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A Bridge Between School and Family: How Environmental Education Coordinators Collaborate with Students' Parents

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores how environmental education coordinators (EECs) working in primary schools in the Moravian-Silesian Region engage with pupils' parents. The main objective is to better understand how this cooperation functions in practice, what strategies coordinators use, and what obstacles or supporting factors they encounter.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with ten coordinators selected based on their experience in implementing environmental activities and engaging parents. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to identify key themes and deeper patterns in their responses.

The analysis revealed three main thematic areas: (1) the role of the coordinator, including motivation, skills, and barriers; (2) parental attitude and involvement, particularly regarding communication and expectations; and (3) contextual factors such as support from school leadership, staff relationships, and institutional conditions.

Findings indicate that successful cooperation is influenced not only by the coordinator's personal engagement but also by the overall school culture and openness to parental involvement. Lack of leadership support and limited collaboration with colleagues were identified as key challenges to long-term sustainability.

The study offers practical recommendations to support EECs – especially in terms of institutional backing, opportunities for professional development, and peer learning across schools. It also contributes to a deeper understanding of an under-researched aspect of environmental education: the role of school-family cooperation.

Keywords: Environmental Education Coordinator (EEC); environmental education; parental cooperation; children aged 6 to 15; sustainability

1. Introduction

Environmental education (EE) is currently considered a key tool for developing environmental literacy and shaping a responsible relationship with nature and sustainable behaviour from an early age (Tilbury, 1995; UNESCO, 2017). Environmental literacy encompasses not only knowledge about the environment but also attitudes, values, and the ability to act in accordance with the principles of sustainability. Education is essential for

helping children understand the connections between human activity and the state of the planet, and develop the skills necessary for responsible citizenship.

Special attention should be paid to the early school years, as children naturally develop empathy for nature and are open to new values. During this period, environmental education has the potential to influence children's attitudes and daily habits in the long term. Schools play an irreplaceable role in this process, but the involvement of families—and especially parents—significantly enhances the impact of environmental education. Parents shape their children's values, attitudes, and behaviour, and their active participation in environmental education is therefore considered essential (Ballantyne, Connell & Fien, 2006; Barratt Hacking, Scott & Lee, 2007).

One of the important links between the school and family environments is environmental education coordinators at schools (hereinafter referred to as EECs), whose task is not only to plan activities and support students, but also to build bridges between the school and parents. Although their role is considered important, limited research has explored how these coordinators engage with parents, what strategies they employ, and what challenges they face in this cooperation (Stevenson et al., 2013; Jaime et al., 2023).

In the Czech education system, environmental education is formally enshrined in the Framework Educational Programmes, and each school is required to appoint an environmental education coordinator (MŠMT, 2020). However, in most cases, this function is performed alongside other teaching duties, often without financial remuneration or systemic support. The scope and effectiveness of this role therefore varies significantly depending on the institutional culture and leadership of individual schools.

While internationally the issue of school-family cooperation in environmental education is receiving growing research attention, in the Czech context, systematic knowledge of EEC–parent cooperation remains limited. Our study aims to deepen understanding of the everyday practices of EECs in Czech primary schools, particularly in relation to cooperation with parents. We focus on their experiences, and on the factors that either support or hinder this cooperation, and we seek ways to more effectively connect schools and families in the field of environmental education. Thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke (2006) was chosen for data analysis, as it allows for the identification of significant thematic areas and deeper patterns in the respondents' statements.

This article presents only a partial outcome of a broader student research project, which is further discussed in the conclusion.

2. Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews with ten environmental education coordinators (EECs). The aim was to explore their experiences with parental cooperation in the context of environmental education at primary schools. A qualitative approach was chosen due to its suitability for capturing individual perceptions, contextual factors, and the complex social dynamics involved in school-family relationships.

We followed an interpretivist paradigm to allow for a rich understanding of how coordinators make sense of their role, communicate with parents, and respond to institutional constraints and opportunities. Data were analysed using thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), which enabled us to identify recurring patterns and deeper meanings across the interview material.

In the following sections, we describe the research participants and procedures (2.1), followed by a detailed explanation of the data analysis process (2.2).

2.1.1 Participants and Procedure

The research sample consisted of ten environmental education coordinators (EECs) working in primary schools in the Moravian-Silesian Region. These participants were selected purposefully based on their relevant experience with environmental education and at least some experience involving parents in school activities. The key criteria for inclusion in the research were active performance of the role of environmental education coordinator for at least one school year and active involvement in organising school activities aimed at cooperation with pupils' parents, such as Earth Day events or community tree planting. The selection was conducted using snowball sampling and professional recommendations, with participants being approached through professional networks and schools.

Participants were informed in advance about the research purpose, anonymity, and voluntary participation. All respondents provided informed consent to the recording of interviews and the subsequent use of anonymized data for research purposes.

In terms of gender, there were seven women and three men among the respondents. Their ages ranged mainly between 30 and 50. Their professional backgrounds were diverse – some were science teachers, others held management positions (e.g., deputy headteachers) or led extracurricular and leisure activities. They performed the coordinator role almost exclusively in addition to their main teaching duties, often without significant institutional support. The length of their tenure in this role ranged from one year to more than ten years.

The schools represented were located in urban, suburban, and rural areas, which made it possible to capture the diversity of the institutional environment, school profiles, and traditions of cooperation with parents. This variability enhanced the credibility of the findings and allowed for a more nuanced interpretation of the factors influencing cooperation between schools and families in the field of environmental education.

For the purposes of analysis and presentation of results, all participants were anonymized and assigned alphanumeric codes (K1-K10). These codes are used throughout the text when referring to specific statements from the interviews, ensuring both clarity and the protection of participants' identities.

2.1.2 Data Analyses

In this study, thematic analysis was chosen as the main tool for interpreting qualitative data. It is a flexible analytical method that allows for the identification, analysis, and interpretation of patterns of meaning (so-called themes) across a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method is theoretically flexible and not bound to a specific epistemology, making it a suitable tool for various research approaches – including this study, which seeks to describe and understand the experiences of environmental education coordinators with parental cooperation.
Thematic analysis is often referred to as a 'basic skill of a qualitative researcher' (Braun & Clarke, 2013) and allows for a detailed examination of how participants structure reality in terms of meaning, what shared themes emerge in their statements, and what personal and contextual factors influence their attitudes and behaviour. In this process, the researcher becomes an active agent, deciding what is significant in the data and how the themes will be constructed and named.

Reasons For Choosing the Method

Thematic analysis was selected for several interrelated reasons. Its flexibility and independence from any single theoretical paradigm allow for inductive engagement with the data without being constrained by predetermined conceptual frameworks. Furthermore, it offers a transparent and systematic procedure—the six phases outlined by Braun and Clark

provide a clearly defined framework that can be described, justified, and applied in subsequent research. Thematic analysis is also particularly well suited for applied research as it enables the integration of participants' experiences with the formulation of practical recommendations, aligning with this study's emphasis on developing cooperation between schools and families. A further strength of this method is its ability to capture subtle nuances and variability in the coordinators' experiences and the ways in which they interpret and respond to their professional realities.

Analysis Procedure

The analysis was conducted in six consecutive steps defined by the authors of the methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

First, in the *familiarisation phase,* the interview transcripts were read repeatedly, accompanied by detailed note-taking. This process enabled the researchers to immerse themselves deeply in the material, gaining a thorough understanding of its content and identify initial patterns of meaning.

The second phase involved *coding.* Each transcript was examined systematically, and initial codes were assigned to relevant sections of text. These codes served as brief, precise labels capturing the essence of the content. To preserve the richness and authenticity of the participants' accounts, open coding was applied without the use of predefined categories. All codes were recorded manually using a 'pencil-and-paper' approach, which facilitated direct engagement with the data and supported a high level of concentration during analysis.

In the third phase, *searching for themes,* the individual codes were grouped into broader thematic areas. Recurring patterns were identified, and deeper meanings connecting the codes were explored. This stage involved regular consultations and discussions among the researchers to refine preliminary thematic proposals, while ensuring that the authenticity of participants' statements was maintained.

The fourth phase, *reviewing* themes, focused on verifying the coherence and clarity of the themes. This step included checking whether the themes were well supported by the data and whether they accurately reflected participants' perspectives. Where necessary, similar themes were merged, or overly broad themes were divided into smaller, more precise units. The naming of themes was also refined to ensure conciseness and comprehensibility.

In the fifth phase, *defining and naming themes*, each final theme was assigned a clear definition and a detailed description of its content. The significance of each theme was considered in relation to the research questions. Sub-themes were introduced to capture more nuanced distinctions between different levels of meaning within the data.

Finally, the *synthesis* phase involved integrating the themes into a coherent narrative, illustrated with selected quotations from the interviews. The resulting themes were organised into three main categories: (1) the role of the coordinator, (2) parental attitudes and involvement, and (3) contextual factors influencing cooperation. To enhance clarity and provide a visual representation of the interrelationships between these factors, a thematic mind map was created and included in the article.

The use of thematic analysis enabled us not only to identify what environmental education coordinators experience, but more importantly, how they interpret these experiences and what meanings they assign to them. Through collaborative teamwork, we were able to reflect on diverse perspectives, thereby enhancing the credibility and depth of the analysis.

3. Results

The analysis of interviews with ten environmental education coordinators resulted in the identification of three overarching thematic areas: (1) the role of the coordinator, (2) parental attitudes and involvement, and (3) contextual factors shaping cooperation. These areas were broken down into sub-themes based on recurring patterns identified in the respondents' narratives. The interrelations among themes were visualised in a thematic mind map (see Fig. 1), which provides a structured overview of the interconnected influences.

3.1.1 Role of the Coordinator

Coordinators reflected on their own perceptions of their roles and the activities they engage in as part of environmental education. Most viewed their work as voluntary and often marginalized within the formal school structure. Some described environmental education as a "matter of the heart," yet reported that limited time, institutional support, or recognition often led to frustration or disengagement. A further sub-theme that emerged was the coordinators' reflections on parent-child dynamics during shared environmental activities.

3.1.2 Role of Parents in Cooperation

From the coordinators' perspective, parents represent a crucial yet underutilised resource in environmental education. Respondents agreed that open communication, face-to-face contact, and positive shared experiences are essential for fostering parental involvement. Conversely, low motivation, distrust, and insufficient information were cited as common barriers. Some schools managed to establish stable collaboration with parents, particularly when informal gatherings, exchange of ideas, or co-planning of events were encouraged.

3.1.3 Contextual Factors of Cooperation

This theme included institutional conditions, leadership support, and school staff culture. Coordinators who felt supported by school management had more freedom to organise environmental initiatives and were more successful in involving parents. Strong cooperation was often observed in schools with a long-standing tradition of parental engagement and where the coordinator was not isolated in their efforts. Other sub-themes included the implementation of successful projects, visions for future development, and opportunities for professional growth derived from personal experiences.

3.1.4 Interrelationships Among Themes

The identified themes were deeply interwoven. For example, coordinators' perceptions of parental disengagement were often linked to their own sense of competence and to broader factors such as school climate and administrative support. These dynamic interconnections are illustrated in the thematic mind map (Figure 1), which serves both as a conceptual summary of the findings and as a foundation for subsequent discussion and practical recommendations.

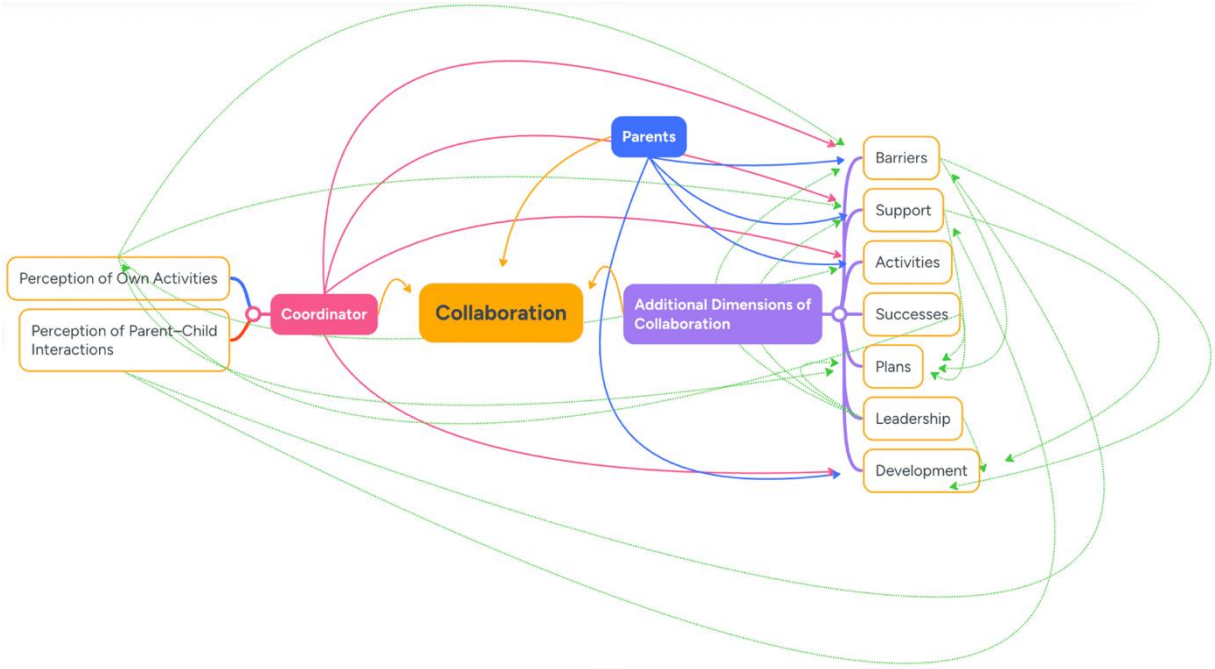

Figure 1: Thematic Mind Map
Source: Authors Owns Elaboration
Colours Differentiate Thematic Domains for Better Clarity. Arrows Indicate Direct Relationships Between Elements – Unidirectional for One Way Influence, Bidirectional for Mutual Connection.

4. Conclusion and Discussion

This qualitative study examined how environmental education coordinators in primary schools in the Moravian-Silesian Region perceive and implement cooperation with pupils' parents. The thematic analysis of interviews showed that collaboration between schools and families in the field of environmental education is a complex, multi-layered process shaped not only by the coordinators' personal attributes and approaches but also by the institutional environment of the school, including the degree of support from school leadership.

The analysis identified three core influences on the quality and scope of collaboration: (1) the proactive role of the coordinator, (2) parental attitudes and level of involvement, and (3) broader contextual conditions. Effective cooperation is characterized by the coordinator's ability to build personal relationships with parents, design mutually beneficial activities, and leverage institutional support. In line with broader educational research, effective school-family collaboration requires both individual educator competencies and a supportive institutional framework (Barratt Hacking, Scott, & Lee, 2007; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Conversely, limited institutional backing, poor colleague engagement, and lack of time emerged as significant barriers. These findings align with recent literature, including Broderick's (2024) study on the design and outcomes of family climate engagement programs, and other research highlighting the importance of raising parental awareness to enrich student learning.

Importantly, the role of school climate–particularly leadership openness and a tradition of cooperation-proved crucial. Coordinators with supportive environments reported more sustainable collaboration. This finding aligns with the results of Sihvonen et al. (2024), who demonstrated that early recycling initiatives in Finnish kindergartens are more successful when educators and parents engage in collaboration from the outset.

Recent meta-analyses also reinforce the broader effectiveness of environmental education. Świątkowski (2024) found that interventions significantly enhance pro-environmental behaviors in children (Hedges' g=0,53), while the Stanford eeWORKS review (2024) confirms that environmental programs improve knowledge, academic performance, critical thinking, and civic engagement.

Despite these compelling insights, the study has limitations. The primary constraint is the small, regionally confined sample, which limits generalisability. Additionally, reliance on self-reported narratives may introduce bias and reflect only selected aspects of the phenomenon. The absence of perspectives from other key stakeholders – such as parents or teaching staff – further narrows the scope of the findings. Future research could thus benefit from a multi-perspective approach to gain a more comprehensive understanding of school-family cooperation in environmental education. Nevertheless, the variety of school contexts and professional backgrounds among respondents enhances the credibility of the findings.

In sum, this research enriches a critically underdeveloped area-the dynamics of school-family cooperation in environmental education-and provides empirical grounding for interventions. The findings highlight the importance of institutional support, targeted parental engagement, and sustainable coordinator roles. They also offer fertile ground for further research and policy development aimed at increasing parental involvement in environmental education and fostering community-wide environmental stewardship.

5. Application

Based on a thematic analysis of interviews with environmental education coordinators at primary schools in the Moravian-Silesian Region, several practical recommendations can be formulated to strengthen school-parent cooperation. These proposals are consistent with findings from recent studies (e.g., Broderick, 2024; Sihvonen et al., 2024), which confirm that effective environmental education requires both targeted parental engagement and institutional support from the school.

One of the key recommendations is to focus on systematic collaboration with parents of younger pupils, particularly in the early years of primary education. Our findings indicate that these parents tend to demonstrate greater willingness to participate in school activities, a pattern also observed in international research on parental engagement in environmental programs (Alam, 2025). Building strong foundations for cooperation during the initial years can help ensure its continuity throughout schooling. A successful example in our sample is the approach adopted by Coordinator K3.

Joint activities involving both children and parents also show considerable potential. The research findings suggest that these activities not only raise environmental awareness but also encourage bidirectional value transfer-both from parents to children and from children to the family environment. Similar effects have been described by Henderson and Mapp (2002), who emphasise that shared educational activities reinforce both family and school bonds. Suitable formats include school projects, thematic workshops and community events (e.g., Earth Days) that combine educational content with an attractive social component.

The attractiveness of activities emerges as another key factor influencing parental participation. Coordinators K4 and K5 reported that the highest attendance was observed at events with a strong social or entertainment element, even if such events did not immediately shift parental attitudes. Nevertheless, they can act as an entry point to deeper engagement, a dynamic also highlighted by Świątkowski (2024), who stresses the importance of initial contact in building long-term commitment.

School openness and the coordinator's readiness to engage even partially interested parents also play a critical role. In this respect, the coordinator acts as both facilitator and motivator, able to offer concrete pathways for involvement and adapt the forms of cooperation to the family context. This ability to establish trusting relationships aligns with the work of Barratt Hacking, Scott, and Lee (2007), who argue that high-quality cooperation requires a combination of pedagogical skills and a supportive institutional framework.

From an organisational perspective, involving an additional person to support the coordinator in planning and implementing activities has proven beneficial. Collegial cooperation can help to alleviate time and psychological pressures and ensure greater continuity of activities. The absence of such support was identified as a barrier in our study, for instance in the case of Coordinator K5.

Some coordinators perceive themselves primarily as teachers, viewing the coordinator role as supplementary. While this stance can protect them from frustration when challenges arise, it also carries the risk of environmental topics being sidelined in school practice. A potential solution lies in strengthening the institutional position of the coordinator-for example, by increasing their workload allocation, providing financial incentives, or integrating environmental education into school evaluation processes.

Although personal motivation and enthusiasm are essential to the coordinator's work, they must be supported by systemic measures to prevent burnout. Sustaining long-term motivation can be achieved through teamwork and the exchange of experiences with colleagues similarly committed to environmental education, as also evidenced by international practice (Stanford eeWORKS, 2024).

In connection with the current findings, the research is now progressing to its second phase, focusing on the analysis of environmental education coordinators' (EECs) experiences in collaborating with teaching staff at primary schools in the Moravian-Silesian Region. As in the first phase, which examined cooperation with parents, the primary data source consists of semi-structured interviews providing an in-depth insight into the strategies, practices, and challenges encountered by coordinators in this area. The data will be analysed using thematic analysis to identify key themes and patterns of cooperation. The theoretical framework is grounded in Urie Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological model, with its four dimensions (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem) serving to situate the findings within the broader context of the school and institutional environment. This phase is expected to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the EEC's role and to reveal the interconnections between cooperation with teachers and with parents, thereby enabling the formulation of integrated recommendations for strengthening environmental education across multiple levels of the school community.

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