

## 9. COOPERATION IN THE GENERAL EDUCATION SYSTEM

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### **Abstract**

The article is based on the results of a complex survey carried out in 41 schools of Estonia in 2003. The number of pupils who discontinue their studies or repeat a grade is worryingly large, which implies unsolved problems in the daily work of the general education system. The aim of the survey was to identify the actual situation of cooperation in the general education system through a complex survey and on its basis to find out how a young person's further life is influenced. The analysis attempts to reveal causal relationships concerning cooperation which would alleviate worrying issues at school. The survey results bring forth aspects which influence cooperation between teachers and pupils, teachers and parents, and teachers and school administration.

The major conclusions of the empirical survey are the following: parents' criticism is justified as home – school cooperation is modest, especially related to information retrieval from subject teachers. The present system makes only a partial use of specialist knowledge and opportunities to influence cooperation skills of a young person. There is no specifically established distribution of tasks between interest groups. The school is not fully aware of its leading role in organisation of cooperation.

## Introduction

Development of cooperation culture in an organisation is a process which evolves through joint work, efforts and awareness. Thus information in an organisation should flow adequately and fast, all interest groups should have clear realistic targets. Teamwork and skilful leadership are of decisive importance in the evolution of cooperation culture. Teamwork presumes an ability to present well-reasoned arguments, readiness to compromise, availability of social capital and ability to use it.

Productivity of human, capital and natural resources of society determines the living standard of a nation. If we were able to direct better-educated labour in production input, it would stimulate innovation, more innovation results in economic development. Consequently, education is the key to development.

Cooperation in the general education system proceeds at several levels: cooperation between pupils, teachers and parents, and cooperation between teachers. There is only one single output – teacher's influence as a leader of working processes in the classroom. What a pupil does as a result of teacher's action is important in school cooperation. Attitudes, cooperation experiences and both positive and negative influence of cooperation culture acquired at school will accompany pupils along their further career paths.

*Politologists and economists have reached a common point of view that a central factor of development in a modern society is cultural development. In a world driven by economy and technology differences between levels of development depend on education and culture, but the development of education should exceed social development.*

The number of pupils who discontinue their studies and repeat a grade is worryingly large. According to the Statistical Office, 60,145 pupils have had to repeat a grade in nine years, which means that a risk group has been created in the general education system. These pupils – 43,159 boys and 16,936 girls – have caused additional expenses to the state in total 485 million kroons. Spent in vain? Criticism by parents and dissatisfaction of

the society refer to unsolved problems in the daily activities of the general education system. The aim of the survey was to identify the actual situation of cooperation in the general education system. The questionnaire consisted of three blocks: I cooperation (15 questions); II education quality (26 questions); III education policy (21 questions) in order to reveal causal relationships concerning cooperation which could alleviate worrying issues at school. A complex survey of the kind has not been made before.

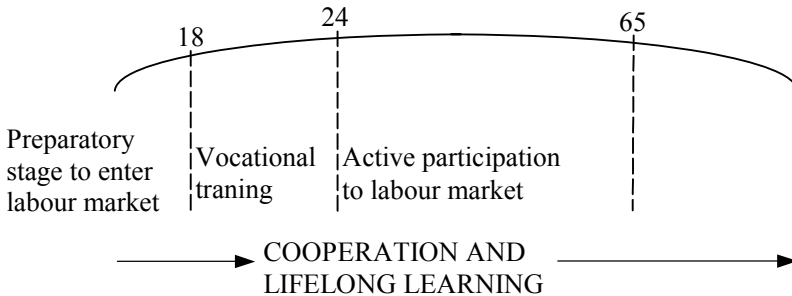
## **Spheres of cooperation culture**

Organisational culture may develop spontaneously, but it may also be developed purposefully. The existence of cooperation culture, which in turn is based on the existence of social capital, is important for the purposeful development of organisational culture. According to Francis Fukuyama, social capital is an aggregate of value judgements and behavioural norms which is commonly acknowledged by the members of the group in order to cooperate to achieve common goals (Harrison, Huntington, 2002: 96). Trust is achieved by having something in common. The pedagogical staff plays a key role in school cooperation culture, as development in school and working education process depend on their work ethics and value systems. Mariano Grondoba claims that providing education does not equal to brainwashing. It should be education that enables an individual to discover his/her truth, without being dictated what the truth is. In development-hostile value systems, education is a process of passing on educational dogmas which moulds conformists and followers (Harrison *et al*, 2002: 48). Modern education, on the contrary, favours a certain relativist tendency or doctrine, according to which all world views and value systems are related to their time and place and none of them contain the truth but reflect the biases and interests of their supporters. A theory telling that no position is better than others fits well in with the desire of a democratic person to believe that his way of life is as good as any other, meditates Francis Fukuyama, professor of international political economy. Many young people would desire to live with a “world view” which

means they would choose a deeper faith and relation with “values” out of liberalism, as traditional religions suggest. But the wide variety of choices confuses them (Fukuyama, 2002).

Information and the flow of it have a special value in the development of cooperation culture. Information may concurrently be owned by a number of people, but analysis and action based on it are increasingly important. These issues are essential: how information creates values, whether all interest groups communicate regularly, whether there is a discussion on sources of values in the long-term perspectives (Boulton *et al*, 2000). The role of an individual is increasing and a person’s ethical, moral character is gaining in importance. That requires more attention to be paid to the period when personality traits are formed.

Let us look at the life span of man:



**Figure 9.1.** Life span from the aspect of economic activities (compiled by the author).

A human becomes an adult at the age of about 17–20, i.e. in the period when a young person leaves the general education system (see Figure 9.1). The life span does not contain sharp changes, everything is based on the previous stages. A carrier of labour force quality is a person and his/her value judgements. A worldwide analysis of age groups by Inglehart indicates that people mainly retain their attitudes acquired by the age of 20 (Taagepera, 2003). The principles and value judgements acquired at an early

age or in the course of socialisation of the individual have a greater influence than those acquired in a later period (Vadi, 2000a). Attitudes towards lifelong education are formed at home but the general education system is the young person's first job outside home. "... this is where a spark of creativity may burst into flames or fade, and access to knowledge may be accomplished or not" is stressed in the report to the UNESCO by the International Commission for the 21st Century (Delors, 1999: 111).

Fundamental value judgements, knowledge and skills, attitude to learning and purposeful work, ability to reason, characteristics of will, and skills to reasonably defend one's views develop and become established in this especially sensitive and susceptible age. A young person gains experience within twelve years in the general education system, which is a long period – therefore such experiences become established beliefs and accompany a person for the rest of his/her life. Later in life the principles may be rectified but they mainly remain unchanged.

M. Lauristin and P. Vihalemm claim on the basis of their study that values are acquired from a number of sources, such as parents, peers, school, religion, society, personal experience, etc. in addition to channels of intercultural communication, e.g. media, as well as through interaction with people of different cultural backgrounds and direct participation in increasing cultural and economic exchange (Lauristin, Vihalemm, 1997: 249). School's unique influence persists. More precisely, the triad a pupil – a teacher – parents. "This triad has an influential power," said Peter Coleman on the basis of his survey (Coleman, 1998: 1).

Organisational values are carried by all its members who, in their turn, adjust and complement them with the values of their own (Vadi, 2000a).

According to K. Prükk, it would be excellent if we could measure a particular person when he/she is selecting a vocation against the attitude scale provided in the code of conduct, and thus reject unsuitable persons. However, we lack that opportunity and real life has to identify the persons whose ethical attitudes do not coincide with those required from holders of a particular job and leave

them aside ... Exclusion from the ranks of professionals of a certain field is not punishment but rather the truth that the person lacks specific qualities needed for that field (Prükk, 1999: 157).

Not only the school influences the pupil but all the teachers of that school as well. During a school day, pupils encounter a number of different leadership styles and teachers with different personality traits. By teachers' cooperation culture I mean the following: each teacher's intellectual abilities in cooperation with their colleagues form collective intelligence. Each teacher's ethical behaviour, that is his/her moral character in interaction with his/her colleagues forms the ethical culture of conduct of the staff of a particular school. The aforementioned combined – collective intelligence and pedagogical ethics – form a school's daily cooperation culture. Cooperation culture is a dynamic process that can be valued and managed by the school administration. Teachers' cooperation culture influences their pupils' culture of conduct and communication.

Organisational culture determines the values, leading beliefs and ways of thinking that the members of an organisation share and that new members should acquire. This is the unwritten cognitive part of an organisation. Each person participates in this culture but the culture itself is usually unnoticeable.

Twofold relations act in any organisation: cultural relations and rational relations. While cultural relations denote common aims, values, traditions and history which create preconditions for cooperation and are necessary in order to achieve the feeling of belonging, then rational relations establish certain rules of employees' behaviour in an organisation, determine the roles, functions, and punishments, and create formal authority. Rational relations dictate precisely what employees can or should do and what is forbidden for them. As a result of combined cultural and rational relations a unique cooperation culture is created in each organisation.

How efficient the cooperation between the teachers of a school is largely influences the cooperation culture of that school.

Values cannot be taught – they are acquired in the course of observing and imitating other people. Formation of values is influenced by culture and the central principles are those which influence the formation of norms. Values mean preferring particular conditions to others (Vadi, 2000a).

Information is always a major factor in leaders' work. Only efficiently working noiseless information and its flowing speed enable efficient management and planning of the system's work (Alas, 2001).

There is just one production cycle in the general education system, i.e. what goes on between a teacher and a pupil, but relevant information reception and transmission of information have remained at a modest level in the current period of rapid changes. K. Haav suggests that teachers are only drilled in pedagogic skills and they cannot even think organisationally or institutionally (Haav, 1998: 25). Expectations run high and needs seem boundless but one of the relatively unsolved major problems in schools is communication and cooperation with parents (Torokoff, 2001). Abstract elements such as values, attitudes, personality stereotypes and major views work in cooperation relations which may provide an explanation to invisible causes of human behaviour at the individual, group, organisation and societal level (Vadi, 2000a). Manifestation of cooperation influence in school is complicated as the cumulative effect and aims of a number of interest groups intertwine and the complexity of counter-effects in the system has to be taken into account. Provisionally, the stakeholders in the school may be divided into four large groups: pupils, parents, teachers, and school administration. One of those groups – teachers – forms a formal group. "A formal group is created by formal power to achieve particular goals. In a formal group its members bear responsibility and obligation to consider group goals more important than personal ones. A determining factor is how group members perceive and realise understanding of group goals" (Vadi, 2000b: 223). The parents group is heterogeneous; their major concern is their child's future. Pupils – a nowadays education policy considers them customers as it

enables us to make the education system a closed system. School administration is a representative of formal power.

Cooperation is intellectuality and relations. School is the first place of work for a pupil where he/she receives first experiences of cooperation (see Figure 9.1). What kind of experiences they are depends on all the people working in the school, their attitudes, stances, values and ability to influence pupils with their behaviour. Outcomes of the general education system lie in a strong correlation with labour quality. Labour quality presumes a person's continuous independent, life-long learning and habit to cooperate. Cooperation skills do not develop by themselves. Cooperation between a teacher, pupil and parent is of major importance as well as the flow of information. The general education system is the first stage to prepare a young person to enter the labour market. Therefore it is essential to pass that stage successfully. School's impact is unique.

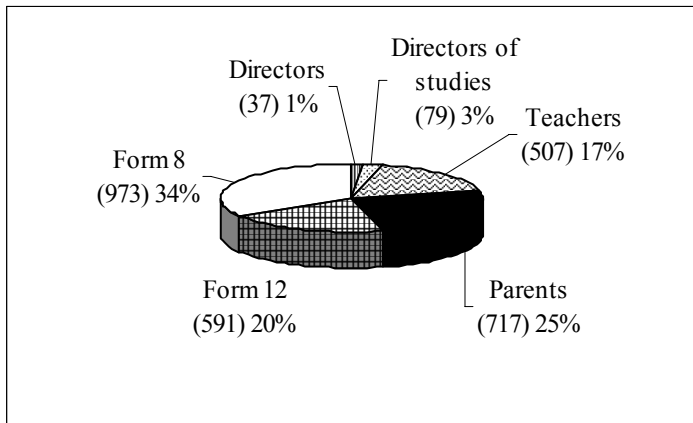
Cooperation culture in the school proceeds at several levels: teacher – pupil, teacher – teacher, teacher – parent and teacher – school administration. Peter Coleman says, referring to his survey, that the impact between teacher – pupil – parent is stronger than expected (Coleman, 1998).

## **Survey**

This article brings forth only the part of the survey covering cooperation and cooperation culture. The survey focuses on how to ensure genuine cooperation between various interest groups.

## **Participants**

Six groups altogether participated in the survey: directors, directors of studies, teachers, pupils of form 8 and 12, and their parents – in total 2904 respondents from 41 schools of Estonia (Figure 9.2).



**Figure 9.2.** Participants in the cooperation survey.

The questionnaires administered to the interest groups were compiled bearing in mind that it would be possible to separate in the responses the respondent's views on the question given and the current real situation.

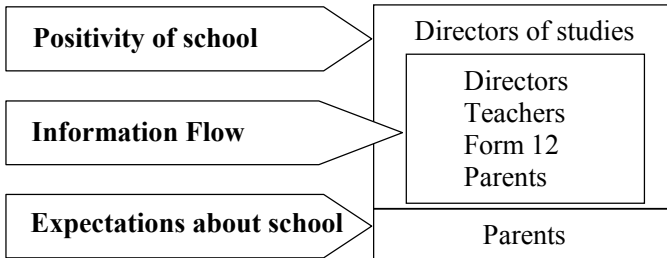
The cooperation survey was carried out between 25 March and 8 April 2003. The sampling contained basic schools and upper secondary schools in one county and in one town and in addition, four different regions in various parts of Estonia in order to gain an expert opinion. In the schools of the town all the employees and pupils filled in the questionnaires at the same time. Children took the questionnaires home to their parents and on the next day the questionnaires were returned. The return rate was 46%. In the county, the questionnaires were filled in on different dates.

## Methods

Prior to the cooperation survey the author carried out a pilot survey involving directors of studies of 47 schools of Estonia in order to determine the most essential issues in school cooperation (October 2002 – February 2003). All participants filled in a specially devised questionnaire for which Peter Coleman's coopera-

tion survey questionnaires (Coleman, 1998) served as models. Some statements included arguments which were to be responded to on a 10-point scale where 10 denoted the most important, 5 – cannot tell, 0 – not important. Open-answer questions were used as well. A systematic approach was used in the response analysis based on analysis logic. *MS Excel* was used for statistical processing.

The place of the group in the system and its level of competence was considered while compiling the questionnaire, whereas upon analysis of all the questionnaires we would obtain an overview of schools organisational culture for the present article on cooperation and cooperation culture formation. A general analysis is a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. Figure 9.3 demonstrates differences and similarities between the questions about cooperation put to the interest groups.



**Figure 9.3.** Questions in the cooperation block (compiled by the author).

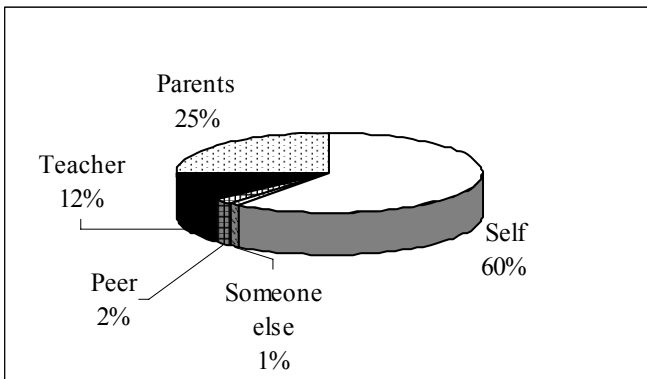
The questionnaires to the interest groups were compiled so that it would be possible to separate in the responses the respondent's: 1) values, views in a given question and the current actual situation, 2) situation of the interest group in the system, 3) level of competence. The analysis has separated the views and the actual situation, and the responses have been grouped.

## Results

### Teacher-pupil cooperation

All the practical work of the general education system is executed in the work relations between pupils and teachers. This forms the efficiency factor of the work done in the system.

School leavers were asked: *Who taught you to study?* The responses had four options, one of them open. Figure 9.4 shows the results.



**Figure 9.4.** Who taught the school leavers to study?

The pupils of Form 8 sorted all the subjects by the degree of difficulty and gave reasons for their choices. The main reasons were: cannot understand; teacher does not explain properly; have to cram only, but cannot understand.

Both the school leavers and pupils of Form 8 were asked practically the same questions, as the primary task of school is to teach a young person to learn. Work is introduced and shown how to do it properly at a workplace, only then one can start working. The teacher's overly modest role in teaching to learn creates the first rift in efficient cooperation.

We also asked Form 8 pupils: *Who helps in case of learning difficulties?* The results:

Teacher always helps – 23%,

Parents – 38%

Attempts to understand on one's own – 32%.

As a matter of fact, learning difficulties are a normal phenomenon, and overcoming these difficulties is the essence of learning. To cope with the difficulties, the teacher works in the classroom, helps pupils, directs, guides. But only in the case if the teacher's working style coincides with that of manager as a leader. If the teacher works as a mediator of a subject in the role of a classical leader as superior (I order – I forbid), the pupil has to find other ways to overcome his/her learning difficulties.

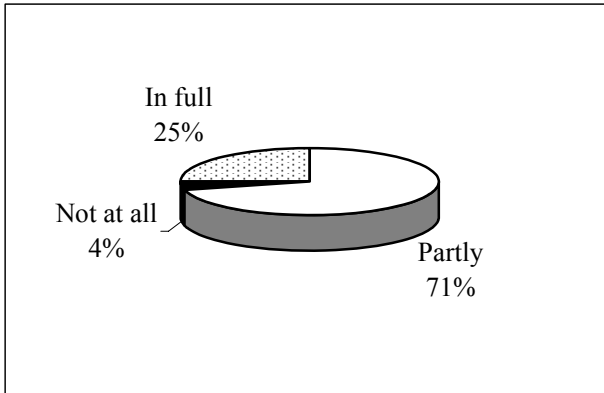
Cooperation relations can only develop when based on trust. There are teachers who pupils ask for help and always receive it; on the other hand, we also find teachers who are never asked, as it would not make sense. Due to the progress made in information technology, factual knowledge is no longer as important as it used to be, as facts can be retrieved immediately, should the need arise. Important is an ability to find facts and create links, to formulate proper questions. The relations between the teacher and the pupil are essential in this process. Characteristic responses were: if the subject is difficult, as a rule, the teacher is not asked for help; it is sought from parents or acquaintances. If the subject is pleasant, the teacher is asked to help. Thus the teacher-pupil cooperation brings us down to the problems of the quality of teacher's work.

### **Teacher-parent cooperation**

Most work in learning and education is done in the triangle: teacher – pupil – parent. It is only possible to influence a pupil's values by an adequate information flow between the school and home.

The work result largely depends on the cooperation between the three parties. A precondition of cooperation is the flow of information.

A question was set to parents: *Your expectations – hopes concerning the school are fulfilled (options – in full, partly, not at all) and if not, in which respect?* Results are shown on figure 9.5.



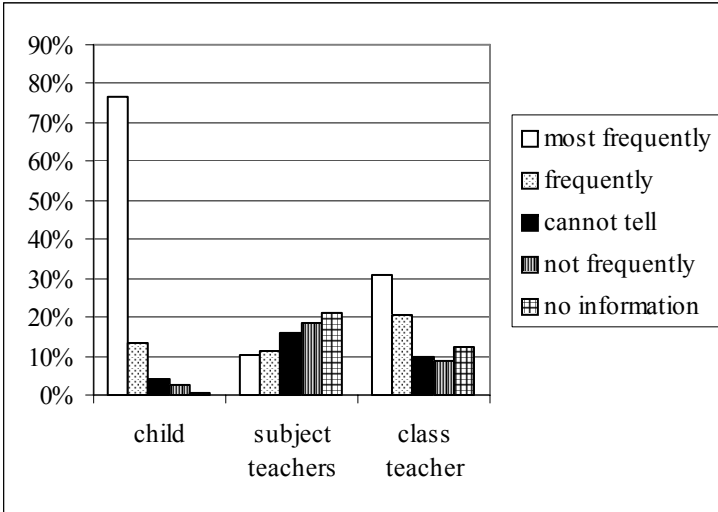
**Figure 9.5.** Parents' expectations about school.

The main reasons for unmet expectations were:

- Unpleasant behaviour and negative attitude towards pupils shown by some teachers 29%.
- Low level of teaching 11%.
- Overly large scope of curricula, children have to cram a lot of facts but cannot link them 37%.

The parents' interest group is heterogeneous and their endeavours are based on intuition rather than knowledge of the respective field. Their basic interest lies in the child's future. As parents mostly gain information about what goes on at school from children (see Figure 9.5), their ties with teachers leaving to be desired, then the information received may be one-sided. Often the information received is related to one's own experience of learning. When we add continuous help to the child in learning a subject, understanding a subject comes down to a notion of secondary importance, dominance of school as a controlling body of knowledge, then a situation is created in which the parent

distances himself/herself – his/her expectations and hopes are met in full (25%) or not met at all (4%). Meeting of expectations or hopes partly (71%) implies seeking for a solution to secure the child’s future, at least in the child’s education.



**Figure 9.6.** Mediation of information between home and school.

The parents answered the question: Who do you obtain information from on what goes on at school? that in most cases from their child (see Figure 9.6).

The flow of information between school and home is insufficient. The information provider is the child but the subject teacher’s role is insufficient, thought 54% of the parents. The gap is bridged by the class teacher but that information is mediated and unfortunately it often may be outdated.

The parents of children with learning difficulties require direct information from the subject teacher. Only one school among the respondents had organised regular monthly meetings of parents and all subject teachers. This example should be followed by all schools in Estonia.

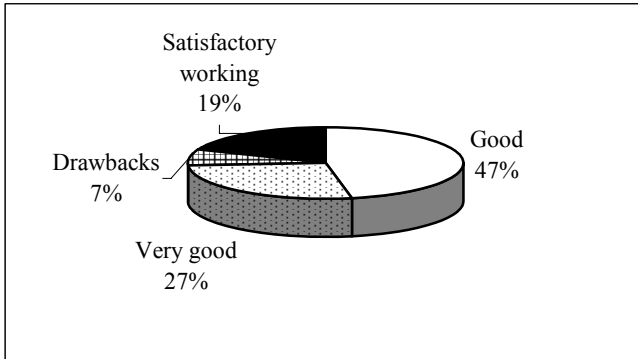
For parents a principal means of receiving information is personal contacts and discussions (78%), and contacts by phone (41%). The least favoured means is by e-mail (10%), or the parents have no access to computers. Just about 25% of the parents thought that parents meetings were important, general meetings of school were considered necessary by app. 40% of respondents. According to the parents, matters of common interest should be discussed at meetings, not just problems of individual pupils or homes. Every parent should receive positive emotions in the discussion with the teacher in order to enhance cooperation, so that consensus would support children's development.

### **Teacher-school administration cooperation**

The level of cooperation and cooperation culture is described in the comparison of the survey results.

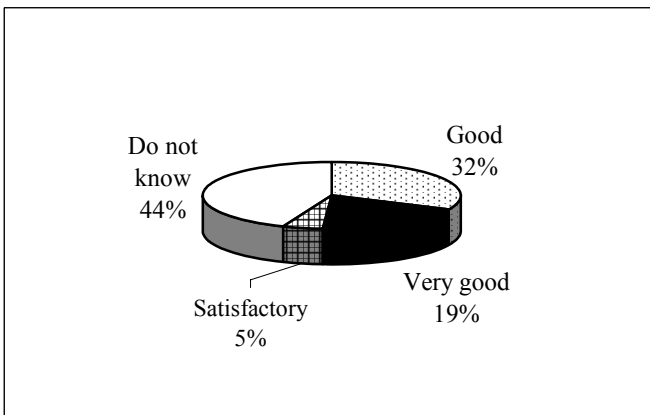
The survey was carried out with directors of studies and teachers simultaneously. Only the school administration may provide an objective and professional evaluation of a teacher's work. We requested directors of studies – direct leaders of teachers: *Please assess your teachers' performance and rate it on the scale in numbers: teachers working very well to those with some drawbacks.*

The results: according to the directors of studies, mainly good (47%) and very good (27%) teachers work in our schools, some work satisfactorily (19%) and only 7% of teachers have drawbacks. The latter part can be covered by in-service training. Thus, according to the directors of studies, the situation is relatively good (see Figure 9.7).



**Figure 9.7.** Opinions of directors of study about their teachers' level of performance (2001/2002 academic year).

The responses to the question to teachers: *Which assessment have you been given?* were somewhat different (see Figure 9.8).



**Figure 9.8.** Assessment provided by the administration that the teachers knew of (2001/2002 academic year).

It is worth noting that 44% of the teachers do not know whether they work well or with drawbacks. The sample included 507 teachers, consequently professional development of 233 teachers

has been divided into stages artificially, as no objective assessment concerning their performance has been provided.

It can be concluded that substantial cooperation between the teacher and the director of studies is not adequate. Only one director of studies pointed out that there are no assessment criteria. The teachers' principal comments were: *assessments are not made public; even external observers do not provide assessment; assessment is not systematically consistent; minimum 10 years no one has attended classes (said by 18 teachers)* and three teachers claimed that no assessment takes place based on the statements of the questionnaire.

Principals and directors of studies answered the question: *Number of classes visited and analysed in the previous academic year?*

The results: a director of studies in different counties on average visits and analyses 0.8 to 1.25 subject classes of each teacher per year. A principal visits and analyses on average 0.47 classes per year. Thus the school administration visits and analyses teachers in 1.27 to 1.72 classes in an academic year.

All the work done in the general education system takes place in classroom, here the aim of the system's work is realised, a young person is prepared to enter active economic life, values are rectified if necessary, information processing and use are taught, work habits are formed, pupils are taught how to learn, practical cooperation is trained, etc.

The teacher becomes one in practical work at school. A diploma shows he/she has obtained the necessary preliminary knowledge for pedagogical work and that he/she has been taught to solve a number of typical situations. But further development?

Although teaching as such means working alone, teamwork is of utmost importance – it contains resources that are partially not involved in solving school problems.

Information sources and spread have developed rapidly in recent years. As teachers and schools have largely lost their leading position in learning experience, they should attempt to make

school more attractive to pupils and equip them with guidelines to use the media (Delors, 1999).

The problems of social environment cannot be ignored any more either. Teachers are expected to cope with a host of social problems that parents have not been able to solve. Teachers should find a balance between opinions and attitudes pupils derive at home and the contents of the curriculum and demands of the school.

Parents would also expect consultations because curricula have substantially changed and supervision of and help to children thus often rendered impossible.

Each parent has certain expectations about support given by school to the development of their child. Figure 5 shows that only 25% of the parents are fully satisfied, while the expectations of 755 of the respondents either have not been fulfilled or have been partly fulfilled. The teachers should change their relationship with pupils, they should become accompanists rather than soloists and shift focus from information provision to provision of help to locate, manage and use knowledge, rather guide than mould the child. It is important that pupils would obtain independence, creativity and thirst for knowledge, which should accompany the knowledge acquired. Simultaneously, teachers should maintain a particular difference between school and social environment, allowing pupils to give critical evaluation. On the other hand, teachers should show great determination in relation with essential values, which should guide each person's life.

The power of teachers lies in their personal example, they incite pupils' inquisitive and open attitudes, readiness to check their opinions and admit mistakes. First and foremost, teachers should pass on their love towards learning (Delors, 1999).

## **Conclusions**

The analysis of the results yielded by the empirical survey revealed: the general education system lacks a specific working goal and that impacts performance of the whole system. To

establish a goal, first the customer of the system must be determined for whom the system works, and what must be done to meet this customer's needs. Education, but what kind? If we consider the labour market to be the end customer, then the requirements differ from those applied if the customer is a pupil, in case different concepts of education are adopted. In the first case, attention is paid to comprehension of the study material, in the second case to learning it, cramming it. Different ways of learning bring about different methodologies used by the teacher. This kind of uncertainty complicates work at school, paralysing involvement of cooperation culture. Uncertainty is further aggravated by the orders of the Minister of Education in Regulations for National Monitoring Procedures, Appendix 2 (RTL, 1999, 60, 799) and Instructions for Attestation of Teachers (RTL, 2002, 118, 1649).

The general education system should become a more open system – consumer, and thus the aim of work should be placed outside the system.

The position of a top manager should be introduced into the general education system with corresponding responsibilities for the quality of work performed: Articles 39 and 40 of the Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act must be amended (RTL, 1999, 42, 497).

The aim of work of the general education system should be placed with the actual performer of each task, so we will be able to avoid involvement of personal aims which may work against the overall purpose of work.

Teachers' work can only be evaluated on the basis of an objective evaluation system and assessment, and in case of cooperation. The main criterion of evaluation of teachers' work should become their efficient cooperative relationships with pupils and their parents.

Extensive reading and development of goal-dependent key skills should become a major form of teachers' professional improvement. Work can be performed if each person has the will to do so.

Technological advances enable acquisition of information on topics dealt with before attending an in-service training session and continue working in a group thereafter.

Different interest groups are involved in schoolwork – the administration, teachers, pupils, and parents. Success of work depends on whether the goals of those interest groups coincide and whether they cooperate in order to achieve their common goals.

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## KOKKUVÕTE

### Koostöö Eesti üldharidussüsteemis

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Artikkel põhineb 2003. aastal 41 Eesti koolis läbiviidud kompleksuuringu tulemustel. Murettekitavalt suur on õpinguid katkestavate ja klassikursust kordavate õpilaste arv, mis viitab lahendamata jäetud probleemidele Eesti üldharidussüsteemis.

Uurimuse eesmärgiks oli kompleksse uuringu kaudu välja selgitada reaalne olukord üldharidussüsteemis toimuvast organisatsiooni koostööst ning selle mõju noore inimese edasisele elukäigule. Analüüsi käigus on püütud välja tuua koostöö põhjuslikud seosed ja pakkuda nende põhjal võimalikke lahendusi, kooli mureprobleemide vähendamiseks.

Uuringutulemustest on välja toodud aspektid, mis mõjutavad koostööd õpetajate ja õpilaste vahel; õpetajate ja lapsevanemate vahel ning õpetajate ja kooli juhtkonna vahel.

Empiirilise uuringu olulisemad järeldused on järgmised: lapsevanemate kriitika on põhjendatud, sest kodu ja kooli vaheline koostöö on tagasihoidlik, seda eriti info liikumisel aineõpetajatelt. Praeguses haridussüsteemis kasutatakse spetsialistide teadmisi noore inimese koostööoskuste mõjutamisel vaid osaliselt. Puudub täpne, fikseeritud ülesannete jaotus erinevate huvigruppide vahel. Kool ei ole oma juhtivat rolli koostöö organiseerimisel täielikult teadvustanud.