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FOSTERING TRUST. PARENTS AND TEACHERS COOPERATION AS A CASE STUDY¹

In contemporary society, schools and parents are supposed to cope effectively with increasing expectations, neoliberal pressure, and lack of time on both sides to engage in cooperation (Graham-Clay 2005). Educational partnership between schools and teachers is gaining the attention of policymakers in Poland. However, considering the ‘territorial wars’ (Lightfoot 1981, p. 97) between parents and teachers, this partnership has never been more abstract than nowadays. These power struggles build

dichotomies between teachers and parents, changing them from allies to enemies, thereby undermining the potential of the possibilities of mutual collaboration [...] By implementing such an approach, schools are presented as an obsolete relic that needs to be reformed. The teacher’s voice is not taken into account because they are already labeled as bureaucrats using out-of-date approaches and techniques. In consequence, the social needs are opposed to distant, bureaucratic institutions (Rusnak 2017, p. 173).

The literature points to the positive features of family–school cooperation for teachers, parents and students (Mapp 2003). The benefits of this collaboration are even greater whenever there is a great gap between the world of public education and the family (Pépin 1997; Crozier 2010). In their works, researchers emphasize the positive effects that parental involvement has on various aspects of school life and the well-being of students. However, a traditional understanding of the parent–school relation stresses the separate responsibilities of schools and parents, and underlines ‘the inherent incomparability, competition, and conflict between families and schools’ (Tschannen-Moran 2001, p. 311). Megan Tschannen-Moran claims that if schools do not include everyone (teachers, parents) in a process of decision making, it may result in withdrawing involvement – considered useless and meaningless – or, as in the case of Poland, causing the increasing rate of demands made on schools.

For that reason, well-organized schools skillfully operate between societal pressure, bureaucratic reality, public opinion, and the fight for autonomy. Although Polish

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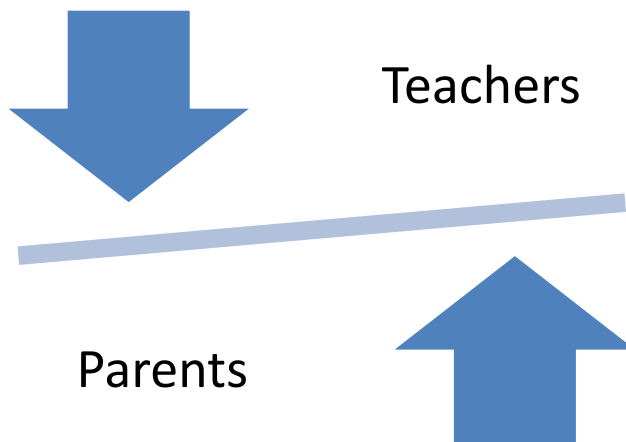
literature deals with the concept of trust in the context of education (Sztompka 2003; Czerepaniak-Walczak 2015), few studies have been published regarding the influence of trust upon parental involvement.

Two worlds, two perspectives, one student

Being a parent is often compared to a ‘rollercoaster ride’ (Weille 2014, p. 27) as it is a lifelong learning process shaped by the world around parents. As Maria Mendel suggests, parents ‘learn from their lives how to be a parent and what being a parent could mean for themselves [for their children] and for society in which they act’ (Mendel 2016, p. 145). She argues that parent identity is projected through relationships and places such as family, home and schools. Hence, it can be acknowledged that the attitude towards school can also be learned on the basis of parental experience gained in the contact with educational institutions.

Unfortunately, parents are also confronted on an everyday basis by members of a community. While Sara Lawrence Lightfoot in her research from decades ago observed that ‘teachers, psychiatrists, welfare workers, and priests all rob the family of its privacy and autonomy and make it overly dependent on “expert” wisdom’ (Lightfoot 1981, p. 98), nowadays parents feel unsupported, judged and misunderstood by educators. In my research, the majority of parents consider their parenthood a failure, they perceive schools as institutions that control them instead of offering support: in their stories they speak of helplessness. One of them said:

While back in the communist regime, the school controlled families to a great extent (*the person showed with his arms a distance you cannot grasp*), nowadays it ... (*the person hesitated*) controls us to a big extent (*showing a distance only slightly smaller than before*). (MK-F- 2016-06-15).



In these rapidly changing times, the concept family is being redefined. A two-parent family with a male as the financial supporter is not the only model; we have families with two working parents, single-parent families, adoptive families, and patchwork families, to name just a few of the new family possibilities (Keyes 2000). Mothers more often take the roles traditionally performed by fathers, fathers are offered opportunities to take some time off from work and help to raise children, and children became more mature taking care of themselves and often their siblings since parents come back late from work. Even grandmothers, who in Poland traditionally used to look after their grandchildren, now still work, often abroad.

Being a teacher has also acquired new meanings. Years ago teachers used to live door-to-door with students and their families. They knew everyone by name, they would chat about everyday life in a local store or in the street. Nowadays, the minority of teachers live in the proximity of the school they work in. Due to constant reforms resulting in closing schools, most of them travel to work each day, which influences their willingness to spend additional time in the school community and identify themselves with it. Moreover, living in a different part of the city, or a different city, may result in differences in socioeconomic class or a system of values: this may influence the way teachers interpret parents' attitudes towards schools and build barriers to developing effective partnerships (Keyes 2000). Notwithstanding all those challenges, communication between parents and teachers has become the focal point in the literature concerning the cooperation between parents and schools (Graham-Clay 2005).

Does trust really matter?

Do we really need to have trust in education? Under the communist regime, authoritarian schools "belonged" to authoritarian teachers. Obedience, not collaboration, characterized those times. Teachers were respected in the same way as, for example, doctors and no one heard about parents challenging them. Even nowadays, there is a great amount of research stating that school structure based on consistent and fair enforcement of rules proves beneficial for students, especially the adolescent ones (Nickerson and Martens 2008; Gregory 2010). Authoritarian schools adopt the standpoint that effective learning takes place in a quiet, disciplined environment, which seems to reflect the attitude of most Polish schools. As Anne Gregory reveals in her research, 'permissive schools that tolerate a wide range of student behavior run the risk of suffering too much disorder' (Gregory 2010, p. 485). Similarly, Amanda P. Nickerson and Matthew P. Martens discovered that approaches toward discipline could be categorized into the security/enforcement approach (i.e., zero tolerance approach, use of security cameras, police patrols) which resembles a zero trust attitude, and an education/therapeutic

approach within authoritarian schools (i.e., teaching conflict resolution, parental involvement) (Nickerson and Martens 2008).

Furthermore, teachers do not feel trusted either due to installation of CCTV at schools, parents questioning their professionalism, or paperwork in which they are obliged to report the work they had done. The use of surveillance technology in general and more specifically in the educational reality is not new (see also Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*). However, its presence in classrooms or in the school corridors to monitor student behavior causes anxiety among teachers since it monitors their behavior as well (Rusnak 2017). Prioritizing students' safety and keeping a disciplined and orderly school environment is believed to have great influence on knowledge acquisition leading to high scores in students' achievement tables; this in turn has a high priority for school administrators and teachers. Although the lack of trust can be witnessed in educational reality, schools still function, and students achieve educational successes. Nevertheless, the issue that needs to be considered is whether the focus on educational achievements and the results of testing is enough.

Like many others, the Polish education system has been dominated by testing, measurement and judgment. It led to the creation of a vicious loop of distrust in which blame, fear and misjudgment impinge on its effectiveness. It is only when the focal point is placed on students and not entirely on their achievements, that trust may be rebuilt. Tschannen-Moran emphasizes that education cannot rely on pure transmission of knowledge. She states that:

to educate a student is to induct them into a community of practice such that they adopt the norms, values, and standards of excellence in that community. The teacher initially serves as a bridge to that community while the student, as a novice, begins to learn the skills of the community before adopting the standards as their own (Tschannen-Moran 2015, p. 1).

Unlike the authoritative approach, parent-school collaboration helped to reduce violent behavior among students at school (Epstein 2002; Nickerson and Martens 2008; Bender and Emslie 2010); Thea Renda Abu El-Haj discovered that the benefits can also be visible in students' well-being in the school environment (Renda Abu-El-Haj 2007).

Collaboration between parents and schools can be understood and implemented in schools in a casual manner. Additionally, it may function as a key phrase that attracts parents to schools that claim to give priority to cooperation. However, Alison Cook-Sather highlights that 'there is something fundamentally amiss about building and rebuilding an entire system without consulting at any point those it is ostensibly designed to serve' (Cook-Sather 2002, p. 1).

In my paper, I voice the opinion that creating the opportunity inside schools for a meaningful dialogue between parents and teachers may be the first step in defining cooperation and living in a local context.

However, despite the enthusiasm among the researchers and the attempts of schools (e.g. introducing electronic registers of students' grades) to improve communication between schools and families, the outcomes have been far from satisfactory.

Insistence on trust in my research comes from the assumption that effective functioning of democratic institutions relies on voluntary cooperation between participants (Bryk and Schneider 2002). Anthony S. Bryk and Barbara Schneider have identified trust as the core resource of effective collaboration. In their work, they provided a wide range of trust definitions coming from different theoretical backgrounds. In my paper, I draw upon their understanding of trust as 'a fundamental feature of day-to-day exchange' (Bryk and Schneider 2002, p. 21). As schooling entails a long process of social exchange between parents, teachers and students, it needs to be taken into consideration that trust is being shaped by respect, competence, integrity, and personal regard for others (Bryk and Schneider 2002).

Theoretical framework

I follow the concept of radical democracy represented by Chantal Mouffe as well as the concept of non-concensual democracy developed by Leszek Koczanowicz. Radical democracy aims at 'exposing and challenging the exclusionary limits of the mainstream democratic theory and practices' (Little and Lloyd 2009, p. 199). Therefore, this paper suggests that it should be perceived as a tool to deconstruct the educational reality and empower those who have been excluded due to the rational consensus.

In her works, Mouffe emphasizes the excluding manner of democracy. She understands 'adversaries' as 'those who stand in opposition to enemies and who do not fight against each other, rather struggle with the opinion of the other, at the same time do not question their rights to have different standpoints (Mouffe 1999, p. 13). She argues that such an understanding has the potential to fight against the dominant social order resulting in exclusion. Otherwise, without antagonisms, acting according to the principles of rational consensus, it would be impossible to create a political identity, especially a collective identity.

The end of the 1980s brought diversity and pluralism to all areas of social life in Poland. It became a challenge for Polish schools with which they have been struggling until today. Certainly, education should be able to distinguish the diversity and plurality of articulated claims beyond the will for stable consensus. As Alan Finlayson justly maintains, 'on every subject there are two speeches or two arguments opposed to one another' (Finlayson 2009, p. 30) Therefore, in a radical perspective 'persons are always, inevitably acting upon each other as they are themselves acted upon; that they cannot help but always be attempting to direct the conduct of others, be directed, resist such

direction or be resisted; and that such action is crystallized and amplified in state and social institutions' (Finlayson 2009, p. 14). Such an understanding does not deny the possibility of a consensus, rather it concentrates on its instability as a value.

For Mouffe, a pluralist approach is one in which there is constant struggle and re-negotiation of social identity. Therefore, the ongoing confrontation or struggle 'should not be seen in a negative light, but as a marker of the vibrancy and pluralism of democracy' (Mouffe 2013, p. 95).

From my research

I conducted my research in an elementary school which is located in a large city in Poland, in a well-off neighborhood. The school's educational traditions date back to the last century. Small and originally suburban, it has expanded into a modern educational institution with hundreds of students. In the mornings, you can hardly enter the school building since parents' cars are everywhere. Parents, however, just stop and let their children out of the cars hardly ever entering the building. The great majority of families come from the middle class. Parents are very active in their children's education. They often challenge teachers and seem comfortable in getting what they want from the school. Lareau's research illustrates that middle-class parents act 'as though they had a right to pursue their own individual preferences and to actively manage interactions in institutional settings. They appeared comfortable in these settings; they were open to sharing information and asking for attention. Although some children were more outwardgoing than others, it was common practice among middle-class children to shift interactions to suit *their* preferences' (Lareau 2003, p. 6).

My study was conducted in the framework of qualitative research as it tries to 'explore attitudes, opinion, and beliefs' (Brantlinger 2005, p. 196). Its focal point was fostering effective cooperation among parents and teachers in the school. To understand the nature of relations between these two groups, and reasons causing the lack of cooperation, I decided to conduct in-depth interviews with parents from the school as a part of my action research.

I scheduled the interview with a parent who was usually absent at the teacher–parent meetings. What is more, this mother never contacted any teacher, she did not respond to mails or notes in a school-to-home notebook. We were supposed to meet after her work. When I arrived, she was not there. I thought she had changed her mind, but she appeared a minute later. When I told her that our conversation would be held in the psychologist's office, she immediately got tense. I explained that it was the only place at school available at that time. She laughed with relief. During our conversation, I asked her about her experience as a parent in the context of cooperating with the school. For

her, the most important factor is the quality of communication between the school and home. However, when asked what it had looked like in previous years, she said that unfortunately the contacts had been organized in the atmosphere of rush: teachers used to talk to her when she was at work because she works nearby. That put her in an inconvenient position because she had to ask the manager for permission to talk (*she blushed*). Moreover, the situation offered little privacy. Even when the teachers asked her to come to school, rarely was there enough time devoted only to her. The meetings did not take place in a quiet place since the teachers were checking the time because they needed to go to the next lesson, or another teacher was entering the classroom to conduct the lesson. The typical place for the meeting was the school corridor. In case of her older children attending junior high schools, the most frequent way of communication were phone calls. It was always a teacher calling her, but when she wanted to call back, the teachers would not answer the phone.

Our interview lasted for over an hour and then turned into a private conversation – we continued talking about her life on our way from school. It often happens that when a researcher turns off a dictaphone, the interviewee continues to talk. Although the woman claimed it is hard to be a single mother of three, it is only when I stopped recording she admitted that her older daughter used to smoke cigarettes and marijuana.

From what she said, it was obvious that teachers usually informed her about her children's misbehavior or the lack of educational achievements and expected some actions on her part. The woman did not feel her opinion was important and taken seriously. Furthermore, working in the mornings in a restaurant and in the afternoons as a cleaning lady, she did not have enough time to devote to the problems of her teenage children.

Being working-class among middle-class parents did not make it easier for the woman. For her and her family, education has the same value as for the middle-class, however, all her strengths were concentrated on urgent economic constraints, such as getting new shoes for the children, paying the bills, etc. On the other hand, the school seemed to value children whose leisure time is devoted to studying hard or attending additional classes, which makes it impossible for a working class parent to become a partner that counts.

Research on trust demonstrates that its level is based on experience and it is established in a lifelong learning process. As Erden and Erden state:

As life as a whole is considered a process of learning, trust has become true by being socialized in the early ages and then by being part of the social organizations. If trust which is gained at earlier ages has been parallel to the trust which is gained at later ages, trust has become stronger, social stabilization has been increasing and trust has been transferred from one generation to another (Erden and Erden 2009, p. 2181).

But what if it is not trust but distrust that is being transferred over generations? What if Anette Lareau is right in saying that distrust towards institutions is in-built and that it is an inevitable characteristic of the working class? The scholar states that the working class' stance towards schools can be best characterized by 'an emerging sense of distance, distrust, and constraint in their institutional experiences' (Lareau 2003, p. 3).

So, was it possible to bring trust into our further cooperation? Trust-building is a never-ending process, so after one conversation – it was probably not enough, but the woman approached me a couple of days later and offered to organize a cookery workshop for the children and parents from her daughter's class. She admitted that in order to make it fun and entertaining for all, she had already bought a cook book with recipes for children. For her it was a purchase that was probably not planned in her monthly budget, for me it was a sign that we managed to find a common path leading to cooperation.

Social transformations occur not by encouraging citizens to actions, but rather through the ways in which daily relations are articulated. My action research, carried out in the framework of Mouffe and Koczanowicz' theories, led to recognizing such research as an empowering method that may show the way to a meaningful collaboration. It illustrates that teachers have the potential to become adversaries, to change the existing social order in schools and, thus, in their fields through research.

Therefore, action research may be used as a tool to improve the educational system for teachers in Poland. It is crucial especially in circumstances which Mendel underlines in her research. She emphasizes that graduate and postgraduate studies for teachers in Poland do not contain separate subjects that treat the idea of cooperation between teachers and families explicitly. The theme is mentioned during workshops, lectures, but not to the extent which results in students' self-confidence in this matter, and, more importantly, teacher candidates do not feel qualified for such collaboration. Mendel claims that Polish students do not feel prepared for such cooperation. She argues that 'low assessments of their preparation for tasks in this area can be read as a request to improve the teacher's curriculum offer, first of all enriching it with the content of cooperation with the environment' (Mendel 2004, p. 269). Therefore, teachers' knowledge acquired during studies rarely results in practical skills for difficult situations. As a result, teachers have to acquire the necessary competence themselves, usually by trial and error, or by following more experienced colleagues. These actions are rather intuitive, they do not guarantee effectiveness (Banasiak and Wołowska 2015). It often leads to teachers avoiding contact with parents (formalizing relationships, limiting yourself to a polite greeting, casual conversation, exchanging opinions on trivial topics), or to establishing non-professional contacts, such as making friends (Pyżalski 2010). According to the research conducted by Jacek Pyżalski, as many as 1/3 of Polish teachers complain

about problems in cooperation with the parents; this significant percentage indicates the need to take action towards problem solving in the teacher-parent relationship. Additionally, it turned out that over 1/3 of teachers feel tired mentally after meeting the parents of their students, which may imply that these meetings involve conflicts or other stressful situations that the teacher does not feel confident enough to solve. Teachers also feel that the parents do not support them (Pyżalski 2010).

My research shows that implementing action research in one's practice can effect a significant change in the teacher's practice, its organizational context and may lead to meaningful collaboration among parents and teachers. Opening schools to the needs and expectations of parents, we open them to a dialogue which – combining different attitudes – is crucial in fostering meaningful cooperation (Nowosad and Olczyk 2001). For me, it was the opportunity to engage and interact with parents through a non-consensual dialogue leading to mutual understanding. A dialogue in educational research can provide a space where teachers become researchers reshaping their professional identity (Clandinin et al. 2006).

Following Koczanowicz, it seems essential to seek a better understanding of another person without reaching a consensus (Koczanowicz 2015). However, it would not be possible without trust, which is crucial for open communication. As Tschannen-Moran emphasizes, people who trust each other 'are likely to disclose more accurate, relevant, and complete data about problems, as well as feelings or ideas' (Tschannen-Moran 2001, p. 313). Thus, I want to highlight the importance of non-consensual dialogue that is crucial for building a critical community which I understand as a community in which members are able to grasp similarities and shared beliefs, but at the same time they are aware of differences (Koczanowicz 2015). Such a standpoint provides another perspective on parents' reluctance towards visits at school.

Conclusions

As a teacher and a researcher, I was amazed how dialogue can change the educational reality best described by Piotr Sztompka as 'the vicious loop, which starts from an already existing culture of distrust, proceeds through withholding trust, and results in an enhanced culture of suspicion' (Sztompka 2003, p. 121). While talking about cooperation, we need to decide what the point of asking parents to collaborate is if there is so little effort put into trust-building. Does it lead to what Tschannen-Moran considers as the attempt to:

buy (parents') greater support, satisfaction, and acceptance of decisions? Or do administrators really see parents as a potential resource that bring information, insight, and a useful perspec-

tive to the table in the search for solutions to problems and opportunities facing the school? (Tschannen-Moran 2001, p. 313)

As a teacher I witness growing criticism about the low level of parental involvement in collaboration. At the same time, schools usually offer a stereotypical range of opportunities for parent involvement that only resemble collaboration. Schools seem to underestimate the valuable standpoint that parents may bring into discussion. Instead, educators seem to focus on the rules and regulations justifying the exclusion of parents from the discussion. Bearing in mind who they are, what knowledge they bring with them, parents should be perceived as crucial partners for schools. Similarly, keeping in mind who we are, what knowledge we bring to the table, we need to acknowledge that facilitating trust and therefore parent-teacher collaboration cannot be based just on obedient participation in parent-teacher meetings, or even creating 'bake a cake' opportunities.

Including the parental point of view into a non-consensual dialogue will provide the educators with the missing perspectives of those who are excluded from schools on a regular basis. 'As long as we exclude these perspectives from our conversations about schooling and how it needs to change, [...] we will be based on an incomplete picture of life in classrooms and schools and how that life could be improved' (Cook-Sather 2002, p. 2). Schools need to make an effort to create spaces within which parents can speak, not just listen; where teachers would focus on understanding, not just listening, and hence taking actions in response to what they learned.

Educational institutions try to protect themselves from various accusations that are addressed towards them, for example, lack of collaboration with parents, or controversial grading systems. They cope with the broken trust and broken communication by turning themselves into fortresses and introducing various rules and regulations that defend them against 'outsiders'. In such circumstances, there is no space for trust and a meaningful dialogue. Unfortunately, 'the educational system, its political representatives, and individual teachers, also suffer from this disease of poor cooperativeness' (Kotásek 1993, p. 476). Cooperation and trust are two-sided, they do not exist apart from each other, but rather side-by-side.

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FOSTERING TRUST. PARENTS AND TEACHERS COOPERATION AS A CASE STUDY

SUMMARY: The changing European context challenges the education system in Poland. Schools and parents are supposed to cope effectively with increasing expectations, neoliberal pressure, and lack of time (Graham-Clay 2005). Being a teacher involves continuously seeking new solutions and ways to respond to these challenges throughout the whole teaching practice. Parenthood is also a lifelong learning process constantly shaped by communities around parents and the world at large (Mendel 2016). In these rapidly changing times, even the well-established concepts of traditional family and teacher roles are being redefined. In the paper, the author will comment on the results of research, which shed light on trust as a key factor in fostering cooperation among parents and teachers in the context of Poland. The methodological framework (Mouffe 1999; 2013; Koczanowicz 2015) which the author has chosen allowed her to achieve certain positive effects, such as establishing meaningful partnership and thus challenging the existing educational reality.

KEYWORDS: cooperation, trust, action research, Poland.

WSPIERANIE ZAUFANIA. STUDIUM PEDAGOGICZNE WSPÓŁPRACY RODZICÓW I NAUCZYCIELI

STRESZCZENIE: Zmieniający się kontekst europejski stanowi wyzwanie dla systemu edukacji w Polsce. Od szkoły i rodziców oczekuje się radzenia sobie z rosnącymi oczekiwaniami, presją neoliberalną i brakiem czasu (Graham-Clay 2005). Bycie nauczycielem wymaga ciągłego poszukiwania nowych

rozwiązań i sposobów reagowania na te wyzwania w swojej pracy. Rodzicielstwo jest również procesem uczenia się przez całe życie, stale kształtowanym przez społeczności wokół rodziców (Mendel 2016). W tych szybko zmieniających się czasach, nawet mocno osadzone w tradycji koncepcje rodziny i nauczyciela ulegają ciągłym modyfikacjom. W artykule autorka skomentuje wyniki badań własnych dotyczących zaufania, jako kluczowego czynnika wspierającego współpracę między rodzicami i nauczycielami w kontekście Polski. Ramy metodologiczne (Mouffe 1999; 2013; Koczanowicz 2015), które wybrała autorka, pozwoliły jej osiągnąć pewne pozytywne efekty, takie jak nawiązanie znaczącego partnerstwa i tym samym zakwestionowanie istniejącej rzeczywistości edukacyjnej.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: zaufanie, współpraca, badania w działaniu, Polska.

