Cooperation between school and family as a key to student success

Abstract

Two highly-important environments for children, both of which shape personalities and influence achievement, are the family and the school. The ability to integrate these communities and establish cooperation between them is key to a child’s welfare and success. This article aims to provide practical guidance and ready-made solutions to facilitate teaching and education aimed at developing the potential of the child effectively. The proposed solutions include: workshops in schools for parents, engaging parents (as experts) in the teaching process, free specialist consultations, involving parents in various activities at school, and using new technologies such as computer programs, shared internet forums, portals dedicated to education-related issues. Such actions are designed to support not only the student, but also the whole family.

Keywords

family, school, cooperation between school and family

Introduction

There is a great unused potential in Polish schools that is lying dormant. Today, we are struggling with a growing number of behaviour problems, and parents seem to be more and more helpless. They lack the skills and knowledge to address problems affecting their children. Creating opportunities to integrate school and family in order that each may support the other for the good of the child and his family is an idea worth pondering. This article aims to identify practical solutions and examples that will contribute to the creation of a unified, positive educational environment for a student.

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The Multi-factorial Model of Giftedness by Franz Mönks shows that development of outstanding talents in a child depends not only on internal individual factors (such as motivation, creativity and intellectual ability) but also on external environmental factors, including peers, school and family (Mönks, Katzko, 2005). The interests of gifted students are among the factors with which it is possible to predict their achievements. The latter are the result of both educational and parental care influences – in other words, scholastic and familial influences (Sękowski, 2004). One should keep in mind that the familial and scholastic environments may affect the personality of a gifted child both positively and negatively.

The approach introduced by Mönks is innovative because it assigns more importance to the role of environment in shaping abilities than do other approaches. These competing approaches pay more attention to the roles of cognitive and personality factors. For Mönks, family is the first and the fundamental space for the development of a gifted child; it is the family that, aside from educating, shapes values and personality and stimulates intellectual development (Sękowski, Gwiazdowska, 2013). When a child starts education, an educational institution becomes the environment that fosters the development of the intellect and the stimulation of cognitive and learning processes. A school’s task does not consist in replacing the role of the family, but supporting it at several levels.

As far as the effect of school and family is concerned, there are four different scenarios. The first one pertains to a situation when parents must make up for an insufficient school system. In this case, overcrowded classes, lack of teaching aids, inadequacy of educational system and overly strict adherence to a core curriculum by teachers often cause a student to have learning difficulties or behaviour-related problems. Committed parents, wanting to give their child equal opportunities, might sign the child up for private lessons, extra courses, or devote their spare time to work with the child. The second scenario is quite the opposite: the school staff is involved in helping the child who comes from a dysfunctional family. Parents are incompetent in terms of raising they child; thus they do not satisfy the basic needs of the child, both emotional and material ones. In such a case, the teacher might assume parental duties, motivate the student to learn and provide support. In the third scenario, which seems to be the most tragic with regard to consequences for the student, both the family and the school are dysfunctional and thus unable to take on their basic roles. The student seeks support among peer groups, sects, etc. He may also turn to alcohol and drugs, as he sees no areas
to draw positive role models on. His needs remain unsatisfied. The child may then get help from other state institutions or non-governmental charity organization such as associations, foundations, community centres. Education and parental care are provided by psychologists, educators or volunteers. From the student’s point of view, the fourth scenario is the most desirable. In this case, there is positive shared commitment and cooperation between the school and the family, resulting in a multi-dimensional support in the area of education and upbringing.

Objectives and methods of cooperation

Helping a child at various levels is the main objective of the integration of school and family. In addition, such a solution is also beneficial to the parents, education workers and sometimes even to the wider local environment. We are talking here about the education of parents, the unification of educational influences, the integration of mutual help, and the taking up joint actions can only serve to benefit the local environment.

Currently, we have wide access to knowledge and information. The internet, numerous publications, and television programs provide parents with multitude of information sources concerning educational techniques. Therefore, it seems reasonable to ask the following question: why educate parents in this regard? An indigestible or incomprehensible amount of information, often conflicting, makes a person become more and more lost. Moreover, the structure of modern family, in which contacts with the family are growing weaker or grandparents are still working, results in young parents lacking reliable instructions regarding their child’s upbringing. As early as preschool age, children begin to use new technologies; they are inundated with various stimuli. In addition, the fashion for stress-free upbringing has contributed to the inability to eliminate unwanted behaviours. Taking into account the above factors, it is worth giving more thought to the idea of organising workshops for parents. The purpose of such workshops would include education in parental care-related matters, integration of environments, development of partnerships and open relationship between teachers and parents. They would also provide common ground for sharing problems. These types of activities could be organised by a class tutor periodically (e.g. once a month) or on the occasion of parents’ evening. The subject area of such workshops would be tailored to the needs of specific groups and age of
children. Examples of subject areas which usually arouse parents’ interest include: managing difficult emotions, aggression and violence, applying preventive measures as regards various addiction, building up self-esteem and interpersonal communication. The subject matter does not always have to involve social skills; it may also refer to a healthy lifestyle, diet and nutrition, and various health-related problems. It is certain that some parents would gladly participate in creative workshops, handicrafts courses, and art classes organised in schools. Activities of this type could be combined with charity campaigns. Parents with children could, for instance, make Christmas tree decorations, and revenue from the sale thereof would be donated to charity. Such workshops not only integrate parents, teachers and students, but also teach children empathy and selfless help.

The key to the harmonious development of the child is consistency and ability to set appropriate boundaries and norms. Making the teachers’ and parents’ educational influences uniform may be very difficult, but it is not impossible. This is particularly important at the early stages of development when children learn independence, social relations, and general norms and principles of behaviour. In addition, students with learning difficulties or behaviour-related problems need multidimensional and consistent actions to be taken on the part of the environment. A student with special educational needs is not just a child who is placed below average or causes behavioural problems. A remarkably gifted or talented student is in need of special support and cooperation on the part of his caregivers just as well. Parents have the important task of providing teachers with information about such a pupil so as to make it easier for the teachers to identify the student’s strengths, weaknesses and areas of interest.

It is worth noting that school can support family and vice versa, as it is a two-way process. Among the more interesting methods of integration is inviting parents to participate in classes as specialists. Parents co-host a lesson or workshop, thereby sharing their time, commitment and passion with students. They can tell them about their profession or hobby. It is also worth involving parents into various actions such as ‘reading to children’ so that everyone could show his skills (in case some parents do not feel competent as a specialist of his field). This type of activity also helps to strengthen teacher’s authority, because it reveals specific nature of this job and the related hardships. Furthermore, such joint initiatives do not have to be limited to the school campus. Parents may get involved in ecological actions or charity campaigns supporting local environment, organise theatrical performances or workshops in nursing homes or hospitals.
Open and direct communication creates favourable conditions for good cooperation. However, new technologies can also be used to shape the integration of environments. In many Polish schools, well-developed e-journals and schools’ websites work beautifully, thereby significantly facilitating contact with parents. Shared forums and information portals for parents and teachers from a given school may also be a useful platform to exchange experience. Currently, numerous parents readily make use of these tools.

Educational institutions often hire specialists who focus their attention only on helping students, thereby ignoring the family. Many behaviour-related problems are too complex to be attributable to only one source, and they may result from problems in the family. Therefore, it is worth organising free consultations with a school psychologist, counsellor and other available professionals that would be addressed not only to students but also to their families.

Positive quality of cooperation with the familial environment is one of several factors that make it easier to foster education values. According to teachers that participated in a survey, aside from elements related to the teaching process, students’ individual characteristics and teachers’ personality traits, it is the familial environment that is the key to educational success. The respondents emphasized the role of handing down values and traditions in the family as factors facilitating this process. According to Małgorzata Bereźnicka’s research, cooperation between school and family was understood as a ‘good relationship’, ‘good correlation between teachers, parents and children’, ‘parents’ care for their children education’, ‘parents’ involvement’, ‘parents’ understanding and help’, ‘model cooperation with family environment’ (Bereźnicka, 2011, pp. 448–449). In addition, the surveyed teachers also paid attention to negative impact of dysfunctional families on students’ learning process (Bereźnicka, 2011).

In 1996, a special program of cooperation between school and family entitled The Family and School Parentship Program was launched by social workers from Chicago, USA. It has been in effect to this day. The fundamental idea underlying this program development was the need to establish cooperation between school staff, families, students, and professionals. The project provides various types of consultations, including weekly workshops. Introducing this type of innovation is to support students in their development, promote good practices, share knowledge and experience. Such measures make the job of specialists, especially psychologists and social workers, considerably easier, because they have better contact with both home and school
environment of pupils in their charge; furthermore, they are able to design broader aid programs based on support and commitment of both these environments (Kelly et al., 2012).

In Finland, great emphasis is put on cooperation between parents and a school nurse as regards health care and health promotion in children and their families in primary schools. Finnish researchers emphasize a significant role of good communication and information flow between school staff and parents of a given child (Mäenpää, T., Paavilainen, E., Astedt-Kurki, P., 2012).

Other American study on parents and kindergarten personnel found that the quality of their cooperation affected the progress of the students. The study group included 2,966 four-year old children. The authors emphasize how important the cooperation between families and institutions is in shaping social development and the acquisition of social skills. More importantly, the frequency of parent-teacher meetings influences not only the quality of communication between them but also their mutual relationship. The way a teacher perceives a given child and his family significantly affects the child’s development and well-being. The purpose of the study was to evaluate the degree of quality of parent-school cooperation on a 7-point scale, which the respondents were to fill in. The focus was on such factors as satisfaction with the contact, emotions, level of confidence, clarity in communication, compatibility, support, and cooperation. Both parents and teachers answered the questions. The results clearly show that good quality of collaboration between parents and teachers negatively correlates with behavioural problems of the child. In addition, it was pointed out that economic status of the family may affect the quality of contact with kindergarten personnel. The lower the economic status, the weaker the cooperation, which consequently translates into behavioural problems of the child and negatively influences his socialization process (Serpell, Mashburn, 2012).

Relationships between schools and families and parental involvement in the educational process have an immense impact on a child’s development potential and his achievements. Furthermore, such an approach allows schools to give equal opportunity to poorer or problem students or those battling against cultural differences, such as, for instance, Latino immigrants in the United States. Parents involved in school life have an influence on improving the grades of their children. They also contribute to an increase in motivation for learning and encourage children to think of education as of an important value. Effective collaboration and open communication are particularly important in immigrant families, because they may provide
Cooperation between school and family as a key to student success

the school with their expectations of cultural origin and show their limitations and differences (Gonzalez et al., 2013). In teachers’ opinion, establishing cooperation with parents, communicating with them and most of all making them involved in various activities constitutes a big challenge. On the part of the parents, it is important that teachers respect them and take their point of view into consideration. Partnership-based relationships between parents and teachers have a positive impact on child’s development as well as his education. Good communication and understanding between the two environments allow them to meet the needs of the child and his family in a more efficient manner. It is crucial to educate teachers and make them understand the need for such integration and collaboration (Sewell, 2012).

Establishing such cooperation takes time and much a preparation. At the first stage the interested parties should present their beliefs, respect values of the other side, and pursue a vision of school and family relationships based on partnership. The next step involves an assessment of needs, strengths and weaknesses. The point is to create a team of committed parents and teachers who will share their ideas and support each other. It is important to plan activities carefully and to strive for a common vision and goals that the group wants to achieve. At the next stage specific actions and tasks are taken and at the end there is only evaluation left to do, that is description of benefits of joint actions and observation of the results. A democratic and fair approach determines whether such cooperation is successful or not. Parents and teachers should become equal partners. Class tutors should go beyond their fundamental role in order to more widely open to the student’s needs, which will be much easier to do if they directly cooperate with the family. Headmasters may have a major role to play when it comes to helping to provide organisational framework for such cooperation as they should support school and family environments with their experience and authority. It is also their responsibility to allocate adequate resources and funds for this purpose (Bryan, Henry, 2012).

Case study: examples of activities undertaken

Each educational institution is different, which is one reason why it will probably be difficult to introduce a uniform model, a pattern of cooperation between school and family, much less to design broad quantitative research. Therefore, qualitative results of observations and surveys conducted with
selected educational institutions as regards cooperation between school and family (organised by such institutions) are presented below.

One of the non-public primary schools in Lublin introduced mandatory workshops for parents that take place regularly (once a month). Workshops are conducted by the school staff members, including the headmaster, school psychologist, speech therapist, teachers or invited guests from the outside. This initiative is very popular among parents who share their problems and seek solutions together. They often choose subject matter of further workshops themselves, pointing to current problems and issues, in the area of which they need advice and support. Classes are designed in such a way that all participants are stimulated into action; they are willing to engage in exercises, role-playing games and discussions.

Establishing regular and friendly cooperation between home and school is possible not just in private schools, which have greater financial resources to dispose of; similar attempts have also been made in state schools. At an earlier stage of education, namely in kindergartens, such actions have been carried out with great success. A state kindergarten in Świdnik (Lubelskie Province) has been implementing almost all of the aforementioned ways to organise such cooperation. Another state-owned kindergarten in Lubelskie Province arranged for a free pedigree dog show. The costs of this initiative were covered entirely by the parents, who were also deeply involved in the event organisation. Teachers emphasize that parents are more likely to engage at early stages of their children’s education and take up initiatives that are directly connected with their own areas of interest and expertise. A leader, that is a parent who takes partial initiative, encourages others and plans distribution of tasks, is very helpful. In addition, parents are more willing to engage in cooperation with school if they were previously integrated and active at preschool stage of their children’s education.

Before positive activities and plans are taken up by way of collaboration with parents, teachers should be first made aware of the goals and benefits arising from such initiatives. One of the state primary schools in Lublin decided to organise workshops for school staff regarding this issue. The workshops took place on the initiative of the school psychologist. Their subject matter included rules and forms an effective cooperation with parents. Teachers were keenly interested in specific instructions regarding methods, so the classes took on the nature of a workshop. During the meeting, case studies were discussed, and staff members gladly shared examples from their daily work. This resulted in continuous development and improvement of methods of cooperation.
Summary

Educational institutions, in order to work well and reliably fulfil their roles and obligations, must take measures to cooperate with parents (Chojak, 2011). This fact seems to be undeniable; there are, however, many schools and kindergartens where such initiatives are not taken. One of the main obstacles mentioned by teachers is lack of motivation on the part of both parents and teachers as well as schools’ financial problems.

The combined influence of family and school on the formation of a child’s personality and capabilities is unquestionable and confirmed by numerous studies. However, it seems that psychologists and school counsellors bringing up this issue treat these two environments as if they were completely separate. There is no integrated approach that underlines the values of common interactions. This article may be an inspiration for researchers, but primarily an indication for psychologists and school counsellors on how to structure cooperation between families and educational institutions. It is definitely worth using the potential of school staff and parents to encourage them to develop better conditions for the student’s personal and intellectual growth. Children with special educational needs, or with behavioural problems as well as highly gifted students need consistent, multi-dimensional and effective methods, which close cooperation between school and parents is able to provide. Such actions will greatly support not only the student himself but also his entire family.

Nowadays, families are particularly in need of support. Attempts to restore the authority of schools as an educational and nurturing institution as well as to establish them as additional resources for the family contributes to the improvement in welfare of both these environments.

References


