Approaches to Family-School Relationships –Examples from Serbia and Australia

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Abstract   *Strong communication and cooperation between the family and the school is one of the most important factors contributing to students' learning, identity and well-being. This research aimed to support Serbian policy makers and school authorities to engage more effectively with families as children transition to the first years of school. By drawing on the experiences of Serbian parents who live in Australia and Australian teachers, and considering contemporary educational literature on family-school engagement, it was hoped to identify strategies that might be employed to encourage Serbian school communities to strengthen communication with families and foster improved cooperation between parents and teachers in the early years of school. This study used a qualitative research approach (semi-structured questionnaires and follow-up interviews) to explore parents' and teachers' perceptions and experiences of building and sustaining family-school partnerships in each context. Analyses of Serbian parents' and teachers' views of family-school interactions during the transition-to-school period indicated that families had limited, if any, communication with the school and were rarely involved in their children's learning, including classroom activities and extracurricular events. Analyses of Australian parents' and teachers' perceptions of their transition-to-school engagement experiences indicated that communication and cooperation between family and school were common and frequent. The findings from this study identified a range of suggestions that Serbian schools might adopt to strengthen and sustain communication, engagement and cooperation with families, particularly during the period when children begin school.*

Keywords: *family-school cooperation, early childhood education, post-communist educational context, democratic educational context.*

Introduction

Strong communication and cooperation between family and schools in early education are major contributors to students' academic and social achievements. In particular, evidence has shown that positive family-school engagement during the early years of

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education results in students' higher levels of motivation, positive attitudes toward learning and better educational outcomes (Carlson & Christenson, 2005; Gratz et al., 2006; Elliott, 2006; Ellis et al., 2015; Epstein, 2005; Sugawara et al., 2014;). These authors indicate that parents' involvement in schooling contributes to positive growth in children's cognitive and social development. Developing strong, positive communication is the first step in establishing productive collaborations between family and school, and schools and teachers have the major responsibility to initiate this communication, ideally before children start school.

This research has indicated clear differences in approaches to family-school engagement and cooperation between developing, post-communist cultures and some modern western societies. Schooling experiences in post-communist countries have little formal or informal emphasis on positive family-teacher interactions. In contrast, western democratic countries tend to promote a strong focus on positive interactions between parents and teachers. This study showed that family-school interactions in democratic contexts are mostly based on well-developed policies and formal guidelines around parent involvement in children's learning activities. This focus on family-school engagement is especially important for the early years of schooling. To date, there is little evidence of family-school engagement in Serbian schools and almost no indication in official policies and educational documents about the importance of family-school interaction in the early years of schooling.

While lack of focus on family-school engagement in the Serbian educational system means limited opportunities for families to contribute to children's learning and educational experiences, strengthening engagement between schools and families has the potential to foster enhanced educational opportunities and outcomes for children (Babic et al., 2011; Polovina, 2006; Radu, 2011; Sugawara et al., 2014). Recognising the value of family involvement as a key part of students' educational journeys, especially in the early years when parents are first becoming familiar with their child's school, is an important first step in building genuine partnerships (Epstein, 2005).

Literature review

The literature review highlighted three main findings. First, it highlighted that family-school interactions during the 'transition to school' period and in the early years of schooling are important for students' cognitive development, social-emotional development and learning outcomes. As parents are at their most receptive in learning how to deal with new responsibilities, roles, and relationships in children's school lives, developing positive parent-teacher relationships is especially important at the beginning of each child's schooling (Carlson & Christenson, 2005; Gratz et al., 2006; Elliott, 2006; Ellis et al., 2015; Epstein, 2005; Sugawara et al., 2014;). The information parents share about their children enables educators to better align children's experiences at home with pedagogical approaches in early education settings. When parents and teachers work cohesively, they share a positive approach to early schooling that maximizes children's social-emotional well-being and academic potential (Tayler, 2006). Supporting productive school-parental engagement during the transition-to-school period can improve children's school adjustment and social and academic progress.

Second, the literature indicated some interacting barriers to effective family-school engagements in early education. Some schools seemed to lack awareness of the value of engaging collaboratively with families while others seemed to lack understanding of how to transform the promise of strong family-school relationships from theory into practice. In many cases schools indicated that limited 'resources' inhibited implementation of strategies to communicate with and involve families in children's educational journeys (Elliott, 2006; Ellis, 2012; Ellis et al., 2015; Mutch & Collins, 2012; Westergard, 2015; Woodrow et al., 2016).

Third, as indicated by Bronfenbrenner (1979), Hofstede (1984), Radu (2011), Vygotsky (Vygotsky, 1931, as cited in John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996), the multifaceted dimensions of culture shape family and school perceptions of what is desirable and acceptable in terms of family-school engagements in the first years of school. Given that family-school engagement models are shaped by diverse social, cultural, economic, geographic and educational contexts, the role of the school and educational authorities in reaching out and connecting with all families is especially critical. A school's role in embracing and celebrating the diversity of its community and families and aspects of local cultures such as history, tradition, and socio-economic status overwhelmingly shapes approaches to building and sustaining relationships between parents and teachers within school contexts.

Research Methodology

This research explored understandings of family-school engagements during the 'transition to school' period and in the first two years of schooling in two cultural contexts, Serbia and Australia. The study investigated to what extent Serbian parents, Serbian teachers, Serbian parents who live in Australia, and Australian teachers valued and supported initiatives to establish and sustain relationships between the family and schools in the early stage of schooling. Concomitantly, this study explored the extent to which schools' and teachers' perceptions of the value and practice of parent-school communication and engagement in post-communist and democratic contexts are supported by official policy guidelines and educational documentation. A key goal of the research was to highlight the enablers and barriers to initiating relationships between parents and teachers to encourage more effective family-school interactions in Serbia.

The research approach in this study was consistent with a constructivist view of social reality as one that grows within the social world and as a result of participants' beliefs and actions (Vygotsky, 1931, as cited in John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). Exploring parents' and teachers' experiences and perceptions of the transition to school experience reflects the ontological perspective that reality is constructed in personalised, local and/or community contexts (Lauckner et al., 2012). Importantly, this constructivist perspective holds that people's views, beliefs and expectations grow in different ways depending on their social and cultural groups. In this case, the focus is on different views and experiences of family--school interactions. For instance, while parent-teacher communication is predominantly traditional (teacher-centred) in Serbia, Australian educational contexts promote 'two-way' communication as a basis for building strong relationships between families and schools.

The limitations of this research included the small, purposive sample of parents and teachers, the limited number of follow-up interview respondents, the complexities of working across cultures, and the possible misinterpretations of Serbian respondents' statements when translated into English. As a small scale, qualitative study where teachers and parents were sourced via personal and professional contacts because of convenience, the respondents are not necessarily representative of the wider population of teachers and families in either Serbia or Australia, so the results of this study must be interpreted with caution. My analyses of respondents' answers, cultural backgrounds, expressed languages, and socio-economic contexts in Australia and Serbia required careful and thoughtful interpretation. Specifically, the translation of Serbian respondents' statements into English required diligent interpretation to reduce the impact of any researcher biases. Translations of respondents' comments tend to be literal rather than grammatically correct, with some attendant possibilities that meaning and nuances are 'lost in translation'.

Research Methods

The study used a semi-structured questionnaire and a follow-up interview to explore parents' and teachers' views and experiences of family-school communication and cooperation in early education in both Australian and Serbian cultural contexts.

The semi-structured questionnaire (administered via SurveyMonkey) provided a systematic and economical way to explore parents' and teachers' views and experiences of parent-teacher engagements in early education and specifically the 'transition to school' period, in both Australia and Serbia (Kelley et al., 2003; O'Donoghue, 2006; Scott, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1994; Sutton & Austin, 2015). The questionnaire contained a series of open-ended questions grouped into thematic categories, drawing on key findings from the literature on family-school engagements in the first years of schooling and issues around culture, such as those highlighted by Vygotsky (Vygotsky, 1931, as cited in John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996) and Bronfenbrenner (1979) and specifically, Epstein's (2005) levels of parental involvement in school activities. There were 32 questions for Serbian parents who live in Australia, 29 questions for Serbian parents, 29 questions for Australian teachers, and 26 questions for Serbian teachers. The four categories of questions included:

Category 1: Parents' and teachers' views of the types and the benefits of strong family-school interactions, especially in early education;

Category 2: Parents' and teachers' experiences of family-school communication models, including digital technology communication (for example, mobile apps, e-newsletters, Facebook);

Category 3: Parents' and teachers' experiences of parental involvement in learning and other school activities (for example, 'transition to school' procedures, classroom and extracurricular activities, 'learning at home' activities, and 'decision making' programs); and

Category 4: Parents' and teachers' perceptions of the main enablers and challenges for successful family-school engagements.

The questionnaire was distributed to 23 parents of children in the first years of school (e.g. 6-7-year-old children) in Serbia and to 13 early childhood teachers in Serbia via

SurveyMonkey. Serbian respondents were recruited via social media (e.g. Facebook), personal, community and/or professional contacts and completed the survey in the Serbian language. An English version of the questionnaire was distributed online via SurveyMonkey to 20 parents of children in the first years of school in Australia and 10 early childhood teachers in Australia. Australian teachers and parents were recruited via social media, personal, community and/or professional contacts. The questionnaires were administered during late 2018, that is Term 4 in the Australian school year and in the first semester of the Serbian school year.

Following analyses of the questionnaire data, 20-minute semi-structured interviews included two Serbian parents, two Serbian teachers, two Serbian parents who live in Australia and two Australian teachers. This interview was particularly created in order to explore their perceptions and experiences of family-school collaboration. The main advantage of the interviews was the opportunity to probe in more depth (than in the online questionnaire) how teachers and parents understood the benefits of family-school engagements for children's adjustment to school, and their learning outcomes and social-emotional well-being. As only a small number of online questionnaire respondents agreed to participate in the more detailed conversation, interviewees were selected from those available to participate, and who also appeared to offer additional insights and clarifications.

Interview questions for both teachers and parents probed:
- understandings of the benefits of strong engagements between the family and the school in early education;
- the types of parent-teacher communication in the first years of schooling, especially communication via online platforms, such as mobile apps, school websites, Facebook, e-mails, and/or e-newsletters;
- ways of initiating strong communication and cooperation between family and school during 'transition to school';
- family involvement in school and 'learning at home' activities;
- planning and organizing family-school interactions;
- family involvement in a school's 'decision making' programs and activities;
- the main enablers and barriers for initiating and developing positive interactions between parents and teachers in early education.

Research Findings and Discussion of Research Findings in Contrast to Previous Research

Parents from both socio-cultural contexts, post-communist (Serbia) and democratic (Australia) had similarly positive beliefs about the value of strong family and school relationships in early education. Overall, they viewed honest and respectful interactions, active engagements, and mutual trust to be key attributes for the establishment and further development of their relationships with teachers. Most parents stressed that parent-teacher connectedness is especially important in the first years of schooling in terms of its positive impact on children's academic and social-emotional outcomes. While Australian parents mostly viewed engagements between parents and teachers to be very important

for children's academic and social development, the Serbian parents viewed those engagements to be important for the establishment of 'control' over students and their learning during the 'transition to school' period and in the first years of schooling. Serbian families had little or no actual experience of positive interactions with the school, other than on rare occasions when teachers perceived that a child had a problem with learning or behaviour. Moreover, parents from Serbia had fewer expectations of engagements with teachers than did Serbian parents who live in Australia. Australian parents reported more frequent opportunities to communicate with the school and said they received regular updates and information about school activities and their child's settling-in experiences and general academic progress. Specifically, Serbian parents who live in Australia indicated that their interactions with the school were often based on online platforms (e.g. mobile apps, e-newsletters, school websites and Facebook). Such digital communication was rare according to Serbian parents. While Serbian parents who live in Australia reported valuing communication aimed at easing children's transition-to-school experience and enhancing socio-cognitive outcomes, legacies of a strict post-communist culture were obvious when Serbian parents reported valuing family-school connectedness as important for establishing 'control' over children in the 'transition to school' period. Additionally, Serbian parents in this study said they were unfamiliar with the school system and felt less confident to participate in their child's learning and school activities.

Serbian parents' responses to the questionnaire and the follow-up interview indicated a range of influences that shaped their perceptions of ways to build and sustain positive family-school relationships in early education. Given Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1931, as cited in Steiner & Mahn, 1996) and many later studies highlighting the impact of culture on educational systems and approaches to learning (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Wursten & Jacobs, 2013), this study highlighted that cultural influences, such as language, traditional models, and/or socio-economic status, have a big impact on family-school relationship arrangements and perceptions of parenting and schooling in early education. The main thrust of this theory is that the ways people interact with others within the culture they live in shape their personal perspectives. In terms of the Serbian families, decades of communism set up an ideology that made it impossible for parents to engage or cooperate with schools or early learning centres. Schools specifically excluded any parental input and new, creative ideas from families. Most communication from schools was one-sided, designed only to inform parents about the academic and behavioural performance of students. Consistent with findings from previous research by Babic et al. (2011), Polovina (2006), Radu (2011) and Sugawara et al. (2014), this study has shown that the Serbian post-communist educational context has not sufficiently supported teachers in achieving successful 'two-way' communication with parents through clear and concise instructions in official educational documents and policies. This study confirmed that, even in 2018, some 30 years after the end of communist rule, there was no evidence of specific policies on family-school engagement in primary school education in Serbia, but the importance of these interactions has only been an integral part of other official documents such as *The Law on Preschool Education* (*Zakon o predškolskom vaspitanju i obrazovanju*, 2010), *Curriculum Framework for Preschool Education* (*Pravilnik o osnovama*

programa predškolskog vaspitanja i obrazovanja, 2018), *Standards of Competences for the Profession of Teachers and Their Professional Development* (*Pravilnik o standardima kompetencija za profesiju nastavnika i njihovog profesionalnog usavrsavanja,* 2011) and *The Law on Primary School Education* (*Zakon o osnovnom obrazovanju i vaspitanju*, 2013).

The legacy of the focus on 'control', with its authoritarian and strict underpinnings had an evident influence on post-communist Serbian parents' views of why family-school interactions were important, especially when parents stressed that strong family-school relationships helped establish control over children from the time they commenced school. Additionally, some Serbian parents believed that schooling is the sole responsibility of the teacher, a view also articulated by Wursten and Jacobs (2013), who indicated that families from post-communist countries and from more vulnerable socio-economic backgrounds tend to be less confident about participating in their child's school life. For example, this research suggested that Serbian parents and teachers viewed the family as 'insufficiently educated' to be involved in school learning activities. Such views and experiences are consistent with Radu's (2011) claim that parent-teacher connectedness in post-communist countries is almost non-existent because both families and teachers are usually led by traditional convictions that education is essentially a national responsibility, a position that was reinforced during the communist years. The cultural barriers, such as parents' beliefs that children's learning processes are not their responsibility, may hinder a smooth transition to school and academic development for some students (Sanagavarapu, 2010).

The main findings around valuing and supporting initiatives to establish and sustain family-school connectedness demonstrated that teachers in both Australian and Serbian cultural contexts had positive perceptions of family-school communication and cooperation in the first years of schooling. Both viewed relationships between parents and teachers as effective for children's academic and social-emotional development and stressed that family-school relationships are especially important in early education and at the 'transition to school' period. However, some Serbian teachers exhibited authoritarian and teacher-dominated views in their perceptions of the role families should play in their children's schooling and in the ways they should communicate with families. As highlighted earlier, these perspectives seem to reflect the centralised, authoritarian relationships that prevailed in the communist era and continue to affect the post-communist educational context in Serbian schools. Serbian teachers showed little or no actual commitment to or experience of interacting with parents before children started school or in their early education. Specifically, they explained that parents' lack of familiarity with the school system was a key challenge for involving the family in school and classroom-related activities. Yet, they did not seem to recognise that parents might lack familiarity with their child's learning because they were not invited to the school or made to feel welcome. In contrast, all Australian teachers said they communicated regularly with parents, provided information about school learning programs/activities and children's academic and socio-behavioural progress, together with frequent opportunities to engage in school activities. It was apparent from these responses that Australian schools and teachers were more pro-active in initiating communication with parents than their Serbian colleagues and with involving them in school activities.

Parents' Views of Family-School Communication and Cooperation in Early Education

Both groups of parents, Serbian and Serbian parents who live in Australia, viewed positive family-school relationships as 'two-way' interactions based on honest, respectful, and approachable communication, a description consistent with that proposed by Ellis, Lock and Lummis (Ellis et al., 2015). Generally, parents in this study believed that positive engagements between families and schools were important for their child's academic and social-emotional outcomes. However, in explaining the benefits of positive family-school relationships, the Serbian parents stressed that these relationships were also important for establishing 'control' over children in the 'transition to school' period. As mentioned earlier, this authoritarian perspective appears consistent with strongly centralised views of education during the communist era that have carried over into post-communist culture, thus impacting on practice in the Serbian school system. Additionally, the impact of Serbia's past totalitarian ideology in which there was little room for parents' contributions to school life was reflected in Serbian parents' lack of confidence to be involved in learning programs and activities. Specifically, although some educational documents in Serbia: *The Law on Preschool Education* (*Zakon o predškolskom...*,2010); *Curriculum Framework for Preschool Education* (*Pravilnik o osnovama programa predškolskog...*, 2018) ; *Standards of Competences for the Profession of Teachers and Their Professional Development (Standardi kompetencija...*2011; *The Law on Primary School Education* (*Zakon o osnovnom obrazovanju...*2013) stressed the importance of the school-family cooperation and communication, Serbian parents and teachers tended to view the learning process as mainly teachers' responsibility. As the Australian school system has been largely free from such ideological exclusion, democratic principles around establishing and building interactions and policy foci on sharing responsibility for children's learning may have helped parents and teachers feel more confident to build strong relationships with each other. Given immersion in this more open, sharing environment, where learning, especially during the 'transition to school' and in the first two years of schooling, is usually viewed as a joint parent-teacher responsibility (*The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers*, 2011; *The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia, 2009*; *Transition to School*, 2017), Serbian parents who live in Australia said they quickly became comfortable with what the perceived as a more open and better organized school system. The statements from Serbian parents who live in Australia aligned with the more positive engagement experiences of the Serbian parent in this study whose child attended an international school in Serbia. Such experiences indicated that positive family-school engagement can be enacted in practice and has the potential to be an integral part of the parent-teacher dynamic in Serbia in time.

Family-School Communication Models at 'Transition to School' and in the Early Years of Schooling

The present study showed that while Serbianfamilies who live in Australiaand Australian schools communicate through a range of activities (frequent face-to-face informal meetings, regular electronic school reports, school newsletters, and/or online platforms),

communication between parents and teachers in Serbia was mostly limited to formal group parents' meetings and occasional individual in-person meetings.

Internationally, online communication tools are becoming increasingly integral to family-school interactions in early education and schooling more generally. This study indicated that Australian schools use a broad range of online platforms (e.g. mobile apps, Facebook pages, e-mails, e-newsletters) to communicate with parents in the first years of schooling (and beyond). In contrast, when Serbian schools did attempt to engage with parents, more traditional, one-way communication was employed. Serbian schools did not use digital technologies in children's learning or in teachers' interactions with families. This limited use appears largely a consequence of the poor state of the Serbian economy where schools generally lack the financial resources to successfully employ digital technologies in classroom learning or in communication more generally. As Mutch and Collins (2012) have emphasized, understanding the importance of parental engagements in school activities during the 'transition to school' period necessitates a move away from traditional, one-way communication models between parents and teachers to reciprocal two-way communication. Initiating two-way communication with families seems an important step for Serbian schools to develop trusting, respectful and meaningful home-school relations, including communication via digital technologies. Minds (2012) and Roy (2018) suggest that employing digital tools (such as mobile devices) might provide an accessible time- and cost-efficient way to enable teachers to interact with parents, especially during the child's early education. Almost every parent in Serbia has a cell phone with access to the internet and social networks (e.g. Facebook, Instagram), so there is the potential for teachers to easily communicate with parents, including through popular teacher-parent communication apps.

Teachers' Views of Family-School Communication and Cooperation in Early Education

Although both groups of teachers in this research, Serbian and Australian, viewed honest, respectful, and interactive relationships between school and families as a positive contributor to students' overall development in early education, some Serbian teachers focused more on the ways to 'control' parents, rather than support children. For example, when they explained that "parents need to listen and do what teachers tell them to do" (Serbian Teacher 2), they appeared to reflect the legacies of communist ideology, where educational authority was given solely to teachers. So, while acknowledging the importance of strong communication and cooperation between parents and teachers, Serbian teachers seemed to pay 'lip service' only to the role of the family in a child's schooling. Not unexpectedly, the cultural impact of Serbia's communist past, together with an insufficiency of policy guidelines about the importance of family-school connectedness seemed influential in shaping teachers' beliefs about the limited value of family-school engagements in practice. All of the above mentioned are official policies in Serbia that mention parent-teacher interaction as highly valuable, they do not contain a specific and detailed guideline how to achieve this and what steps teachers should make to maintain and further

develop positive two-way communication with parents. So, while Serbian teachers valued family-school cooperation in theory, Australian teachers enacted family-school partnerships in practice. They believed that family-school engagement is important for students' academic and social success, thus reflecting the importance of family-school partnerships in documents, such as *The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (Barr et al., 2008) or *The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* (2011). Documents, privileging partnerships between parents and teachers in the first years of schooling, act as guidelines for schools when developing their own policies on family-school communication and partnerships. Such positive views of parent-teacher communication and cooperation have been translated into communication and engagement practices, which have most recently been enhanced by the use of mobile teacher-parent communication apps, big electronic signs at school entrances, closed Facebook sites and e-newsletters. To conclude, the Serbian school system would benefit from the adoption of evidence-based approaches to family-school communication and cooperation, such as those highlighted in the literature and experienced by Serbian parents who live in Australia and teachers in Australia.

Parental Involvement in Learning and other School Activities

Parental Involvement in 'Transition to School' Programs

While strong relationships between teachers and parents during the 'transition-to--school' period are considered beneficial for children's academic and social-emotional outcomes (Epstein, 2005), parents from Serbia and Australia had very different experiences of school familiarization programs before their children commenced school. While Serbian parents who live in Australia indicated that they had a range of parent-teacher interactions before their children started school (e.g. specific orientation/familiarization programs, frequent school visits, and/or workshops), Serbian parents reported minimal communication with the school during their child's 'transition-to-school' period. This lack of family-school interaction before children commenced school in Serbia may be a key contributor to limited relationships between parents and teachers into the early school years and beyond. Additionally, evidence showed that increased family-school interactions before school starts are especially important for children whose school readiness has been adversely affected because of socio-economic disadvantage (Jackson & Cartel, 2010; Woodrow et al, 2016). Considering that Serbia has many students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, developing these positive interactions between parents and teachers during the 'transition-to-school' period is likely to be especially beneficial for those children and their families, and potentially for the Serbian school system more generally.

Parental Involvement in School Activities

As Davis (2000) and Epstein (2005) assert, parents can make a range of engaging contributions to support the successful social-emotional well-being and academic achievements of their children in early education. However, this research showed that while all Serbian parents who live in Australia were frequently engaged in a variety of school

activities, parent participation in a child's school life in Serbia was rare. In elaborating their reasons for limited engagement in their child's learning activities, Serbian parents indicated that the high level of stress, unemployment and financial problems influenced them in a way that they were not in a position to give meaningful support to teachers and to their children. Concomitantly, as also noted by Sugawara et al. (2014), there was rarely any concerted effort by schools to encourage family involvement at the transition time or in the first years of children's schooling. As highlighted in previous research, parents want to feel a sense of participation in learning activities, yet findings from the present study indicate that Serbian schools rarely reached out to parents, let alone sought to engage with them in their children's learning. As the value of building and sustaining parent-school communication and cooperation is widely acknowledged, the benefits of connecting with families need to be explored by Serbian school system stakeholders. Developing a commitment to family-school engagement and employing strategies to actively involve parents in their children's learning and other school activities are likely to enhance learning experiences and outcomes for children (Carlson & Christenson, 2005; Clarke-Habibi, 2005; Decker & Decker, 2000;).

Parental Involvement in 'Learning at Home' Activities

Despite Epstein (2005) and Raftery et al.'s (2012) description of 'homes' as being key contributors to children's positive educational achievements, Serbian parents felt they were not encouraged to engage with the school and were generally not confident to support their child's learning at home. Moreover, teachers in Serbia rarely encouraged parents to engage with the school or supported involvement in their child's 'learning at home', except by offering occasional informal advice and reporting on students' academic achievement. Explaining why this is the case, Serbian teachers said that, although primary-school related official documents such as *Standards of Competences for the Profession of Teachers and Their Professional Development* (*Standardi kompetencija...*,2011) and *The Law on Primary School Education* (*Zakon o osnovnom obrazovanju...*,2013) emphasized the value of positive communication and cooperation with families, they do not have specific guidelines on how to achieve and continuously develop their interactions with parents. In contrast to Serbian parents' views about the lack of encouragement to get involved with their child's learning, Serbian parents who live in Australia said that their schools used a range of methods to encourage parental involvement as children transitioned to school and in a child's 'learning at home' activities (such as story reading) in particular. This positive practice of supporting parents' participation in 'learning at home' activities is likely to reflect teachers' recognition of the shared responsibility for children's learning and the value of parents' input, both of which are highlighted in policy guidelines that encourage strong family-school engagement. For instance, Australian policy documents (AITSL, 2011) state that teachers *are responsible* for planning and working with families to provide relevant opportunities for parents to be involved in their children's 'learning at home' and provide teachers with precise guidelines on how to achieve it in practice. It is possible that similar policy foci in Serbian teacher standards or requirements might encourage teachers to build and sustain interactions with parents and encourage parents to be more proactive in their children's learning.

Parental Involvement in 'Decision Making' Activities

Although Epstein (2005) and Carlson and Christenson (2005) stress that parents' participation in a school's 'decision making' activities is a core feature of genuine family-school partnerships with the potential to positively affect students' adjustment to school and later educational progress, this study indicated that few parents in Serbia or Australia had the opportunity to be involved in school and classroom related 'decision making' activities for different reasons. Teachers from Serbia and Australia expressed quite different views about the possibility of parents' participation in 'decision making' procedures. While Australian teachers tended to believe that parents should be involved in creating and implementing school decisions – but seemingly did not follow through with actual involvement – most Serbian teachers highlighted their central role in school matters and indicated that parents were not sufficiently informed or 'educated' to be a part of the 'decision making' process. Specifically, Serbian teachers' views in this study were consistent with those noted by Radu (2011), who observes that teachers in post-communist countries tend to believe that schooling outside of the individual context of their child is not a parent's domain. The Serbian teachers' views about centralised control are likely due to the influences of decades of communism that excluded any parental input and new, creative ideas from families. In contrast, Australian teachers in this research expressed positive views of parental participation in school-related 'decision making' activities. For instance, Australian Teacher 1 was very specific when she said that: 'Involving the family in making decisions about their child's learning is useful because it gives a chance to parents to feel more powerful in terms of putting their own ideas and thoughts into their child's education'.

Given that the family and the school usually build their connections in relation to cultural values within their own microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), the positive views of Australian teachers are most likely linked to the democratic principles established in Australian culture and through the context of the school system. Considering the lack of parental involvement in children's education in Serbia, developing policies and strategies to value and build partnerships with parents, including enhanced communication and opportunities for involvement in decision making, as well as in other school activities, is an important step. In particular, involving parents in school life, first by building trust, familiarity and confidence, and then by including them in decision making processes around policy development and day-to-day curriculum implementation could be a catalyst to strengthen and sustain family-school cooperation in Serbia along the lines suggested by Sugawara et al. (2014).

Enablers and barriers to initiating and sustaining school-family communication and co-operation

All parents and teachers from Serbia and Australia recognised interactive family-school communication based on honest, respectful, approachable, and positive engagements, as well as sufficiency of parents' time, to be the most effective attributes for sustaining and developing connectedness between parents and teachers. Nevertheless, respondents from each cultural context had differing views on factors that encourage family-school

communication and interaction in early education. While Australian parents and teachers who already engaged with each other to support children's learning focused on ways to enhance communication, such as highlighting the value of digital technologies, Serbian parents and teachers tended to focus on fundamental reasons why communications between families and schools were limited. Rather than looking at their own practice and pedagogical reasons for their lack of communication with families, Serbian teachers specifically indicated that parents were not capable of involvement and needed to be more familiar with the school system, or that teachers needed higher pay and more time if they were to initiate successful interactions with families. There seemed to be little acknowledgement that Serbian teachers should initiate communication with families and encourage and support families to engage with their child's school. In elaborating Serbian respondents' contention that parents need to be more informed and educated to participate in their child's school-related activities, it was evident that the post-communist culture in Serbia helped to create the idea that school life is 'teachers' responsibility'. Additionally, most Serbian respondents in this study complained of low salaries that contributed towards an overall lack of motivational interest among teachers. They stressed that better teacher salaries would motivate them to engage more effectively with students and their families. Finally, it was clear that many parents in both Serbia and Australia are struggling to find a balance among parental, professional, and social responsibilities.

A universal finding from this research was that almost all parents said they *lacked the time* to participate in their child' learning and other school activities. As most parents work full-time, an effective way to engage them in their child's learning and other school activities is to include some kind of online components. Essentially, digital tools offer a range of possibilities for the school to build and sustain positive interactions with parents and to partner with them to jointly support children's social and academic development. Given this study has shown that schools in Serbia rarely communicate with families in practice, policy initiatives around building and sustaining family-school communication could, perhaps, start with building trust and communication through the use of online platforms to connect with parents. As Serbian educational authorities begin to promote the use of digital tools to support children's learning, and given that most Serbians have a cell phone, it seems natural that they would also become key tools for communicating and engaging with families. While all respondents highlighted both teachers' and parents' lack of time to work together to support children's learning, respondents from Australia also suggested some specific ways to facilitate family-school engagement. For example: 'It is important for schools to run events at times parents can attend because most parents are working, and able to come to school only in the evening and on weekends (Australian Teacher 2). Secondly, this study aligned with Radu's (2011), Babic et al.'s (2011), and Sugawara et al.'s (2014) assertions that parental involvement in school activities in Serbia is also shaped by parents' and teachers' disadvantaged socio-economic position. For example, Serbian respondents in this study overwhelmingly reported poor working conditions and low pay for both teachers and parents as a main contributor to their low motivation in developing positive relationships and interactions with each other. In thinking about ways to improve the current model of family-school interactions, Serbian respondents highlighted a need

for a considerable investment in professional development for teachers, better allocation of accessible resources, and the development of specific strategies designed to encourage parental involvement in their children's learning and other school activities. Lastly, findings indicated that most Serbian parents in this research felt unfamiliar with learning programs and activities, resulting in an overall lack of parental confidence to participate in children's school life, findings also identified by Babić et al. (2011). When explaining the reasons why parents were not invited to participate in school activities, Serbian parents and teachers mostly stated that parents' limited familiarity with school procedures and the learning process would prevent appropriate and meaningful contributions to their child's schooling. Contributing to this view, perhaps, was the finding that more than half of the Serbian parents in this research who live in Australia had completed bachelor's degrees, while most Serbian parents had non degree level qualifications. These differences in parents' educational experiences and backgrounds, together with likely socio-economic opportunities might have impacted on their inclination to be involved with the school and learning activities.

In order to encourage parental confidence to interact with teachers in early education and to participate in school activities, schools in Serbia could provide specific workshops and training sessions for families on how to become a stronger part of their children's learning activities. Additionally, parents should be made aware of the benefits of positive family-school engagements for students' academic and social outcomes. Similarly, educational authorities need to provide teachers with professional development opportunities and clear official policy guidelines, because, while many teachers are aware of the key attributes for sustaining effective family-school cooperation, they seem to lack an understanding of how to transform theoretical knowledge into practice. Transforming this theoretical knowledge into practice is not an automatic operation. Essentially, teachers need different types of skills and approaches to implement strategies to handle their interactions with the family (Westergard, 2015; Woodrow et al., 2016).

Conclusion

The present study investigated to what extent socio-cultural context might influence Serbian and Serbian/Australian parents' perceptions of family-school engagements; to what extent Serbian teachers and Australian teachers are supported by official policy guidelines to establish interactions with the family in the early years of schooling; and the main enablers and barriers to initiating and sustaining family-school communication and cooperation in early education. The results showed Serbian and Australian parents' and teachers' essentially positive views of the benefits of family-school interactions in early education. There were clear differences though in the actual experiences of engagement between parents and teachers in the transition-to-school period and first years of schooling. Although all parents and teachers from both cultural groups viewed interactions between the family and the school in early education as very important for students' academic and social-emotional progress, Australian teachers and Australian-Serbian families tended to see schooling as a joint effort between parents and schools, while the economic disadvantages experienced by Serbian parents and teachers in the aftermath of the war, together with decades of communism with its authoritarian and teacher-centred ideology contributed to:

• overwhelmingly underdeveloped and infrequent communication models between parents and teachers in early education;
• almost non-existent family-school interactions via digital technology such as e-newsletters, mobile apps, and/or social network groups;
• parents' inability to be actively involved in their child's schooling at almost all levels ('transition to school' procedures, classroom and other school events, 'learning at home' activities, and/or 'decision making' programs);
• non-existent or unclear official policy guidelines on family-school communication and cooperation in the first years of schooling.

Consistent with responses from Serbian parents who live in Australia, many Serbian parents said they wanted to be a part of their child's schooling, but lacked the time, the confidence, the knowledge, the expectations, or the opportunities. Similarly, Serbian teachers in the present study indicated that they wanted to establish and build positive relationships with families, but generally lacked the time, resources and sufficient official policy guidelines to do so. While overcoming such structural barriers is challenging, focusing on international evidence highlighting the importance of family-school communication and cooperation in the first years of schooling, strengthening policy focusing on family-school connectedness and providing professional and resource support to enact closer family-school relationships would be good starting points to better connecting schools and families.

The different approaches to family-school communication and cooperation in Serbia and Australia appear to be related, at least in part, to overarching policy frameworks around the value of family-school interactions. Serbia's scant policy focus on valuing, building and sustaining engagement between parents and teachers, contrasts with Australia's well-developed policy and curricula guidelines designed to help teachers support families to become familiar with schools and facilitate their children's transition to school.

One way to fill this policy gap in Serbian education would be to consult with families and teachers about the value of family-school collaboration with a view to developing policy and professional learning opportunities that support teachers to initiate and sustain communication and cooperation with parents, including participation in their children's learning. A formal focus on the value of parent-school cooperation through professional learning opportunities could help provide schools and teachers with the support they need to encourage parental involvement in learning, which in turn might lead to improvement of students' social and academic outcomes (Bailey 2017; Davis, 2000).

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Pristupi u proučavanju odnosa porodice i škole – primeri Srbije i Australije

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Apstrakt   *Čvrsta saradnja i redovna komunikacija između porodice i škole predstavljaju jedan od najznačajnijih faktora koji doprinose sticanju znanja, gradnji identiteta i opštoj dobrobiti učenika. Ovo istraživanje je imalo cilj da podrži tvorce obrazovnih zakona i nadređene u školama da razviju efikasniju kooperaciju sa porodicama već u periodu polaska deteta u školu. Oslanjajući se na iskustva srpskih roditelja koji žive u Australiji i australijskih nastavnika, uz razmatranje savremene obrazovne literature o saradnji porodice i škole, težilo se određivanju strategija koje bi mogle da budu iskorišćene da podstaknu jačanje komunikacije između vaspitno-obrazovnih ustanova i porodica, kao i jačanje modela saradnje između roditelja i nastavnika u prvim godinama školovanja. Ova studija je koristila kvalitativni istraživački pristup (polustrukturirani upitnici i naknadni intervjui) da bi istražila iskustva i mišljenja roditelja i nastavnika o uspostavljanju i održanju partnerstva između porodice i škole u oba obrazovna konteksta. Analiza viđenja odnosa porodice i škole u periodu polaska u školu od roditelja i nastavnika u Srbiji ukazala je na to je komunikacija bila vrlo ograničena i da su roditelji samo u retkim prilikama bili uključeni u proces sticanja znanja svoje dece, uključujući nastavne i vannastavne aktivnosti. S druge strane, analiza opisanih iskustava i pogleda na saradnju roditelja i nastavnika u Australiji u periodu polaska u školu pokazala je da su komunikacija i kooperacija između porodice i škole bile ustaljene i redovne. Saznanja koja su proizašla iz ovog istraživanja pokrenula su mnoge predloge koje bi škole u Srbiji mogle da usvoje zarad jačanja i održanja pozitivne komunikacije, saradnje i odnosa sa porodicama, naročito u periodu polaska u školu i prvih godina školovanja.*

Ključne reči: *saradnja porodice i škole, rano obrazovanje, postkomunistički obrazovni kontekst, demokratski obrazovni kontekst.*

Подходы к изучению взаимоотношения семьи и школы на примере Сербии и Австралии

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Резюме
Тесное сотрудничество и регулярное общение между семьей и школой являются одним из важнейших факторов, способствующих получению знаний, формированию личности и общему благополучию учащихся. Данное исследование было направлено на поддержку создателям образовательного законодательства и руководителям школ в развитии более эффективного сотрудничества с семьей уже в период поступления детей в школу. Опираясь на опыт сербских родителей, живущих в Австралии и австралийских учителей, а также на изучение современной образовательной литературы о сотрудничестве семьи и школы, нами хотелось определить стратегии, которые можно было бы использовать для поощрения более тесного общения между учебными заведениями и семьями, а также и укрепить модели сотрудничества родителей и педагогов в первые годы обучения. В исследовании использовался качественный исследовательский подход (полуструктурированные анкеты и последующие интервью) для изучения опыта и мнений родителей и учителей об установлении и поддержании партнерских отношений между семьей и школой в обоих образовательных контекстах. Анализ отношений между семьей и школой в период поступления детей в школу на основе мнения родителей и учителей в Сербии показал, что общение было очень ограниченным и что родители лишь изредка участвовали в процессе приобретения знаний своими детьми, включая классные и внеклассные активности. С другой стороны, анализ опыта и взглядов на сотрудничество родителей и учителей в Австралии в период поступления в школу показал, что общение и сотрудничество между семьей и школой были налаженными и регулярными. В связи с этим результаты исследования привели к ряду предложений, которые школы в Сербии могли бы принять для укрепления и поддержания коммуникации и сотрудничества с семьями, особенно в период поступления в школу и в первые годы обучения.

Ключевые слова: сотрудничество семьи и школы, раннее образование, посткоммунистический образовательный контекст, демократический образовательный контекст.