

Family-school cooperation in the context of traumatic transitions in Serbian society

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The main topic of this paper is to clarify from a point of a researcher and practitioner a complex issue of parent-school cooperation under the pressures of long lasting and traumatic transitions in Serbian society. The paper consists of two parts. The first part includes «vertical» research based analysis focused on the parallel processes of change in a broader society and family's functioning with reflections upon new meanings and potentials for parent involvement in academic socialization of their children. In the discourse of leading sociological and socio-psychological researches conducted during the last ten years, parental position and their potentials are described with the following words: confusion, stress, material deprivation, collapse and demoralization of family life, short-term adaptation strategies in rapidly changing environment, time and energy draining and lack of physical and psychological presence in the life of their children. The second part of the paper deals with «horizontal» research based analysis focused on actual and concrete manifestations of parent-school cooperation, parent's needs and resources connected to elementary and secondary level of their children's schooling. Leading psycho-pedagogical quantitative, qualitative and action-based researches conducted during 2006 are presented, with the aim of analyzing the actual state of functioning and identifying systemic knots that support, hamper or block family-school cooperation. Words like disengagement, passivesation, tension and dissatisfaction, pseudo-cooperation, decreasing of parental and school authorities, are emphasized in the discourse of this group of research. Finally, the author integrates two levels of analysis and suggests ways of improving the quality of parent engagement in school/education.

Parenthood and social history, new economies and everyday living

Ordinary people of today are living in times of big and overreaching historical changes named globalization and New World Order. They are exposed to important social events like enormous progress of communication technology and powerful media development, new economies of multinational corporation's type. The overall globalization process going on for over 15 years now induces changes happening in all areas of life: education, culture, ideology and value systems, family and way of life.

As Anthony Giddens (2005: 33) claimed in his "Runaway World", we all fall into a globalization process (for better or for worse) which nobody really understands, but the consequences of which we all feel. Under the pressures and challenges of this process, everyday living of ordinary people has changed dramatically. New social trends include a new relationship between work and private life, demanding better time-management, changing gender roles and relationship between sexes, bringing migrations and new demographic trends. These changes open up many new questions, needs and dilemmas focused on fastening of living processes, increased insecurity and severity of basic, existential issues. Life of a modern man/woman is carried out on the basis of sketched processes, dislocated from the

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framework of once familiar traditional pathways towards strikingly new set of living circumstances that require: (a) rethinking and reorganizing personal life planes, strategies and perspectives; (b) new adjustment procedures; (c) new role models and (d) development of new identities. In this new context of living, a high level of thoughtful adjustment is required from each individual (Giddens, 2005).

In our opinion, it is *parenthood* which represents that single dimension of modern man existence which bypasses and integrates the past, the present and the future. A parent is a mediator and moderator of social and cultural influences, and through them a mediator of influences of the age we all live in. The role of the mediator is particularly complex and difficult at times when social and cultural patterns decompose and need to be re-constructed. From this perspective we see parenthood of modern age as an issue grounded in a sphere of contradictions that raise conflicts, challenges and dilemmas, as well as potential source of parental burnout and parental resiliencies. In other words, sudden socio-economical and historical turnouts are more vividly reflected in parenthood, and the parents are required to link, bridge over and integrate them into a meaningful entity, so as to prepare their children for future world and raise them with hope and expectation for their good living. From that perspective the benefits of researching parenthood can have much broader meaning than those related to their children.

It is common knowledge that complex phenomena of parenthood can be defined in a number of ways and from different perspectives. Within a psychological framework, parenthood is treated both as a role and identity, as a multi-layer psychological investment which is life-long and cannot be terminated by one's own volition. In this article, we put emphasis on *parental role and parental tasks* since these inevitably link parents and children of modern age with new social reality.

For the "*parents of globalization*"¹ numerous issues are opened while trying to construct the picture of parental role in a new living reality. The issue of values is of crucial importance. Two different groups of dilemmas and problems are connected to this issue.

Firstly, according to what values and cultural belief system should parents build up their respective roles and prepare their children for life? Will those be the values of local community or the culture of global society and values prevailing in a broader region? What is the best way they might integrate these two streams? Secondly, education

has a special place in the value system of the new age, which is recognized in world-wide acceptance of Drucker's vision (1994) of new "knowledge-based society", with vast and overreaching impact on the nature of work, higher education, and the way society functions. The growing educational demands impose additional pressure on parents, both concerning financial costs and organizational and psychosocial support to the children faced with "life-long learning" philosophy.

Change in broader society and family's functioning: Parenthood in Serbia today

In the context of globalization, different social groups, and whole regions, entered into this more or less forced process of transitions from different starting positions: *economical* (type of economy and technology level in place), *political* and *cultural*. The transformation processes and the outcomes of these processes are guided by these initial differences. In some regions, like the region of Ex-Yugoslavia for example, adverse historical events made these changes turbulent and dramatic, marked by collapse of institutions (institutional vacuum) and increased corruption, crime and all kinds of violence. In such a context, exercising parental role and parental tasks were extremely difficult and connected to serious problems.

Sociological studies of transition processes in Serbia are numerous, including four successive monographs that followed different cycles of transition processes (Bolcic, 2002, Bolcic & Milic, 2002; Milic, 2004; Tomanovic, 2006). Parental role functioning is addressed in many of these studies. The terms used in these studies for description of twenty years of social turmoil in Ex-Yugoslavia are: multidimensional destruction of the previous society (Milic, 2002; 251); drastic crisis and global social transformation (Lazic, 2002); a very complex crisis under the influence of destructive events and processes (Gacic, *et al.*, 2004); unsuccessful, blocked and delayed transformation in society (Tomanovic & Petrovic, 2006). Being self-explanatory, these phrases denote that socio-historical traumatic turbulences reflected a combination of multiple internal (post-socialist, ideological, ethnical, near-war-zone, bombardment, etc.) and external (Balkan contexts, European community, superpowers, and the United Nations) factors in interaction (Gacic *et al.*, 2004; 5).

Research findings of above mentioned studies illuminated existence of parallel processes between broader social context changes and imposed changes of family living and parental functioning. As Serbian well-known family sociologist Anđelka Milic (2002a; 251) claims: "History is presented without regularities and

¹ We develop this phrase in order to integrate numerous new meanings and tasks nowadays parental role include

meaning, as chaos and boiling-over of everyday life. Global society level disintegration and chaotic events converge on the medium social space level of family life (accumulation of consequences), which on the level of daily life produce a new environment for family survival, and specific exposure to stress". Elements of broader social context directly interfering with everyday family/parental functioning include domains: economy-work, institutional functioning (schools, social and health services), and value system/orientation.

Under conditions of drastic economic crisis (and UN sanctions), financial position of majority of families deteriorated dramatically. It is particularly true for the families with children, who are the most vulnerable ones. The research that Milic (2002) carried out in 1994 on representative sample of adults (18 years of age and over) indicated that most families (61%) manifested large existential deprivation and impoverishment – faced with inability to accumulate material goods which should have provided the coming generation with the basis for faster development. Massive impoverishment had its ground in abruptness of *working life* of great number of persons in Serbia since 1990 – toward private firm's employment /private sector. Rise of the »grey« ("moonlighting") economy, and various forms of *socially unregulated activities* in all spheres of society, characterised context in which "working people" earn their living (Bolcic, 2002a; 232). All sociological surveys have shown that all households reported «additional» jobs in irregular forms of work, *without clearly defined «working hours»*, often below their education level or skills, and in a manner of «daily opportunities» (Bolcic, 2002b; 244). From this brief portrait of working conditions and their reflections on family life, one can understand how the struggle for economical survival for majority of families became both unpredictable, and time and energy-consuming.

Anomic social circumstances and crisis in value orientation of the population bring along a lot of inconsistencies in moral norms and standards. Changes in *value system* have the frame of a moral crisis, and bring extremes and »normalization« of asocial and aggressive behaviour (Lazic, 2002, Gacic *et.al*, 2004). Parallel to this, certain behaviour like learning, which ones served as a basis for social and economical improvement, devaluate profoundly.

Institutional functioning has been marked with the collapse of previous regime institutions and institutional vacuum that created "new rules of the game" (Blagojevic, 2002). Institution of school was under the impact of transitional processes, too. Quality of school functioning and

school climate changed reflecting general value crisis, impact of impoverishment, and attempted and stacked reforms (fluid ideas of reform changes, lack of equipment, low staff salaries and necessity for additional work). On one side, in some ways, school was a suitable ground for accumulation of negative impacts of systemic changes (through exposure of children/pupils and adults/teachers to broader context difficulties). On the other side, for many parents, it is the institution of school that offers some continuity at "times of discontinuity", and preserves the idea of development at times of social regression.

In described contextual circumstances and conditions families become units of stress and accumulating life adversities. In order to adapt to new and hostile realities, families had to develop new styles of living which included changes even in the very family relations. The research conducted in 1998 (Polovina, 1999), on the sample of so called «normal families» (non-clinical sample) indicated that families: (a) were unable to plan their functioning under ever-changing living circumstances; (b) under pressure of lacking time and tension, members of families have been continually frustrated in efforts to organize financially their household' functioning and their daily routines. All these had impact on the quality of family communications and atmosphere, making it unpredictable, tense and depressive. The issue of «normal» families under chronic stress was in the focus of research that Gačić, Trbić, Marković, and Nikolić (2004) conducted during 1991/2 and 1994/5 in Belgrade. With longitudinal test/retest design, and use of Olsson's FACES-III Scales (Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scale), authors came to the following conclusions: (a) under the influence of crisis families have changed the patterns of upbringing to increase family cohesion / emotional bonding dramatically, (b) flexibility of family rules decreed faced with increased risks brought with chaotic social context, (c) communications were low in quality, superficial, avoided real-life topics, and were focused on secondary, peripheral, naive, harmless themes but avoiding open conflicts, (d) short-term survival strategies developed in the context of «negative adaptation» (adaptation on negative contextual circumstances).

Presented findings leave no doubt that living in the Serbian transition context created a number of new, genuine problems in raising children. It is also empirically documented that parenthood under transitional context is marked by engaging of enormous resources – financial as well as energy, time, emotions, health (Blagojevic, 1996; Milic, 2002; Milic 2004; Tripkovic, 2004; Tomanovic, 2004).

Social transition and family -school cooperation

As we already pointed out, parents, schools, as well as parents-schools cooperation are under particular impact of transitional processes which brought additional risks to those already present (change in importance of families and schools) in the world-wide globalization processes (mass-media as powerful socialization agent, as well as new educational and labour market frames). The school reforms in many European countries put emphasis on parental participation and involvement in schools and their greater engagement in academic socialization of their children (Piorkowska, 2007). The rationale behind this parent inclusive approach is multi-focal and includes: (a) well grounded research findings that parent's involvement promotes better students achievement and lesser discipline problems, (b) ideas of sharing responsibilities upon the complex psychodynamics involved in learning and development in modern age, (c) platform of democratization of the process of education.

Families/parents-child/pupil-school/teacher mezosystem is the frame that regularly includes a lot of different-level variables (families', schools', individuals'), as well as natural and predictable relational instability based on developmental and situational factors. From sketchy descriptions of families and schools in transitional context we can assume that mezosystem's dynamics includes additional instability and value-behaviour incongruence and confusion. And what do research findings indicate about family-school cooperation in Serbia today?

On the legislative level, parent's participation in school boards and parental council is well specified and defined as important in the sense of rights and responsibilities for organizational and professional work in the schools (normative rhetoric). But in reality of everyday functioning of schools, these relatively new forms of partnership are difficult to establish. During planned and semi-structured round-table discussions on the issue of democratization of education, held in 2001² on eighty five locations in Serbia (with 9000 participants included), on evaluation type of questionnaire, some interesting findings emerged. Firstly, all participants (school staffs, students, parents) express a need for a greater parental presence in the work of the schools, but only parents gave rank one to this need, while teachers put it on the fifth place, and students on the tenth place (Stankovic, 2006). It is clear that the most interested parties were those that are the least present at school, and

that most parents would like more information and assistance from schools and teachers about how to support their children's education. Also adult - youngster's polarization emerged.

On the level of actual and concrete manifestations of parent-school cooperation, parent's needs and resources connected to elementary and secondary level of their children schooling, research result give much more complex picture. In the two connected researches (Polovina & Todorovic, 2007; Polovina, 2007), systemic analysis of parent-school cooperation was undertaken in one Belgrade's inner-city elementary school. *The first research* methodology was based on school documentation analysis (register book evidence of parent's group and individual meeting with teachers), that included 60 classes (from the first to the eight grade) with 1289 students. Results indicate that parents develop pragmatic strategies based on time-energy economy and their implicit theories of developmental processes and "of crises/risk" grades. Generally, parent's visits to school are connected with student's grades. With upper grades, parental visits linearly decrease (both on the group meetings and individual visits), but this does not hold true for the third and the seventh grade that, in our research, emerged as transitional points in elementary schooling. Also parent strategies of group meeting and/or individual visits varied in relation to students school absence, discipline problems-reports and school achievement. The more students miss attendance and have a lower achievement, the fewer parents come to individual meetings, but more to group meetings. This sounds paradoxically since group meetings are less suitable frames for solving individual problems, and might indicate manner of escaping direct facing with the problems. In the *second action based research* study (conducted at the same school), the perceptions of parents, teachers and students were investigated regarding issue of family/parent-school/teacher collaboration and communication. The sample in the study consisted of 20 parents, 42 teachers and 57 seventh grade students. Three isomorphic questionnaires were administered to all participants separately, and after that parents and teachers in format of small focus group discussions (of 5 to 7 persons) elaborated further their reflections on the issues raised by questioners. Neutral observers followed the discussions. The research illuminated the tensions between "how the things are" and "how things ought to be", both in parent's and in teacher's answers and discussions. On the normative level, both parents and teachers elaborated high expectation from "the other side".

² In the context of proceedings to planned reform

But, on the level of reality, parents-teachers connectedness emerged as fragmented, occasional, partial, with superfluous action ideas and unclear communicational exchanges, marked with numerous negative connotations and blaming. All the above mentioned, we see as a mark of unresolved problematic situations and relational impasses. According to this, our research findings also indicated deep dissatisfactions, frustrations, and readiness to quit and disengage (both with parents and teachers), rather than to search for potential resourcefulness in their connectedness. The "empty space" that passivisation of adults left has "taken over" by the students themselves and their spontaneous behavioural rule regulations created under the strong impact of mass-media models and "new vision of success" (quick and easy success, imposing one's needs to those around you). All participants involved stressed the importance of peer relations in the frame of negative connotation (violence, bullying, insulting, marginalizing, etc.). The authority of school and authority of adults were on a low level. For a number of parents schools became "risky places", for teachers "kindergartens" for taking care of children while parents are busy at work, and for student's important place for meeting peers although this might be a very difficult experience.

In the study of Dzinovic, Pavlović and Milošević (2007) that focused on parents' perceptions of available resources for solving problems related to their children schooling, 121 parents described their views of problems-resources issues by fulfilling dependency grid questionnaire based upon George Kelly's constructivist approach. Generally speaking, research results pointed out three areas that invited further research clarification: (1) the structure of the problems that parents recognized connected to schools functioning (lack of basic equipments in schools, unsafe school environment, relational problems between all parties involved) is very different than those presented in the relevant literature; (2) majority of parents perceive collaboration with school as important, but at the same time declare lack of resources for this collaboration; (3) in this unbalanced need-resources situation a lot of miscommunications emerge and systemic knot is made reduced to the same attitude of both the parents and school staff: "If they do nothing to improve the situation, neither do I".)

Concluding this part of the paper it seems obvious that on the concrete level of parent-school cooperation, one can recognize mirrored elements of a broader context, processes of change represented in contradictions, confusion, tension, lack of resources and lack of engagement.

Conclusions

Changes in a broader society, both on global and local (Serbian) context levels create totally new reality scene for evaluation of families and schools, and for creating family/parents-school/teachers collaboration. Parallel to profound changes in the family life and school functioning, collaboration of these two institutions emerges as more important than in the no-changes time since a level of instability and uncertainty emerges inviting (arise and invites) all participant to reorganize and restructure their relations and resources in order to preserve quality of schooling and development of young generations altogether. Yet, this most important task is more difficult to fulfil, since in the periods of change and socio-historical crisis a lot of pressure is put on the shoulders of adults. At times when group identities change (dismember), and when socio-psychological sphere of our everyday functioning is dramatically changed parents and teachers are challenged to search for new streams of resources and for development of new resiliencies.

In our opinion, the first step needed in improving family/parents-schools/teachers engagement in the described social context might be joint effort of parents and teachers to learn more about actual importance and mutual interest of developing partnership and good communication. When we say joint effort we mean work in the same group, based on equal position in the psycho-educational frame that includes a neutral moderator as organiser, catalyser and integrator of group discussions around relevant topics (changed values, time consuming, new models of adult authority's needed, new models of teaching, models of school/family partnerships, etc). The output of this kind of work should be better connectedness, problematisations of actual functioning and creation of joint plan for productive future cooperation. The second step might be organising supervision of the process of cooperation and implementation of created plan.

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