

## THE FAMILY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP AS REGARDS PROVIDING STUDENTS WITH ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

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**Abstract:** *An extremely important task of contemporary school refers to its obligation to satisfy students' needs for receiving adequate support regarding schoolwork and education. Providing students with additional support is a complex and demanding process which may be successfully realized on condition that the cooperation between all the significant subjects from a child's environment has been developed, especially between their parents, teachers and professional associates of the school. It is very important to provide parents' proactive participation in the process of providing students with additional support, starting from the phase of planning the measures and activities that are to be realized until their evaluation. Parents' proactive participation in this process actually makes the foundation of developing a family-school partnership – an approach or model of cooperation which is increasingly being affirmed not only in pedagogical theory but also in school work practice. This paper focuses on explaining different approaches towards understanding the importance of the family-school partnership as well as describing different ways of establishing this cooperation within the process of providing students with additional support with brief reference to the current condition of the Serbian school system. In the final part of the text there are some key prerequisites for the development of the family-school partnership as regards providing students with additional support.*

**Key words:** *additional support for students, family-school cooperation, family-school partnership, key prerequisites for the development of the family-school partnership*

### Introduction

One of the essential prerequisites for the successful realization of school work is the cooperation between its key actors. The issue regarding the family-school relationship is a very significant and current issue of pedagogical theory and practice. With the development of pedagogical scientific thought and practice of school work came the development and affirmation of different approaches within the interpretation and understanding of the function and nature of the relationship that can and should be established between the family and school. Today, the argumentation about the need for establishing the family-school partnership is being increasingly accepted. The issue of the importance of establishing and

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developing collaborative relationships and partnerships between the family and school is particularly actualized within the context of developing inclusive school practice. Namely, one of the important tasks of the school in terms of practical implementation of inclusive education is the provision of adequate response to different educational needs of students as well as providing additional support in learning and development to those students who need it.

It is in this paper that, after the presentation of various approaches regarding the importance of the family-school cooperation and different possibilities of its establishment with brief reference to the current condition of the Serbian school system, the role of parents involved in realizing the process of providing additional support to students is specially analyzed. The prerequisites for developing the family-school cooperation within the process of providing additional support to students have been singled out and explained in a separate section of the text.

### **Cooperation and / or partnership between the family and school - different approaches towards understanding the importance of cooperation and different ways of establishing the family-school cooperation**

The family and school are the primary and interconnected microsystems in which the child's life and development take place. Strengthening relationships and developing collaborative relationships between the family and school can have multiple positive outcomes, both for students and their parents and for the school itself (Polovina, 2008). The results of numerous studies indicate that the establishment of cooperation between the family and school can have numerous positive effects on school success and students' positive attitude towards school, as well as on other aspects of their development. The results of the meta-analysis indicate that the family provides very important support to the child regarding mastering school materials and that parental involvement has a strong influence on students' school achievements (Goshin & Mertsalova, 2018; Mitchell, 2014), their cognitive development (Driessen & Smit, 2007), positive attitudes to school (Cano et al., 2016). There are also numerous authors who have suggested that engaging parents in school work and establishing collaborative relationships with the school stimulates the development of certain attitudes, values, aspirations that may contribute to prosocial mechanisms of development and upbringing (Smit et al., 2007). The positive effects of the school-family cooperation have also been confirmed by research findings indicating that students' benefits are reflected in better behaviour both at school and at home, higher learning motivation, more developed social competences, more regular school attendance and better adaptation to school requirements and rules (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

In today's living environment, where children and young people are exposed to numerous risks and are increasingly in need of different types of support in order to overcome possible difficulties in their way of growing up, the cooperation between the family and school is becoming increasingly important. Namely, the listed benefits that students can gain from the cooperation that their family and school have established have an exceptional value and importance in case of a need for additional support as regards the work referring to education and upbringing.

However, regardless of what we might call the generally accepted view about the importance of the family-school cooperation, the function of this process and the nature of this relationship are still viewed differently, and the practice of school work is still 'burdened' with the difficulties arising within the relationship between students' parents and teachers and professional associates of the school. Therefore, it would be useful to view the cooperation of the family and school through the perspective of the current development of this process implementation practice, which is based on different approaches regarding its observation and understanding.

During the previous development of ideas as regards the family-school cooperation and related practical solutions there have been three approaches having distinguished themselves in terms of perceiving the nature of the relationship between the two systems: the approach of parallel (separate) systems with different functions and fields of activity (the school is responsible for education, and the family for the upbringing of children and young people) among whom there is a noticeable social distance,

and the forms of interaction are ritualized and formalized; the supplementation approach, according to which school education is regarded as a supplement to family upbringing, and where the starting point in establishing the relationship between the family and school is the program of teaching and school work, where professionals determine the type of activities the parents will be involved in as well as the way they will do that; the support approach based on the conception that the family and school share overlapping spheres of influence and that it is necessary that they should act as partners because they act as important agents of children and youth's changes and development (Pavlović Breneselović, 2012a). From the foregoing, we could say that the family-school collaboration has evolved from a model in which these two key factors of child development have acted as two separate entities to today's model of partnership which tends to view the family as a significant source of support for child development and its proactive involvement in school work and life (Goshin & Mertsalova, 2018).

Professional sources often recognize two approaches and / or models in the conceptualization of the family-school relationships: the so-called traditional and contemporary ones. In relation to the traditional conceptual-research approach in which the importance of the parental role in connecting / cooperating with school is elaborated through creating the educational-stimulating home environment, in the past four decades new concepts of cooperation based on the philosophy of comprehensive and supportive partnership between the family and school have been promoted (Polovina et al., 2013). According to the traditional approach and / or model, the school has an expert position for the upbringing and education of children and youth, it defines the goals and contents of the cooperation, the conditions and ways of its realization, and parents have a peripheral role, i.e. a role of a supportive character (providing a stimulating family environment, a good preparation of the child for school in accordance with the requirements of the school environment). The collaboration is based on a clear structure and content of connection (the school is in charge of educational services and parents are advocates for their children's interests as well as their educators, 'home teachers'). The modern approach and / or model is based on the idea of the importance of parental involvement in different school activities, but respecting diversity (the socio-economic status of the family, the cultural, ethnic and religious specificity of the family environment, parental education, parenting style, etc.) determining the family and school collaboration modalities. The starting point is the idea that the family and school have a common goal and interest, as well as overlapping spheres of influence on the work and development of the child / student, which is why mutual support and partnership is indispensable (Zuković, 2017).

The partnership approach, as an ideal or model of the family-school relationship that should be nurtured and developed in practice, is based on the prerequisite that students' parents and school professionals connect with each other and join their forces and resources regarding decision-making and taking actions towards a common goal, i.e. creating optimal conditions for the child's development and learning. In order to develop the family-school partnership, it is necessary to actively involve students' parents in the management of school work, open a space for expressing their interests and needs related to their children's work and development in school, as well as the agreement between these two sides on mutual obligations and responsibilities (Pavlović Breneselović, 2012b).

The partnership orientation, however, is not yet widely accepted in modern school systems. The research results indicate that the traditional view of the relationship between the family and school still prevails, which implies clearly delineated roles and responsibilities in which insufficient attention is paid to building mutual trust (Kovač Cerović et al., 2012). It is possible that the realization of the process of providing additional support to students is actually a space within which positive changes can occur in terms of the relationship between the family and school.

### **Providing students with additional support in school as a framework for establishing and developing the family-school cooperation**

In order to answer the question why the realization of the process of providing additional support to students can be observed as a suitable ground for establishing and developing cooperative relationships, and possibly even family-school partnerships, first it is necessary to give a few basic remarks about this

very process, the role of students' parents in its realization, as well as about the ways in which the cooperation between the family and school in this domain can be realized. Further in the text there are remarks on the mentioned issues together with a brief overview of the situation in Serbian school practice within the elaboration of the last mentioned topic.

*Providing students' with additional support in school.* The process of providing additional support to students can be realized by taking various measures aimed at achieving students' optimal development and involvement in various school activities. According to the OECD classification, students who need additional educational support can be classified into the following three broadly defined categories: students with disabilities, students with learning difficulties (who face learning and behavioural problems) and students with vulnerable and marginalized groups (who need additional educational support due to inadequate social environment and / or problems arising from insufficient language fluency) (*Diversity, Inclusion and Equity: Insights from Special Needs Provision*, 2003; according to: Šaljić & Hebib, 2016). The reasons for providing additional support to students can be very different if we take into consideration the fact that every child, due to certain life circumstances, may need additional support at some point. Thus, students who go through various crises during their development (whether it is an adolescent crisis, a crisis in family relationships or difficulties in overcoming educational requirements etc.) can overcome the existing problems more easily and successfully on condition that they are supported enough through various measures and in that way strengthened in order to surmount them. Students exposed to various risks of developing certain forms of antisocial behaviour also belong to a sensitive group of children and young people, and therefore, the provision of additional support is related to the preventive action performed by the school, which tends to be an increasingly important segment of its work.

As fundamental areas within which additional support can be provided to students, the following can be singled out: mastering the curriculum material; fulfilling school obligations and achieving optimal educational results; developing social and communication skills; establishing positive interactions with peers and adults; self-care training. Providing additional support to students can be realized in different ways. As the basic ones the professional and reference literature recognize the application of an individualized approach in teaching as well as the adaptation and modification of the curriculum. Besides, additional support to students can be provided through advisory work forms by involving students into appropriate extracurricular activities, providing peer or assistant support, providing health and other assistance, material support, etc. (Šaljić & Hebib, 2016). From the foregoing it can be concluded that providing additional support to students should not be limited only to mastering the school curriculum materials, but should also include various aspects of student development. In order to make a good assessment of the areas in which additional support needs to be provided and to determine the optimal ways of providing support, it is crucial to maintain continuous cooperation with students' parents, which includes constant exchange of information and parents' involvement in various school activities with the aim of providing support to the student.

*The role of students' parents in implementing the process of providing additional support to students.* The process of providing additional support to students takes place in several phases during which parents can and should have a significant share in the activities that are carried out within them. Involving students' parents in different phases of this process and specific activities that are carried out is a prerequisite for the effective provision of additional support to students and is of vital importance for their school success, psychophysical, emotional and social development (Afolabi, 2014).

As the first and essential phase, on whose realization depends the effectiveness of the following phases, the identification of students' needs for additional support stands out. It is in this phase that the information about different aspects of student development and functioning is collected from different sources. In the next phase, measures and activities through which appropriate support will be provided to the student are planned, followed by their implementation and evaluation, which will determine how to approach improving the flow and effects of providing additional support to the student. In order to plan effective and adequately measured additional support for students, it is important to involve all important subjects from the child's environment (parents, teachers, peers and other important people who know the child well) in the process.

*Ways of realizing cooperation between the family and school in the process of providing additional support to students.* Considering various possibilities for establishing collaborative relationships between the family and school in the process of providing additional support to students, there are several essential ways that can be singled out regarding the realization and development of the cooperation (Goshin & Mertsalova, 2018). It should also be emphasized that different ways of realizing the cooperation can be viewed as levels of different complexity and quality of the relationship between the family and school.

The essential way of establishing the cooperation between the family and school in the process of providing additional support to students is communication, i.e. the exchange of information that is important for making an assessment of the required type of support and ways of its implementation. Students' parents can provide important information about the child's characteristics, specific needs, behaviour at home, his/her attitude towards school and school obligations, his/her experience of interactions with teachers and peers, etc. On the other hand, teachers and other experts employed at school have information about the student's general functioning, i.e. his/her work and behaviour at school, progress in school work and mastering the learning material as well as his/her relationships with teachers and peers. This way of establishing cooperation is actually its first, essential level. At this level, which is important from the aspect of identifying students' needs for additional support, the cooperation between the family and school does not include either parents' more serious involvement in school work and life or participation in the decision-making process regarding the school activities that are important for their children.

Another method, different in terms of the content, and a qualitatively higher level of cooperation between the family and school implies more active engagement of students' parents in the school work and life as well as the conceptualization, realization and evaluation of the school activities that provide additional support to their children. If this way of cooperation between the family and school is realized and developed in practice, it is realistic to expect that it will result in an atmosphere of togetherness and mutual acceptance and respect. In this way, closer relationships between students' parents and the school's employees are established, which is a significant resource of support for activities undertaken in order to provide additional support to individual students. Such relationships between the family and school can also contribute to students' more positive attitudes towards school, which can be singled out as a particularly important benefit of the way the cooperation is realized.

The highest and most important level of cooperation between the family and school, which has probably yet to be widely accepted and applied in practice, would imply the involvement of students' parents in the decision-making process, i.e. their participation in planning the measures and activities to be implemented in school in order to provide additional support to students. In this case, it is actually a matter of joint decision-making and choice of optimal solutions in the process of providing additional support to students. In this way mutual respect, understanding and the development of common attitudes to important issues regarding the school work and activities are promoted (Šaljić, 2017).

All the previously presented ways of establishing cooperation do not at the same time represent a partnership between the family and school. A partnership does not imply any form of joint action, but joint decision-making and sharing responsibility for the achieved results in the process of providing additional support to students (Goshin & Mertsalova, 2018). The lower levels of cooperation described in the previous part of the text are important and represent the basis of cooperation, but if the process of joint action of the family and school ends and is exhausted in them, then there is no partnership. The collaborative relationships between the family and school that could be developed in the direction of partnership should be characterized by the coordination of the family and school activities in order to encourage students' learning and development as much as possible (Smit et al., 2007), as well as the two-way support and assistance in adjusting the school work to students' needs (Hirsto, 2010).

*The cooperation between the family and school in realizing the process of providing additional support to students in the school system of Serbia.* If we look at the situation in the existing school practice in Serbia for a moment, we could say that certain elementary prerequisites for the development of the cooperation between the family and school in stimulating the process of providing additional support to

students have been set. Namely, the framework for the implementation of the process of providing additional support to students in school through various measures and activities is defined by the legal documents, whereas the manner of its implementation is specifically regulated by the bylaws (*Law on Primary Education and Upbringing*, 2013; *Law on the Foundations of the Education and Upbringing System*, 2017; *Rulebook on Additional Educational, Health and Social Support to Children, Students and Adults*, 2018; *Rulebook on Detailed Instructions for Determining the Right to an Individual Educational Plan, Its Application and Evaluation*, 2018). Pursuant to the provisions of the bylaws, students' parents are members of professional school teams who are in charge of planning, implementation and evaluation of specific measures and activities that provide additional support to students. However, according to certain provisions of the bylaws, it can be concluded that they do not emphasize the partnership role of students' parents, i.e. that we have yet to develop the practice of sharing obligations and responsibilities between the family and school regarding the quality of the process and results of providing additional support to students. Namely, the participation of students' parents in the process of planning the support measures is not explicitly mentioned in these documents, but it is stated that the team for providing additional support to students is in charge of adopting the support measures, whereas teachers and professional associates are those who are in charge of planning the individualization measures and students' parents only give consent for the adopted measures, i.e. for the individual educational plan) (*Rulebook on Additional Educational, Health and Social Support to Children, Students and Adults*, 2018; *Rulebook on Detailed Instructions for Determining the Right to an Individual Educational Plan, Its Application and Evaluation*, 2018).

In order to develop cooperative, and particularly partnership relationships between the family and school in providing additional support to students, it is necessary to make certain changes in the above mentioned bylaws, according to which the parents' active participation would be more emphasized. The basis for such elaboration can be a legal provision regulating the issue of cooperation between the family and school, which emphasizes that the school should encourage and nurture a partnership with the family based on mutual understanding, respect and trust (*Law on Primary Education and Upbringing*, 2013). A good starting point defined by the bylaw is the obligation of the school to provide students' parents with training in order to develop their knowledge and skills that are necessary for providing adequate support and assistance to their child (*Rulebook on Additional Educational, Health and Social Support for Children, Students and Adults*, 2018).

While assessing the situation in the school practice, we must keep in mind that it is not determined only by the way in which the practice is regulated by various regulations. Much of what constitutes the context (institutional, at the level of the school system, social) in which the practice takes place and develops determines the quality of the relationships that are established and developed between the family and school. The cooperation and partnership of these two agents of children and youth's learning and development probably still reflect a situation that should be strived for in the school system of Serbia. It is therefore useful to dwell on the question of which and what kind of prerequisites should be provided in order that such relationships between the family and school may be developed.

### **Prerequisites for developing the cooperation between the family and school in realizing the process of providing additional support to students**

There is a series of prerequisites for the successful development of cooperative relationships between the family and school in the process of providing additional support to students - general prerequisites for the development of cooperation between the school work actors, as well as specific prerequisites arising from the content of joint work around which the cooperation develops. In the following text, we will focus on only three key prerequisites for the development of cooperation between the family and school in stimulating the process of providing additional support to students (the first two are more general, and the third is specific).

As one of the key prerequisites for the development of cooperation between the family and school, many authors mention the school's responsibility and initiative for establishing cooperative

relationships with students' parents. It is often pointed out that the initiative for establishing cooperative relationships should be launched by the school (Afolabi, 2014), because parents are generally interested in cooperating with teachers, but often take such an attitude that they 'wait for the development of events' (Smit, Driessen, Sluiter & Bruce, 2007, according to: Smit et al., 2007). Accordingly, it can be considered that the school should be the initiator of activities through which the contact with the family will be established and parents will be actively involved in the school activities, i.e. in their planning and implementation. In addition to the fact that it is evident that the school has a certain responsibility and an important role in establishing cooperation with students' parents, we must not ignore the fact that the degree of parental involvement in school life depends on numerous factors in the field of family life. Objective factors or reasons that may limit parents' participation in the work of the school, arising from the characteristics of the family, refer to its socio-economic position, the level of parents' education, the family structure, as well as parents' own personalities, their beliefs, skills, abilities, etc. (Alofabi, 2014; Goshin & Mertsalova, 2018; Smit et al., 2007). These factors should be kept in mind while planning the cooperation with students' parents in order to take certain measures that could contribute to their getting more actively involved in the school activities. In order to do that, the school can and should make students' parents acquainted with its functioning, their role, as well as the rights and obligations in relation to their children's education, responsibilities for the quality of the school work etc. However, it should also be sensitive enough to recognize and respect the specific characteristics of individual families. This can be the first step in identifying and defining the goal of joint action in the best interests of the child, creating a climate of mutual respect and trust. In this way, students' parents are enabled to recognize the benefits of their own engagement in the school work and cooperation with the school.

The second important prerequisite for the development of cooperative relationships between the family and school is the positive and stimulating school climate, especially in its segment which refers to the quality of communication and relationships established between direct and indirect participants in the school work. School employees should be willing to regard students' parents as active participants in the school work, to view them as collaborators and to work persistently in order to make them feel accepted, welcome and supported in school (Afolabi, 2014; Smit et al., 2007). The school employees' awareness of the fact that working together with students' parents can influence better achievement results in students' work and development as well as a higher level of the school work quality, has a significant role in building collaborative relationships. In order to perform that, teachers and other school staff need (new) knowledge of various issues and topics related to developing collaborative relationships, as well as the skills that are necessary for interacting with parents and their involvement and participation in school life (Smit et al., 2007).

There is yet another prerequisite which is important for the development of cooperation between the family and school as regards the realization of the process of providing additional support to students. It implies the necessity for professionals employed in schools (teachers and professional associates) to provide the necessary assistance and support to students' parents themselves in order to involve them in this process as expected. In this way, educational programs intended for students' parents as well as advisory and consultative forms of work, etc. can be realized in school. Thereby the content and form of the work with parents should be in line with parents' needs and availability. Numerous studies indicate that 'parent training' contributes to the improvement of parenting competencies, establishing more positive interactions with their children, but also better school achievements of students and positive changes in the behaviour of the students who need additional support (Mitchell, 2014).

On condition that the previously stated prerequisites are provided, it is realistic to expect a successful cooperation between the family and school in the process of providing additional support to students, but one can also imagine its development towards building partnerships between these two systems.

## **Conclusion**

Within the context of the inclusive school practice development, it is the process of providing additional support to students that is becoming a very important segment of school work. Providing additional support to students primarily refers to a different approach as regards the conception and implementation of the teaching and learning process and implies a review of methodological approaches that are applied in teaching, which should be based on respecting the principles of teaching differentiation and individualization. In addition to the changes in teaching, additional support to students also implies the 'revival' of various types of school activities intended for students, which take place outside the classroom, as well as numerous and diverse activities performed by school teachers and professional associates in order to undertake instructive, corrective and advisory work with students. Therefore, the realization of the process of providing additional support to students 'opens' a space for full engagement of teachers and professional associates in their work with both individuals and groups of students, in and out of class. However, their successful realization of all the necessary activities and ways of working with students will depend on the quality of the relationship they have with their parents.

Since the family and school are two key agents of child development, their cooperation is indispensable in order to achieve the expected results in students' work and development. The process of providing additional support to students can be seen as the segment of school work that potentially provides great opportunities for the development of cooperation, and possibly even building a partnership between the family and school. In order that the relationship between the family and school may develop towards partnership, it is necessary for students' parents to be actively involved in deciding what is to be done and how in order to provide additional support to students and to be engaged in all the phases of this process as well as the measures and activities carried out within it.

In order to establish and develop a relationship between the family and school that would be based on cooperation and partnership, it is necessary for both parties to demonstrate readiness for engagement with shared interests and aims, but also to be skilled at putting working together into practice. In the end, after all, it is necessary to emphasize that professionals with different qualifications employed in the school have a greater responsibility for the quality of the relationship between the family and school. They can and should be rightfully expected to take the initiative in building a cooperative and partnership relationship with the family, as well as to provide the indispensable professional assistance and support to students' parents in order to develop the competencies that are essential for getting involved in various school activities and thereby in those conducted within the process of providing additional support to students.

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### **SARADNJA ŠKOLE I PORODICE U PRUŽANJU DODATNE PODRŠKE UČENICIMA**

**Apstrakt:** Jedan od važnih zadataka savremene škole odnosi se na njenu obavezu da odgovori na potrebe učenika za odgovarajućom podrškom u školskom radu i učenju. Pružanje dodatne podrške učenicima je složen i zahtevan proces koji može uspešno da se ostvari ukoliko je razvijena saradnja između svih značajnih osoba iz detetovog okruženja, posebno između njegovih roditelja i nastavnika i stručnih saradnika škole. Važno je obezbediti proaktivno učešće roditelja u procesu pružanja dodatne podrške učenicima, počev od faze planiranja mera i aktivnosti koje treba da se realizuju do njihove evaluacije. Proaktivno učešće roditelja učenika u ovom procesu zapravo predstavlja osnovu razvoja partnerstva porodice i škole – pristupa i/ili modela saradnje koji se sve više afirmišu u pedagoškoj teoriji, ali i u praksi školskog rada. U ovom tekstu objašnjeni su različiti pristupi u razumevanju važnosti saradnje porodice i škole i opisani različiti načini ostvarivanja ove saradnje u procesu pružanja dodatne podrške učenicima sa kratkim osvrtom na stanje u školskom sistemu Srbije. U završnom delu teksta izdvojene su neke ključne pretpostavke razvijanja saradnje porodice i škole u ostvarivanju procesa pružanja dodatne podrške učenicima.

**Ključne reči:** dodatna podrška učenicima, saradnja porodice i škole, partnerstvo porodice i škole, pretpostavke razvoja saradnje porodice i škole u pružanju dodatne podrške učenicima.