman Reid, 2002, p. 104). Consequently, after taking into account gender complexity and heterogeneity, studies of male-female differences are one of the ways to a more complete and better understanding of the lives and experiences of both women and men.

The male / female differences issue is present in the field of education both in terms of parental contribution to education and in terms of the characteristics of functionality within the school environment. Accordingly, the subjects of the studies are how family configurations, the educational status of mothers and fathers, parental educational aspirations, maternal employment, and parenting practices / parent involvement differentially shape girls' and boys' academic achievement, aspirations and academic self-conception in general (Standing, 1999; Scott, 2004; Halsey, 2005; Davos *et al.*, 2007; Bogunović & Polovina, 2007). A detailed review of the above studies is not the focus of this paper. What is important for our thesis is to point out that the results of the above mentioned, and many other, studies, in general, could be aligned with the viewpoint of Nancy Chodorow (1978/2001), who has pointed out the universality of situational circumstances implying that women are responsible for the early care of children; that women-mothers are the primary caregivers, and that this aspect of their role is often retained throughout the later stages of child development, in spite of the constraints imposed by their occupational demands.

As regards the school environment itself, the issue of male / female differences can be expressed through demographic statistics relating to employment structure, in the context of effective teaching (Joksimović & Bogunović, 2005) and of extra-curricular activities, as well as in the segment related to the professional development of teachers. Since school teachers, in many regions, are mostly women, another important issue is related to the manner in which women teachers manage to connect their professional role and functionality in private life (roles related to family life and parenthood) not only in terms of organisational and functional components, but also in terms of inner psychological dynamics. The essential concern regarding cooperation with parents is the view that parental comprehension is taken for granted by the teacher (institutional – as the norm, group – as a representative of the family entity, individual – as an individual person) when approaching co-operation. Does the duplication of

roles (professional and familial), which can be assumed both for teachers and parents / mothers, affect cooperation? Also, an important concern regarding cooperation with parents is the issue of power dynamics and the positioning of parents and teachers in the process / episodes of cooperation (Widding, 2012).

Gender aspects of parent-teacher cooperation: case of Serbia

Our position in this work is based on the assumption that it is not possible to view the question of adequate cooperation as a whole, without taking into consideration some specific characteristics of the participants of the interaction and specifics of the context in which that interaction takes place. In that sense, the frame of our analysis of empirical material includes two components - the gender aspect of the persons involved in the collaboration (teachers, parents), and the context, the preparation of children/young people for an independent life and work as a basic and general educational and upbringing goal of the school and family. The question to which we are trying to find the answer is how feminisation of the space/context of parent-teaching cooperation shapes the cooperation.

During analysis of the empirical data, we approach the issue of gender in contextual terms - the focal point of our attention is the organization of everyday life, as well as relations and interactive processes. In this work, we are dealing with one aspect of cooperation, and that is the meeting and conversation of teachers and parents about their students/children learning, achievements and psychosocial functioning in school.

Our considerations are based on the analysis of gender related data as well as results accumulated during two national survey studies, and five studies which focused on the different aspects of parent-school cooperation (realized from 2006-2010).

Some general indicators of everyday life conditions and the situation in the education sector in Serbia

The analysis in this part of the research review is based on the official statistics and includes some data about gender differences concerning the actual and potential working force in the education sector, as well as data concerning statistics about the share of paid and unpaid work of women in Serbia and their engagement in the parental role.

Women and Men in the Republic of Serbia 2011

Through the analysis of specific indicators presented in the publication *Women and Men in*

*the Republic of Serbia 2011*¹, we review the situation in the education sector and in society expressed through relations between the sexes concerning some aspects of parenthood and working in the school. In our analysis we connected three groups of gender sensitive data - those presented under the headings *Population, Employment and Education*.

The first group of data (Table 1) indicate that out of all the women in Serbia, 59% live with a youngest child under 17 years of age (51% live in a marriage/cohabitation; 7% are unmarried). This data marks the span of the population in a way, from which parents and teachers are "recruited".

The second group of data (Table 2) indicates that a significant proportion of women in Serbia participate in the labour market - among them a significant proportion live with one child or two children under the age of 16. An important fact is that approximately 90% of employees work over 40 hours per week, with no significant difference between women and men.

The third group of data indicates that women make up 68% of the workforce in the education sector in Serbia, with the distinct possibility that this will remain the case in the future - of all the students that graduate in the field of education, 91% are women. The data shows the rapid feminisation of teaching staff at lower levels of the education sector, a profession which is considered non-prestigious and far removed from those of social power (the majority of teaching staff at university level are male).

Time Use Survey in Serbia

The first Time Use Survey carried out in Serbia (Đoković-Papić & Stojanović, 2012)² included a representative sample of 1,866 households, i.e. 4,495 persons aged 15 and over. The survey offers an annual overview and covers all weeks throughout the observed year (2010/2011). The complex nature of instruments used in the survey (a household questionnaire, an individual questionnaire for a person aged 15 and over, a time diary for a person aged 15 and over and the weekly schedule of working time) determine the interpretations of statistical analysis. In that respect, we will use the thematically selected original interpretations of

¹ Sex-disaggregated statistical data presented in this publication were collected from different institutions. The data we used in our analysis was collected from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, Ministry of Education and Science, Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and National Employment Service.

² Available at: www.stat.gov.rs

Table 1. Characteristics of living arrangements and family structures

<i>Living arrangements and family structures</i>	<i>Men (%)</i>	<i>Women (%)</i>
Live in a marriage/cohabit	78	81
Live in a marriage/cohabit without children	29	30
Live in a marriage/cohabit with their youngest child aged up to 17	49	51
Living unmarried with their youngest child under 17 years of age	2	7

Table 2: Activity rates for men and women with respect to different family structures

<i>Activity rates and family structures</i>	<i>Men (%)</i>	<i>Women (%)</i>
Age 15 to 64 (earlier retirement for women partly affecting this ratio)	67	51
With vocational school or university education	65	75
Living with no children	64	58
Living with one child under 16 years of age (Age 25 to 49)	79	60
Living with two children under 16 years of age (Age 25 to 49)	82	58

Table 3: Actual and potential employees in preschool and school education sector

<i>Professional-working domains and gender</i>	<i>Men (%)</i>	<i>Women (%)</i>
Enrolled in colleges and universities	45	55
Graduates in colleges and universities	39	61
Graduates in the field of education	-	91
Employees in preschool education (for 2010 year)	-	96
Employees in school education	32	68
Teachers in primary education	29	71
Teachers in secondary education	37	63

data that "portrays" the characteristics of women's and men's time use which is potentially relevant to the issue of everyday life, parental involvement and parent-teacher communication.

The activity of paid work was recorded in the diary by almost one in three women (31 %). The middle-aged population (aged 30-64 years) dominates in terms of paid work (41%). The average time women spent on paid work activity

was six hours and 55 minutes per day. Women, on average, spend almost five hours per day doing unpaid or household work - the middle-aged population (30 to 64 years) spend five and a half hours doing unpaid work (p. 99). Regardless of the employment status, unpaid household work is performed mostly by women, especially those that live in a marriage/cohabit with their youngest child aged from 0-6 and 7-17

years. When the total work is taken into consideration (a sum of paid and unpaid work), employed women spend an average of almost ten hours a day working, while unemployed women spend half that time working (p.103-106).

Childcare is the main activity for most women in Serbia, and they spend on average three hours looking after the children as basic activities (7 hours when we take into consideration parallel activities when the child is present). This is especially characteristic of woman with children aged 0-6 years.

The results of the Time Use Survey indicate that women in Serbia live very laborious lives. In Serbia, women's work within the family is very much present – on the one hand, it is a contribution to the survival of the family, on the other hand, it is the intensive exploitation of women's resources in a society and economy impoverished by a long-lasting crisis. Bearing in mind, that parent involvement in their children's education and cooperation with teachers presupposes the availability of time and additional household organisation and activities, it is easy to grasp that it has to be conceptualised and practiced in the manner of a meaningful, time and energy saving practice.

Some specific indicators of the state of practice in parent-school cooperation in Serbia

In this section of the article we present some of the results obtained in the series of five thematically connected studies (published extensively elsewhere) aimed to shed light on the different aspects of parent-school cooperation in Serbia today. The studies were designed by the author of this article and conducted as a complementary and broadening research cycle (Polovina, 2007; Polovina & Stanišić, 2007; Polovina, 2008; Polovina & Žegarac 2008; Polovina, 2010). Through variations of research focus, methodology and type of samples, we tempted to open up some relevant areas of knowledge regarding family-school cooperation in Serbia. With background in systemic theory and systemic thinking, the general objective of all five studies was to assess the family-school cooperation issues at different context levels, including: the impacts of a wider social context (the living reality of parents and teachers); impacts that derived from the specifics of school and family settings; impacts that are generated from the perceptions and approaches of different actors in the process (parents, teachers, students). Initially, the issue of gender was not the focus of our studies, but in the process of data analysis it emerged as an issue of key importance. Actually, in all five studies women were the dominant participants – out of 519 of the teacher participants in three studies, 77% were women teachers; out of 87 parent participants in three studies, 81% were mothers.

In that respect, the obtained results mostly represent the female perspective on the family-school cooperation issue. Since extensive summaries of each of the five studies are available in English³, here we present the selected research findings in table format (Table 4).

The research findings refer to two main thematic fields: (1) *the assumptions underlying cooperation* (the place and role of educational institutions in family life; perspectives and expectations of parents and teachers); (2) *practice of cooperation* i.e. the approach and involvement in episodes of communication/cooperation (characteristics of parent-teacher communication, participation in different forms of meetings).

As far as *the assumptions underlying cooperation* are concerned, our analysis indicates that in Serbia, parents perceive teachers and teachers perceive parents as relevant actors in the educational process of children/students (Polovina, 2007; 2009). On the one hand, teachers perceive parents as deficient figures in an out-of-school context (they do not motivate children/students, they do not prepare them for school, they do not help them socialize), while on the other hand, teachers regard them as accountable assistants who can contribute a lot to the fulfilment of their current educational goals. To parents, a teacher is an exponent and a representative of the school, and in a way, a representative of the educational system as a whole. Parents expect teachers to be much more professionally involved and to have a better rapport with the children. Parents feel helpless and unable to change anything (especially parents who live in poverty), except on an individual level and concerning their own child.

Research findings reveal that *in practice*, parent-teacher cooperation is superficial (with respect to the degree of involvement), occasional and mainly formal (Polovina, 2007, 2008; Polovina & Stanisic, 2007; Polovina & Zegarac, 2008). It seems that, as far as the school is concerned, parents and teachers have developed certain behavioural patterns that are rather antagonistic and distancing (one-sidedness, partiality and affirmation of one's own stance) instead of complementary and collaborative. The relationship between parents and teachers represents a potentially abundant but inactive "space" in which currently there are partial and finger pointing activities, limited communication, and time and energy disengagement. It seems that teachers are not ready to discuss these issues, and parents have nowhere to discuss

³A more detailed review of this research (presented in English) is available at: http://www.ipi.keylink.rs/Upload/Dokumenta/Strane/NP_11.pdf

Table 4: Details from five studies relating to parent-school cooperation in Serbia: participants, objectives and key results

Year of conducting	Sample	Subject of research	Main findings
2006 ⁴	128 participants from one elementary school (city) 44 teachers (94% female, aged 30-35) 20 parents (80%mothers, aged 40-49, 75% have a permanent job) 64 students of Grade 7 (52 % girls; 48% boys, age 13-14 years)	Comparing perceptions and experiences of parents, teachers and students concerning parent-teacher cooperation <i>Methodology:</i> mix-method (questionnaires, focus group discussions).	Mothers most frequently visit school and cooperate with teachers, according to teachers, students and parents estimations (mothers come seven to ten times, and fathers between once and three times during one school year). Findings indicate a low level of bonding and numerous pending issues;both teachers and parents were overloaded with numerous frustrations.Currently there are partial and finger pointing activities and limited communication.
2007 ⁵	Sample of 60 attendance registers (roll books) with data for 1289 students from Grade 1 to Grade 8, collected over one school year (2004/2005 of one elementary school (city)	Exploring parents' attendance to parent-teacher conferences and individual parent-teacher meetings in relation to students' grade, sex, conduct and number of excused and unexcused absence from school. <i>Methodology :</i> analysis of school documentation.	The total number of parental visits (during a school year) correlates to the Grade the student attends - parental visits decline at higher Grades, with the exception of Grade 3 and Grade 7 (turning points with shift in demands concerning curriculum and learning). Parental visits to school reflect both developmental changes in relation to children, as well as parents' own assessment of "critical Grades".Parental attendance at parent - teacher conferences and individual meetings show the characteristics of adjustment strategies expressed as a combination of types of visit within the offered forms - individual meetings become a more prominent form at later stages of schooling.
2008 ⁶	365 participants (from 37 schools in urban area, 23 in rural area) 305 teachers/class teachers 67.9% females, 37.2% with over 25 years of service; 24.6% of them with length of service between 15 and 24 years; 22.9% with length of service between 7 and 15 years; and 15.3% of young class teachers (below 7 years of service) 60 school principals (65.5% male, the majority having between 15 and 25 years of service)	Exploring how principals and teachers of different sex, from different contexts (urban, rural), and with different lengths of service, perceive and assess the conditions, obstacles and necessary incentives for improving cooperation with parents. <i>Methodology:</i> quantitative (questionnaires)	Principals and teachers in their assessments do not go deeper into the essence of understanding the importance of cooperation with parents, they do not take into account essential prerequisites for cooperation such as a cooperative approach and the significance of understanding and appreciating the experiences and life circumstances of parents, the significance of teachers' initiative, the significance of well-planned and not <i>ad-hoc</i> meetings.

⁴Presented in details in article "Systemic analysis of school-family cooperation" (Polovina, 2007).

⁵ Presented in details in article "A study on family-school cooperation based on an analysis of school documentation" (Polovina & Stanicic, 2007).

⁶ Presented in details in article "How school contribute to family-school cooperation" (Polovina, 2008).

COOPERATION AS A GENDER SENSITIVE PRACTICE

<p>2008⁷</p>	<p>17 families with school-age children (all families were on social welfare benefits). 16 mothers (10 single mothers), 1 father The average age of parents 41years (between 26 and 53). Two thirds of the parents completed up to a maximum of 3-years in vocational school. The average number of children per family - between 2 and 3.</p>	<p>Exploring everyday life of families living in poverty, their needs and resources, linked to schooling demands and children's functioning at school Methodology. Qualitative (semi-structured interviews with parents)</p>	<p>In everyday life experience the most stressful aspect of living is parents' frustration based on the "inability" to find the means necessary to meet the child's needs. A separate group of "demands" is based on the "provide-protect-represent" function of parents, and refers to "providing healthy development of children in spite of all the pressures", protecting children from violence and discrimination within the school context, representing one's own children in contacts with teachers, which is often not an easy task for parents "lacking the means to express themselves properly" in conversation with teachers. Most parents report visiting school on a regular basis in order to get information on their children's grades; they use "open door" days and individual discussions more frequently than parent-teacher conferences. Some parents do not go to school since they feel inferior and do not wish to expose their children to further degradation and marginalization in the school setting.</p>
<p>2009⁸</p>	<p>270 participants (73% female) The teachers' sub-sample had 170 participants - 76% were female teachers, average age 43, average length of career in education 15 years. The parents-teachers sub-sample had 60 participants - 83% were mothers-teachers, average age 44, average length of career in education 17.7 years, 92% were married and on average had two children (at least one child at elementary school). The parents sub-sample had 40 participants, 60% were mothers, average age: 39; 80% of participants were married, 20% divorced/widows, on average living with two children</p>	<p>Parents' and teachers' perceptions and beliefs regarding their working and living context <i>Methodology:</i> quantitative (questionnaires)</p>	<p>Similarities and differences were found between these three subgroups of participants in the conceptualization of perceived difficulties in living and working contexts. In teachers' perceptions, parents do not figure continuously and directly as part of their work setting (less than 1/7 of them perceive cooperation with parents as a difficulty). Almost the same statement is valid for parents, too; however, parents see the main difficulties in the characteristics of a broader living environment that includes schools and teachers, respectively. The parents and parent-teachers ranked the difficulties in working and living contexts similarly.</p>

⁷ Presented in detail in the article "Ecosystem analysis of functioning of families that live in poverty in the context of children's schooling" (Polovina & Žegarac, 2008).

⁸ Presented in detail in the article "Teachers' and parents' perceptions regarding their working and living context: implications for parent-teacher cooperation" (Polovina, 2010).

them. According to the presented data, the teachers' input in teacher-parent patterns of relationship is of an "expert-instrumental" type (one-sided communication, teacher-expert informs parent/non-expert), while the parents' input is of the "criticising-compensatory" type (parents criticize school on the one hand, but at the same time learn together with their children at home or engage private teachers).

Conclusion

The policy makers', researchers' and theoreticians' initiatives and advocacy striving to achieve recognition of the idea of family-school cooperation, in practice did not reverberate powerfully among the teachers, school staff and parents. Considering the arguments used in advocacy, one cannot find gender sensitive points. Un-recognition of the importance of the gender aspects of parent/teacher cooperation has at least two important consequences. One is related to preserving the existing state of affairs (no one gets what he expects). The other is related to an impasse in creating new approaches and forms of cooperation - through our studies parents/mostly mothers produced more concrete and better specified proposals about cooperation than teachers did.

The results of the presented surveys give a sketchy picture of the overwhelming burdens of everyday life placed on the "shoulders of women" (draining female resources in family life spheres) and the marginalisation of the feminised

teachers' profession in the current context of Serbian society, which still suffers from the consequences of the sociohistorical and economic crisis of the 1990s. Also, the results of the presented studies indicate that the characteristics of the parent-teacher "cooperation space" is female-dominated, since female teachers form the majority of employees in education, and according to our research results, mothers are "the parent delegated" to cooperate with teachers.

The analysed data implies that when we consider the topic of parent-teacher cooperation, we need to bear in mind the exact nature of the educational system as well as the range and variety of people from which parents and teachers are recruited. In that respect, at the most general level of conceptualization of parent-teacher cooperation, two principles could be established: (1) communication and relational connectedness is inevitable and potentially useful; (2) the question of organization and forms of cooperation should be open to different approaches. In addition, the development of the gender sensitive practice of parent-teacher cooperation could be designed at least in two directions. One is based on the planned promotion of fathers' involvement. The other is based on the possibility of creating collaboratively (mothers and teachers) different types of "cooperation packages" as "legitimate" forms of cooperation.

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