

“Advancing Education Quality and Inclusion” in South East Europe (SEE)

The National Soros Foundations and the Education Civil Society Organizations
Center for Education Policy Studies (Ljubljana)

Policy brief

Improving decision making and communication in schools

Author: Alexandru Cernat

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Executive statement

The current paper tries to put forward a set of policy recommendations that are based on the results of the “Advancing Education Quality and Inclusion” study conducted in South East Europe (SEE). The research had two directions of interest: one centered on principal’s opinions and the second based on the parent’s views. The questionnaires have been applied on representative samples in 10 countries from South East Europe.

The proposals are oriented in two distinct directions. In the first part we highlight the importance of parent’s participation in the decision making processes of the school. We use this occasion to show (Figure 2) that the schools openness to parent’s implications is still lacking in Romania of 2008. We conclude this topic with two concrete proposals: including parental counseling in curricula and allocating resources for this, and create a collection of good practices and disseminating this to all schools.

The second direction of the paper is centered on the importance of communicating with the parents. The 2008 research shows us that there are some groups that are more problematic in this aspect than others, at least from the principal’s perspective. We propose to ameliorate this situation by implementing at a large scale the action plan experimented by our team in some schools from Argeş. This system would include a formalized practice of written reports regarding the pupil’s activities. These should be written by teachers and psychologists and should be sent using letters or e-mails to reach people like migrants and those with little time at their disposal.

Introduction

Important institutions, as the European Union and the World Bank, and states around the world have made education a top priority. The “Advancing Education Quality and Inclusion” in South East Europe (SEE) can be seen as part of a growing number of projects aiming at better understanding and enhancing the processes linked to education. The present paper tries to bridge two groups with different perspectives and “languages”: researchers and policy makers. In this policy paper I will try to sketch the main results of the research, with special focus on Romania, and bring forth two main directions for policy making which result from these.

The current research perspective is based on the assumption that participation can significantly enhance the educational process. In this perspective, education can reach its full potential only through the partnership of the school, the community, the family and the pupil. As a result, the data and the analysis used have tried to reveal which are the relationships between these actors in ten countries from South East Europe and which are the impediments, as seen by the different actors, which lie in their way.

Methodology

The “Advancing Education Quality and Inclusion” in South East Europe project has had a wide variety of data gathering methods which, combined, have helped in creating a realistic and complex picture of the processes linked to education and participation.

The first part of the research took place in 2008 with a sample of 2,273 principals of primary schools (which were attended by pupils aged 6 to 15) in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, and Serbia. The survey was preceded by: 16 focus groups with school principals, a pilot survey of the survey

instrument, and one coordination meeting with researchers in each of the eight participating countries.

The second survey was conducted in 2009 in the same countries as in the 2008 research, with the addition of Bulgaria and Croatia, and looked at the parents' views on the participation process inside the educational system. Face-to-face household surveys of representative samples (N=9600) of parents took place in 320 public schools covering grades one to eight, including booster samples of Roma parents. This information was complemented by the principal's opinions on related topics from the same schools (the 2008 research). The survey was preceded by 60 focus group meetings (which included average parents, disadvantaged parents, including Roma parents, and parent's representatives of school government bodies) and a pilot survey for the survey instrument.

Between the two main research initiatives seven of the countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia) initiated a three-month action plan in a particular school/community. The aim of the action plan was to help schools initiate, design and implement participatory action (initiative) at school and/or community level and, possibly, to bring forth good practices that could be implemented at a larger scale.

Results and recommendations

In this section I will try to provide a series concrete policy proposals which can improve the quality of the educational process based on the results of "Advancing Education Quality and Inclusion" in South East Europe and other studies. The first part of the proposals will center on the idea of implicating parents in the decision making and other activities of the school and why is this important in the Romanian context. The second part of the proposals will be directed on the schools need to communicate with the parents. I will try to motivate this perspective and to propose a possible solution.

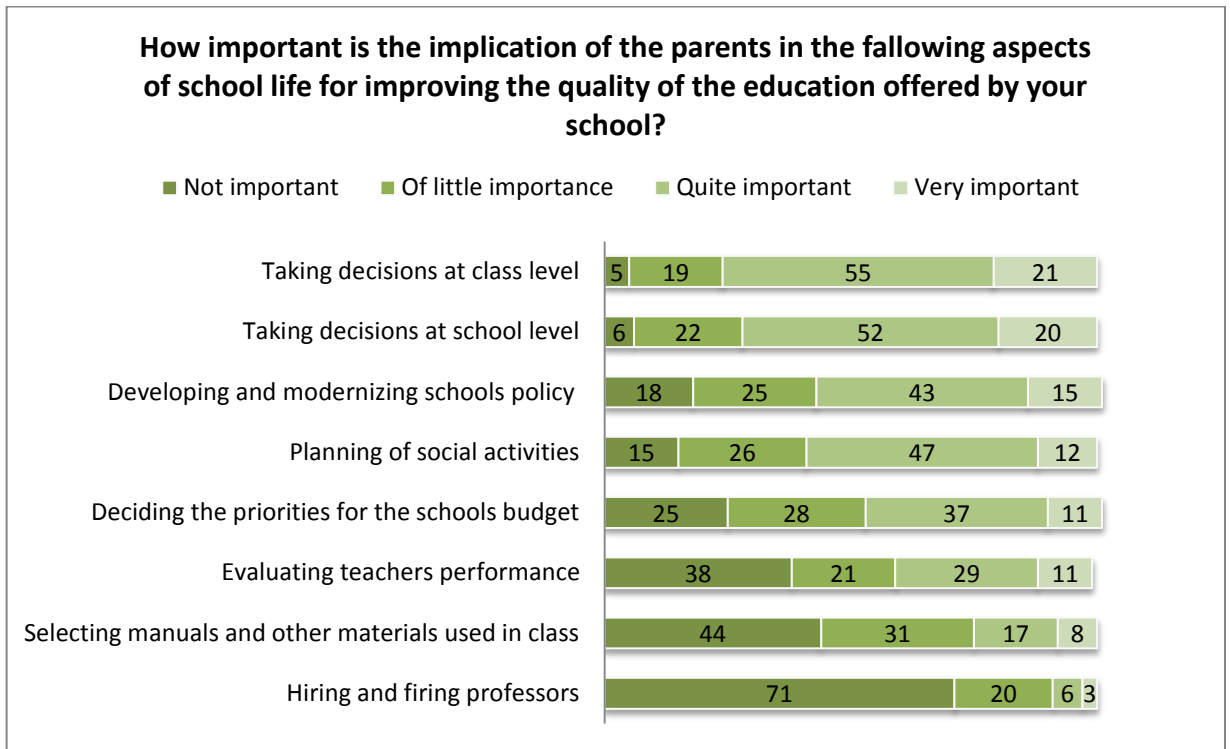
Including parents in decision making

There are strong theoretical and empirical evidence to believe that the implication of parents in the educational process will lead to the improvement of pupil's performances. Joyce Epstein (1996), one of the most cited theoreticians in the parent's participation "field", has highlighted the shared responsibility of schools and family in the socialization of the child. Nada Polovina (2007), for example, found that students, parents and school employees believe that parent's implication in the schools should be more significant. She also observed a correlation between absenteeism and lower achievement with lower frequency of meetings with teachers. A similar result was presented by Wendy Miedel Barnard (2004) who has found a significant association between the involvement of parents in early school and long-term school success. All these results point to the idea that the parent's implication in the activities and decision making of the schools is desirable. Starting from this point we can ask ourselves two questions: does the same sentiment exist in Romania and, if it does, does this really happen?

It seems that the importance of parent's participation in the educational process is clear for the Romanian principals as well. Figure 1 shows us that the principals see as important parent's implication in activities like planning of social activities or class level decision but as the decisions become more important, like hiring and firing professors or selecting manuals, the importance of parent's contribution to the educational process seem to diminish. This situation can be motivated by the way principals see the borders of parent's role in the school.

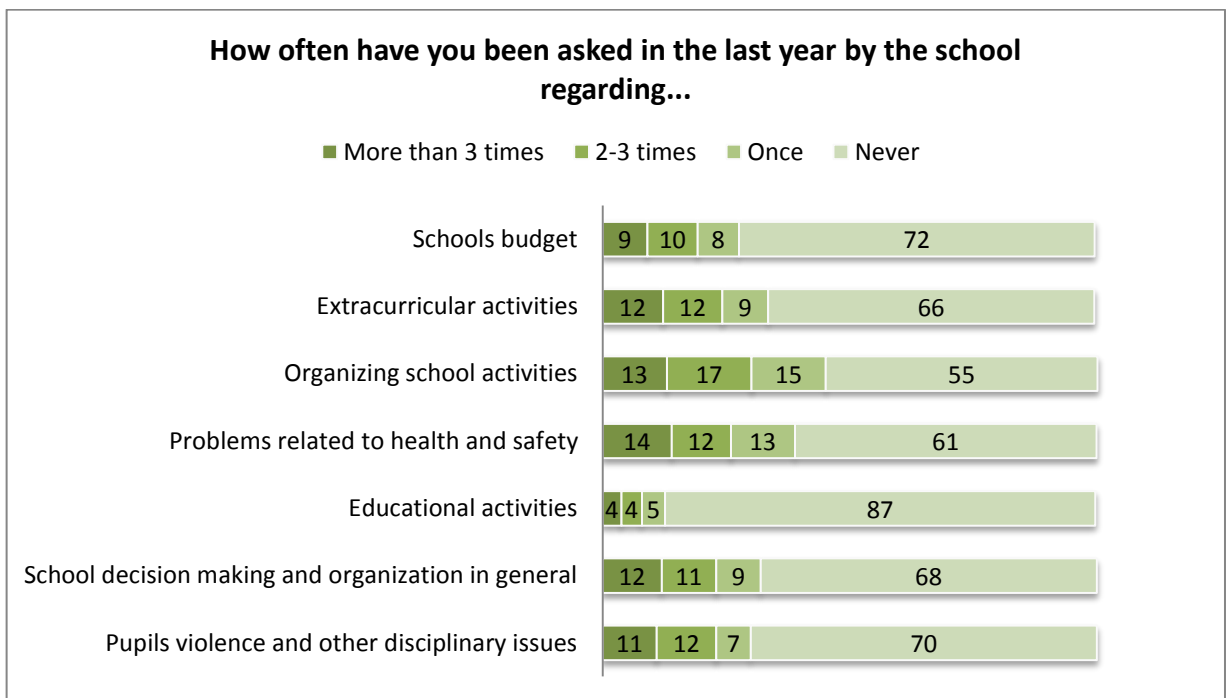
On this background of principal's opinion regarding the parent's involvement in school life we can expect a somewhat high degree of participation of parents in the school, at least in some kinds of activities. The results of the 2009 parent's survey do not portray such a situation. Figure 2 clearly shows that the schools do not invite parents to school activities as their importance to the principles would suggest. There seems to be outliers: social activities, where parents seem to be more welcomed and educational activities where less than 15% where invited at least once in the last year. Nevertheless, most activities, like the school budget or pupil's violence, seem to lack active implication of parents from the schools part.

Figure 1



Principals, Romanian sample

Figure 2



Parents, Romanian sample

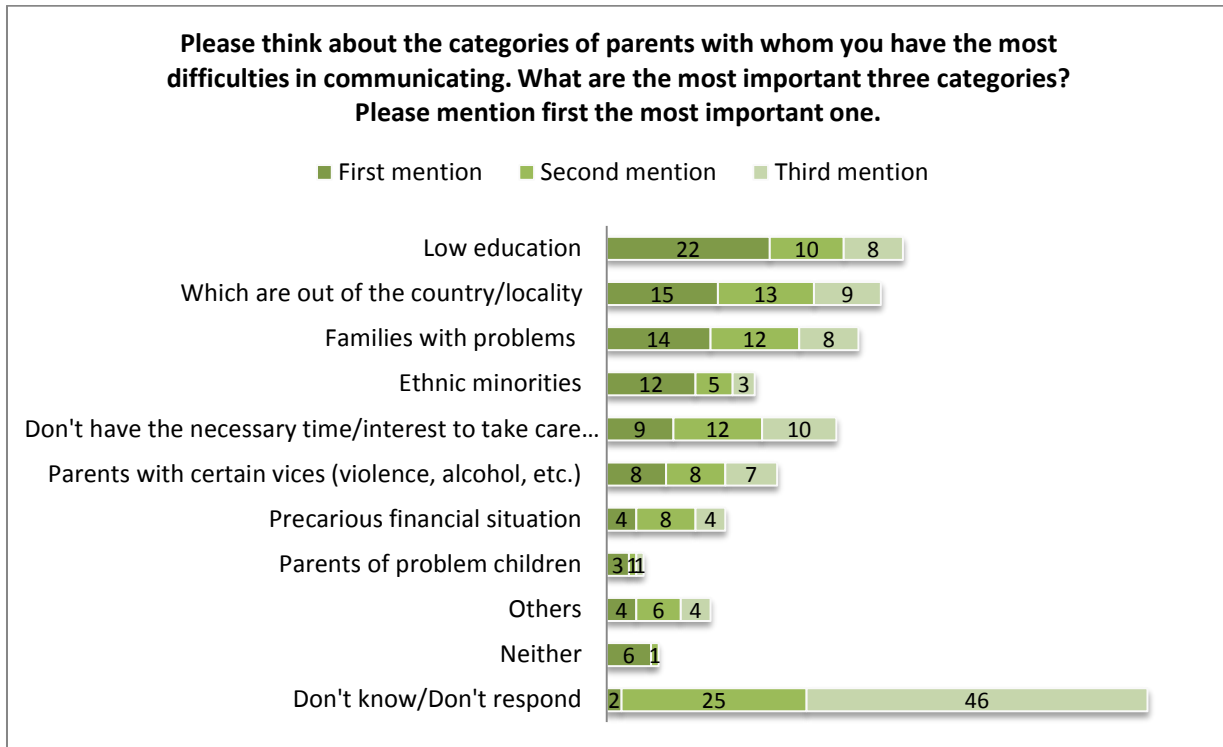
A problem seems to exist here. On one part we have theoretical and empirical evidence that the implication of parents in decision making has positive benefits. This perspective is even recognized by the principals. On the other hand we can observe that the parents aren't as much implicated by the school in decision making as much as they should be. As a result of these considerations I bring forth two solutions that may, if implemented, ameliorate the situation. The first one is including parental counseling in curricula and allocating resources for this. This would oblige principles to take more seriously the parent's role in the educational process. The inclusion in the curricula and the resources allocated for these activities would give the principals and teachers the time and support needed for the new activities. The second proposal, which is linked to the first one, is to create a collection of good practices and disseminating this to all schools. This final act would help guide the principals and teachers in these new activities.

Improving communication with parents

The second proposal of this policy brief is related to the communication between the parents and the school. I will start by pointing out a few of the reasons for which we can consider communication as very important. I will continue by showing which groups are more vulnerable to problems linked with communication and I will end with a policy proposal.

Communication between the social partners is important in the collaboration process of socialization. Nada Polovina (2007), for example, highlights that most of the parents lack school assistance on how to support their child's learning, which can be supplemented by better communication between teachers and parents. Seitsinger, Felner, Brand & Burns (2008) have found out that different simple communication practices, like informing the parents on student performance and problems, boost parents involvement in the school life and Poulou and Matsagouras (2007) discovered that parents prefer different formal methods of communicating with teachers like: parent-teacher conferences and informing the teacher about the child.

Figure 3



Principals, Romanian sample

The empirical and theoretical evidence which underline the importance of communication between the schools and the parents is evident just from the small sample of works presented above. We can conclude that good communication is a desirable characteristic of the parents-school relationship. We can also, reasonably, assume that there are groups which can communicate better and other which have more difficulties. Using the Romanian sample of the principal's research from 2008 we have found out which are the groups that are considered more problematic, regarding communication, by principals. Figure 3 shows a few of these groups. It seems that parents with low education, who are out of the country/locality, who have family problems or those who are of an ethnic minority have the most important problems.

A policy proposal which tries to ameliorate, at least partly, the communication situation has already been tried out in the Romanian context as an action plan with considerable success. The basic idea of the program was to implement a written system of communicating with the parents. The information was written by the teachers and the schools psychologist and was sent by e-mail or regular mail. The reports included evaluating the child's activity and narrative reports of the child's school activities for a determinate period of time, with

recommendations and conclusions regarding the pupil's progress. As a result of the action program, the children involved improved their grades and opened their perspectives, becoming aware that their problems are not entirely their own. Parents also increased their trust in the school and they are more confident in addressing requests to the school. This kind of system would help improve communication with, at least, two of the groups mentioned in Figure 3: parents who are out of the country/locality and those who don't have enough time to meet the professors in person.