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GOLDEN AREA

(5) Family-school relation

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- 1. - The importance of the relation**
- 2. - Understanding and cooperation levels**
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1. - The importance of the relation

Family-school relation is one of the most important issues in the “Golden 5” project. Throughout Europe the quality and expectations of parent support differs, as well as the practice. Both parents and teachers attitude will be special and unique for every country and school. The main goal of this project is to create a climate of cooperation between parents, child and school to improve children's academic achievement and increase social inclusion in classroom through mutual respect and understanding.

There are two main reasons for a link between the school and the parents: a normative reason and a theoretical and pedagogical one.

The normative reason is based upon legislation. In the Human Rights Declaration of UN from 1984 it is stated that the parents have the main responsibility concerning their children's` education (Article 26, point 3) The Norwegian Child Law (par. 30) underlines the parents important role in bringing up their children, support them and give them education according to their abilities. In the Law of education par.1 it is said that the school's` role in education is to cooperate with parents in bringing up and educate the children. In L 97: 30 it is stated that the parents have the main responsibility for bringing up their children and because of that must have influence upon important school matters.

The theoretical frame also underlines the important role of parents in their children's` school success. (Birkemo 2002; Bø 2002; PISA 2003; Siles 2003; Ung I Norge 1992). In an OECD report “Parents as partners in school” from 1997 is analyzed the link between home and school. The report shows that the parents` contribution has a very important impact upon their children's` school improvement. It stated that it is important to increase the dialogue and cooperation on all levels and especially to build good relations in the early years.

A Canadian project (Coleman and Collinge, 1993) shows that the parent's` positive attitude towards school influences the children's` school satisfaction and school motivation. The school must be very obliged towards parents` contribution and cooperation because it is the most important factor to increase the pupil's` outcome from education.

It is very important for children to feel that all adults surrounding them are in a positive contact with each other. Data show that children who experience good cooperative networks and who are in positive relations with adults are less at risk developing both academic problems and problems out of school. (Wentzel, 1998; Parra & Sanchez, 2002) 23% of child's school achievement can be linked to parent's support. (Berg 2002) There is a great correlation between the quality of family-school relation and the pupil's school achievement and school adjustment. (Stortingsmelding 14, 1997-98) The two main factors which influence a child's school achievement are the level of parents' education and the quality of cooperation between school and home (Nordahl 06)

The upbringing and education of a child are the parent's responsibility, and the school's role is to support the parents on these two matters. A good family-school relation will have effect on the pupil's motivation and long term goal setting (NOU, 1995; Wentzel 1998)

To feel social support and academic support from parents will influence upon the child's feeling of being competent, general interest in school matters, school achievement and motivation for relation building (Wentzel, 1998)

Children who don't feel that their parents support them in school matters will be three times more at risk for stress related sickness (headache, stomach, muscle and skeleton problems). There is also a strong link between parents' support and a child's classroom behaviour, academic achievement and feeling self-confident (Coleman et.al 1996).

2. - Understanding and cooperation levels:

Thomas Nordahl (2006) suggests three different levels of cooperation and three levels of cooperation understanding between home and school.

Understanding levels:

Level 1: Representative cooperation – To participate in parents organisations.

Level 2: Direct cooperation –The specific meetings and understanding and agreements between children -teacher- parents.

Level 3: Indirect cooperation: All the things parents do at daily basis at home to help their child's school achievement.

Cooperation levels:

Level 1: The exchange of information: Both ways.

Level 2: Dialogue: Communication and discussing important matters concerning child.

Level 3: Contribution and Influence: Important decisions made by mutual agreement.

In general, parents are satisfied with information level. 75% feel that they are not in real and equal dialogue with school. 4 out of 5 are not at all satisfied with level three and feel that their

influence in school is very scarce. Parents who have good experience with family-school relations normally have children who succeed in school and do not cause any trouble. The more success and the better school adjustment are, the more the parents feel that they are in dialogue with the school and the more influence they feel.

Parents who have children who fail in school would be more likely to feel that family-school relations are mainly based on one-way information. 2/3 of the parents with children who fail in school adjustment think that the cooperation with school is negative and incriminating. (Nordahl 2006)

Epstein (2001) suggests a six step models of cooperation between school and home:

Step 1: Assisting the parents in upbringing matters.

Step 2: Information: To communicate with families about school matters and their children's progress.

Step 3: Voluntary assistance: To invite parents into school to assist in classroom and in activities.

Step 4: Learning at home. Involving parents in home-work matters.

Step 5: Influence: Parents must participate in making decisions concerning their children on different levels in school society.

Step 6: Link towards society and school surroundings: Coordinate local resources and services for children and families.

3. - The implication of parents

The parents are a very important resource for their children. For them to understand that and to have the feeling of being important, there have to be three main factors present. First they have to feel the **meaning**. The reasons for helping, the importance of helping and how to help. Secondly they must feel **influence**, to see that the effort of helping give their child school success. Thirdly they must feel **support**. To feel that the school and the parents have common goals and to cooperate well on behalf of their child.

Parents who feel that they play an important role in helping their children in academic achievement and involve themselves in their child's education, can also result in facilitate changes in parent's behaviour. (Apter, 1982) Changes in parent- child relations can have impact on other parts of a system. Changes in a child's life can lead to changes in family life. A more open attitude towards school could lead to more contact with local society. Mothers supporting their children could more easily revue their own educational situation and start their own academic career. Apter also suggests system of parents groups where parents could learn from each other, get to know each other and be acquainted with other children.

However, reports from NOVA (2000-2002) show that the general situation in family-school relation is not satisfactory. Schools are in general not interested in parents who take to much

initiative and who care too much. Parents are in general uncertain upon what the schools really expects from them concerning cooperation and relations. Parents do not find themselves as equal participants in school cooperation and feel that teachers are in power. It did also underline the problem of immigrant parents who in general feel uncertain in expectation, have lack of relations and knowledge of other parents and participate less in school meetings. (Vilchez 2004)

Teachers have institutional power and a lot of parents feel inferior. They are afraid of the school sanctions. They also think that criticising the school or the teacher will intimidate their child. Parents very seldom experience social support from school, even though the teachers say they do so. Empowering practise from teachers towards parents in order to give them self-confidence is therefore very important. Communication based on social support, praise and encourage is crucial. The feedback towards parents should be accurate and precise to avoid misunderstanding. (Nordahl et.al, 2005)

Mothers seem to be the most important person in family-school matters (Nordahl 2006). Between 70-80% of the family school-relation is done by the child's mother. Mothers help their child with home lessons; participate in school meeting and activities. To improve the father's assistance would have a huge impact on the child's school achievement. However the participation from the mother or the father has a different influence concerning the child's performance. (Winqvist, 1999) Both parents participation on low class levels are six times more important for school improvement than the influence from school. If all parents in a class would support and stimulate their children equally, it would reduce the average academic variation in achievement by 30% (Desforges, 05)

In a report from FUG (2005) concludes with ten reasons for parents why they do not participate in family- school matters:

1. Some parents have small children and no one to look after them.
2. Some parents work at night time/evenings.
3. Some parents don't feel well in schools because of their own negative school experience.
4. Some parents don't attend to school meetings because they don't feel it important.
5. Some parents are stressed and have problems.
6. Some parents feel lack of social network and don't feel confident going alone to school meetings.
7. Some parents feel lack of language knowledge and think they will not understand.
8. Some parents feel lack of own education and feel that teachers know best anyway.
9. Some people feel they will be misunderstood and that they will not be able to communicate.
10. Some people don't feel that school matters are their concern. Schools are for teachers.

Siles (2003) also points out that there is a link between the general quality of school-family relation in a school and the general quality of the school. He also says that there is a connection between school failure and cultural and social distance between school and home. Teachers who are interested in their pupils' social life and family life will have more motivated pupils because they are more likely to use this information as a base for relevant education. Knowledge of pupils' life history and cultural experience is a good basis for good and safe learning processes among students. (Ericsson and Larsen 2000)

The family-school relation is primarily a matter of attitudes. The teacher plays a very important role in building up a good relation through: (Chrispeels 1996)

For a teacher the relation is based on:

1. The teacher's general interest in the individual parents and their special situation.
2. The teacher's ability to work with own stereotypes towards certain families.
3. The teacher's ability to work systematically with the individual pupil, showing special interest, motivates, spends time together with, see qualities in.

Cohen (1974) underlines the teacher's responsibility in parent-teacher interaction. He recommends the following components in family school relations:

1. To welcome communication with parents about the child.
2. To communicate his or her dedication, to helping their child learn.
3. To communicate his or her desire to work cooperatively with parents.
4. To listen to parental concerns and goals for their child.
5. To communicate an interest in a complementary manner with the home.
6. To explain the goals and programs in the classroom for the child and the parents.
7. To report the child's progress.
8. To offer ideas for possible use at home for helping the child's learning progress.
9. To make use of information and ideas obtained from parents.

The teacher is a professional and has the main responsibility for building up good relations (Nordahl et al 2005). The teacher must have general positive attitudes towards parents in general and regard parents as a resource for their children. To have focused more about future than past is also important as well as regarding that parents have emotions concerning their children. Another aspect is the importance of empowering the parents and emphasise upon their important role.

Ericsson (2000) uses the word *rand zone* in connection with family-school relations. *Rand zone* is the areas within the connection which is unclear. Samples of *rand zones* could be whether the teachers can interfere on matters of how families bring up their children, family routines etc. Other *rand zones* could be whether parents should pay for school equipment or activities or if parents have any influence on school matters such as discipline, sanctions or education in general.

A good relation between teacher and parents will gain both the teacher and the parent. It will help the teacher to understand the child's special situation and daily life. (Thomson et al 2004) Through a good relation the teacher can develop realistic expectations towards a child. It would also give the parents realistic and adjusted expectations towards their own child.

The parents also have a responsibility concerning the relation between home and school. (Chrispeels 1996; Vilchez 2004). The parents must work with their own attitude towards the school and deal with their own feelings regarding own school results and own school experience. They must involve more into school and in school activities. They must together

with the teachers create common expectations towards the child. They must understand that the school and home have a common goal, to increase the child's success in school.

4.- Tools to improve the school-family relations: key steps GOLDEN

The project "Golden 5" has chosen school-family relations as one of 5 important issues to improve children's school success. The theoretical frames indicate that a good relation between parents and teachers will have impact upon a child's development and progress. It also shows us that it will have a good effect if both parents support school. To establish a good relation between school and home is a matter of attitude and systemic thinking. The main responsibility for building up good relations always belongs to the professional part, the school and the teachers. However, the parents also have to work with their attitude towards school and education and work with their own feelings and emotions. A systemic approach through "whole school approaches" in order to develop good routines and procedures concerning family-school relation seems to be more effective than individual approaches.

Parents who have negative school experiences or who have children with school failure often feel that contact with school is incriminating. They also often feel that the teachers blame them or the child for the lack of success. They also often feel out of power and little influence. The teacher must therefore have strategies in relation building that empowers the parents, have positive attitudes and expectations towards all parents and look upon parents as a recourse for their children. For pupils it is very important to see adults in their surroundings cooperate in a positive atmosphere. It will diminish being at risk for developing both school failure and problems out of school.

For the teachers it is also very important to have in mind that parents from other cultures need extra attention and that it is very important to build up positive relations and expectations to them and to integrate them into the parents group.

In the family-school relation there often are unclear expectations and demands towards another. It will therefore be important to build up systems and routines which can make clear areas of responsibility and obligation for teachers and parents.

According to theory and research mentioned above, the effect of a quality relation will be measured on different matters:

- Academic achievement
- Self-esteem
- Psychological health
- Pupil's motivation in school
- School adjustment
- Long-term goal setting and future planning.
- Pupil's satisfaction in school

Key steps:

- *Make regular phone calls to the parents with a positive message.(can also or instead write in a special contact book for these 5 children)*

- *See to that the parents of the golden 5 attend to parents conferences by giving them extra attention (special message-phone call-message through child e.g.)*
- *Show interest in the child's family and social life by asking questions.*
- *Go through the "home curriculum" with the parents in the class as a whole or with the parents of the golden 5. (see in appendix)*
- *Organize family groups in the class (groups of parents taking pupils out on activities once a month)*
- *Make learning contracts between pupil-teacher-parents focusing on responsibility and improvement.*
- *Make a parents-bank in the classroom where parents put in their contribution (help-assistance-driving-baking-inviting class to work/farm-tell class about special interests/travels or helping in class. e.g.)*

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Appendix:

Home curriculum:

1. Talk positive of school, teacher and education in general.

2. Discuss things and news being in focus in society or among youngsters.
3. Attend to and speak positive of all meetings and cooperative activities happening in school.
4. Put your name in "the school bank of activity"
5. Make sure that you are a good cultural model for your children.
6. Show interest for your children's school performance, help them with their home lessons, promote a good learning atmosphere and a good work place at home, help them with school projects, etc.
7. Make sure that your children have books to read and have opportunity to use IT in their learning process.
8. Make sure that your child have a good nutrition and enough sleep.