

SCHOOL-FAMILY RELATIONSHIP: HOW PERMEABLE ARE THE BOUNDARIES OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SCHOOLS FOR THE PARENTS?

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to discover how permeable are the boundaries of public and private schools for the parents, so what is the current level of the communication between parents and the teaching staff of the 9-grade schools, and which are some of the barriers with which is faced this communication.

For the realization of this study a questionnaire was used for the parents (N = 537), and other questionnaires were designed for the parents (N = 109) and teachers (N=107), to discover the barriers facing the communication. Some interviews were realized and semi-structure conversations were done.

The study showed that the parents do not feel like “clients” of the educational service. They testify having free communication with the teachers, but very limited one with the school headmasters. The information about the way how parents’ organization functions is very limited, the parents are not satisfied about the clarity of communication and with the concrete way that the school offers about the child’s performance. The attitudes of the teaching staff are relatively good, there are some more positive attitudes at private schools. Interpersonal climate is relatively good, but even better at private school. The level of parental influence in school affairs is low in public school, while in private school it is at an average level. The presence of barriers in communication is accepted both by teachers and parents.

Key words: *parent-teacher communication, parent-headmaster communication; parental influence, communication barriers*

If I had money, I would have solved the problem of my son’s education. It is difficult today to achieve what you want with your child at a public school. Everything changes when you pay. (A parent)

Introduction

Parental involvement in children’s education has been one of the most studied topics recently by the researchers of education in the world. All these research and study articulate the idea that the children can achieve the development of their complete potential only if they are supported from their parents during the process of education. If a parent stays close to the education of his child, the influence will be bigger in the development and educational achievements of the child (Fullan, 2001). Based on the analysis that Fullan makes, it is of a special importance the communication of parents with the school.

Coleman (1998) also shows that teachers can facilitate and encourage this collaboration through some simple practices of communication and even though they recognize their importance, they often neglect.

Another very important study on this issue was undertaken by Mortimore and his colleagues (1988) for effective schools, shows that the way the school communicates with parents is one of 12 factors that distinguishes effective schools and less effective ones. Epstein and her colleagues believe that parental involvement can be equated with the six types which in correlation with each other improve learning achievements of children and parental involvement in education. They are: Type 1 - skills and expressions of their parents. Type 2 - Communication. Type 3 - Volunteering. Type 4 - Learning at home. Type 5 - Decision making in school. Type 6 - Collaborating with community agencies (Epstein, et al, 1997).

They classify communication as the main obligation of the school. Communication school-family is often labeled as parental involvement, but in fact it is information for parents. Schools should be separated from traditional ways of biased communication towards a greater interactive support to achieve a higher level of parental participation in the education process. If the school will have a real communication between school and family, we may have a mutual sharing of information between schools and parents. (Epstein, et al, 1997).

Based on research and studies made in education in recent years, all governments which are members of European Union have given a great importance on parental involvement in education. This is also demonstrated by one of the most important documents in the field of education White Paper "Excellence in Schools" (1997). In Strategies of Education of these countries, parental involvement is thought to be accomplished through these three activities combined together:

- Providing information for parents
- Increase the effectiveness of the voice of parents
- Encouragement of families learning together

Albania, a country which wants to enter the great European family, have to orient its policies in the same directions of the member states.

The school-family relationship mainly refers to formal and informal connections between family and school. It involves *communication of parents with teachers* to help children not only at home but also participate in school activities having a positive benefit for the child.

From the efforts made to find studies or research reports regarding the involvement of parents in education, or for aspects of school-family communication in our country, it results that there are no such publications. There is a study report conducted in 2007 by CDE & UNICEF "For the assessment of parental involvement in education and setting priorities for the future." Given that in this area there are few contributions, and convinced that *communication of parents with the school at the basic education, it is necessary to equip children with solid knowledge and democratic citizenship values and that measures for improvement can be obtained only by knowing the existing condition*, and also based on a public opinion that **schools do not offer such a service to education, where parents and children feel they are clients of this offered service**, we undertook a study to back this hypothesis by considering *some aspects of school-family relations in 9-year schools of the city of Tirana*.

The purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to support the hypothesis that parents do not feel "school masters" with the service they currently offer. This was also the reason why in this study we stopped in some aspects of communication such as: 1) Flexibility of the contact between parents and school. 2) The level of contacts 3) attitudes of teaching staff toward parents 4) Interpersonal climate 5) The impact, influence of parents in school affairs as well as in 6) barriers with which communication is faced. I can support the hypothesis of this study through these communication aspects taken into consideration.

Methodology

The population of this study were parents of children who were in 9-year public and non-public education (N = 537), but also teachers at the city of Tirana (N = 109). Stratified sample was used which was selected randomly.

Three questionnaires were used for this study, two of which were used for parents and the third was used for the teachers. The administration of two questionnaires for parents was conducted outside schools to ensure realistic information.

For case 6 two questionnaires were made, one for parents and one for teachers. 107 questionnaires were gathered from parents and 109 from the third questionnaire (for teachers) was distributed in 12 schools of the city of Tirana, of which 7 in the center and 5 in the suburbs.

Data collection of the first questionnaire was conducted during April - May 2008 and the data of the survey two and three was conducted in June 2008.

Study Instruments

For this study, three questionnaires were used of which the first two were for parents of pupils of 9-year schools and a third was used for teachers. The first questionnaire for parents was borrowed from the researches (Winer, 1975) and was adopted. The purpose of its use was to gather data on the issues: 1) Flexibility of contact between parents and school. 2) The level of contacts 3) attitudes of teaching staff toward parents, 4) interpersonal climate 5) The impact, influence of parents in school affairs. Factorial analysis was conducted that reaffirmed the separation of scales and Cronbach Alpha reliability test, and it resulted $\alpha = 0.76$ ($N = 537$) which is satisfying if we consider the conditions of our country.

The questionnaire consists of five parts, without including the first five questions dealing with demographic characteristics of parents, schools where children study (public and non-public) and levels (lower and upper). Five other sections consist of 47 descriptive sentences that answer the rate of Liker scale, with five degrees¹, for the issues.

The second questionnaire (for parents) is also Liker scale and was designed to ensure data on the communication relationships established between parents and the teaching staff, and to learn more about the barriers that hinder this communication. Cronbach Alpha reliability test resulted in $\alpha = 0.84$ ($N = 107$).

The third questionnaire was designed in the same format, and for the same purpose with the second questionnaire but in this questionnaire, the opinions about the level of communication and barriers that impede it, are levied by teachers of 9-year schools. Reliability test resulted in $\alpha = 0.78$ ($N = 109$).

There were also 42 semi-structured interviews, of which 32 interviews with parents, 7 with teachers, 5 with school principals and two with DART employees. Through them it was provided valuable information, which could not be assured only through questionnaires.

Not-answering has been in a small percentage (2.3%) and in general we can say that the questionnaires and interviews have provided a reliable sample in terms of given answers.

Data Analysis

The questionnaires were processed with SPSS, which facilitated the highlighting of quantitative data and results. However, the conclusions of the study were also taken based on information collected from the interviews. In this paper only are those results that are reliable from the statistical side are reported.

The results

From the processing of data collected these results we have reached: Communication with teachers in school is free but very limited with the headmasters, 84.9% or 17 from 20 parents indicate that communication with teachers is freely but is 35.3%, or 1 in 3 parents are not satisfied by having access to meet with the headmasters. In private schools it is higher access to meet with the school teaching staff. (Difference 19%)

Information about how the school operates parental organization is weak. A problem is the fact that 60.9% are unaware of the way of organization and operation of councils and boards of parents. From the interviews we discovered an interesting fact, asked - How and how much boards and parental organizations function? Public-school parents responded to 22% good, 38% are formal and the rest - do not know. Here's how a parent interviewed answered:

¹ 1. Never true 2. Scarcely true 3. Sometimes true 4. True 5. Always true

"We have no idea what is the role of the parents' council. To be okay with their work, teachers fill formally the documentation but these tips practically do not function. This is also what the headmasters do."

Disturbing is the fact that this is the prevailing opinion of the parents.

On the other hand, one of the headmasters interviewed said:

"There is a terrible formality. Even myself I do not understand how we do things like that. The formalism starts to teachers, then we as parents, but even we as headmasters lack the will to put things right and to end this formalism".

Parents are not satisfied with the concrete and clarity of communications that makes the child's school performance, only 41.7% of parents are satisfied with the concrete and clarity of communications that the school does for the child's school performance.

25.6%, or 1 in 4 parents, show that teachers do not contact them when their children have problems. 41.56% or 2 in 5 parents are not satisfied by the lack of contact when their children have achievements. There is a tendency for teachers to call parents in meetings when children have problems and not in cases of achievement.

Teaching staff attitudes towards parents are somewhat better: based on analysis of data it is shown that 60.5% of parents stated that teachers meet with parents (non-public schools and public) if they like. There is a difference from 15% among public schools and non-public on the *"desire of teachers to meet with parents."* Public schools 53.15% and private schools 68%. According to the data the teachers of private schools are more willing to meet with parents of students. The fact that parents are afraid to complain to teachers because of revenge on the child is disturbing. 34.98% or 1 in 3 parents say that teachers take revenge in such cases and the number of those who claim otherwise is the same.

Headmasters are not open to listen the negative feedback of parents for school work, 26.63%, or 1 in 4 parents, bear witness to this and only 48.29%, or 1 in 2 parents, say the opposite. At this point, the headmasters of private schools are open (difference 22%)

Interpersonal climate is relatively good, 57.8% or 3 in 5 parents are satisfied by the warm and welcoming atmosphere they find in school (private and public). Differences between the atmosphere on private school and public school are important. Private schools 70.5%, or 7 in 10 parents, feel a warm and friendly atmosphere, while public schools 45.1%, or 9 to 20, parents feel this kind of atmosphere. In private schools the atmosphere is 25% warmer and friendlier (see Figure 1). But if we compare these data with studies conducted in developed countries of Europe we can see that we are far from the requested level. In a study done in England (Williams, Williams & Ullman, 2002) the majority of parents (94%) are satisfied by the attitudes of teaching staff and appreciate the school atmosphere as warm and welcoming.

P 27 I feel a very warm and friendly atmosphere during my visit at the school.

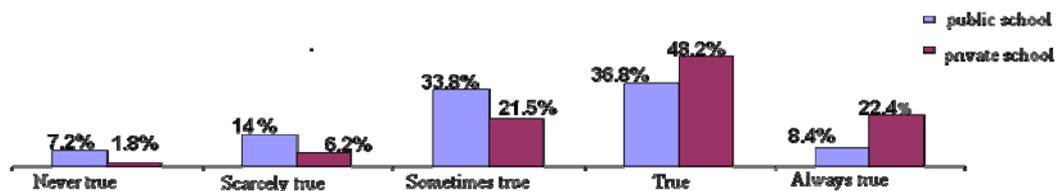


Figure 1: The atmosphere at school.

The level of parental influence in school affairs is low. Only 23% or 7 in 20 parents believe they have an impact on school and 43.6% of parents say the opposite.

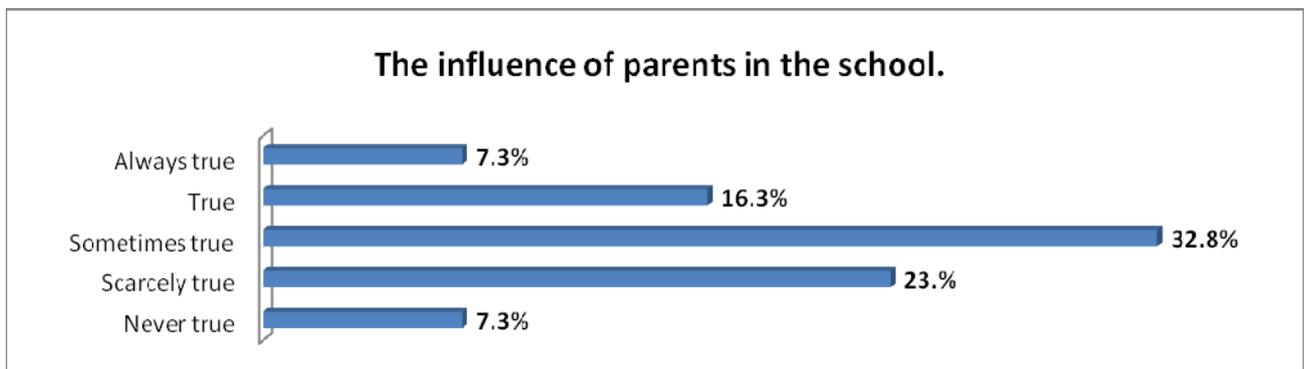


Figure 2: The influence of parents in the school.

Results show that only 40.6% or 2 in 5 parents are of the opinion that may affect at the headmasters of the school. Meanwhile, parents' influence is greater in private school (difference 17%).

Only 48.13% or 1 in 2 parents are aware of the responsibilities belonging. The level of awareness of parents about their obligations as a partner in the education of children is higher in public schools (5% difference).

There are marked differences in family-school communication between public schools and private schools and even more in terms of parental influence in school affairs where non-public schools are more cooperative.

It is accepted both by parents and teachers that there are barriers in communication

Barriers according to the teachers: Overloading of parents with other commitments and work (77.1%), their family problems (55%), low educational level of parents (54.1%) are not aware of the importance of their involvement in education (37.6%), fear that they become annoying (33.9%), and the inability of some teachers to establish good relationships with parents (15.6%).

Barriers according to parents: I do not have time (45.3%), the school organizes few meetings with parents (43.4%), teachers have not scheduled a meeting with parents during the week (41.5%), it is hard for me to meet the teacher because my child does not have good results (33%), I do feel not enough appreciated by the teacher (21.7%) I have family problems (18.9%) and teachers are not highly motivated to meet me (17%).

In terms of communication barriers there are not significant differences between private schools and public schools. On the other hand there is closeness between the rates and types of communication barriers with those of studies conducted in other European countries.

Discussion

Parents in this study demonstrate freely communication with teachers, but very limited with school headmasters. The fact that 35.3%, or 1 in 3 parents are not satisfied by having access to meet the headmasters is disturbing. In private schools there is higher access to meet the school teaching staff. From a survey done, CDE-UNICEF in 2007 for the level of contacts with school headmasters is known *that during meetings with parents 44% of parents had "frequent opportunities" meeting with the headmasters. 32% say they have met the headmasters "sometimes" and the rest, say they have met the headmasters "rarely" or "never".* These results have an approach with our study taking into consideration the fact that our study focused only on the 9-year schools of Tirana and the above mentioned study has attempted to collect data in 11 other districts.

The information about how the parental organization operates in school is weak. In the research report undertaken by CDE -UNICEF in 2007, *the parents' advice is mentioned as well-functioning organs. 83.5% of parents state this and only 14.7% say that they do not function.* In our

study from interviews during the first questionnaire of the parent, but also from interviews with teachers, headmasters and employees of DA it results that the organization of councils and boards of parents in public schools is very formal. As for private schools these structures are often not available.

From the same study report *concerning the level of information about the work of the boards we have 47.9% of parents saying they have information and 40.4% answered negatively*. At this point the findings of our study have differences. For both schools, public schools and in private ones 23.2%, or 1 in 4 parents are informed of how the councils and boards of parents function, 19.03%, or 1 in 4 parents, are somewhat informed, and 60.93%, or 3 in 5 parents are not informed. These figures are disturbing because according to Normative Dispositions, organizing parents in councils and boards is mandatory. It is the obligation of schools to inform parents about how they function.

The study showed that there is dissatisfaction on the part of parents for the clarity of communications and concrete manner that the school offers about the child's school performance. Information on the child's performance is better in low cycle than in higher cycle. For both schools, 41.75%, or 2 in 5 parents, are pleased about the concrete ways of the communications that the school makes, 29.28%, or 1 in 3 parents are somewhat satisfied and 26.46%, or 1 in 4 parents, report the school communications as too general. If we compare these findings with a study report conducted in England (Williams, Williams & Ullman, 2002) we will see significant differences, most parents (85%) are satisfied by the information the school provides. They appreciate the information received as too obvious to the child's progress. We see that there is a difference in terms of level of information between the two countries. In our study this percentage is 41.75%. This indicates a non-satisfactory level of information by the school.

In terms of teaching staff attitudes towards parents they are somewhat better, there are more positive attitudes in private schools. There is an approach to the English study (Williams, Williams & Ullman, 2002) concerning the attitudes of teachers to parents. Teachers at the lower cycle differ on their positive attitudes to parents, compared with their colleagues in the higher cycle. The data shows that 26.73%, or 1 in 4 parents think that teachers are not willing to listen to parents' negative opinions about their work, and less than half 46.5%, prove the contrary.

The atmosphere in the foreign schools is friendlier and warmer than in the schools of the city of Tirana. However, we can say that there are differences in terms of atmosphere between public and private schools, where the latter emerges from the data to have an atmosphere 25% more welcoming and friendly in its atmosphere than public schools.

The level of parental influence in school affairs is *low* in public schools, while private school is at an average level. To conclude we can say that only 23% or 1 in 5 parents believe they have an impact on school and 33.68%, or 1 in 3 parents state the contrary. Also, 40.68%, or 2 in 5 parents are of the opinion that there may be affect the school. The confidence about having an impact is higher among private school parents (17% difference). In them, parents have more influence on teachers (difference 19%) but also on headmasters (difference 29%).

The study revealed the presence of barriers in communication both by parents and teachers. Teachers think that the main barrier that hinders communication with parents is the bulk of other commitments and work (77.1%) of parents. In a study done in England (Williams, Williams & Ullman, 2002) are reported the following barriers: work load (54%), lack of time (14%), care for other children / difficulties of growth (13%), other ... (Not specified) (14%)

From the results reported in the study done by UNICEF CDE in 2007 teachers enumerate as barriers for the communication with parents: low educational level of parents, parents with lots of other commitments and jobs, poor educational achievements of children, the inability of some teachers to establish good relationships with parents.

In this study, teachers represent the main barrier the low educational level of parents. In our study, it ranks as the third barrier (based on percentages) and more important barrier seems to be the

other commitments of parents. It seems that at this correlation point it is better with the British study (Williams, Williams & Ullman, 2002).

For parents, the barrier with the highest percentage is - I do not have time (45.3%) and corresponds to the barrier with the barrier of the highest percentage stated by the teachers. From the results reported by the study conducted by CDE and UNICEF, parents listed as barriers to the communication with teachers: the organization of a limited number of meetings with parents and their development not on time, lack of motivation and training of teachers, lack of information about what happens at school, not informing the parents for what happens in school and partnership between them and teachers, mentality, cultural and educational level of parents, poor child outcomes, the work of teachers.

Conclusion

The findings of this study show significant differences in some aspects of communication between private schools and public schools. This indicates that the headmasters of private schools, unlike their counterparts in public schools, show care for their clients. Differences in the ability that the parents of private schools have to meet school staff (19% difference), the atmosphere that parents feel in these schools is warmer (difference 25%), the desire that the teachers of private schools have to meet with parents of their students (difference 15%), the willingness of headmasters to listen to negative feedback of parents about the work that the school does (difference 22%) and highest level of parental influence at school work (difference 25%), support at best this judgment. Although schools are maintained by taxpaying citizens, it seems clear that public school parents do not feel "clients" or "masters" of schools, based on the analysis the aspects of communication between school and family relations taken into consideration in this study.

During the application of questionnaires, from conversations with parents of the public schools, we understood *that they are less or not conscious of the fact that schools are maintained with the taxes they pay*. This fact makes parents be retreated, less demanding towards teachers and headmasters, less involved in school, and therefore less involved in their children's education. If we compare these findings with other studies conducted in other European countries, it is clear that the changes are great, as the governments of these countries have the time to devote to a higher parental involvement in education. It is time that we invest in this direction, to achieve the standards of countries with which we want to live together.

Recommendations:

- Measures should be taken in order to change the situation from the national level, to regional level and the school to lay the groundwork for the awareness of parents about their role as educators of children, by making possible the creation of psychological principles and parental of parental involvement not only in school but also at other levels of educational decision making.
- I judge as necessary undertaking an advertising campaign but also training not only for parents but even for the teachers to recognize the legislation, so that interested parties have clear rights and obligations.
- We should make serious efforts to improve legislation that regulates the cooperation and parental involvement in education.
- For this purpose it is needed to invest to create a real parental movement starting from parental organization at school, and then their membership in a national structure.
- To increase the level of school-family relations DA and ZA but even schools should develop a detailed plan for not only for action but even for a later evaluation.

- Intervention in the curricula of the Faculty of Education by creating special courses to prepare the future teachers for partnership with parents, would affect the improvement of the situation in the future.

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