

Part 2

Pre-service and In-service Teacher Training & Learning and Teaching Styles

Jana Kalin & Barbara Šteh

The Goals and Conditions of Qualitative Collaboration between Elementary Schools and Community – a Challenge for the Professional Development

Abstract

One of the most important tasks that schools have is the establishment of collaboration between the school and the wider community it belongs to. We have conducted an empirical study on the collaboration of Slovenian elementary schools with different partners. We were interested in, among other things, what are the objectives set by schools in the field of collaboration with the community, and what the schools point out as examples of good collaboration. Descriptions of good collaboration that the principals presented have been analyzed from the perspective of basic characteristics of the collaboration between partners. The questions about the conditions of the partnerships and new challenges that everyone involved have to face naturally also arise.

Keywords: elementary schools, community, collaboration, partnership

Introduction

It is important to realize that school is part of the local as well as wider social environments (Bečaj, 2009; Deutsch & Kolar, 2009). It is, therefore, important for schools and school community members, and individuals and institutions to work together intentionally, to establish mutual trust and encourage a culture of dialogue through various shared activities in schools and in the community. This opens up a space for learning from each other, it offers possibilities of educating both children and adults and develops individuals' social and cultural capital, which strengthens the sense of belonging and solidarity, and enables individual and community development.

Contemporary authors (e.g. Epstein, 1995; Sheridan, Napolitano & Swearer, 2002) discuss the involvement of schools, individuals and institutions in the community in terms of partnership, which they define as a collaboration of various individuals as equal partners, forming a trustworthy relationship within which they share ideas, resources, services, expertise, and responsibilities on the path to common goals. Partnerships combine individuals and material, financial, etc. resources both in schools and the community, which empowers schools, families as well as wider communities and their members.

Nelson, Amio, Prilleltensky and Nickels (2000 in Sheridan et al, 2002, p. 322) emphasize that through good-quality partnerships or positive relationships individuals create more than a concrete program of collaboration: “/.../ they build a sense of community, a positive social climate, and an ethos of change”.

Sheridan et al. (2002, pp. 322-323) define a number of *basic characteristics of the partnership* between schools and communities. An essential characteristic requires that interactions among participants should be founded on collaboration. Collaboration means more than simply working together; it means a change (transformation) in the views and structures about *how* individuals or institutions collaborate (Minke, 2000 in Sheridan et al, 2002). Collaboration means blurring the borders among individuals or institutions and distributing resources and responsibilities for planning, conducting and evaluating activities and goals among all participating partners. Here, it is important to highlight that there should be mutual respect for the professional autonomy of each institution and individual. Furco (2010) notes on the popularity of academic service-learning, which is characterized by students’ participation in various activities in the community where they develop and carry out solutions for real-life, social problems in the local community or in the wider society. Simultaneously, students acquire theoretical knowledge and learn how the concepts they learn about in the classroom can be applied in the situations of their everyday life. These projects are most frequently conducted in collaboration with community members, and they are primarily designed with the needs of the community in mind. With this type of learning, teachers should be prepared to give up some control so that they can empower students to take on an active role in the learning process (*ibid.*, p. 234). Teachers also need time to develop relationships with community representatives “who will be important partners in the service-learning enterprise” (*ibid.*).

Collaboration between schools and communities is based on shared responsibility (Sheridan et al, 2002). All subjects participating in partnership simultaneously and individually co-create life in a particular community, they enable learning for all participants and they encourage their development.

During such collaboration, very different individuals with different knowledge, skills, experiences, viewpoints and perspectives meet (*ibid.*). Such a variety among participants should be perceived as a specific advantage rather than a disadvantage. A variety of viewpoints requires negotiations and agreements and presupposes respect for difference. Any prejudices and discriminatory behavior have a negative effect on the quality of collaboration.

Having positive personal relationships is of paramount importance to partnerships among schools, individuals and institutions in the community (*ibid.*). Balanced relationships based on cooperation and co-dependence must be established. These relationships are developed in the context that puts students in the foreground of all considerations. Partners focus on students’ benefits from the aspect of their learning and development.

The characteristics of partnerships and their activities relating schools and communities or individual institutions are flexibility and proactive orientation (*ibid.*). Collaboration and shared activities depend on the context and the situation in which they are conducted. Collaboration also depends on a number of other factors:

the quality of the relationship, the purposes of collaboration, the availability of resources, the suitability of circumstances for collaboration and many more.

Finally, collaboration is based on common, clearly defined goals whose attainment must be regularly monitored (*ibid.*). It is important that collaboration should be goal-oriented, which requires a special emphasis during the process of collaboration planning. When stressing achievements, we must not overlook the very processes that any collaboration encourages or the possibilities that arise for future collaboration.

The purpose of the research study

Our empirical research study was designed to gain an insight into how elementary schools in Slovenia are involved in wider communities. We were interested in how schools perceive their role in the environment and the main purpose of collaborating with communities. Furthermore, we investigated how frequently and in what manners they collaborate with individuals or different institutions from the community, what the advantages of such collaboration are, what obstacles they face, and what they see as still unexploited possibilities of collaboration. Of the many research questions, this article deals with only the following:

1. What goals are they going to try to achieve in the area of collaboration with the community in the future?
2. What typifies the collaboration between their school and the community in the described cases of collaboration that they emphasize as an instance of good practice?

Method

In the empirical research we used a descriptive and causal non-experimental method (Sagadin, 1993). We attempted to include all elementary schools in Slovenia in our research study, and in October 2014 we sent out questionnaires addressed to the principals of all of them ($N = 450$). A good half (54%) of all the questionnaires ($n = 245$) were returned. The non-random sample thus included 85 (34.7%) urban and 160 (65.3%) non-urban schools. The questionnaire included multiple-choice items, scales and open-ended questions. Here we only discuss the principals' responses to the questions presented in the purpose of the research. The gathered data were processed and presented at the level of descriptive and inference statistics.

Results and discussion

The goals that schools wish to achieve in the next three years in the area of collaboration with individuals and institutions in the community

The first issue was to find out what short-term goals schools wish to reach in the area of collaboration with individuals and institutions in the community. Based on the principals' responses to the open-ended questions, we formulated nine categories, which present the content of collaboration more than actual goals; at the same time this points to the individuals and institutions they are going to contact when reaching the goals. However, we are fully aware that within individual

categories the goals are formulated at markedly different levels of conciseness and quality – from merely mentioning the content area of their future work to very concisely formulated operational goals which we believe can contribute significantly to activating strengths for their attainment and can provide us with criteria for the evaluation of achievements. Response categories are given by representation, with the exception of the “other” category, which includes general or unclear answers (n = 194):

1. *enrichment of instruction and extracurricular activities* (41 or 21.1% of all answers): participation of individuals and societies from the community in school instruction or extracurricular activities;
2. *co-creating life in and establishing connections with the community* (40 or 20.6%): “*We’d like to make local sights known to the general public.*”;
3. *career orientation* (24 or 12.4%): keeping students well-informed about different professions in the environment, enabling their familiarization with professions and working organizations;
4. *international cooperation* (20 or 10.3%): participation in international exchanges and projects, collaboration with Slovenian schools in the neighboring countries;
5. *intergenerational cooperation* (16 or 8.2%): “*More intergenerational cooperation*”;
6. *school’s recognition, promotion in the public* (14 or 7.2%): “*To make our school’s work better known to the public.*”; “*To strengthen the school’s identity.*”;
7. *collaboration with volunteer organizations, developing humanitarianism and other values in young people* (14 or 7.2%): this category includes both the replies that explicitly name only volunteering and developing humanitarian orientation in students and the replies that refer to wider educational goals that schools strive for (“*To develop the culture of peace and non-violence.*”);
8. *financial reasons for collaboration* (4 or 2.1%): “*Raising as much money as possible to provide for students coming from socially underprivileged families.*”;
9. *other* (21 or 10.8%): the category includes general answers (e.g. exchange of experiences, learning from examples of good practice, more collaboration in life-long learning) and the answers that stress the already existing good collaboration or the wish to strengthen the existing collaboration, but with no explicit or specific goals.

Our results show that the principals’ priorities when considering collaboration with individuals and institutions in the community in the next three years were in the area of the enrichment of instruction and extracurricular activities (21.1%) and in the area of co-creating life in and establishing connections with the community (20.6%). In terms of content, the former goal relates more to developing a good-quality educational process in schools, and the latter refers to collaboration with the environment. With regard to the similar shares of the two responses, it could be argued that the responding schools are equally aware of the importance of collaboration that directly benefits schools (i.e. enriching the curriculum) and the importance of schools’, students’ and educators’ work for the welfare of the local community. Schools are clearly aware of the importance of co-creating the cultural

and social environment in which they function; the role of schools in developing the area's cultural capital is significant. It means establishing a relationship of mutual enrichment.

A good tenth of the responses refer to setting goals in the area of career orientation (12.4%), and a further tenth to the area of international cooperation. 8.2% of the principals cited goals from the area of intergenerational cooperation and learning between different generations. A similar share (7.2%) also mentioned goals from the areas of the school's public promotion as well as volunteer organizations and developing humanitarian and other values in the young.

The smallest share is represented by the goals that the responding principals listed in the area of raising financial means for the school's good-quality work or for the welfare of individual students. These responses were few (2.1%), but we must be aware that such goals are also important to schools' good-quality work, as they affect directly the opportunities that schools can provide in the local environment.

Examples of good collaboration between schools and individuals/institutions from the community

We looked at what kind of collaboration the principals themselves set as examples of good practice they had developed or realized and would wish to share with others. To find out, we asked them an open-ended question with additional questions: who participates in their chosen example of good practice, how and when is it conducted, what are the advantages of the collaboration and what could be improved? Despite a whole page of the questionnaire devoted to their response, the principals repeatedly provided cursory and inexact descriptions of examples of collaboration between schools and individuals or institutions from the community. In spite of certain gaps in the responses, the questionnaire gave us at least some information on examples of good collaboration between schools and the community from a great majority (83.7%) of the schools participating in the research study. This gave us a good insight into a relatively great number of different cases of collaboration between schools and the community. The principals' responses were carefully analyzed and categorized according to the following criteria: the participants in the collaboration, the frequency of the collaboration, the type of collaboration, the advantages of the collaboration and required improvements. During the analysis, however, we were constantly faced with the dilemma about the quality of the described collaboration between schools and the community, and this is the issue we would like to address below. We examined in how many cases the partnership (Epstein, 1996; Hornby, 2000; Sheridan et al, 2002) means that participants prepare and conduct a project together, using the process to learn together as well as from one another and to grow personally. At the other end of this continuum are forms of collaboration arising when schools or communities organize something for one another, but there is rarely any real partnership in collaboration. To distinguish between the different forms of collaboration, we divided all the descriptions of good collaboration into two categories, according to the *level of collaboration*:

1. *Prepare something for others* (150 descriptions or 77.7%): "They ask the school to prepare cultural programs for various events."; "Students' visits in the retirement home, workshops and performances.";

2. *Establish partnership in collaboration* (43 descriptions or 22.3%): for a description of good practice to be included into this category, there had to be a clear description of at least one characteristic of partnership (e.g. common goals, interdependence, learning from one another, participants' empowerment, participation and responsibility of all participants, mutual understanding, trust and respect, equality, goal orientation, etc.) or there had to be a clear emphasis placed on a joint organization or carrying out of something (it was not enough only to state that they collaborate): "*Carrying out a specific task – a goal that is useful in everyday life and the local community ...*"; "*learning from one another ...*"; "*planning the content, organization and realization of an event together*".

Of all the 193 descriptions of good collaboration between schools and the community only rare examples (22.3% of the descriptions) made it possible for us to consider them partnerships – provided they stressed at least one of the basic characteristics. According to our results, it is obvious that schools still face considerable challenges as well as problems when establishing partnerships with the community. Yet we must underline that some schools are successful, and they succeed in a variety of different ways. To illustrate it, let us provide an analysis of a selection of two examples of partnerships between schools and local communities as given by the responding principals. We intentionally chose two very different examples to illustrate that the collaboration with the community can be carried out in a great variety of ways.

1st example:

In one of the urban schools they offer really good intergenerational collaboration, which goes beyond mere students' performances for retired people; rather, *together* with grandparents students set up a maypole, students teach the retired computer skills, and the retired teach students handcrafts (extracurricular handcrafts classes). Grandparents are, additionally, invited to attend physical education classes, and the school organizes a day of movement and intergenerational socializing – charity bicycling for all generations. This, then, is *continuous collaboration*, not only a one-shot event, conducted in a variety of ways. In the above-mentioned example they *build on mutual collaboration and respect* (according to Sheridan et al, 2002), they include *learning from one another (empowerment of both)*, and at the same time they look after cultural heritage, which they see as among the advantages of such collaboration.

2nd example:

This example differs from the others as to the exceptional commitment and *participation of various stakeholders and its integration into the community*. It is an interdisciplinary project on the lighthouse and youth tourism. Participating are all the students and teachers of the school, students and their supervisors from Turkey, Romania and Montenegro (making it an international collaboration), the students' parents, numerous institutions and local community representatives – the municipality, hotels, individual societies, the museum, local restaurants, local cultural workers and students from the Faculty of Tourism Studies. The main activities are

organized during the “Interweek – Meet you at the lighthouse” *at different locations* (the museum, the hotel, the lighthouse, etc.), not only in the school, which shows the integration of the project into the community. The project is expressly *goal oriented*, which is also one of the characteristics of partnership (according to Sheridan et al. 2002), since they design leaflets for young travelers, a video and an exhibition for all locals and tourists in the Lighthouse. In the principal’s own description of the advantages of the collaboration we can recognize the characteristics of partnership: *“increased awareness of the necessity for the synergy among the local stakeholders that can have an impact on the preservation, development and promotion of the community; familiarity with the professions which are unavoidable in the development of tourism and the conservation of cultural heritage; researching the past, the role and significance of the Lighthouse for the community; designing promotion materials; organizing a cultural event related to the lighthouse and tourism; presenting the results to the representatives of the municipality, local tourism providers and cultural institutions”*.

Based on the analyzed examples, we can conclude that schools have a variety of ways to collaborate with the community in a good-quality way, as it is always necessary to adapt the collaboration to each unique context and situation as well as to the needs of community members. Perhaps it is crucial that schools become aware of the importance of such collaboration and the advantages that it can have for both schools and communities. Only then will they be willing to invest energy and effort in collaboration.

Conclusion

It is necessary to ensure, in addition to the fact that the attitudes of all subjects involved towards the collaboration between the school and the community have to be correspondent, some basic conditions for quality collaboration. Sanders (2003) lists the following:

- *professional preparation of the partnership and the competence of the partners involved*; requires quality planning of the collaboration (clarity of objectives, tasks and roles of individuals, and the extent and the time span of the partnership), effective leadership, consideration of the characteristics of all the partners involved and their respective potential; adequate communicational, collaborative and organizational skills of the partners;
- *the selection of a suitable partner*, that is based on the good understanding of all the partners involved, joined research into the possibilities of collaboration, and shaping of the vision of the collaboration; it is crucial to be aware of the specificity of the contribution of each partner, and to develop a culture of willingness to collaborate on the basis of flexibility, respect for diversity and ethnic stance;
- *evaluation of the partnership* involves both, the evaluation of the quality of interaction between partners and the introduction of the planned activities; partnership is always a process and it therefore demands an appropriate

amount of time for formative and summative evaluation that lead employees in their development of their professional skills, and in qualitative collaboration.

Collaboration of schools or teachers with partners on different levels presents a special opportunity for professional development of teachers. The intensity of the collaboration opens new perspectives and enriches individual teachers as well as the school as a whole and on the other hand presents an opportunity for teachers and the development of all participating partners from the community. Consequently collaboration is becoming a lever for integration of different individuals into the process in an effort to enrich the educational environment and the local community and create a culture of collaboration.

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Prof. Dr. Jana Kalin, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, jana.kalin@guest.arnes.si

Prof. Dr. Barbara Šteh, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, barbara.steh@guest.arnes.si