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## **Views of Teachers and Support Staff at Schools on the Implementation and Development of Family Life Education**

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### **Abstract**

In many education systems, the curriculum includes preparation for independent living, sexual or family life, and social relationships. The relevant literature includes research on the target groups' attitudes to and evaluations of these modules. The novelty of our research is that we examined the views of school professionals to be involved in the implementation before the launch of the programme. Our aim was to explore their stance on the development of family and adult life education and relationship culture. The target groups of the study were class teachers and subject teachers in grades 5-13 as well as school support professionals in the three most disadvantaged counties of Hungary. The research method was qualitative, with individual and focus group interviews. Respondents were selected using quotas (county, type of school, school provider and career stage) and snowball sampling (N = 53). Our results highlight the role of school professionals' existing knowledge and experience of family pedagogy and that public education can rely not only on accumulated individual experience but also on well-functioning initiatives at the institutional level. We have found that teachers do perceive dysfunction in families and inadequate or dysfunctional preparation for adult life, and see the need to prepare young people for adulthood, but commitment to this task is not general.

**Keywords:** family life education, implementation, teacher attitudes, school support professionals.

### **1. Introduction**

The range of OECD publications makes one realise that 21<sup>st</sup>-century development policies are rediscovering the importance of families. While one and a half decades ago it was the Teachers Matter (OECD, 2005) report that caused a great stir, the past decade has seen several pieces of writing published by this global think tank on the effect of families on children's future (OECD

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2012; Ulferts, 2020). Human society, both at national and global levels, is currently struggling with countless social, economic and health problems which are rooted in family socialisation and which are easily handed down to subsequent generations, imposing tremendous strain on everybody. The OECD analyses raise awareness of the facts that spontaneous processes of family socialisation must be dealt with consciously and that the impacts new generations are exposed to can easily become issues of public concern.

In recent decades, family life has undergone fundamental changes, with traditional extended family and local community patterns no longer being passed on due to social and geographical mobility. The concepts of marriage and family have diversified, fertility and marriage rates have declined and the number of divorces and single-parent households have increased (Pusztai et al., 2022). In OECD countries, 17 % of children under 18 grow up in single-parent families or in multiple households due to joint custody arrangements (Ulferts, 2020). The proportion of ethnically and culturally mixed families is high, in which some of the complex and sensitive issues of family life are avoided as they can easily lead to cultural conflicts (Buehler, 2020). As a result, new generations' views on family life and adult life management have become uncertain, and therefore prevention as well as professional assistance are needed within the education system (Csók, Pusztai, 2022).

Family life education, preparation for independent living and life skills are existing educational content in many countries. In Hungary, family life education has been part of the new National Curriculum and the related content regulations as an independent field since 2020. Its aim is to prepare school-age groups for independent adult life, responsible relationships and family life in order to have a significant positive impact on unfavourable demographic and social tendencies (Engler, 2020; Engler et al., 2020).

Consulting teachers is an inevitable part of the implementation process, both in the preparation, process tracking and evaluation phases. It should be taken into account that in different education systems, teachers have different responsibilities depending on the presence of other support professionals in schools and the staff assisting them in their teaching. Teachers' roles can also vary according to the nature of the childcare, welfare and leisure activities delegated to educational institutions due to typical family structures and the proportion of female employment in a given society, and according to the length of time pupils spend at school during the week.

### **Family Life Education from an International Perspective**

The early definitions of family life education were narrower than those today. Family life education meant educational activities at schools with the aim of developing those skills that could help students find constructive solutions to problems arising in their present or future families (Avery-Lee, 1964).

Today's concepts, however, are more complex (National Council..., 2015). Engler (2020) distinguishes between two branches of family life education, one that concentrates on families' problems in the present aiming to assist, counsel and provide remedy and another that prepares for the future focusing on education and prevention.

In order to decide on the most appropriate working method in family life education, it is worth reviewing international experience, as there is great diversity in the curricula, working methods and pedagogical approaches. There are basically two opposing views in the literature. One view is that family life educators must have specific knowledge and competence to be able to apply this knowledge creatively in different socio-cultural contexts, periods and situations. The other concept is the evidence-based approach, which has recently emerged as a result of the infiltration of the methodology of medical sciences into social sciences. According to this approach, family life education curricula, methods and programmes are to be tested and only those that have been proved to be effective should be widely used (Darling et al., 2020). This implies that before the introduction of family life education, teachers should be involved in a preparatory, pilot research phase in which work organisation, didactic methods and curricula are tested on the basis of research findings. The next step is to decide on the solutions that have proved to be effective.

Several authors have discussed the extreme context sensitivity of family life education (Myers-Walls, 2000; Ballard, Taylor, 2011; Darling et al., 2020), particularly the need for culturally responsive family life education both in terms of content and methodology, and the importance of this approach in the design and implementation. In different cultures, the practices and content of family life education may be very different. In addition to the diversity of families in terms of

religion, culture, language, social status, region and place of residence, the variety of family structures within the same culture must also be taken into account. Therefore, in the everyday practice of family life education, educators must also choose carefully what and how to teach, while selecting from a range of procedures and teaching materials that have been proved to be effective by research evidence. In other words, in addition to being evidence-based, modern family life education is expected to bear socio-cultural relevance (Ballard, Taylor, 2011). For example, one of the authoritative handbooks on family life education lists specific approaches to family life education in a range of contexts. It devotes separate chapters to children in rural settings, to different minority groups, classifying them by language and culture, to children raised by grandparents and to children of convicts and prisoners, etc. (Ballard, Taylor, 2011). It also emphasises that overlapping characteristics could be used to further break down family life education methodology into intersecting types, i.e. children from certain families could be classified into several types. It is an important recurrent idea that taking socio-cultural diversity into consideration during the implementation of family life education does not only mean identifying the specific difficulties and problems in a particular setting, but also exploring the strengths of the families of the pupils concerned (Myers-Walls, 2000).

Two important research questions arise in relation to family life education programmes. First of all, based on previous practices, a fundamental research goal for the future of the programme is to identify the content focus and the themes that can be genuinely used by learners in different social and cultural contexts. Secondly, it is considered necessary to launch longitudinal research to follow up how the knowledge, skills and values acquired through the programmes promote a healthy transition to adulthood (Nasheeda et al., 2019).

Research has shown that family life education and preparation for adult life are highly important and urgent tasks due to the transformation and dysfunctionality of families. By living together, families spontaneously educate for family life, which is a very strong influence, currently characterised by a low level of parental awareness, being completely distanced from traditional ways of socialising for family life and being flustered by financial and time pressure – but all this does not provide sufficient preparation for the challenges of adulthood. It is clear that among all the institutions and organizations functioning in a society, it is the institutions of the educational system, i.e. schools, that can reach all young people and provide useable models for family life education apart from the ones existing in families. The literature also points out that there is not one uniform curriculum and method for family life education that could be applicable in every segment of society because of the constant interaction between institutional influences and spontaneous family life education taking place in families.

The aim of our research was to explore current school practices regarding preparation for family life, school staff's expectations of the modern approaches and learning materials assisting their work and the help they need for successful implementation. The target group of the study included class teachers, subject teachers and support professionals working with students from grades 5 to 13. We have two principal research questions: (1) What range of challenges will family life education be faced with in the Hungarian school setting when it is introduced? (2) What do teachers and other school professionals think of the potential of family life education and the development of relationship culture? What are their views on those and what specific recommendations do they have?

## **2. Methods**

As the international literature did not provide well-proven measures to be used before the introduction of family life education, we worked out an innovative conception to plan the structured interviews. We established quotas for the selection of interviewees in order to have an adequate number of respondents from each professional branch of teaching. The quotas were set according to county, type of school, school provider and stage of teaching career. The career composition of the responding teachers corresponded to the age composition of the Hungarian teaching profession (6 teachers in their early career stage, 7 teachers who have been teaching for 5-10 years, 13 teachers who have been teaching for 10-20 years, 19 teachers who have been teaching for 20-30 years and 8 teachers who have been teaching for more than 30 years). Quotas were adjusted by type of school (20 primary, 15 secondary vocational, and 18 secondary general), by type of school provider (31 public, 19 church-run, and 3 private), and by the spatial criteria (according to the number of pupils in the 40 districts of the 3 counties). We conducted detailed

individual interviews with ten highly experienced teachers who had worked extensively as class teachers, seven focus group interviews with another 39 teachers and one focus group interview with four support professionals (kindergarten and school social workers, school counsellors). The focus groups consisted of 4 to 8 respondents. Altogether, we analysed a text database comprised of 53 professionals' interview answers. The text database, based on the verbatim transcripts of the interviews, was processed using open coding by thematic units. In addition to triangulation within the qualitative method, validity was ensured through personal triangulation.

### 3. Research results

This section of the paper discusses the findings of the interviews conducted with school professionals (teachers and support professionals). First, we will present one aspect of their work that is currently classified by them as family pedagogical and support activities including school activities preparing for family life. Next, we will focus on their views on the potential, possibility and function of family and adult life education programmes, and finally we will highlight their suggestions for implementation. International models and debates in the literature indicate that a very important decision is to be taken as to how wide the thematic range of the programme could be. This adds considerable weight to the opinions of teachers and support professionals, who are closely familiar with the student population and spontaneous family life education as well as the transmission of adult behaviour patterns existing in their students' families. Apart from teachers, school support professionals also proved to be very useful sources of information for our research. [Table 1](#) contains the issues, constructs and variables.

**Table 1.** Frequency of assigned codings

| Investigated issues  | Construct   | Assigned coding                    | Times codes were assigned throughout all interviews |
|--|---|------------------------------------|---|
| Family pedagogy-related problems in today's schools  | Family structure                                      | Non-intact family                  | 50  |
|  |   | Single parent                      | 17  |
|  |   | Foster parent                      | 15  |
|  | Way of life in family                                 | Decline of communication/attention | 73  |
|  |   | Child abuse                        | 9   |
|  |   | Drug                               | 15  |
|  |   | Alcohol                            | 19  |
|  |   | Unemployment                       | 20  |
|  |   | Criminal                           | 6   |
|  |   | School absence                     | 17  |
| Teachers and school support professionals on how to implement the plan for family life education | Knowledge and attitudes towards family life education | No information                     | 35  |
|  |   | Uncertain information              | 18  |
|  |   | Reject                             | 7   |
|  |   | Welcome                            | 46  |
|  | Practical implementation                              | Working method                     | 159   |
|  |   | Expert                             | 106   |
|  |   | Need                               | 80  |
|  |   | Skills                             | 94  |
|  |   | Family-school partnership          | 133   |
|  |   |                                    |   |

#### 4.1. Family pedagogy-related problems in today's schools

We have found that the spontaneous family and adult life education experienced by young people in Hungary today is extremely diverse, and family subcultures are much further apart from one another than in societies with strong and stable middle classes. This has to be taken into account when planning family life education for schools. There is an almost general tendency towards the decline of communication within families, the shrinking – or disappearance – of time

spent together and the dysfunction of family structures, all of which lead to families being no longer able to fulfil their traditional role of educating for adult and family life. This is even more so in single-parent families, where children might find themselves in adult roles prematurely. In patchwork families, children might experience a lack of belonging or the negative consequences of competition between parents. It is characteristic of middle-class families that paying full attention to and spending quality time with children are on the decline, and so are activities that promote emotional and intellectual development. Instead, parents tend to replace care with buying objects for their children. *“What I can see is that our world has become so materialised and objectified that the personal contact between parents and children is very different from what it was like 20 or 30 years ago. Parents try to substitute objects for their personal presence, which has an impact on children. Admittedly, they really want to provide their children with everything, but they fail to devote enough time to them, which would be the most important thing. I know parents also have a hard time working three shifts and the like, but they should still find time for such things because this is the root of the problem.”* (F5/2, interviewee) Teachers and support professionals working with disadvantaged children report a wide spectrum of family problems including long-time unemployment, alcohol or drug consumption, parents with a criminal record, dropping out of school, affairs with the police and raising children under guardianship. In contrast, in schools where the student population has a more favourable composition, support professionals are confronted with concealed or ostensibly resolved problems. In low-status families, however, preparation for adulthood and family life is even more likely to include verbal aggression in communication as well as physical aggression, child abuse and transmitting deviant behaviour patterns. *“A few weeks ago one of my pupils informed me of her intention of going home early every day from then on, and as it was upon the mother’s request, I couldn’t suspect truancy or the like. When I asked her about the reason, she said that the child would like to get home earlier than dad so that dad couldn’t beat mum up. She had filed for divorce, and her husband was not too keen on the idea.”* (F1/3 interviewee)

4.2. Teachers and school support professionals on how to implement the plan for family life education.

It is noteworthy that the majority of the focus group interview participants and half of the individual interviewees had not heard about the inclusion of family life education in the National Curriculum, and of those who answered they had, several were uncertain: *“it was probably included”* (E/7 interviewee), *“I only heard about it.”* (E/9 interviewee) There is a sharp distinction between groups of respondents according to their attitudes towards family life education. A minority holds a strong opinion rejecting this additional task on grounds of being overloaded or lacking competence. The second group considers that this is not a new task, as it is already part of the school’s informal functions. The third group is made up of those who consider that, although it is a new task, it is a useful initiative.

The question of the form and place of this new content in school life is an extremely interesting one. An insignificantly small number of people are in favour of introducing a separate subject, suggesting a maximum of one lesson per week. The vast majority of respondents would like to integrate family life education into several subjects (e.g. class teacher lessons, humanities, arts and sciences). Among the topic areas to be covered, respondents have mentioned some for which it is difficult to provide an academic context (and facilities) in the current school system: some teachers consider practical training, cooking and handicrafts to be necessary in family life education. *“Practicality is the basis of growing up, (...) it would be new for today’s children, it would inspire them.”* (E/6 interviewee)

Interviewees are even more unanimous about the educational impact of extracurricular activities than about curricular training. In essence, in all focus groups and individual interviews, mention has been made of theme weeks/days, project weeks/days, film clubs, lectures, workshops, tea parties, board game clubs, afternoon classes in student residence houses, family days, student council days, etc. as family life education opportunities. For those who think in terms of a larger time frame (a project week, for example), the ideal frequency is one occasion per year or per semester, and for those who prefer individual lectures, film clubs, tea parties or project days, one occasion per month. *“I am a great believer in project work and its complex impact. Not in saying, well, this is project work that prepares you for family life or adult life, but in giving it a name and even targeting several areas and working together. Doing something that attracts and hoo children and that helps them learn a lot, directly or indirectly, about family life, or about being in a family,*



*about the conditions for being in a family... and they can acquire many new competences. So, all in all, I can imagine this kind of knowledge transfer within school, but perhaps there would be even more room for it outside school, embedded in project work.”* (F8/2 interviewee)

Opinions are divided as to whether schools' own teachers or external professionals are more suitable for this task. Most respondents opt for a combined solution: the collaboration between authentic, renowned guest speakers well known to the school and apt, well-prepared and motivated teachers. Apart from the professionals to be involved, we also asked interviewees about specific content related to this subject area. They hold the view that it is not lack of information that primarily causes problems in family life although some (mainly practical) knowledge needs to be conveyed such as handling money, what to do in an office, “management” and other practical information. Slightly more theoretical but still close to everyday life are communication and conflict management techniques, which respondents think could be taught as knowledge. Most respondents, however, opt for transmitting only a minimum amount of factual knowledge and believe in raising awareness and skills development instead. *“Skills development and raising awareness are more important than information, which changes all the time. Some of it is obviously permanent, but it is much more changeable than anything else we deal with”.* (F7/2 interviewee) *“I wouldn't even think of information. I really mean it.”* (F7/3 interviewee) *“I agree, God forbid”.* (F7/4 interviewee)

What content to include in family life education is a critical question, whether it is the transmission of knowledge, skills development or raising awareness. Most school professionals would start with self-awareness and personality development as well as the questions of independent work and taking responsibility. *“I think every adult should have good self-knowledge before starting a family. They need to work on that”.* (F5/6 interviewee) Whether it is caused by a lack of or unawareness of expectations or by one-sided and maximalist expectations, children do not have a realistic self-image, are unaware of their abilities and potential, adapt poorly to rules and each other, have poor problem-solving skills, stress tolerance, conflict management, empathy and social sensitivity. Respondents also often mention crisis situations, the prevention and treatment of self-destructive alcohol or drug abuse, and healthy lifestyle. All these thematic sets could be summarised as life management skills since family life can only be founded on healthy adult personalities. Once mature personalities are formed or while they are being formed, family life education can commence.

Sex education is a fundamental part of family life education. Beyond the biological, practical issues of sexuality, respondents lay more emphasis on responsible relationships, knowing one's partner, adaptation and listening to each another. While family life education is intended to focus on future family plans, the vast majority of pupils in public education still live in their own families of origin, with their norms and possible dysfunctions, and will obviously compare with those what they hear during lessons, various activities or lectures, and it is questionable what conclusions they will draw. Respondents agree that children should not be brought up against their own families, but that they should be made aware of possible relationship problems. *“Children should recognise what hurts their own personalities and realise that they can handle these situations. This is something they aren't usually aware of. (...) Children unconditionally trust those they love, and this is right. (...) They just have to be taught to recognise what is no longer love but abuse, so they have to notice that something goes beyond a certain limit”.* (F5/5 interviewee)

The professional development of class teachers is also essential for the successful introduction of family life education, as interviewees feel only partially prepared for this task. Although all of them have completed psychology courses at university, without basic knowledge of child welfare, sociology, social pedagogy, and, if necessary, romology, mental health, communication, etc., professional competence is incomplete. Almost all the interviewees consider their own educational and family experience as well as their helping selves as primary resources in this work. As the interviews were conducted mostly with experienced teachers, we received more answers leaning towards optimism. At the same time, we should be aware that in most schools, beginner teachers are assigned to be class teachers immediately or within 1-2 years, so it is not possible for them to rely on life experience that will develop, but this should be included in teacher training. The biggest challenge is that only a complex reform can bring family life education into schools, and that this can only be achieved by motivating teachers and making them interested. *“This whole system, from examination requirements, would have to be reformed in a complex*

*way to make it work (...) Yes, and that complex reform needs to be approved by a teacher society that is extremely intolerant of change (...) So it's not a simple story.” (E/4 interviewee)*

#### **4. Discussion**

The most important task is to define family life education and determine its purpose. Internationally, its interpretation is either limited to romantic relationships and sexuality or entails a wider range of life skills (Plaza-del-Pino et al., 2021). In Hungary, where society displays great social and regional inequalities, it is obvious that the latter, more comprehensive model is needed, which is also supported by the latest National Curriculum as well as the teachers and support professionals interviewed.

Regarding thematic orientation, the foundation of family life education should be individual personality development so that individuals can become mature and healthy adult personalities capable for taking responsibility and participating consciously and productively in working life. The next layers would be the development of interpersonal relationship culture and the issues of future family life and raising children. It is advisable that the name of the programme should reflect this thematic diversity. The term family life education refers to an important subarea of the thematic target but does not apply to the full content. A synthesis should be created, which would also include the content behind the terms “interpersonal relationship culture” and “life skills” (Engler, 2020).

According to our respondents, family life education should have a highly complex thematic structure. Details to be elaborated include the breakdown by age groups, the structuring of curricular goals, of competences to be developed and of subject areas to be covered. In addition, specific content, stages and timeframes are to be assigned to the points above. Alignment with the organizational structure of public education, with its work schedules and timetables also require careful consideration. Under the present circumstances of curriculum structure and student workload it is impossible to introduce family life education as an independent subject. Integration into other subjects is also a matter to be weighed as it would entail the modification of the content of the subjects concerned along with the correction of current textbooks and workbooks. However, if these steps are not taken, education for family and adult life will only exist on paper. It is also avoidable to delegate this task outside the scope of schools. Most of the course content should be delivered through extracurricular activities at school, which can also serve as experience-packed, community-building leisure activities for pupils. The most suitable activities include lectures, discussions, drama sessions, film clubs, project work or workshops, soft skills training, competitions and board game sessions. It is advisable to abandon the traditional class setting and work in smaller groups.

For the implementation of family life education, human resources are needed both from within and from outside schools. It is not recommended that every teacher or class teacher should be assigned to this task because this might turn out to be counterproductive since even our research has proved that it is not equally welcomed by everybody. The programme should also heavily rely on the initiatives, organizing skills and expertise of school support professionals (Csók, Pusztai, 2022). The best idea would be to form teams of teachers and support professionals to coordinate work and mentor their colleagues in their schools. This task should be included in their compulsory working hours or they should be otherwise remunerated. Professionals who will take part in family life education need special training, which is to be made available both in higher education and in the nationwide system of professional development for teachers and which is to be acknowledged as a measure in the teacher evaluation system as well.

Owing to the social context-sensitivity of this content (Myers-Walls, 2000; Ballard, Taylor, 2011; Darling, Ballard 2020), the programme should provide ample room for differentiation while keeping a few standardized thematic items. According to local circumstances such as the ethnic or cultural composition of schools or localities, the appropriate content would be selected by school staff, but it would even be possible for pupils to choose from a choice of required optional or optional modules. This opportunity would increase participants' motivation levels and provide them with knowledge and skills more relevant to them.

When it comes to family life education, there is another group of stakeholders who must not be ignored, namely parents and caregivers (Oz, 1991; Varani-Norton, 2014; Yildirim, 2019; Plaza-del-Pino et al., 2021). First of all, these programmes are not expected to educate children against the culture of their families. Parents should be involved as much as possible in the planning and implementation

phase at the school level (through the parents' council and other parental organisations). A wider circle of parents can be addressed by organizing family days and inviting guest speakers. In this way, their views can be shaped and their family lives influenced at the same time.

### **5. Conclusion and recommendations**

This study has focused on showing Hungarian professionals the diversity of challenges that will be encountered in the reality of school life once family life education is introduced. These challenges can and should be prepared for. Even today, school documents contain objectives and ideals on preparing for family and adult life, and curricula for class teachers also include the subject, but this content is generally overlooked. However, whether explicitly or implicitly, all schools provide education for family and adult life, but with very different values. Even teachers who do not see preparing for family and adult life as their mission are constantly confronted with situations which involve them in family education. Educators feel the need for preparation for family and adult life because they perceive dysfunction in families and inadequate or dysfunctional preparation for adult life.

The practical conclusion that can be drawn from our research is that this content is still before the experimental phase. The international literature finds it essential that only practices with proven effectiveness should be generally implemented. We therefore propose that family life education should not be introduced all at once everywhere, but that educational research centres should support the launch of pilot projects for which schools and teams of teachers can volunteer. It is to be noted that the issue of funding cannot be avoided. Sufficient funds must be provided for research, pedagogical experiments, teachers and support staff who prepare and implement the programme, events, guest speakers and any additional costs (e.g. travel) to enable students to participate. Additionally, maintenance costs after the launch must also be covered in order for the programme to be effective.

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