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Electronic Media and Online Parent-Teacher Cooperation

ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on pedagogical theory and practice, which was brought to the fore about a year ago in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors deal particularly with the implementation of electronic media into family-school cooperation. The paper presents mainly the views and theories of authors from abroad, where the issue is more researched than in Slovakia. These are maintained by selected empirical data obtained by the authors during the pedagogical practice by means of the research carried out during the first lockdown in Slovakia (2020). We obtained the results by providing an online questionnaire. The research sample consisted of teachers at the primary level of education and parents of primary school pupils. It can be observed that traditional face-to-face ways of communication are still favoured among parents and teachers and that various barriers determine the so-called e-nvolvement of parents in parent-teacher cooperation. Another dimension of family-school cooperation is represented by an insufficient preparation of both parents and teachers.

Keywords:

distance learning, family-school cooperation, parent-teacher communication, traditional means of parent-teacher communication, Online communication, Internet-based parent-teacher communication, parental involvement

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INTRODUCTION

Family-school cooperation is one of the topics characterised by many theoretical views and practical recommendations for parents' contact with their children's teachers. We state that this topic is more elaborated in the pedagogical literature written in foreign languages (especially of Anglo-American provenance) than in the Slovak pedagogical environment. From our point of view, this is an "old-new" topic as it reflects many phenomena of the external environment in which it takes place. The family-school cooperation is determined by sociohistorical factors, features of the relevant culture, characteristics of the current family's life, the form of the school, and the level of competences of teachers and parents to enter these processes. In the context of our topic, the evaluation of teacher-parent cooperation also reflects the level of technical progress, currently, mainly the application of modern communication technologies in the school environment and their use in pupils' families.

As university teachers, we have been dealing with family-school cooperation for a long time. Based on our professional experience, in the last decades, we have concluded that especially novice teachers often perceive the area of cooperation with pupils' parents to be great stress. It is supported by several studies on the so-called "transition" or "reality shocks" carried out abroad. One of the many reasons is the insufficient preparation of future teachers for cooperation with the pupil's family. It can be shown or reflected in teachers' fears of contacting and communicating with parents or fear of problem-solving as well as in feelings of general incompetence in this area (Casper, 2019, p. 6).

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the teachers faced a very special situation. From our point of view, the COVID-19 pandemic has thus become a new shock of reality for teachers. Without prior training and warning, teachers and pupils' parents had to deal with the life circumstances related to health, earnings, education, restrictions of social contacts etc. In mutual communication on an individual and societal level, the concepts such as "lockdown" or "home-office" with all their dimensions and consequences began to be used very quickly. Concerning education, it was mainly a transition to remote education and family-school communication.

In the introduction to the discussed topic, we need to emphasise that we know a given issue's relatively broad terminological basis. Based on the study of Slovak and foreign concepts, we perceive discussions and efforts to clarify concepts such as "family-school communication", "family-school cooperation", "family-school partnership", "family / parental involvement in school", "family/parental engagement", "parental involvement", "home-based parental involvement", "school-

based parental involvement” etc. Due to the considerable ambiguity, resp. only very slight differences in their definitions, we use the broadest term “family-school cooperation”, or “teacher-parent cooperation” in our paper (Kurincová, 2021).

In this context, terms such as the already mentioned “online family-school communication” and “internet-based parent-school cooperation” are becoming more commonly used. L. Gu explains the term “parental e-nvolvement” to address parental involvement strengthened by the technology (Şad-Konca & Acar, 2017, pp. 133–143).

FAMILY-SCHOOL COOPERATION AS ONE OF THE AREAS OF EDUCATIONAL WORK

The role of parents in school and their involvement in their children’s education is historically determined. According to the Czech author, J. Průcha (2000), parents have various roles in school. Another Czech author, M. Rabušicová, explains why parents should enter the school environment and cooperate with their child’s teacher. These are their parental rights (and the parent’s primary responsibility for the desirable development of their child), the belief that parents have a decisive influence on the child. Cooperation with schools intensifies this influence even more. In addition, the principle of civic participation applies here – civic involvement of parents in community institutions (Rabušicová & Šedřová, 2004).

The importance of family-school cooperation is based on several theories that present the essence of contacts between the family and school: I. Ajzen’s (1991, pp. 179-211) theory of planned behaviour, identity theory, paternal investment theory, ecological theory, role theory, social exchange theory, and others. However, the author points out that some application dimensions are limited.

In this sense, the attitude of the American author J.L. Epstein, based on the theory of “Overlapping Spheres of Influence”, proves to be a functional approach. The author points out the importance of the common involvement of the family, school and community in the complex care of the child’s well-being, with each of the involved subjects having their specific roles. In a family-school partnership, one can see an interest in building more “family-like schools”, in which each child feels their own value, and there are opportunities for different activities of all families. Concerning the family, it is a matter of creating a home environment that supports the school’s intentions (so-called “school-like families”), while everything is a part of the surrounding community (“family-like settings”, “community-minded families”).

We also see the contribution of J.L. Epstein (2009) in the division of the parental public into the cooperation with the school according to different levels of their

interest and family possibilities. Originally, based on her research in Baltimore schools (1991), there were 5 types of parental involvement. Today, six key components of family involvement are described – parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. Another American author, E. Berger (2004), introduces five types of parents. Her research was based on the incentives that the teacher has to apply to involve the parents into the cooperation: parents who avoid schools like a plague, parents who need encouragement to come to school, those who are readily responding when invited to the school, parents who are comfortable and enjoy the involvement in school and those, who enjoy the power and are overly active. Surely, each group requires a different response from a teacher, resp. school personnel⁴.

The research carried out abroad shows that the presented levels of parental involvement in the cooperation with school can also be identified in terms of online communication, or the so-called e-nvolvement (Gu, 2017, pp. 133–143). It should be emphasised that the level of family-school cooperation is determined by several factors concerning not only parents/family but also the teacher/school. On both sides, these are appropriate competences, interests, and beliefs in the importance of cooperation for the child’s well-being, as well as time and technical possibilities. Commonly cited author G. Hornby (2011) identified four areas of barriers: parent and family factors (e.g. parents’ beliefs about parental involvement, parents’ perceptions of invitations for involvement, current life context of family, class, ethnicity and gender), child factors (age of school children, learning difficulties and disabilities, gifts and talents, behavioural problems), parent-teacher factors (goals and agendas, teachers’ attitudes to parents, language that is used) and societal factors (historical, demographic, political and economic factors). As the author stated, one problem is insufficient teacher training for this area of educational work. G. Hornby (2011) also recalls that his model can be used to generate ideas for further research on parental involvement (Jusović Rangelov et al., 2013, pp. 24–35).

The previous year showed that in the conditions induced by the COVID-19 pandemic, many new factors have entered into the online family-school cooperation. It is not always possible for a parent to communicate with their children’s teachers similarly as when meeting them personally (household technical equipment), economic possibilities, time possibilities, e-literacy of the parent etc.).

4 The school’s approach to cooperation with the family (by J.L.Epstein) can also be applied in our school practice. For example, the school could create common areas for teachers and parents to meet (parents’ room). The school could organize joint activities for parents, children and teachers (outdoor day, sports day, school trip with parents), etc. It is important to build more “family schools”.

ELECTRONIC MEDIA AND ONLINE FAMILY-SCHOOL COOPERATION

The pandemic caused changes in teaching methods and in the organization of education at home and at school. The terms like electronic media, the Internet, electronic communication, and others began to be used much more often. Electronic communication itself is a relatively young concept in the existence of humanity. We live in a world that we could characterise as the world of the Internet and information technology. Over time, the Internet has become an everyday part of our life. Without the Internet, most people can no longer imagine their everyday life, work, entertainment, or contact with others. Today, we can state that most information and news are spread through the Internet. The Internet provides people with an unlimited amount of information, which reaches its users from the youngest age categories (the so-called “digital natives”) to the oldest age categories (the so-called “digital immigrants”). The Internet is an inseparable part of adults’ working lives and free time. In recent months, this has spread to the daily lives of children and young people.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which hit the world in the spring months of the 2019/2020 school year, interrupted the teaching and learning process and transferred education to the online environment. This situation mobilised ICT professionals, and in a short time, a platform for home education was created for teachers and pupils, most often through video calls, the use of Skype, and the creation of virtual classrooms where pupils met their teachers. In addition, special television programs for schools were set up. This new situation tested the level of digitalisation of education, digital skills of teachers, pupils, and parents. Contacts among parents and teachers took also place mainly in the online environment.

Based on several literary sources, the aim of online communication between home and school can be defined: “to convey information between teachers, students and parents”. As e-mail and the Internet become even more widespread, these tools become more valuable and useful in education. The main goal of this communication is to increase student learning and facilitate conversations between students, parents and schools. Online methods serve as a platform for parents and teachers to exchange ideas. For teachers, it is easier to reach the parents and build partnerships with parents through online communication. This communication can be achieved either synchronously or asynchronously depending on time management, providing greater time flexibility. Online communication allows parents to receive information about their children in real-time. It also allows parents to receive information about their child’s performance and activities at school. It also gives parents flexible options to ask questions and provide information to teachers (Pozas & Letzel, 2021, pp. 1–16).

The benefit that online communication brings for parents can be an increase of parental participation in children's learning (on the other hand, this can increase pupils' interest in learning), familiarisation and understanding of classroom procedures, knowing school leading ideas, its philosophy and school policy. Another benefit, confirmed by the current pandemic, is that online communication allows everybody involved in more asynchronous communication and better time flexibility (compared to traditional forms of cooperation such as face-to-face cooperation, for which various restrictions apply due to epidemiological reasons). Parents can plan better the fulfilment of tasks and responsibilities related to home-office, online-schooling of their children and caring for the day-to-day running of the family. Naturally, communication can also be achieved synchronously.

On the other hand, it must be seen that there are various problems and challenges in online communication at parents' and teachers' sides. We can start with parents' ability to use the software, a possibility for internet access, appropriate e-skills to the language barriers (immigrants' families, low-income families, poor socio-cultural background of families). Teachers carry out online or distance teaching concerning the situation within families and school possibilities. They often feel overworked, and the communication with parents often takes place during the evenings and at weekends.

DISTANCE AND ONLINE PARENT-SCHOOL COMMUNICATION AND COOPERATION THAT WORKS

The pandemic situation of COVID-19 allows only to a very limited extent the use of traditional ways of family-school cooperation (one-to-one or collective cooperation). These are mainly home visits (currently not allowed due to the lockdown or other restrictions on contacts of people from different households concerning the risk of spreading the infection) and parent-teacher meetings in schools (their organisation is equally problematic during the COVID-19 pandemic). The events that schools traditionally prepare for parents also include various informal school productions, gala days or school fairs (occasional, often festive mass events such as school concerts, theatre performances, masquerade balls for children, entertaining events for parents etc.) as well as open days or outings (common walks or trips of children, teachers and parents to nature, or other places of interests) etc. (Hornby, 2011).

From the experience of recent months, it can be observed that some of these events have been moved to the online environment (e.g., open days and parent-teacher meetings). Written communication among teachers and parents has also taken on a new form, where the provision of printed parent handbooks and school prospectuses (about the school's goals, staff, school policy and rules, transport and

the organisation of information exchange) and the publication and distribution of print newsletters is problematic. Naturally, schools with their own websites can publish all the information for parents online. Nevertheless, it is useful only for parents with technical access and skills. As a consequence of replacing regular school attendance with online or distance education, other forms of written communication such as home-school diaries or weekly folders cannot be used appropriately. They can be modified into the online environment, but their preparation demands more time and technology. Concerning the traditional forms of parent-teacher communication, telephone communication (landline or mobile line) remains the most commonly applied. Teachers point out in this situation that it is a question of using private telephones to deal with work matters.

In recent months, new technological options have taken primary positions in communication and cooperation between family and school. The most frequently used Internet-based means are video conferencing systems (ZOOM, TEAMS, MEET, etc.). It is also very common to use school websites, e-mails (a possibility of sending various types of attachments), text messaging (using mobile phones), blogging (a classroom teacher can post blogs on the Internet about a school day or experiences of pupils; there can be posted a variety of materials – photos, texts, video etc.), and chatting via Facebook or Instagram. L. Gu emphasises the special value of school websites. According to the author, a school website can be considered as a window to the school – it is a platform for presenting the information, school ideas, goals, policies and strategies for school-family cooperation, as well as the information about school management influenced by the condition of the digital world, etc. (Gu, 2017, pp. 133–143).

Modern means of communication and family-school cooperation undoubtedly include electronic pupil's record books, which parents follow through their own specific password, thus ensuring the protection of information about their child. We will not describe them in more detail due to the limited scope of the paper and the fact that in our teaching community, these tools have become a common part of our lives.

METHODOLOGY

The quality of the implementation of online education is conditioned mainly by the attitude of teachers and parents to online education. This process depends on the teacher's readiness for online education and the family's readiness for the online education of their child. It is closely related to the opportunities to cooperate with

teachers in this context. Our exploratory research aimed to examine the situation in implementing modern communication technologies in the family-school cooperation from the perspective of teachers and parents during the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic in Slovakia.

The Research Sample

The research sample consisted of teachers at the primary level of education (N = 56) and parents of primary school pupils (N = 64). The selection of participants was non-random and based on availability.

Data Acquisition Methods

We obtained the results by providing an online questionnaire of our own design, which was carried out as a part of a diploma thesis supervised by the paper's co-author (V. Kurincova). The questionnaire contained introductory and factual items (Part 1), multiple-choice questions focused on assessment and self-assessment (Part 2) and open-ended questions (Part 3). The questions in the second and third parts of the questionnaire addressed many related issues. Concerning the paper's focus, we present only the selected results of the exploratory research.

Data Analysis Methods

Due to the need to explore the new topic, the analysis was conducted at the level of description – quantity, percentage values. The results are presented in the following part of the paper. Figures and tables present results related to using electronic media in family-school cooperation.

RESULTS

Our research showed that 50% of teachers are convinced that most parents are willing to cooperate and communicate with the school even during these conditions of education. Another 50% of respondents stated that parents only communicate and cooperate with the school when needed. A positive finding was that none of the interviewed teachers stated that the parents were not interested in cooperating with the school.

Despite the situation in which all pupils and their parents found themselves during a state of emergency in Slovakia, the teachers state (61%) that parents prefer traditional forms of cooperation. 39% of teachers think that modern and electronic media are more used forms of family-school cooperation. Concerning the parent

questionnaire results, most parents (84%) prefer traditional forms of family-school cooperation (personal meetings, class meetings and parents' associations). On the other hand, even the teachers (50%) prefer personal meetings with parents. These forms are the most problematic during the current COVID-19 pandemic. 39% of teachers prefer to cooperate with parents by phone, e.g., text messages or calls. The least used form of parent-teacher cooperation is e-mail, which is preferred by only 7% of teachers and contact *via* the Internet (Facebook or Instagram), which was chosen by only 4% of teachers. As to the parents, only 16% of respondents stated that they prefer electronic forms when cooperating with the teacher (e.g., e-mails, text messages, phone calls, and various groups on a social network such as Facebook).

The later development of the pandemic situation showed that these forms of cooperation, the use of Skype and video conferencing systems, had become an important prerequisite for parental contact with the teacher. Based on the findings, we further analysed the types of electronic media preferred by parents when cooperating with the school (Figure 1).

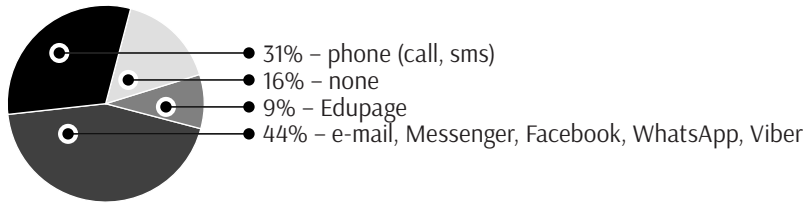


Figure 1. Parents' preferred types of electronic media in parent-teacher cooperation

Another dimension of the problem is the actual ability of teachers to carry out and manage online cooperation with parents. We found that 29% of teachers acquired the skills needed for online communication while studying at university, 25% considered themselves self-taught, and 35% of teachers said they had used various trainings and courses to improve their digital skills. We consider it unsatisfactory that 11% of teachers do not feel sufficiently prepared for online communication with parents because they lack digital skills (Figure 2).

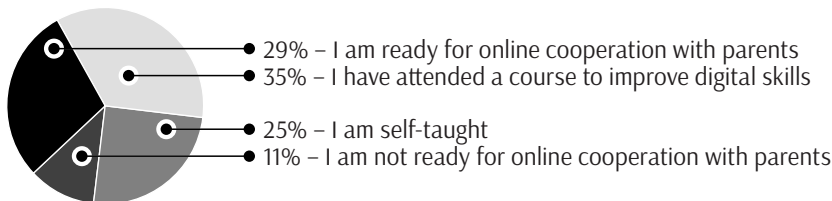


Figure 2. Readiness of teachers for online cooperation with parents

The readiness for online education by the teacher/school and cooperation with the family can be considered one of the key areas determining the forms of online education during the COVID-9 pandemic. Difficulties in the sudden transition to the distance form of education most often concern teachers in relation to their low readiness for direct online teaching and online cooperation with parents. Teachers with longer teaching experience (older teachers in particular) have a worse experience with online communication. Teachers with less pedagogical experience consider online communication to be easier for the teacher's work. (Table 1).

Table 1. The length of teachers' pedagogical practice and the assessment of online communication with parents

Pedagogical practise	Cooperation with the family (online)			Total	
	Online communication facilitates the cooperation	Online communication takes much time	Online communication is a common activity		
0–10 years	N	11	0	11	22
	%	50%	0%	50%	100%
11–20 years	N	3	0	3	6
	%	50 %	0%	50%	100%
21–30 years	N	3	6	3	12
	%	25%	50%	25%	100%
31+ years	N	0	8	8	16
	%	0%	50%	50%	100%
Total	N	17	14	25	56
	%	30%	25%	45 %	100%

Note: N – number of respondents; % – percentage

Effective dealing with many situations at school requires teachers to contact the pupil's parent as soon as possible. Therefore, we were interested in whether there is mutual knowledge of mobile phone numbers. Almost 90% of teachers said the parents had their phone number. Some teachers stated that they could only be contacted during working hours, while others claimed that the parents could only contact them after working hours, e.g., after 16:00, 18:00 or until 21:00. 24 teachers stated that the parents could contact them at any time if necessary. In this respect, we see a great willingness of teachers, as the provision of a private phone number to parents and the possibility to contact them after working hours is a sign of teachers' real interest in the well-being of children.

Another way of school-family communication is to use a website. According to our research, most schools in Slovakia have their websites. As many as 93% of teachers said that their school has its own website where parents can find various announcements and news, information about school events and pupils' study results, and information about the school catering system, curricula, and important contacts. Only 7% of teachers stated that the school where they teach does not have its own website, and the necessary information is published on a social network such as Facebook. The information obtained by parents from the school website is shown in Figure 3.

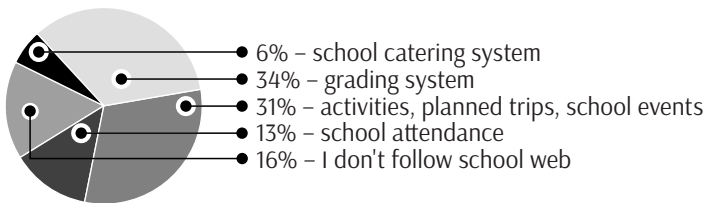


Figure 3. Information obtained by parents from the school website

The pupil's record book is an important means concerning teacher-parent communication about pupil's school results. In connection with the online cooperation of the family and school, we determined how teachers evaluate the use of electronic pupil's record books. More than half of the teachers stated that they do not work with an electronic pupil's record book, which we can consider a negative finding. On the contrary, teachers, who answered that they work with an electronic pupil's record book, stated that the main advantage is better awareness of parents about pupil's results and easier communication with the school.

DISCUSSION

The study aimed to examine the situation in implementing modern communication technologies in the family-school cooperation from the perspective of teachers and parents during the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic in Slovakia.

Changed teaching conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic and increased demands on teachers and parents also affected school-family cooperation's usual forms and intensity. Distance education transfers much of the responsibility for educating children to their parents. It often brings an increased level of stress and an increased need to communicate with the school into the family.

Families without adequate technical support remained at a disadvantageous position in this context. The transition to the distance form of education brings increased economic and technical demands. The lack of appropriate technical equipment (e.g., in low-income families) seriously complicates education and cooperation with the school. Teachers, especially in the interests of pupils, had to look for other acceptable forms of contact with parents from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. It is also complicated by the long-term low interest of these parents in cooperating with the school. Up to 25% of teachers consider the impossibility of involving this category of parents in cooperation to be the biggest problem. This situation thus contributes even more to the deepening of differences between children from different socio-cultural backgrounds (for the benefit of the children of parents with higher education and better economic status).

Difficulties in the sudden transition to the distance form of education were also affected by individual differences between teachers. Naturally, younger teachers have a higher level of digital competences and skills and, therefore, these tools make their work easier. Teachers with longer teaching experience are a generation for which ICT has not been a part of their whole life, and that is why they evaluate online communication more as a tool that takes them much time.

This situation is not typical for our domestic context, but for teachers in other countries facing similar problems (König & Jäger-Biela, 2020, pp. 608–622; Flores & Swennen, 2020). Insufficient ICT skills for providing online education and the concerns about health after comeback to face-to-face education in the critical moments of the pandemic mostly experienced by elderly teachers caused many of them to decide to leave their jobs. In such context, there are thoughts of a new approach to the study of future teachers regarding some kind of preparation for crisis management of education, a call for “trauma-informed practice” or acquisition of a new competence – a competence of distance education management (Darling-Hammond & Hylar, 2020, pp. 457–465).

Our study provided some new results. However, there are some issues we did not cover properly and may serve as suggestions for future research. In this context, there is a need for in-service training of teachers for online teaching and cooperation with the family and research in this area. It should cover the whole career of teachers, including their undergraduate training, novice teachers, and teachers with many years of teaching experience.

CONCLUSIONS

Under the influence of the global pandemic, changed educational conditions have significantly affected the entire teaching process and forms of teacher-parent communication at all types and levels of schools.

We summarise the following findings from our research:

- despite the situation in which all pupils and their parents found themselves during a state of emergency in Slovakia, the teachers and parents prefer traditional forms of cooperation,
- parents also prefer traditional forms of family-school cooperation (personal meetings, class meetings and parents' associations),
- there was a problem with cooperation with low-income families and families without adequate technical support during the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic in Slovakia,
- the actual ability of teachers to carry out and manage online cooperation with parents is not sufficient,
- teachers with longer teaching experience (older teachers in particular) have a worse experience with online communication.

In terms of improving school-family cooperation in these changed educational conditions, the following is necessary to be applied:

- teachers need to acquire adequate digital skills for effective online cooperation with the family (in-service training of teachers should also focus on this issue),
- online education and cooperation with parents should already be included in the content of the training of future teachers in higher education),
- during the communication with parents, it is necessary to take into account the individual characteristics of families and systematically solve the problems of low-income families and families without adequate technical support,
- to define more precisely the rights and obligations of parents and teachers in the conditions of distance education, including the ethics of behaviour in a virtual environment,
- mentioned cooperation strategies can also be applied in a non-pandemic situation, e.g., concerning the pupil's absence in the teaching and learning process (due to illness or for other serious reasons), making more use of hybrid opportunities for family-school cooperation in the future.

Under the influence of the global pandemic, teachers suddenly (without planning and having time to prepare themselves) had to change organisational forms of education, teaching and assessment methods, and intensify the level of mutual support or cooperation with parents. The sudden lack of social contacts of pupils with peers, teachers and school environment, and the difficulties associated with distance education, confirm the irreplaceable role of the school as an institution and the personality and role model of the teacher in education.

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