



FUND FOR AN OPEN SOCIETY - SERBIA

School Governance and Social Inclusion

Involvement of Parents

South East Europe Countries Accounts of the Parents' Views



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2010

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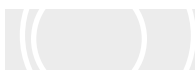
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Foreword

This publication is the fourth in a series presenting the results of a multiyear regional research and evidence-based advocacy initiative “Advancing Education Quality and Inclusion” in South East Europe (SEE).

The initiative was launched in 2007 following a series of international meetings with members of the Open Society Institute, education government and civil society representatives of the 10 SEE countries (Albania, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Kosovo, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia). This initiative is funded by the Education Support Program of Open Society Institute and jointly implemented with the Center for Education Policy Studies (CEPS, University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Education), the National Soros Foundations and the Education Civil Society Organizations in the above SEE countries.

Despite the considerable improvements in national legislations on anti-discrimination and democratic school governance, disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes in SEE countries continue to exist. *The Advancing Education Quality and Inclusion* initiative was created to address these persistent disparities. The aforementioned representatives of the all 10 SEE countries have identified insufficient and inadequate involvement of the parents in school governance as a common issue affecting the equality of access to high-quality education. The gap between legislations and policies on parents’ involvement in school governance and their implementation raises concerns about the extent to which the equitable provision of education can be achieved in the schools in the newly developed education systems in the SEE region.

The equitable provision of education is intrinsically linked to the quality of school-level governance. Extensive worldwide research and evidence of practice has demonstrated that inclusive school level governance where the parents are given the opportunity to participate in shaping school policies has a positive impact on school climate and student learning. A true partnership between school and parents directly improves the chances for students to have access to a quality education, which all children in democracy are entitled to.

To determine the course of action to take with the goal of decreasing disparities and bridging the policy-practice gap, it was necessary to:

- Better understand the opportunities created by school leadership for parents to participate in school life and to assess the extent to which equal opportunity for parental participation in school life is promoted;
- and
- Learn about parents’ needs, expectations and experiences regarding their influence on school life and the school efforts to engage them.

With these goals in mind, the two comprehensive, robust scientific surveys were conducted.

The first took place in 2008 with a sample of 2,273 principals of primary schools (attended by students aged 6 to 15) in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro,

Romania, and Serbia. Those principals in the aforementioned countries participated in an hour long, face-to-face structured interviews. The survey was preceded by: 16 focus group meetings with school principals, a pilot survey of the final survey instrument, and one large-scale coordination meeting with researchers in each of the eight participating countries. The cross-national principals' survey report, published as the first book in this series, provides a panoramic view of what schools are achieving or failing to do to promote an inclusive and democratic environment for students and parents in each of the listed countries.

The English translations of the summaries of the principals' survey reports for each of the participating countries are the content of the 2nd publication of this series. All the countries produced comprehensive survey reports in their respective languages which are available at www.see-educoop.net/aeiq/outputs.htm. Some of the participating countries undertook local initiatives to promote school-parents partnership. These examples are also presented in the 2nd book.

The second survey, conducted in 2009 in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, and Serbia, looked at the flip side of the school-parent relationship – the parents' views. This survey provides a panoramic view of parental participation in schools from the perspectives of parents, parent representatives in school government bodies and principals in each of those countries. Face-to-face household surveys of representative samples of parents (N=9600) in 320 public schools covering grades one to eight, including booster samples of Roma parents are combined with interviews with principals and parent representatives on related topics in the same schools. This survey was preceded by 60 focus group meetings (30 groups with average parents, 20 groups with disadvantaged parents, including Roma parents and 10 groups with parent representatives of school government bodies) and a pilot survey of the final survey instrument.

The cross-national parents' survey report is published in the 3rd book, while the summaries of each of the participating countries report appear on the following pages.

The materials presented in all the books and other information related to the project are available at www.see-educoop.net/aeiq/outputs.htm.

Both surveys have yielded a tremendous amount of important data. To best utilize the collected data, the Education Support Program of Open Society Institute has organized an Individual Research Competition for the young researchers preferably from the countries that participated in the survey. The twenty five research grants have been awarded with the primary purpose of gathering additional information from the survey data which can be used to support education reform, policy development and strategic planning. The research papers produced so far are of the superb quality and shed additional light on how policy makers and educators can improve education for all students, particularly those from vulnerable groups, in each of the ten SEE countries. These papers will be published in separate volumes.

It is hoped that this publication, as well as previous ones, will be of interest and use to all education stakeholders in our joint efforts to build and sustain an inclusive school governance and establish a meaningful partnership between school and parents in SEE countries. This will be a huge step on the road toward providing access to a high quality education and expanding opportunities for all children.

Gordana Miljevic
Senior Program Manager
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Acronyms and Abbreviations

B&H, BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
CA	Council of Administration
BGN	Bulgarian currency (Bulgarian lev)
CDE	Center for Democratic Education
CEPS	Centre for Education Policy Studies, Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana
CRT	Central Research Team
FG	Focus Group
FOSIM	Foundation Open Society Institute Macedonia
ESP	Education Support Program
GO	Governmental Organisation
ME	Ministry of Education
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MEYS	Ministry of Education, Youth and Science
MNE	Forum Mladi i Neformalna Edukacija
MTHS	Multi topic Household Survey
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NPP	National Plan and Program
NSI	National Statistics Institute
OSF	The Open Society Foundation
OSI	Open Society Institute
PC	Parents' Council
PTA	Parent-teacher association
PTM	Parent teacher meeting
RM	Republic of Moldova
SB	School Board
SP	School Principal
SEE	South East Europe
UNICEF	United Nations Fund for Children

National survey of parents in Albania

Elona Boce, Center for Democratic Education

Acknowledgments

We are deeply grateful to all parents and school principals who took part in this survey. Our sincere gratitude goes to the Ministry of Education and Science for providing access to schools.

Purpose

The purpose of this survey was to explore parents' views on the parents-school partnership, their participation in school life, as well as the relationships between school and families.

Methodology

The universe of the survey were parents of elementary school children from mainstream schools (sample A), parents members of school structures (councils, boards, associations) (sample B), school principals of each school in the survey (sample P), and socially excluded parents (sample E).

The sample involved 30 schools in total. The total number of participants is shown in the table no 1 below.

Table 1. Weighted sample according urban/rural area

Geographic location	Urban	Rural	Total
North	84	141	225
Center	139	112	251
South	148	205	353
Tirana	212	82	294
Total Albania	583	540	1123

We used a stratified random sample. Stratification considered both relevant geographical regions and the urban/rural dichotomy. Random selection was performed proportionally according to the size of the school. The school size was defined based on the student population indicator. The data analysis combines findings from interviews conducted with parents and school principals. This report reflects only statistically significant findings.

Findings

Findings from composite variables

- The principal ways in which parents say they take part in school are attending parent's meetings, reading school written materials and helping children with homework. Taking part in school decision-making such as school financial management, extra curricular activities, educational issues and others, are seen as important by most of the parents, but especially from those parents who are not counted as socially excluded (5% of the survey sample).¹
- Parents who think of themselves as capable and competent to participate in school life are more likely to be mothers living in Tirana and parents who are not socially excluded.
- 66% of parents involved in the research see benefits from participating in school life such as the benefit of their child being happy at school. However, this is not always the case for socially excluded parents.
- Parents' representatives feel capable and competent in all participation dimensions, such as attending meetings, helping in homework, taking part in extra-curricular activities and the like. They perceive more benefits in participating and view themselves capable for contributing in school life.
- Most parents believe that it is both their role and the role of school's to secure child happiness at school. However, parents view child's rearing as their direct responsibility. Socially excluded parents expect the school to ensure happiness of the child more frequently than the other parents.
- According to parents, children whose parents are representatives at school show higher level of satisfaction in attending school. Lower satisfaction is found among children from mainstream parents and even lower level of satisfaction when it comes to children of socially excluded parents.
- Parents from mainstream schools² are satisfied with communication in school. However, parent representatives and those living in urban area rate their communication with school more positively than others.
- Parents in rural areas accept school invitations to meetings more often than those in urban areas. They read school information more often, and think more positively about the communication with teachers and school principal compared to urban based parents.

1 With socially excluded parents, we mean parents of children who live in families with irregular income, from families with a single parent, families with a parent who works abroad, family where both parents work in another country, who come from residential care institutions, who belong to ethnic minorities, who are Roma and who have special educational needs.

2 Parents in mainstream schools (see Sample A on Methodology section of this summary).

- Parents opportunity in influencing school decision making such as on school financial management, organization of school events, educational issues and pupil discipline issue is rated more highly by parents' representatives compared to the rest of the parents.

There is a strong correlation between the perception of the benefits of participation and the sense of duty to participate in school life.

Main findings

Formal parent participation such as representation in school structures goes along with other variables, such as: children being happier with school; children having better performance at school, and having more books at home. Parents who are representatives in school structures tend to have university or post university education and have higher aspirations for the child's future education.

Another picture is drawn with findings on socially excluded parents: their children tend to dislike school more often and have lower school results. Many of them do not have a single book at home. Parents from this group aspire that their child finishes just the high school. These parents generally have a minimum level of education and hence they do not believe strongly in school participation.

Participation dimensions

- According to the survey schools tend to invite socially excluded parents less frequently to class parents' meetings and individual meetings than other parents. The survey indicate school tendency in inviting only parents who are already part of representative school structures. On the other hand, when they are invited, excluded parents say that they accept school invitations less often than the rest of the parents. Moreover, they have less confidence than other parents that such meetings will actually help their child. The survey indicates that 40% of Roma parents do not view themselves as capable of making the best use of these meetings.
- Parents' representatives tend to receive more often written information from school and they are more likely to read them compared to the rest of the parents.
- Schools rarely invites Roma parents to provide volunteer work such as helping with maintenance or improving school infrastructure, with sport, social and cultural activities, with lessons and with school services such as library (60% of Roma parents interviewed were never invited from the school). In contrast parents representative tend to be invited more often to such activities.
- Socially excluded parents do not expect that the school should consult their opinion in taking decisions on most areas such as financial management, extracurricular activities, organization of school events, health, safety and discipline issues. They do not believe in their ability to contribute. On the other hand, the other parents, especially parents' representatives feel more confident with regard to their contribution in school decision making process.
- Most parents have never taken the initiative to get organized in order to influence something in school life.
- The research indicates that 60% of Roma parents were never asked to become part of school or class structures such as class parental council or school board. They do not feel capable to take over a role as parent representative in these structures.

Predicting and mediating factors

- Compared to the rest of the parents interviewed, Roma parents rate school openness at lower level. The research indicates that 43% of Roma parents confess that their children experience difficulties studying at home since nobody feels capable to help them (25 % of Roma children do not receive any help with school work). Moreover, 80% of Roma parents believe that school shall do more in order to help their kids.
- Parents' representatives in school structures do not receive the highest evaluation from the rest of the parents especially in terms of contacting them regularly or in terms of how effective they are in representation. On the other hand, representative parents have a higher self opinion regarding their performance of representative functions. However, 85 % of representative parents believe that their voice is not considered by the school administration. Generally, they were not asked to participate in major decision making occasions such as financial management or educational issues such as text content and teachers' assessment.
- Parents' attitudes are biased towards a traditional view. They believe that issues like: the quality of teaching, the organization of extracurricular activities and school safety are the school's responsibility, while what regards child's rearing and helping with homework is considered mainly as a parent responsibility. Nevertheless, they view themselves and the school as co-responsible for a number of issues such as: child happiness at school, child good achievement at school and motivation to learn.

Recommendations

School based programmes that address root causes. Programs for raising awareness among parents may be needed for targeting the root causes with regard to problems related to quality and participation. Such causes are based on such beliefs as: "school does not invite parents", "school does not involve parents in key decision making", "we are not able to contribute as parents", or "intellectual parents are the ones needed here." In this context, awareness programs focusing parents (especially those who are excluded) teachers and educational managers implemented by the school might be helpful. It is important that such programs originate from the school, as it is closer to the community.

Participation starts with participation. In any current or upcoming programmes and initiatives which encourage participation, parents must be part of them from the beginning. They shall be viewed as an important actor with regard to the designing, implementing and monitoring of such programs and initiatives. Parents need to feel that decision makers and school managers do consult their opinion. It is important to make parents participate in such ways which are useful for the school, the child and the parent. Most of the socially excluded parents did not feel capable of making the best use of participation in schools (for example school meetings). It is important to explore initiatives which would increase socially excluded parents interest and belief toward the benefits coming from their participation in the school life. Moreover, parents being part of the school representative structures might be involved in ensuring that more and more parents become active participants in the school and/or class meetings, in providing volunteer work or helping with organizing school activities.

Eye on the excluded. It seems quite difficult to break the resistance of parents in fully understanding their role in the school life. This seems especially difficult in the case of socially excluded parents. It

is recommended that schools and different interest groups such as organizations who promote the socially excluded persons rights or the community groups must work especially with the excluded parents, in order to help them in building self confidence with regard to their ability to contribute in school matters.

Breaking inertia for change. The current status of participation does not improve only by increasing the self confidence of socially excluded parents. One of the reasons why these parents do not feel capable to contribute is because they say that they are not invited as often as other parents. The school and its administration need to break the pattern of engaging only parents “who come”, or “parents who are interested”. School needs also those parents who don’t come and who never read their child report card, so that the school delivers its services in the best way. Education experts and schools must find proper and creative ways in order to increase parents’ awareness.

Small things bring change. School must be aware of other independent factors that influence or coexist with the issue of low participation. School therefore must try to engage parents gradually and not forcefully. Such factors are wealth of families, which is positively related to mother’s education level, high results of the child, satisfaction from school etc. School must penetrate beyond these factors and understand how they relate, and find ways to involve more excluded children and parents affected more significantly by the above factors. For example, low grade students who have few books can be engaged more often in the school library or other students may be asked to lend them books. Small gestures may initiate big changes.

Rejuvenating parents structures. Parents’ structures need to be functioning appropriately not only in order to gain trust and support of other parents, but, above all, to influence the school life, thus fulfilling the mission they are created for. The school must be supportive, and objective in helping parents to fulfill their representative role. Moreover, these structures must focus and work towards their purpose. They must not be distant from the rest of parents, but in contrary they need to keep permanent relationships with the group they represent in order to ensure that their needs are met. They cannot exist as structures per se. They should represent as effectively as possible the parents community.

National survey of parents in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Esad Bratovic and Andrea Soldo

Acknowledgment

The research team would like to thank the following:

- The 1,143 parents and 30 school principals who kindly found the time to take part in the survey.
- The 12 Ministries of Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina who all kindly agreed to allow the study to take place in their schools.
- The “PULS” marketing and public opinion research agency which conducted the survey on time and at the highest standards.
- The Education Support Programme (ESP) of the OSI (Open Society Institute), which was in charge of the regional project.
- Igor Repac from the Centre for Educational Policy Studies, Slovenia, who helped us at every stage of the survey.

Purpose

This report presents the results for Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H) of a survey on primary school children parents’ attitudes to and views on parental participation in schools. For the purposes of this report, “parental participation” means the involvement of parents in school decision-making, in extra-curricular activities, and in the education of their own children.

This research is part of “Advancing Educational Inclusion and Quality in South-East Europe”, a project of the Education Support Programme (ESP), which is financed by the OSI (Open Society Institute). The project aims to address the problem of the widening disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes that continue in the South-East European (SEE) countries of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia.

Similar surveys were carried out in the other nine countries and will be reported on separately. The plan is to have a three-year project in several phases. During the first phase, empirical research was conducted in order to better understand the capacity, values, positions and activities of school princi-

pals with respect to participation at the school level in selected countries of South-East Europe. In the second phase, the attention turned to finding out more of the attitudes and experiences of parents in respect of involvement in school.

Methodology

The field research was conducted by Puls, a marketing and public opinion research agency, from 21 Dec 2009 to 28 Jan 2010.

Target population:

A) parents of primary school children (mainstream parents); B) parent members of school boards and/or the parents' council in the same school, or parent members of the parent-teacher association (PTA); P) school principals in each of the same schools; and E) socially excluded parents.

The sample comprised 1,143 parents of children attending primary school. Of the total number of parents, 60 were Roma parents.

569 parents came from an urban area, while 574 parents came from rural areas.

422 respondents were parents of children who attend schools that work according to the Bosnian curriculum, 367 respondents were parents of children attending schools that work according to the Croatian curriculum, and 354 respondents were parents of children attending schools that work according to the Serbian curriculum.

32 directors of primary schools participated in the study.

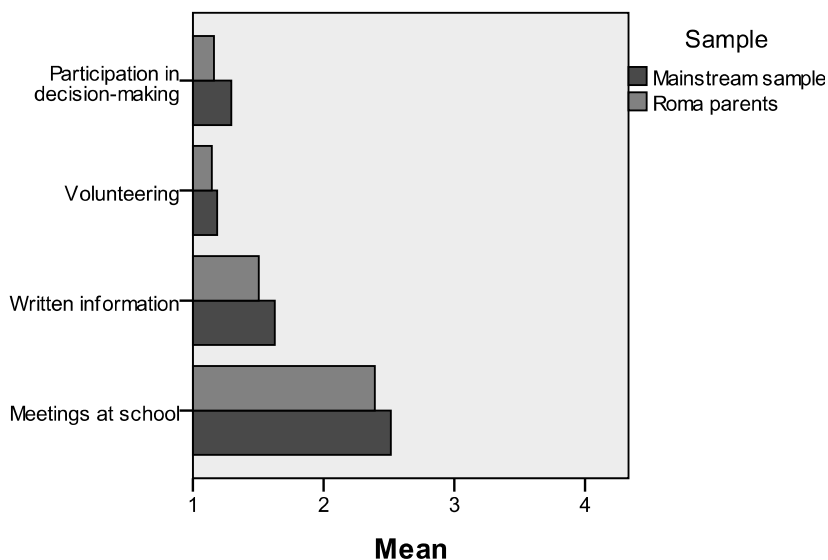
Towns/villages in which the parents and directors were interviewed: Banja Luka, Bileća, Bristova Derventa, Đulići, Fajtovci, Grude, Ilijaš, Kalošević, Kamberi, Kiseljak, Kočerin, Kostajnica, Livno, Maglaj, Mišini Han, Mostar, Obudovac, Osijek, Osmaci, Prisoje, Rodoč, Sarajevo, Sovići, Stolac, Tarčin, Tuzla, Vitina, and Živinice.

Findings

Figure 1¹ shows that parents stated that the school mostly invited them for group or individual meetings at school, they were sent written information less frequently, and they were almost never invited to take part in decision-making or volunteering at school during the previous year. The Roma parents said that they had received fewer invitations to school meetings, and less written information from the school in comparison to the mainstream sample of parents.

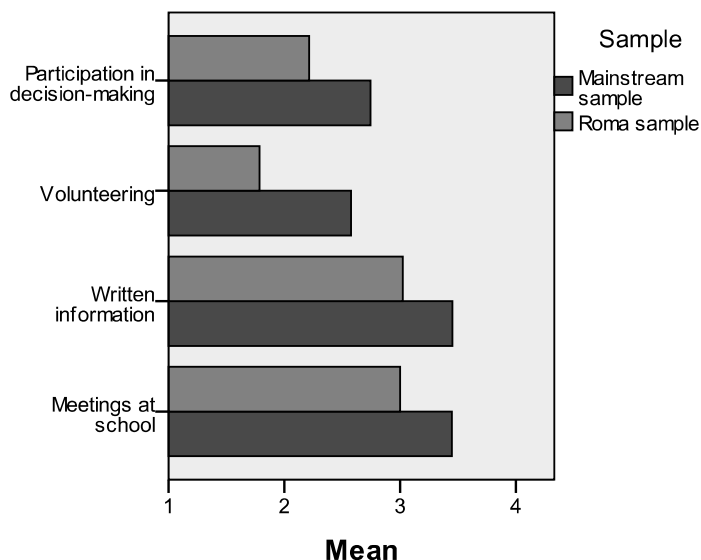
1 Scale measurement: 1 = Never; 2 = Once, 3 = 2-3 times; 4 = more than 3 times (last school year)

Figure 1 How often did the school invite parents to various forms of participation?



The parents stated that they respond to the invitations to school meetings almost every time, and that either they or someone from their family reads the written information received from the school almost every time. Even though they were almost never invited to take part in volunteering at school during the last year, on average, the mainstream sample of parents asserted that they respond to an invitation to volunteer at school almost every time, while the Roma parents had responded once during the last year, on average (Figure 2)².

Figure 2 Response to various forms of participation



Almost all parents agreed that it is necessary for the school to invite parents for individual or group meetings at school. Further, the parents thought that the school should send written information (feedback on a child’s progress, school or class newsletter, written information on other things such as health, drugs, violence...).

² Scale measurement: 1 = Never; 2 = Once; 3 = Most times; 4 = Every time

The parents least agreed that asking for their help with school maintenance, the organisation of events, classes and school service activities is something the school should be requesting from parents.

Generally speaking, the parents believed that the school should probably ask for their opinion when making decisions about administering the school.

The principals thought that the number of invitations sent to parents is significantly larger than the parents' perception of the number of invitations to various forms of participation in school life and work during the last year. There is especially a significant difference in perceptions of participation in decision-making when, on average, the parents said that the school had not invited them at all during the last year, while the principals thought that they had invited them at least once.

In relation to the parents, the principals thought that the parents respond less frequently to the invitations to individual and group meetings at school. On the other hand, the principals perceived the response of the parents to participation in decision-making at school, as well as various forms of volunteering, much higher than the parents' perceptions.

Unlike the parents, the principals were more convinced that the school should invite parents to volunteer at school, that is, to help with school maintenance or infrastructure, or the organisation of sports/social/cultural activities, and that the school should ask the parents for their opinions on the school administration.

In general, the Roma parents felt less involved in school life than the other parents.

The Roma parents were, on average, less satisfied with how happy their child is at school, as well as their influence on and communication with the school, in comparison with the others.

Almost one-third of the Roma parents (28.6%) stated that the school does not treat them with respect, while only 1% of mainstream parents said the same thing.

The parents who had received most invitations to meetings at school were more satisfied with their communication with the school, that is, with the quantity and quality of information, as well as the various ways in which they can become involved in the work of the school ($r=.209$, $p=.000$).

The parents who had been invited by the school to take part in making school-related decisions were more satisfied with the communication they have had with school, and thought that they have more influence in the school.

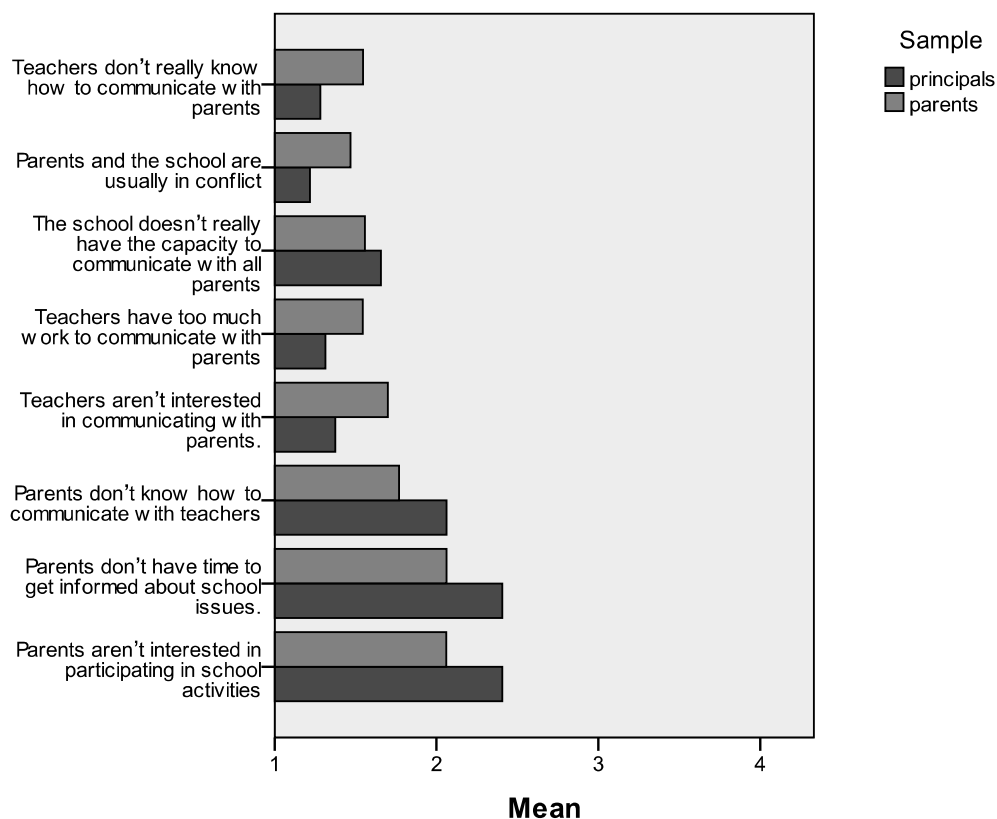
In comparison with the parents, the principals were more convinced of the parents' lack of interest to participate in school activities; they thought that the parents do not have time to learn about the school's activities, and that parents do not know how to communicate with teachers.

In comparison with the principals, the parents saw their conflicts with the school and the poor communication skills of the teachers as an obstacle to their greater participation in school life and work. On the other hand, the principals saw the parents' lack of interest, time and communication skills as an obstacle to any bigger parental participation.

Although one could think that the parents see the school as an obstacle to their participation, while the principals see the parents in that regard, one should point out that the levels of agreement with the mentioned statements are very small, and all the mentioned statements, most probably, do not pose a real problem for the parents' participation (Figure 3)³.

3 Scale measurement: 1 = Not at all; 2 = To a limited extent; 3 = To some extent; 4 = To a large extent

Figure 3 Barriers to participation



Recommendations

- Regular responses to school invitations to parent-teacher and information meetings are not the only form of participation; therefore, it is necessary to stimulate and support parents to undertake self-initiate activities, and take full responsibility as a key partner in their child's education.
- To more frequently inform parents about the work of the Parents' Council, about the activities that are implemented in school, school development plans, the projects in which the school is involved, as well as the school's long-term objectives.
- As the parents' voluntary work is recognised as a desirable form of engagement of both parents and principals, it is necessary to determine the ways and possibilities of organising it.
- Organising joint activities in schools (school staff, parents, students) in which a visible contribution to school life would be evident (for example, cleaning the school playground, sports playground, internal premises of the school, organising workshops or lectures...).
- The school/principal, in co-operation with the Parents' Council, can promote voluntary work in schools, inform both parents and students of good practice examples of voluntarism, and jointly define for which areas of school life volunteering is desirable.

- The school should point out to the parents the role they can play in the educational process and in the life of the school in general. This should be done through: notifications, school newspapers or bulletins, lectures, or joint meetings.
- Enabling parents to participate in defining school goals and school policy could encourage a desirable partnership.
- Organising additional meetings with parents belonging to the Roma nationality which would be initiated by the school; including individuals from the Roma community in communication between parents and the school (representatives of the Roma Association for example, or persons who are recognised as trustworthy and influential in the Roma community).
- Since almost one-third of the Roma parents (28.6%) stated that the school does not treat them with respect, additional education and/or advisory work with teachers and other school employees on working with students/parents belonging to ethnic minorities should be organised in order to tackle this issue.

National survey of parents in Bulgaria

Boyan Zahariev and Ilko Yordanov

Acknowledgements

The survey team is grateful for the support received from the Bulgarian Ministry of Education Youth and Science, especially by making an official commitment to implementing the cross-national survey of parents. This greatly increased the credibility of the survey and the response rate among all groups included in the survey.

Purpose

The purpose of the National Survey of Parental Involvement in the Life of School (NSPILS) is to assess the level of parental participation in the school education system in Bulgaria and to compare that with other CEE countries. The survey comes at a very important moment for education policy in Bulgaria. A new draft law on school education is currently being proposed for public and expert discussion by the Minister for Education. The discussions will continue until the third quarter of the year, as the Minister said that there is no rush in introducing the new law and it is better to achieve the widest consensus possible before submitting it to the National Assembly. The draft law envisages a new role for parents in the school education system and eventually the establishment of a new type of school boards with a much wider set of powers than now. By examining attitudes to and the experience of parental participation in school life, the Bulgarian report will contribute to this ongoing debate.

Methodology

The survey data were collected using a two-stage sampling design. In the first stage, a total of five rural and urban settlements was selected in each of the six planning regions (NUTS 2 level). The individual rural and urban settlements were drawn randomly from a list of the corresponding type of settlements in each planning region. The ratio of urban to rural settlements was based on the ratio of the

corresponding population within the planning region. In the next stage, a school was randomly selected within each settlement. The final stage included the identification of parents of students enrolled in the school, based on households identified through a random walk within a specified area around the school – namely, 3 kilometres for urban schools and 5 kilometres for rural schools. Twenty to forty parents were interviewed in each school, depending on the size of a school. At each school the sample included also five parent representatives (i.e. members of the board of trustees or a class council). A booster of two schools situated in segregated neighbourhoods was designed. The survey questionnaire was prepared by the central research team and then translated into Bulgarian and adapted.

Main conclusions

Education level and participation in organised school life

Parents' education level is an important factor in the attendance and performance of children in schools. The low level of education of parents or the complete lack of any formal schooling is likely to involve serious and multidimensional risks for a child's education. First, parents who were early school leavers or parents who received little or poor quality education are not always able to secure the necessary household income and therefore the family cannot create favourable material and living conditions for the child's education (purchases of textbooks and supplementary books, creating a comfortable home environment etc.). The current survey confirms a strong positive correlation coefficient between mother's education level and wealth of the household – 0.44¹. On the other hand, the poor education of some parents does not allow them to skilfully monitor the education performance of their children at school and to provide full support for their self-preparation at home. The survey data show that in every 4th household normally nobody from the family helps a child with homework (similar is the share of interviewed parents who think that helping with homework is something the school should not ask families to do). Consequently, the interest of low-educated parents in their child's school readiness and performance is limited, they do not motivate their children to attend school and a vicious cycle is completed as the children frequently do not receive a higher education than their parents.

The existence of a comparatively high education level (secondary education or higher) is a prerequisite for parental participation in organised school life as parent representatives or in parents' councils. Only 3% of the school-active parents have completed less than a secondary education (see Chart 1). While the country-average share of parents with a tertiary education is 16%, the group of parent representatives and parents' councils has a share which is double that.

The data obtained in the survey indicate the significant role parental education plays with regard to school attendances of the Roma. In the group of Roma households with children the probability that the children will attend school increases with an increase in the parents' education level (see Chart 2).

The possession of books is another significant indicator of parents with great potential to participate as parent representatives or in parents' councils. Book possession has a strong positive correlation with mother's education level (0.49). While for the average households of pupils attending primary school

1 Here and below, all of the quoted correlation data are significant at $p < 0.001$.

only 27% have more than 100 and less than 500 books, for the households of school-life active parents this proportion is almost twice that figure at about 44% (see Chart 3).

Indicators such as the number of books in the household clearly differentiate between mainstream and disadvantaged households. The correlation analyses between background indices show that the correlation coefficient between the wealth of the household and the number of books is very strong and positive and more than twice (0.66) the correlation coefficient between ethnically excluded groups and number of books possessed at home (-0.27), which is also strong enough but negative.

Median income per capita of the household for Roma is half of the average index for the surveyed households of children attending primary school. The income of families of active parents who participate as parent representatives or in parents' councils is even higher, leading to a wide and very significant discrepancy with the average per capita income of Roma households (BGN 79 compared to BGN 239). It seems that becoming a member of any parents' body is strongly related to having at least a secondary education, which in practice excludes disadvantaged parents. The low education level and low income of parents from minorities and more specifically of Roma parents can be a barrier on its own for parents' participation in school councils, even if we assume that bias and discrimination have not played a role.

Problems and difficulties at school

The parents of three out of every four pupils claim that their children do not have any troubles at school. However, about one-quarter of the parents admit that their children have been faced with at least one of the following challenges at school: problems with learning; problems with behaviour; problems with interacting with teachers and staff; problems with peers, the most serious difficulties being in the area of learning followed by the issues of declining discipline at school, which have been escalating in recent years. Disciplinary and behavioural problems and disturbances are manifested in the interaction among peers, and with the teachers and staff (see Chart 4).

The National Survey of Parental Involvement in the Life of School (NSPILS) clearly shows that cognitive and behavioural problems are registered in schools with a large proportion of Roma, in quite a few village schools², as well as in some large urban neighbourhoods characterised by a poorer infrastructure and a lower socio-economic status of the inhabitants. In these schools there is a much higher chance of a student being confronted by more than one challenge at school, which he or she would not be able to cope with without support.

The combination of unconquered language and communication barriers, difficulties in learning the taught subject matter and worsened relationships has a strong negative impact on the motivation for regular class attendances. This, in turn, intensifies the problems related to learning and further deteriorates educational results. The correlation coefficient between the number of difficulties a parent says their child has and school achievements and positive attitudes to the school is strong and negative – respectively: (- 0.22) and (- 0.35). Indicative in this respect is the fact that 15% of the parents of Roma

² The share of pupils with problems is also significant in certain secondary education schools in smaller places and on the periphery of larger cities, with these problems mostly being in terms of behaviour and relations with school staff and peers. Probably this is largely extent due to the aggression and demonstrations of violence by older pupils towards younger ones when they attend one and the same school shift.

pupils and 9% of the parents of Turk pupils assess the school achievements of their children as poor or below-average, which could partly be a sign of low self-esteem, yet it also reflects real gaps in student performance (see Chart 5).

Children who come from excluded and minority groups (ethnic minorities and the residents of small villages) significantly more often declare a negative attitude to school. Among Roma, 17% of the parents acknowledge that their children have a negative or strongly negative attitude to school, while among Turk parents this proportion is 15% (see Chart 6). By comparison, only 3% of the Bulgarian parents declare that their children do not like their school. It thus seems that low performance and a lack of capacity to cope with school-related problems can generate indifference and passivity or even dislike, which in turn negatively influence performance and the chances of being well integrated into the school.

Sensitivity and initiatives of the school for coping with challenges

In the Bulgarian governance system parents' meetings remain the main tool for parent involvement with both school affairs in general and the progress of a child in particular. Therefore, any judgment about parent participation should start by taking a look at the frequency and character of parents' group meetings. Principals report having invited parents to attend parents' meetings a little more often than parents declare having been invited, but in broad terms from the answers of both school principals and parents we obtain the same picture (see Chart 7). More than three parents meetings a year is rare. We can reasonably assume that one meeting per term is the widely adopted practice. From the replies of the school principals it is also evident that the class teacher is the most likely participant at these meetings on behalf of the school, although the school principals also report high (probably somewhat exaggerated) rates for their own participation at such meetings. This picture fits well with what is known about the content of such meetings. This is an event where the parents of students from a specific class get feedback on the performance of their children during the school year or semester, some information about what lies ahead in the next semester and which textbooks and teaching aids have to be purchased. At such meetings parents are also often asked to contribute some funds for teaching aids for class use, small repairs etc. Such a format is congruent with a frequency of up to three meetings per year. However, the answers of both school principals and parents show that the average intensity of parent participation in group meetings hides some significant differences between rural and urban areas and a huge gap between Roma and the majority population. In rural areas, parents meetings take place a little less often, while in Roma schools there is usually only one meeting a year.

Parents and school principals also broadly agree on the frequency of parent participation in parent group meetings (see Chart 8). Most principals report that the parents come most times (they are invited), while a similar majority of parents believe they attended every meeting. But in general there seems to be an agreement that parents are active when it comes to attending meetings organised by the school.

The initiative of the school in resolving problems faced by pupils from excluded groups and their parents depends on several factors. Recognising the need for communication with the parents is essential. Some schools have established traditions of parent participation and democratic principles of school management. Because of the still limited and partial decentralisation of school education in Bulgaria and lost educational traditions of parent participation, the role of parents in the decision-making process in the school remains limited.

According to the information gathered by this survey from the school principals, in about 30% of schools there is no operating body with parents' participation. Research data show that six out of seven parents in the last three years have not been members of the school board or another similar body. The

willingness to participate in these forms of parents' involvement identified in the survey is not high – only 36% of interviewed parents feel it is the duty of someone in their family to take on at least one of these roles. Perhaps the low level of participation is associated with overall high distrust of institutions; the school is seen as part of the institutional setting. Often vulnerable groups attribute the blame for their serious socio-economic situation on inefficient state-controlled bodies. Moreover, there is a trend of parents of vulnerable groups treating their children as a “bargaining chip” in relations with institutions (especially school and social service officials). For example, some parents from vulnerable groups often use threats that they can stop their children attending school unless they receive certain benefits – e.g. social benefits, access to electricity and water etc.

Informal ways of participation are even more limited due to the lack of initiatives by the school and the lack of feeling among parents that they have opportunities to influence school life and school policies. Research data show that in the last year an overwhelming majority of parents were never invited by the school to help with maintaining or improving the school infrastructure – cleaning, painting, building etc. (more than 70%), help with sport, social and cultural activities – plays, concerts, field trips etc (75%), help with school services such as the library, playground, lunchroom (90%) and help with lessons – telling a story, talking about jobs, playing an instrument, providing teaching assistance to teachers (94%). Almost 9 out of 10 interviewed parents reported that in the last year the school did not ask for parents' opinion on school financial management. Only less than 15% of parents try to influence something on their own or with other parents without first being asked by the school. These perceptions and the lack of initiatives and active partnership between parents and schools are inherited from the time of the highly centralised education system when decisions were taken by the central state government. The recently initiated decentralisation reforms in the national school education system are unable to change those attitudes quickly, especially because they are focused on financial decentralisation alone and put little emphasis on parents' participation in school life.

In order to measure school proactivity regarding parents in various schools, the research team worked out a composite index of school initiative and activity that was intended to reflect the information level and parental assessment about the level of openness of the school to communication and consultation with the parents³. The data indicate that this index achieves the highest values in schools located in municipal centres, while it has lower values in village schools and in schools with a significant number of pupils from the ethnic minorities.

The probability of a more active initiative on the part of the school towards a partnership with the parents is higher in places where households have a more stable income and a higher living standard. On the contrary, schools are most passive in seeking contacts with parents when the families of their pupils live in deep and multidimensional poverty (which typically correlates with a high percentage of pupils from the ethnic minorities in a respective school: over 30%).

The data from the survey on parental participation in school life in Bulgaria show the presence of a significant gap between the potential of mainstream parents and parents from excluded groups to influence school policies owing to a lack of knowledge, low income and low self-confidence. It is not by chance that the survey shows a positive correlation between household wealth and parents' satisfaction with an opportunity to influence decision-making in the school (0.25) and therefore an even higher positive correlation with general satisfaction with the school (0.31). On the other hand, the need to compensate for these inequalities in minorities' access to educational decisions has not yet been realised by the

³ The index includes replies to the questions: How many times have you been invited to a general parents' meeting at the school and an individual parent meeting at the school in the last school year?; How many times has the school given you written information about the development of your child, written information about help for your child, about the school bulletin, or other written information in the last school year?

schools and by the school education system as a whole. As a result, parental trust and the involvement of excluded groups in school life seem to be decreasing. As a consequence, families are not giving their children the stimuli they need, which is the first step to losing interest in education and being excluded.

Recommendations

The data from the cross-country survey of parents reveal a clear pattern involving the segregation of parents into groups, characterised by different capabilities to participate in education by having their voice heard, by being proactive, and by supporting their children. The children of such parents also seem to be concentrated in certain types of schools. Apparently the school system must have as a primary task some form of compensation for such disadvantages. Currently, the NSPILS seems to indicate that schools actually reinforce the embedded disadvantages. The relevant policy question is “What would make schools in disadvantaged areas more proactive and more competent in communicating with marginalised parents, involving them in school life and upgrading their competence vis-à-vis the education of their children?” One of the possible answers is that to achieve this we need appropriately trained and highly competent and motivated teachers and school management. Since teachers’ career paths and the differentiation of teachers’ salaries has been on the policy agenda for many years (without much progress), it is still a good time to integrate appropriate incentives for teachers who choose to teach in schools in disadvantaged areas, reflected in their remuneration and in opportunities and requirements for continuing training.

The overall deprivation suffered by parents from disadvantaged areas is also likely to generate higher per student costs of education should schools seek to provide opportunities for parent involvement. It is generally more difficult to get in touch with such parents. They lack access to the Internet and sometimes even phones. This support an additional case for designing special programmes for schools in deprived areas or even providing some supplement to the per capita funding.

Appendix

Chart 1

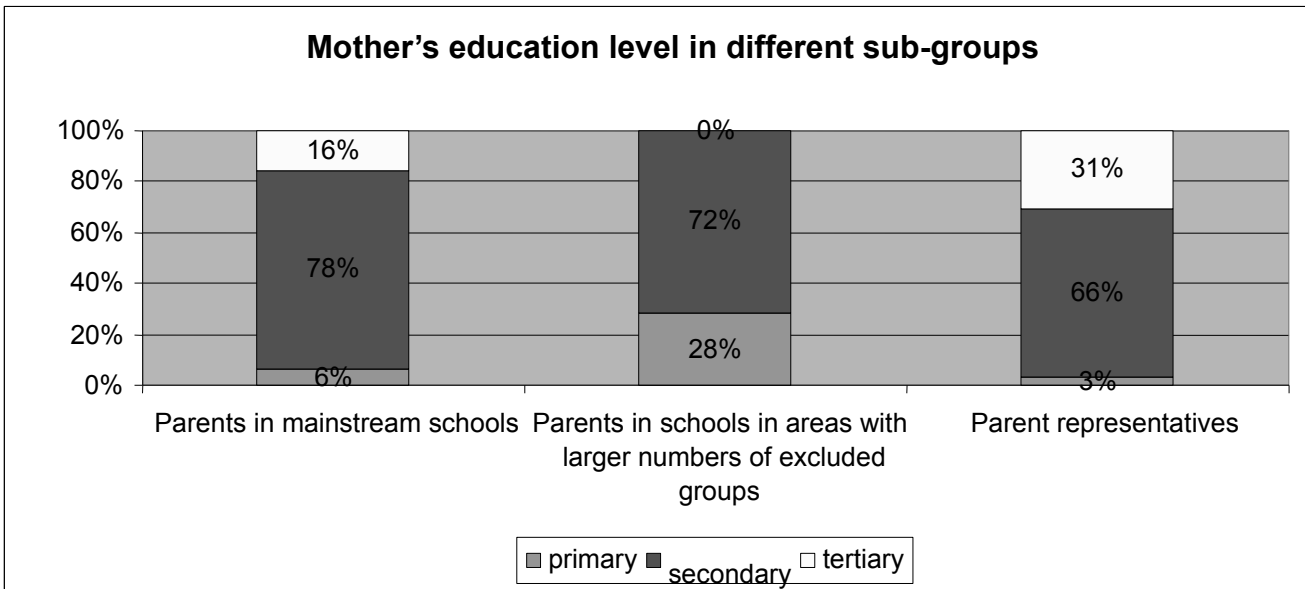


Chart 2

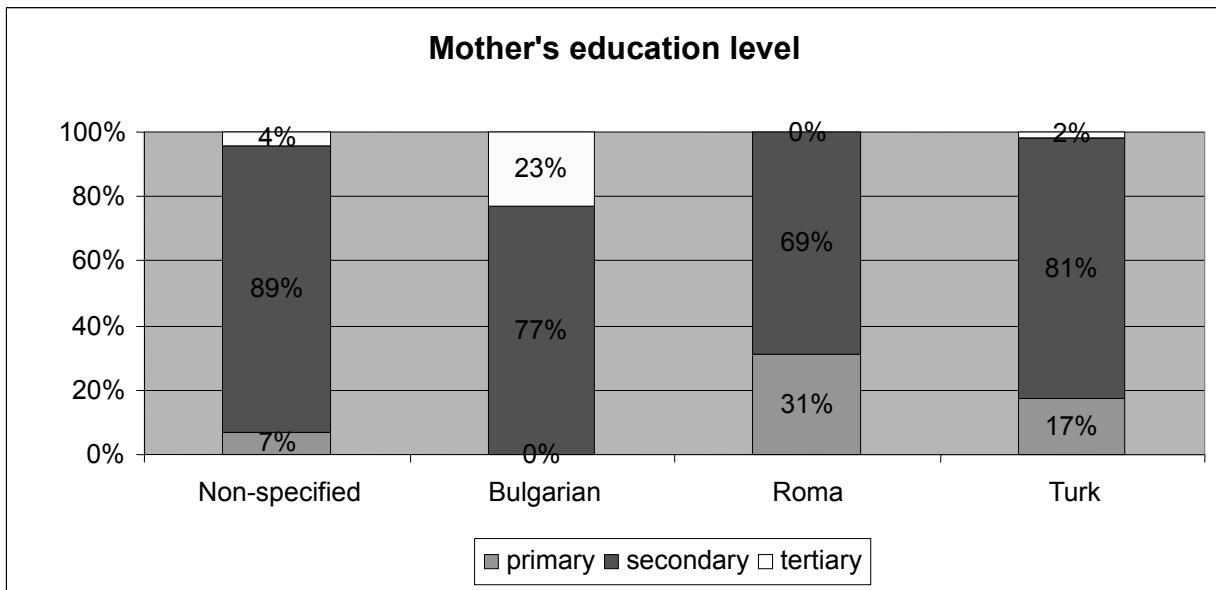


Chart 3

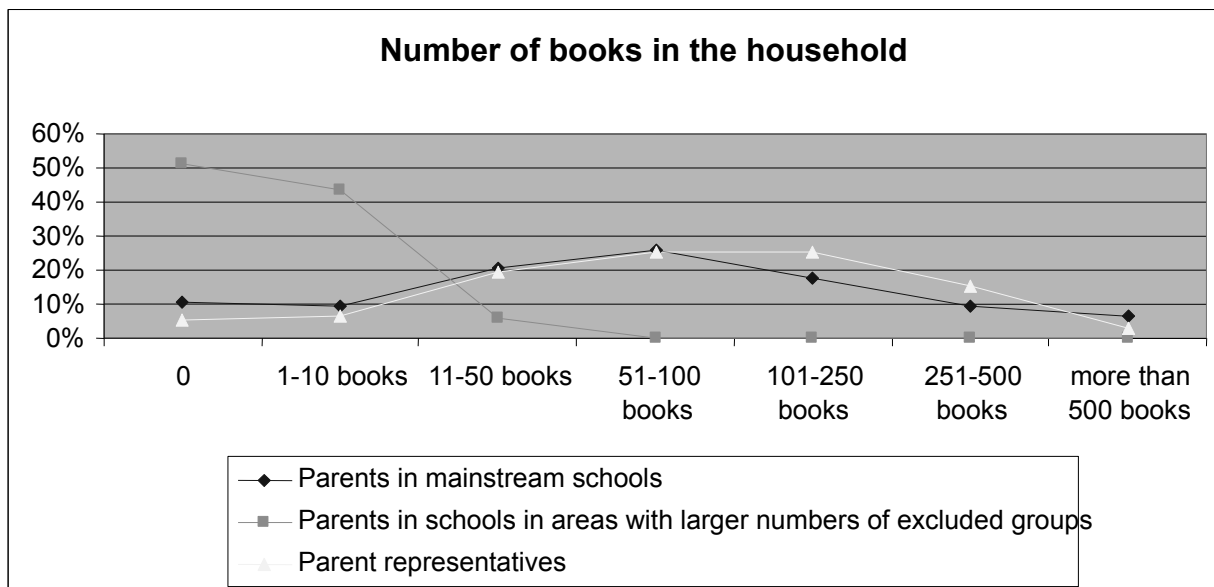


Chart 4

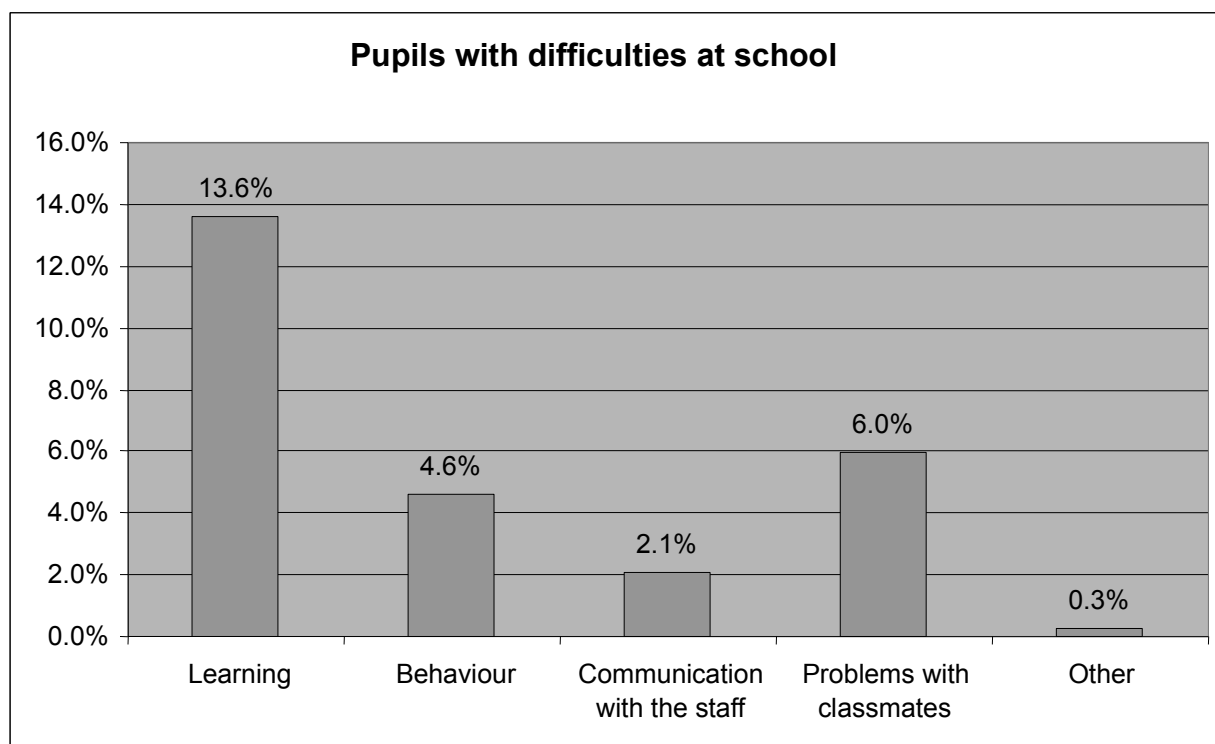


Chart 5

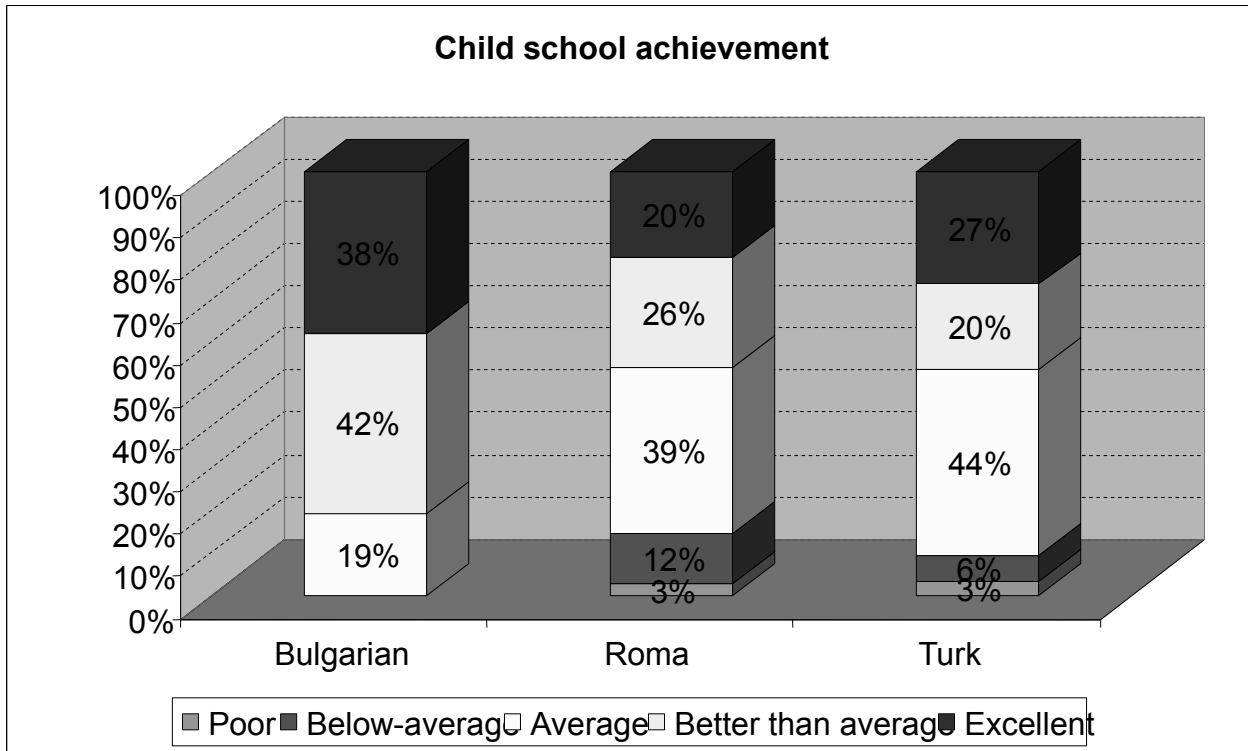


Chart 6

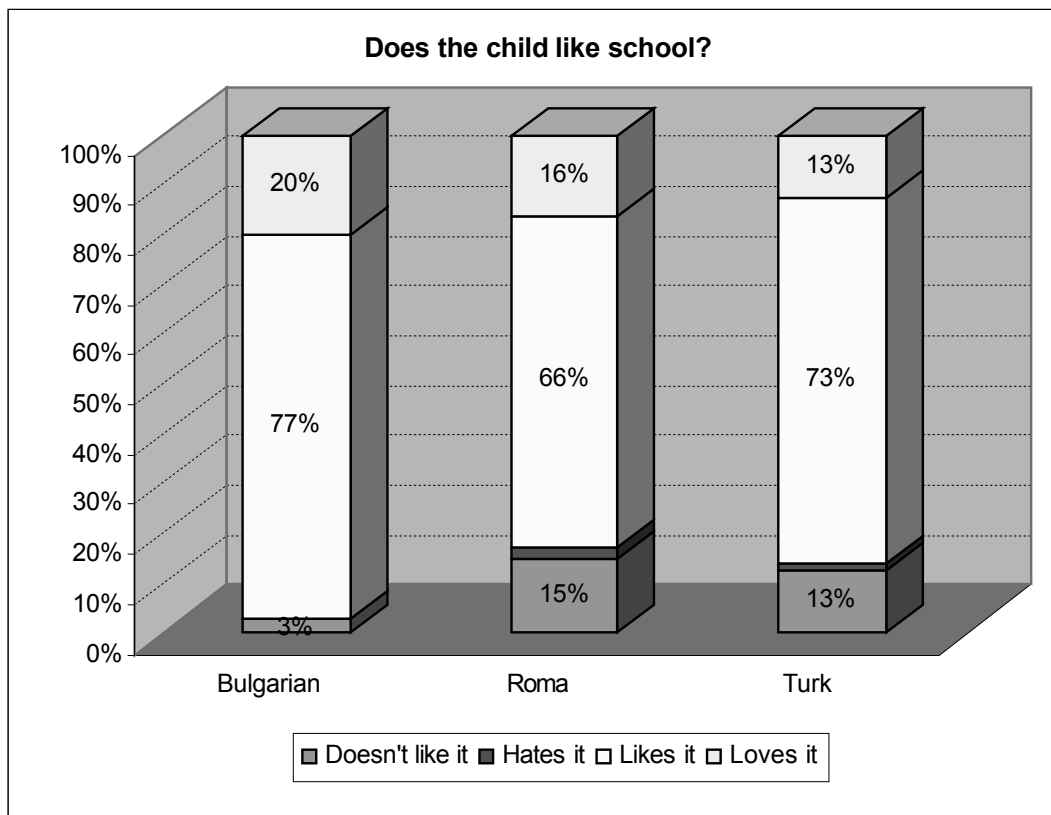


Chart 7

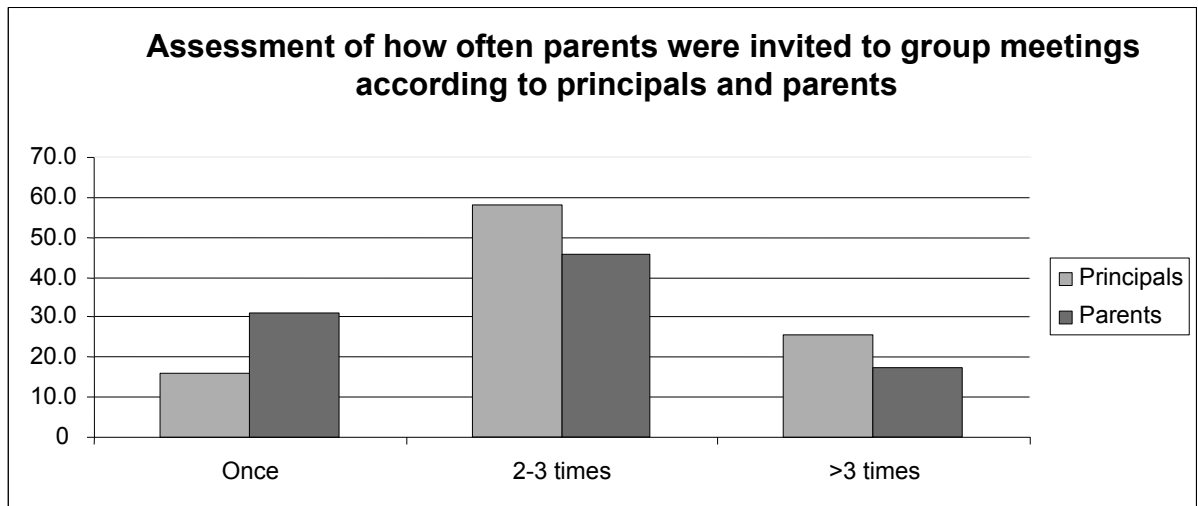
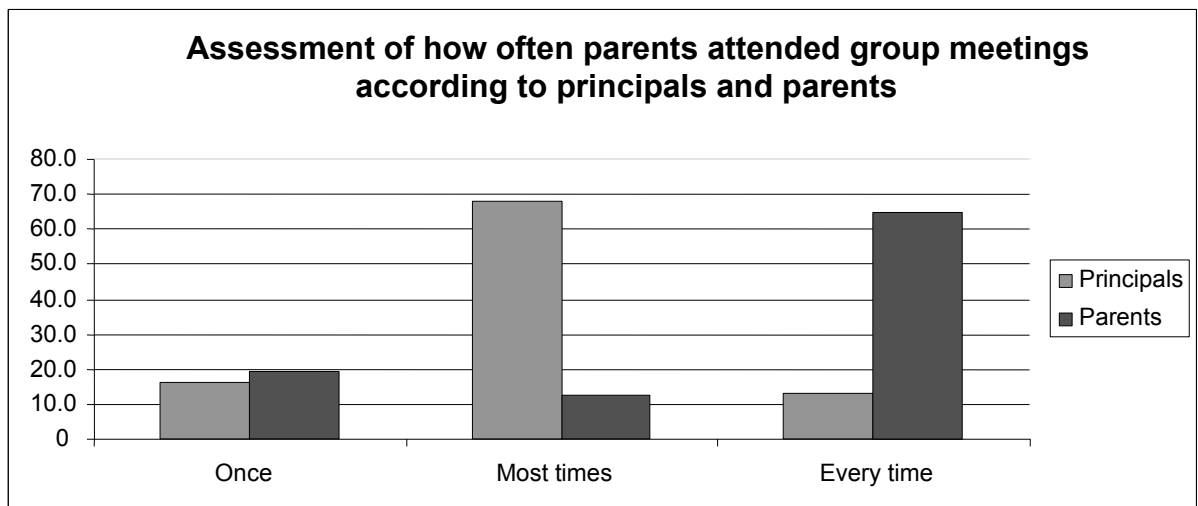


Chart 8



National survey of parents in Croatia

Renata Miljević-Ridički and Tea Pahić

Acknowledgment

This project is carried out as part of the *Advancing Education Quality and Inclusion in South-East Europe (SEE)* countries initiative.

It is funded by the Education Support Program of the Open Society Institute and implemented in co-operation with the Centre for Education Policy Studies (CEPS, Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana).

Purpose

The main purpose of the project is to advance educational quality by promoting partnerships between schools and parents.

Main aim of the survey: To provide a view of parental participation in schools from the perspectives of parents, parent representatives, Roma parents and principals.

To learn about parents' needs, expectations and experiences regarding their influence on school life and the school's efforts to engage them.

Methodology

This survey was preceded by six focus group (FG) meetings and a pilot survey of the final survey instrument.

We conducted focus groups in the following places: Zagreb (capital), Samobor (a small place near Zagreb); Solin (a small place on the coast, near Split); and Kutina (a city in mainland Croatia).

The variety of parents and their experience with schools provided the central research team (CRT) with material for the main **instruments** of the project:

- a questionnaire for parents (as a base for the standardised interview); and
- a questionnaire for principals (as a base for the standardised interview).

The procedure for the FG and questionnaires they were given can be found at: <http://www.see-educoop.net/aeiq/>

Sample

Parents:

A – parents in mainstream schools (30 schools out of 944 primary schools in Croatia) (N = 908)

B – parent representatives (N = 144)

E – parents in schools in areas with a larger number of marginalised groups (Roma) (N = 60)

EB – parent representatives in schools in areas with a larger number of marginalised groups (N = 10)

Principals:

A – principals in mainstream schools (N = 30)

E – principals in schools in areas with a larger number of marginalised groups (N = 2)

Procedure

The survey was conducted by the PULS agency in autumn 2009. It interviewed 1,122 parents of primary school children (a random stratified sample). The parents were interviewed in their homes.

Principals from the schools in the sample (30 from mainstream schools and two from schools with a larger number of Roma children) were also interviewed. The interviews took place in their schools.

Findings

1. Parents

Most of the parents tend to the traditional approach to co-operation with school. They mostly expect an initiative from the school and then they react. For most parents the school is a safe place for their child, even if the child has difficulties at school or does not understand the language (as with some Roma children).

When they are not satisfied with school, it is not because the school does not accept their initiative but because they want something more from the school (written information).

The parents are mostly satisfied with the way teachers communicate and they, the parents, think that they themselves do not take the initiative for co-operation. Their attitude is that parents should not become involved in some “school matters”.

We tried to identify some of the characteristics of different kinds of parental involvement; for example, differences which arise because of the mother's level of education and because of belonging to a rural/urban area.

A statistical analysis of the data showed a correlation of **mother's education** with the following variables:

- mother's higher education is connected with higher parental ratings of their *child's school achievement*;
- *frequency of reports on the child's progress* – a lower education of the mother is connected with the perception of a higher amount of such information being given;
- *parental opinions on whether a school sends written information home on how to help their child learn* – a higher education of the mother is connected with a perception of the school's greater obligation to send such information;
- *frequency of a school or class newsletter, or some other written information on drugs, violence etc.* – higher education levels positively correlate with the recollection of receiving written information from school, whether a regular class newsletter or more occasional information on bullying or drug awareness, as well as with a stronger belief that it is the school's obligation to send this kind of information;
- *parental competency to read any kind of written information from the school* – a higher education of the mother is connected with a perception of a higher competency as well as a stronger sense of parental duty to read such materials;
- *the school's right to ask parents to help their child with homework* – a lower education of the mother is connected with a parental perception of the school's greater right to ask parents for that help, as well as with a stronger sense of duty to help their children, whilst the competency to help with homework is connected with a higher education of the mother;
- *the school's right to ask parents for help with sport, social and cultural activities* – a higher education of the mother is connected with a higher parental assessment of the school's obligation/right to do it;
- *the school's right to ask parents to help with lessons in school* – a higher education of the mother is connected with a higher parental assessment of the school's obligation/right to ask for such help;
- *parental competency to do any kind of volunteer activities* – a higher education of the mother is connected with a stronger sense of competency and a stronger sense of the child's perceived benefit from this kind of parental co-operation;
- *an opinion on the school's financial management* – a higher education of the mother is connected with more frequent consultations (seeking opinions of parents); a higher education is connected with greater respect for opinions so given and a stronger parental sense of the school's obligation to ask for it;
- *seeking opinions in all other aspects of school decision-making*, such as: the organisation of school events, health and safety issues, overall school management, educational matters, violence and discipline – a higher education of the mother is connected with a stronger parental sense of the school's obligation to ask for their opinion; and
- *parental competency in all kinds of participation in decision-making* – a higher education of the mother is connected with a stronger sense of competency, a stronger sense of duty to co-operate in such a way and the greater perceived benefit for the child.

The results indicate that mothers who are more educated are more willing to become involved in their children's education and feel more competent to do that. The results also indicate that their attitudes to school (their high expectations and willingness to co-operate) could be predictors of children's higher school achievements, as confirmed by many previous studies.

There are some urban/rural distinctions in the following areas of parental participation:

- *wealth index* – parents in an urban area have a significantly higher wealth index, which means they are able to provide better living and learning conditions for their child;
- *frequency of the school's invitations to individual parents' meetings* – parents in a rural area are less frequently invited to individual meetings and they have a weaker sense of the school's obligation to invite parents to individual meetings compared to parents in an urban area;
- *the school's obligation to send written feedback on the child's progress* – parents in rural areas believe less strongly than parents in urban areas it this is something the school should send families;
- *parental perception of the frequency of different kinds of written materials and the school's obligation to send them* – parents in rural areas stated there had been more written information on how to help their child learn, more school or class newsletters and more written information on health, drugs, violence in the last year than parents in urban areas, and yet they held a stronger belief than parents in an urban area that the school should send them information on things like health, violence, drugs etc.;
- *parental competency to read any kind of written materials from the school* – parents in a rural area feel less competent to read any kind of written information compared to parents in an urban area, and they do not find this kind of participation as useful as parents in an urban area do;
- *the school's right to ask parents to help their children with homework* – parents in a rural area more than parents in an urban area feel that it is the school's legitimate right to ask parents to help their children with homework, their sense of duty to help their children is stronger and they think this kind of participation is more helpful for their children;
- *the school's right to ask parents to help with maintaining or improving school infrastructure* – parents in a rural area feel, more strongly than parents in an urban area, that helping with maintaining or improving school infrastructure is something that the school should ask families for;
- *frequency of the school's invitations to help with sport, social and cultural activities* – parents in a rural area stated there had been a higher number of school invitations to help with sport, social and cultural activities;
- *the school's right to ask parents for help with lessons in school* – parents in an urban area estimate, more than parents in a rural area, that helping with lessons is something the school should ask parents for and they believe it is useful for their children more than parents in a rural area;
- *parental perception of the school's obligation to ask parents for an opinion on various aspects of school issues* – regarding participation in different kinds of school decision-making (parents' opinions on school financial management, extracurricular activities, the organisation of school events, health and safety issues, overall school management and educational matters) parents in an urban area believe more strongly than parents in a rural area that the school should ask for their opinion on these issues; and
- *parental competency in all kinds of participation in decision-making* – parents in an urban area feel more competent to participate in any kind of school decision-making, and they are more likely to see the child's benefit from these forms of participation.

Some results indicate that parents in rural areas tend to have a more traditional orientation than parents in urban areas. For instance, they seem to be more willing to help with improving the school infrastructure, but their belief less firmly that they should participate in decision-making, perhaps because of their lower sense of competency.

Parents in rural areas show a greater need for written information from the school on various issues, although they feel less competent than parents from urban areas to use this information.

2. Principals

A comparison of perceptions of principals and parents of parent participation in school activities

The school principals and parents answered the same questions. For example, about giving opinions on decision-making, the organisation of school events, school trips etc:

Question for the parents:

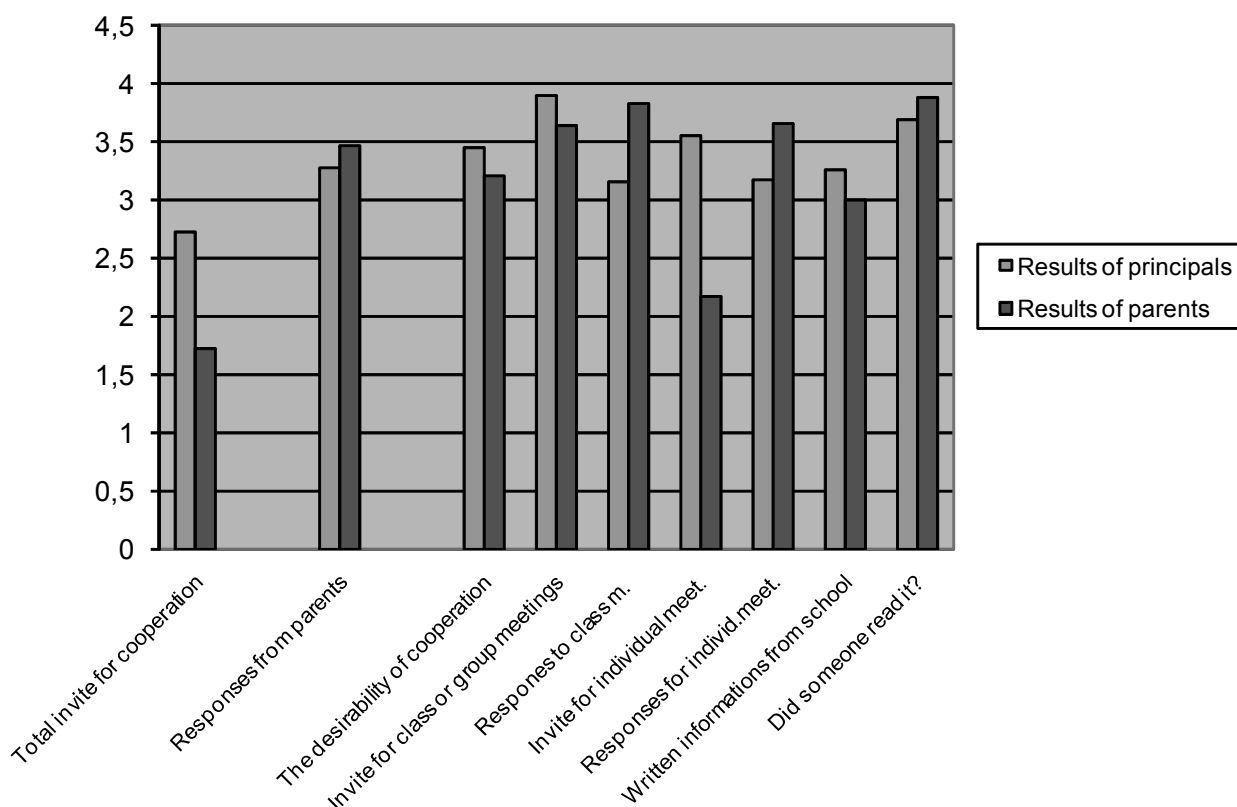
How often did the school ask for your opinion in the last year (PERSONALLY OR AS A FAMILY)?

Question for the principals:

How often was the average family asked for its opinion about this during the last school year?

For the following graphic presentation we used answers to the questions about: overall (total) invitations from the school seeking co-operation with parents, parents' responses to such invitations; parents' opinions on the desirability of co-operation, invitations to class or group parents' meetings, responses to class or group parents' meetings, invitations to individual meetings, parents' responses to the individual meetings, written information on the child's progress from the school, whether someone in the family read it. Both the parents and principals answered the questions using a scale of 1 to 4: 1 (no), 2 (probably not), 3 (yes, probably) 4 (yes); alternatively, (depending on the question): 1 (never), 2 (once), 3 (most times) 4 (every time).

Graph 1. Comparison of parental and principal means of composite variables of school invitations for cooperation and response of parents



The principals and parents differ in their perceptions of school initiatives for parent participation – the principals estimated there had been more school initiatives, especially concerning invitations to individual meetings. On the other hand, parents’ estimations of their own participation are greater than the principals’ estimations. In their opinion, their responses to requests for co-operation were greater than the principals’ estimations of those responses.

Both groups agree that the most common co-operation is through class or group meetings.

When directly asked who is more responsible for addressing the obstacles to better co-operation between parents and the school, both groups pointed out the parent factor (items: *Parents are not interested in participating in school activities; Parents do not have time to inform themselves about school activities*).

3. Roma parents

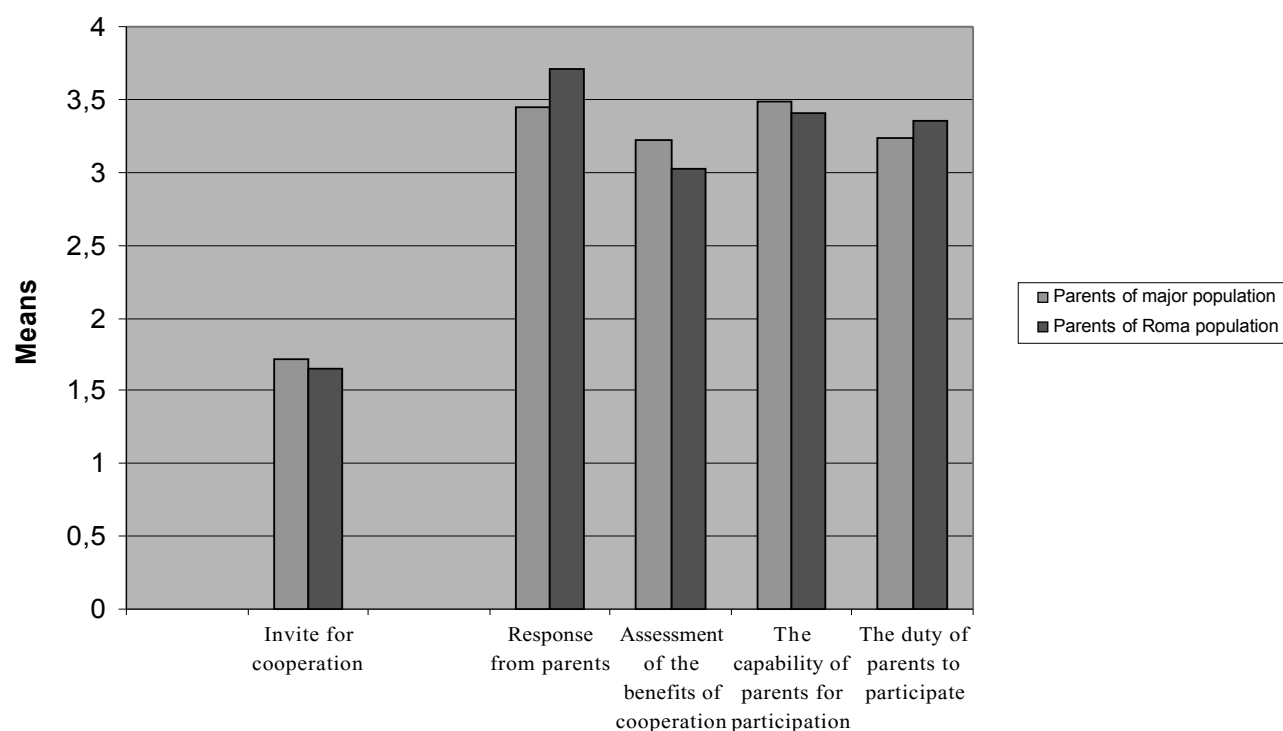
Of all Roma parents, 25% thought that their children have more difficulties at school than other children, 69.6% thought they have the same, while 5.4% thought that their children have fewer difficulties than others.

Those who thought their children have more difficulties mentioned the following reasons: the child does not speak Croatian well, the child has problems achieving educational goals, and the child is anxious or hyperactive.

Those who thought their children have fewer difficulties than others mentioned: an adapted school programme, the school helps Roma children more than others, the child speaks Croatian very well.

We compared the answers of Roma parents and parents of the majority population for the following categories: number of invitations for co-operation from the school, parents’ responses, benefit of the co-operation for the child, parents’ ability to participate, parents’ duty for participation.

Graph 2. Means of composite results for the parents of the majority population and the population of Roma parents



There is a difference between the Roma parents and the majority population. The Roma parents' perception was that they are rarely invited for co-operation than other parents but, when invited, their response is bigger. They also had a higher estimation of the parents' duty to participate. According to data from the focus group, some Roma parents would like to participate in the parents' council (but they do not because they have not been invited). The parents' council consists of one representative of the class so the majority chooses their representative.

Parents of the mainstream population more highly estimated the benefit of co-operation for the child and the parents' ability to co-operate.

The Roma parents were more satisfied than other (mainstream) parents with the information they had received from the school and their reception in school (they come to the school more often, when invited, than other parents). 93.3% of the Roma parents agreed that the school does a lot to help Roma children. They mentioned the following forms of help: they receive free or reduced price textbooks, free meals at school, additional classes, especially for those who do not speak the Croatian language well, financial assistance for school trips, teacher's support in education – teachers encourage Roma children to stay on at school longer, protection in the case of violence from other children. Some schools have a Roma assistant to help Roma children adapt and learn.

Recommendations

Since parents generally accept initiatives from the school, the school should expand them by offering more and different activities for parents, asking parents for greater participation in decision-making etc. However, this cannot happen if the principals and teachers do not believe that this would be useful for the children.

The Ministry of Education, Science and Sport should organise **seminars for principals** in order to present the data from this survey. This should sensitise principals to change their ways of co-operating with parents and make their co-operation more productive and more partnership-oriented following the main findings of the research (parents showed they are interested in being involved in various aspects of the school's functioning because of the perceived benefit for their child's school achievement).

Parents should receive more information about possibilities of participation. Schools should inform parents of the possible ways of volunteering, their rights and the possibilities of influencing the process of the school's decision-making. Some documents concerning parents' rights and possibilities in co-operation with the school should be changed, especially the one that refers to teaching assistance to teachers because the current law does not permit parents to assist teachers in class with teaching.

There is also a need to arrange **education for teachers** to make them aware of the importance of partnership co-operation and parental involvement in the schooling of their children. It is important to make teachers realise that parents are very keen to co-operate, in terms of all the aspects mentioned earlier, and that they would like to receive more school invitations for various kinds of co-operation. Teachers should view the parents' participation as a benefit and not as a burden on their work.

In one of the focus groups an interesting proposal emerged: each school should have a *room for parents* – allowing the possibility to join other parents, drink coffee with them, have a box for suggestions, a board with information about activities parents can join in as well as information on other school activities.

Parents' council members should regularly inform other parents about the main decisions.

The parents' council should not be too big; it could be divided into two groups (lower and upper grades) so that every parent has an opportunity to discuss.

Roma parents should be enabled to participate in the parents' council, by law if necessary. For instance, for schools with a minority population it could be regulated by law that the minority parents must have a representative in the parents' council.

LITERATURE: <http://www.see-educoop.net/aeiq/>

National survey of parents in Kosovo

Shkelzen Gashi and Dukagjin Pupovci

Acknowledgments

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- Mrs. Gordana Miljević from the Open Society Institute – Budapest for initiating and planning this Regional Project and closely following its implementation.

Purpose

The objective of this survey is to present parents' views on school-parent co-operation.

Methodology

The survey was carried out by means of direct interviews conducted by Ipsos Strategic Plus, following a qualitative analysis of parental participation in Kosovo, and an analysis of the legal infrastructure.

The population of the study consisted of the following groups:

- a) parents of primary school children;
- b) parents – members of school councils or parents' councils in the same schools as A;
- c) school principals; and
- d) socially excluded parents.

Sample size:

School sample: 32 schools in total

Sample A: 1,141 parents in total

Sample B: in each school, one School Council and four Parents' Council members were randomly selected for interviewing from among members of the respective councils

Sample P: principals of 30 schools, plus 2 principals of 2 schools with socially excluded parents (32 principals in total)

Sample E: 2 samples of 30 socially excluded parents in 2 schools (60 socially excluded parents in total)

Table 1. Distribution of the school sample according to geographic variables and urban/rural criterion

Geographical Region	Parental survey			Principals' Survey		
	Sample	Urban	Rural	Sample	Urban	Rural
Centre	313	163	150	11	6	5
South-East	240	98	142	10	5	5
West	588	192	396	11	5	6
Total Kosovo	1,141	453	688	32	16	16

For the purpose of this study the schools were randomly selected from among those where the principals had participated in a previous survey on principals' views of parental participation. The sample was stratified according to geographic regions (Centre, South-East, West) and urban/rural criterion. The selection was random and proportional to the number of students in a school. The principals were interviewed face-to-face.

The selection of parents was also random and based on school catchment areas. Surveyors interviewed parents (mother or father and, in particular cases, guardians) with at least one child aged 8-14 in a sampled school. Parent members of school councils and parents' councils were selected randomly from lists submitted by school principals. All the parents were interviewed face-to-face.

Main Findings

- Socially excluded parents are disadvantaged in communication with the school, and this particularly applies to parents from marginalised ethnic groups (Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians). They are less frequently invited to attend individual parental meetings.
- More than half the average parents had never received any information on the way their child should be helped with homework, or any information on school regulations. It is interesting that the proportion of parents in urban areas who had received this type of information is double the proportion of parents in rural areas. Also, almost half of the parents had not received any progress report during the previous academic year.

- In terms of their attitudes, most parents believe that the school needs to ask them to help their children with homework, even if there is somebody in the family who can do that. Mothers are more involved in helping their children with homework than fathers, and this proportion increases among socially excluded families.
- More than half the parents (52%), mainly average parents and those involved in school structures, stated that during the previous academic year they had not been invited to help with any sport, social & cultural activities – plays, concerts, field trips. On the other hand, 75% of socially excluded parents had been invited at least once to help with school activities. With regard to help with teaching, 100% of socially excluded parents confirmed they had not been asked to provide it, just like the vast majority of average parents.
- Almost half of the average parents had been invited more than three times to help with school infrastructure improvement or maintenance, which is not the case for 92% of the socially excluded parents. However, half of the parents from both categories confirmed they would provide this type of help if they were asked to do so.
- Most of the parents had never been asked for their opinion regarding financial management of the school, and this applies to all parents from socially excluded groups. In general, the opinion of socially excluded parents on any matter related to school business was solicited only in isolated cases, if any.
- Average parents very rarely (12-18%) tend to influence any school decision, either individually or in group with other parents. On the other hand, socially excluded parents do not even try to influence school decisions.
- Parents tend to be more open in expressing their opinions in one-to-one meetings with teachers as compared to parent meetings.
- All socially excluded parents confirmed that neither they nor their family members had ever been elected to the school council or parents' council, although more than half of them thought they are capable of doing that.
- Most of the socially excluded parents felt that teachers are unwilling to communicate with them. In general, parents thought that teachers are too busy to communicate, and this percentage is higher in rural areas.
- 75% of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian parents thought that schools can put in more efforts to help their children.
- Most of the parents thought that the school and parents should jointly make sure that children are happy at school and that they are making progress. However, the vast majority of socially excluded parents claimed that their children do not like going to school.

Recommendations

Recommendations based on the above conclusions are divided into three categories.

For schools:

1. Schools should develop procedures for meetings with parents, specifying the dynamics, preparation of teachers and parents, and content of such meetings. Group/thematic meetings should become a practice, as well as individual meetings with parents. An action research undertaken in four Kosovo schools demonstrates that such procedures are likely to advance communication with parents. It is necessary to train teachers to manage different types of meetings with parents and to use them for developing teaching and learning in school.
2. In addition to parents' meetings, schools should organise regular information about the children's progress and general school matters using other media like messages transmitted through students, e-mail etc, particularly for cases requiring immediate parental attention.
3. Schools should engage in raising the awareness of parents on their role in the school and should train them to exercise such a role. Further, parents should be aware that their role in relation to children is not exercised only upon request by the school, but should be regularly exercised for the benefit of the children by taking a pro-active instead of a reactive position. Progress may be achieved if parent meetings are structured to convey messages that mobilise the parents.
4. Parents need greater support from the school side in order to help the students improve learning outcomes because, even if they are willing to do that, they lack the necessary knowledge and skills. By advancing communication with parents, schools should think of modalities for offering assistance to parents which can be achieved through information sessions.

For the governmental sector:

1. Since amendments to pre-university education legislation are in process, more attention should be paid to democratising school governance by delegating more responsibilities to the school and ensuring the higher participation of parents in school life. On the other hand, more support needs to be provided to the Kosovo Education Parental Council that was re-established in 2009 after a few years of inactivity.
2. To continue with financial decentralisation to the school level by increasing the responsibility of schools for managing their own finances and by creating additional possibilities for parents making financial contributions to schools.
3. To encourage schools to improve their communication with parents by supporting the activities of professional, governmental and non-governmental institutions in developing manuals and guidelines that help this process.

For the non-governmental sector:

1. To work on raising the awareness of parents on their role in the school and other levels. As a consequence, awareness-raising activities should be organised at the school level as well as other levels such as the municipality, region and country.
2. To work on building the capacities of parents' associations at all levels in order to help increase the influence of parents in school life. These associations should be trained to work with parents and their representatives in schools on building their capacity to better serve their role and responsibility.
3. To promote good practices of parental inclusion in school life by creating opportunities to benefit from them.

National survey of parents in Macedonia

Ana Tomovska

Acknowledgments

The research team would like to express the deepest gratitude to all the parents and School Principals who expressed their opinions and attitudes in the survey. We would also like to acknowledge the parents participating in the focus groups and providing invaluable data.

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Background and purpose

The issue of parental involvement in schools is becoming increasingly important in the functioning of the schools today, especially in the countries in transition. The enhanced involvement of parents creates a more positive atmosphere, opens up the schools towards the local community and increases the positive schooling outcomes for the children.

However, the issue of parental involvement has been neglected in the countries in South East Europe. Having that in mind, the Educational Support Program funded by Open Society Institute, initiated a broad project in 8 countries in South East Europe and the Republic of Macedonia was one of them. In the later stages two additional countries were added to the list.

The goal of the project is to enhance the understanding of the ways in which parents are involved in the school life. The research is focused on understanding the issues of parental involvement and participation in the primary schools.

The first part of the project was focused on mapping the views of the school principals. The initial findings accentuated the need for a broader understanding of the issue and the parental perspectives on school involvement of parents. Therefore the second part of the project was initiated in 2009.

The research involved focus groups with different groups of parents as its first phase and a survey with parents and principals as a second phase.

Research methodology

The research outlined in this paper comprised focus groups and a survey. The focus groups were realised in May 2009 with different groups of parents to map the situation regarding parent's experiences of participation and involvement in the school life in the country. Therefore 6 focus groups were led (urban ethnic Macedonian parents, rural ethnic Macedonian parents, ethnic Albanian parents, parent representatives, Roma parents, parents of children with special needs). The focus groups were used as a starting point in understanding the views of the parents and provided ideas for the design of the questionnaire. The results of the focus groups also provided additional insight in the analysis of the results of the survey.

A survey of parents and school principals was conducted in the second phase of the research. Four stratified random samples of parents and a sample of School Principals were formed from the sample of the 200 schools from the first part of the project to enable comparison and continuity of the data. The samples were as follows: (1) parents of elementary school children; (2) parents members of School Boards and/or Council of Parents; (3) Roma parents as especially vulnerable and marginalised group; (4) sample of Principals coming from the same schools that the samples of parents are drawn from.

Separate, but parallel questionnaires were prepared for the parents and the Principals to enable comparison of the data. The questionnaires were based on conclusions and recommendations of a previously prepared literature review and models of participation as well as the data of the focus groups of all the countries involved in the project. The survey was conducted in the second half of 2009 and beginning of 2010 in a face-to-face interviews with the survey participants.

A total of 1164 parents and 32 principals were interviewed in the Republic of Macedonia.

Conclusions of the research

The results of the survey pointed out the following conclusions regarding parental involvement and participation in the school life in the Republic of Macedonia:

- The parents tend to be insufficiently involved in the school life. They are rarely informed of the different aspects of the school life (75% of them report that they never get information on how to aid their child's learning and 80% never got school newspapers). Parents are also rarely invited to volunteer in the realization of different school activities.
- The decision making process of the schools is the area in which the parents are hardly ever involved. The majority of the parents (89%) declared that they have never been invited to make decisions about the school's finances, 85% have never been invited to get involved in the decisions about the overall school management, 80% never got invited to make decisions on the educational things (content of lessons, textbooks, assessment etc.). Furthermore 72% were never asked to state their opinion about the extra-curricular activities, 62% were never asked about issues connected to the discipline, 58% declared that they were never involved in the decision making process regarding health and safety and 52% stated that they were never involved in decision making about organization of different school events.

- When compared to the responses of the parents, the Principals of the schools overestimate the current parental involvement in all areas, by stating that parents are more involved in all aspects of the school life than the parents do. At the same time the Principals are, at least declaratively, more open towards greater parental involvement compared to the parents.
- Parents are rarely invited to volunteer and help the school in different areas (89, 4% of the parents were never invited to help with lessons, 87% of parents state that they never got invitation to voluntarily help with the maintenance of the school infrastructure, 86% declare that they never got invited to help with school services and 72% never got invited to help with sports and cultural activities). Even when parents are invited to volunteer in organising different aspects of the school life they do not always answer the schools' plea for help. This finding is supported both by the survey and the focus groups. However both the Principals and parents are split in their answers whether such parental involvement is needed, which again points out the need of educating both stakeholders of the benefits of parental involvement.
- In addition, majority of the parents declare that they do not try to influence matters in the school. This could indicate that the parents' awareness of the benefits of school involvement (especially decision making) needs to be raised as well.
- In majority of the cases the schools fulfil their lawfully given duties of informing the parents of their children's achievement and organizing parental meetings (56% of parents and 94% of Principals stated that those meetings took place more than 3 times in the previous school year). However when all other forms of participation (such as using other forms of informing the parents, volunteering, decision making) are low it becomes questionable what do those parental meetings serve for and whether they are only organised to inform the parents of the student's achievement and discipline rather than creating opportunities for the children to fulfil all their potentials.
- Even parents who are members of the School Board and the Council of Parents, appraise their involvement and influence as moderate and are even more critical when it comes to the influence of the parents in general which they perceive to be low. Similar to the other parents, these parents also perceive highest level of influence in the organization of different events, discipline, health and safety of the students, moderate influence on educational things and extra-curricular activities, and lowest level of influence when it comes to the school's finances.
- Roma parents are faced with finding ways to provide basic conditions of the school life for their children and rarely get help from the schools.
- Parents are aware that both schools and parents are responsible for raising happy, successful children and motivating their children to enhance their learning. This can serve as good building ground for activities to increase their actual involvement and participation.
- In contrast to their actual low involvement parents declare that they are satisfied with the level of communication they have with the schools and the teaching staff (91% can talk with the class teacher) and perceive their children as being happy at school (64% totally agree). Generally the parents are satisfied with their children's school achievement (64% totally agree and 26% agree that their child is doing well in school work and 56% totally agree and 30% agree that their child is achieving to the best of their abilities), they are less satisfied with the quality of teaching (39% totally agree and 34% agree that the teaching is of high quality) and they are least satisfied with the opportunities for parental participation (31% totally agree and 35% agree that they are satisfied with the different ways they can get involved in the school). However they evaluate their relation-

ship with the schools as good and non-conflict one (64% totally disagree and 19% disagree that the school and parents are in conflict), which can provide basis for building future partnerships between the schools and the parents.

- The parents still think in terms of a traditional distribution of responsibilities between the schools and the parents. Parents tend to think that they know what is best for their children and they should be responsible for the children's homework and it is schools' responsibility to organize the curricular and extra-curricular activities. However according to the majority of the parents happy and satisfied children are raised by joint efforts of the schools and the parents.

Recommendations

The need for initiating more and better planned activities to promote real involvement of parents in the school life in the Republic of Macedonia is a general finding of this research.

As a precondition for parental involvement and increased participation of parents in the school life, the awareness of the Principals of the meaning of real, not just declarative parental participation and the benefits of such participation should be raised. It also becomes important to include the whole school staff in the changes and increase the level of understanding of the school-parents partnerships and the benefits of such understanding of the school life and managing the school according to those principles. Further research in the area can offer help in those activities and also deepen the understanding of the meaning of parental participation and involvement.

The educational system in general should be developed towards creating conditions for real stakeholder participation. The ongoing decentralization could be used to enable devolution of decision making powers to local and school level, opening the schools towards the local community. This in turn can open possibilities to involve the parents in the school life and offer help to those that needed it most, such as the marginalised groups.

At the same time systemic activities, involving the whole educational system, could be initiated to inform the parents of the benefits of their active involvement in the school life. The "education" of parents should aim towards promotion of school-parent partnerships and shared responsibilities between the schools and the parents in raising the children.

The activities in the educational sector should be based on continuation of existing good practice and using localised approach towards development of new programs to respond to the needs of the schools, parents and children. The existing positive examples and realised activities should be examined and their success could serve as basis for additional activities and disseminating the activities further.

As a final goal of the changes real school-parent partnerships should be developed resulting in improved educational outcomes, more satisfied parents and teaching staff and happier children.

National survey of parents in Moldova

Viorica Goras-Postica, Diana Cheianu, Rima Bezede

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RESEARCH PURPOSE: to investigate the level of involvement and school activism that parents manifest, to identify the opportunities created by the school and the support offered to parents for building a functional partnership; the school directors' attitude to the parents' role and place, as well as their involvement in school life.

Research methodology

This project involved representatives of 10 Eastern European countries. In order for the data to be comparable between the participant states, it was decided to employ two-stage sampling (urban-rural and distribution into regions). The parents of pupils from 30 gymnasia filled in a total of 1,128 questionnaires. Depending on the number of pupils, 27 to 50 parents were interviewed in each school. In addition, every school principal had to fill in a questionnaire in order to allow us to analyse by comparison the relationship between the school and family through the parents' and school managers' viewpoints. 30 managers were interviewed.

Classified by their residential environment, 46.7% of the parents are urban dwellers, while 53.3% reside in the countryside. Classified by region, 39.5% are from the South of the country, 34% from the Centre and 26.5% from the North. The gymnasia were categorised according to capacity (up to 225 pupils – small, 226 to 450 pupils – mid-size, and over 450 pupils – large) in order to facilitate the understanding of the kind of institutions the children are studying in. Therefore, it emerged that, of the interviewed parents' children, 69.1% go to small gymnasia, 21.9% attend mid-size ones, and 9% study in large establishments.

Classified by gender, 52% of the interviewed parents' children were boys and 48% were girls. The average age of the children discussed with the parents was 10.6 years. Thus, the age of the children involved in the study ranged from 8 to 13 years. It is also noticeable that 1st and 9th form pupils are not represented in this sample. This is relatively good because the parents of 1st form pupils are still lacking the experience of active collaboration with the school, while by the time of their children's graduation from 9th form the parents may have become overly active in their collaboration with the school, and these phenomena have the potential to distort the survey results. Of the interviewed parents, 70.5% were mothers, 13.5% – fathers, 0.3% – stepmothers, 0.1% – stepfathers, and 15.7% – other guardians (grandparents, uncles, aunts, siblings, neighbours etc.). Unfortunately, there is no conclusive up-to-date country-wide information about the proportion of guardians among carers. This temporary or partial abandonment of children by parents is widespread and growing in RM, where in the last 10 years men and women have been leaving the country to work abroad.

Findings and recommendations

Modern society increasingly appreciates the positive effects of parents' active participation in school life. A large number of international studies and a smaller amount of local research have highlighted the extent to which the quality of parent-school interaction has a defining impact upon the quality of education. The recognition of the important role parents play in improving the children's school success has made educational authorities realise and support the need for forging stronger links between parents and the school and promote them at the public policy level as well. In the current context, these links more important than ever. Increasingly, the school's social mission goes further than the mere achievement of curriculum-defined pedagogical goals since many parents are far too preoccupied with family, professional and social problems to be able to trace their children's evolution or to check the coherency between the family and the school education.

After analysing the **dimension of parents' participation** in school life (all kinds of participation), we found that generally there are positive experiences and attitudes to it. Traditionally group meetings and verbal messages from teachers to parents via children prevail over other forms of participation.

When analysing answers to the question *How many times during the last school year has a member of the family been invited to school to meet the class or a group of parents, including group parents' assemblies?*, we have found the following replies: 2-3 times – 32.8%, more than 3 times – 61.3%. Asked whether the parents responded to these invitations by attending, the majority of parents (79.4%) indicated that they did, every time. At the same time, the school managers indicated that during the last year they had asked parents to school more than three times, for meetings with the class or group meetings with other parents (including parents' assemblies), and the parents had attended. Compared to group meetings, individual meetings with parents are used with much less regularity: during the year 68.6% parents had never been asked to individual meetings; those who were invited, two or three times, were summoned in connection with their children's behavioural problems; 1.4% parents did not recall whether they had been invited or not. The managers provided essentially the same data.

The great majority of parents – 94.4% – believe they are capable and competent enough to take part in such meetings, group or individual, while 95.6% believe that it is their duty to go to such meetings because 96.3% are convinced this may help the children. School managers, who regard these meetings as most valuable and useful, share this opinion.

Asked about communication regarding the children's progress – grades and other information received by the parents through their children or directly, about 70% of the parents said that they had received such information two to three or more times; the rest, 30%, had received it once or could not recall ever receiving it. 20% of the managers claim that every year that the parents were sent information 2 or 3 times about helping their child to study, about the school, its rules, lesson content etc. 40% of the managers said they had sent out such information more than three times within the year (meaning administrative information (meetings scheduling, timetables: 27.8%; school results, grades: 22.2%), suggestions for parents: 19.4%; behaviour and discipline-related: 16.7%). At the same time, 59.3% of the parents indicated that they had never received such information. A mere 25.2% said they had received it two to three or more than three times. This discrepancy might be caused either by the managers' tendency to present the situation in an overly positive manner, or by the communications not actually reaching the parents for whatever reason. The survey data show at the same time that parents from the urban area had received such information more frequently than parents from the rural area (29.2% of parents from the cities had received information two to three times, or more than three times in comparison with 21.6% of those from villages).

The parents had very seldom been sent informative school bulletins – 52.6% of the parents said they had never seen such information. Over 85% of those who had received it have read it too; 82% believe the school ought to send such bulletins to the parents. In addition, just 50% of the managers confirmed that the information had been sent, referring mainly to administrative notices (36.8%), extracurricular activities (26.3%), education and grades – 15.8% each. It is sad to find out that only 12 of the 30 managers involved in this research find that these bulletins were useful and welcome. According to the managers' explanations, the printing of the bulletins costs too much and the schools cannot afford them. Other reasons mentioned by the directors are: they do not have special staff and enough time for this. Therefore, although the parents expect written information, including bulletins, not all the managers realise their necessity, even today, in the era of information and the Internet. 51.5% of the parents had never received any information from the school concerning drug use, health issues, and violence. 15.8% had received such information once, 18.2% – 2-3 times, 11.5% – more than 3 times, while 3% of the parents were not sure or could not recall whether they had. Over 80% of those who had received the information read it every time, and 88.3% believed that the school ought to send such data to the parents. About 89.5% of the interviewed parents believe they are able and competent enough to understand such data, and 95% consider it is their duty to read it because they might be able to help their child with it.

Concerning the **support given to learning**, about 90% of the parents believe that the school ought to ask the family to help the child do their homework, and the managers share this opinion: 90% said that in every family there is somebody who is able to do this. Only 4.8% did not think so, and 3.5% did not expect there was anyone who could. Asked whether it is the family's duty to help the children thus, 82.1% of the managers agreed that it is, and only 5% disagreed. In more than 55% of cases, children are helped by their mother to do their homework, in 18% of cases by somebody else, in 17% by nobody, and only in 8% of cases do fathers help. Therefore, there are significant differences related to the mother and father's level of involvement in doing homework. At the same time, the number of children who need help doing their homework is huge: according to the survey results, only 17% of children can do it by themselves, based on the knowledge they have acquired at school.

Asked *What kind of difficulties does your child encounter at school?*, the parents replied as follows: learning difficulties – 28.5% of the children; behavioural issues – 9.4%; communication with teachers and staff – 6.1%, relationships with peers – 7.1%, no difficulties whatsoever – a happy 63.8%, which is an encouraging figure. According to the data, children from urban areas have more problems. Thus, 12.3% of

parents from urban areas mentioned behavioural problems, but for parents from rural areas the figure is 6.8%; 10.1% of parents from urban areas mentioned problems concerning their child's relationships with their classmates, but only 4.5% parents from rural areas noted the same; further 9.1% of parents from urban areas mentioned communication problems with teachers and school staff, while just 3.5% of parents from rural areas mentioned this.

In order to paint a general picture of the level of parental involvement in children's education, especially in promoting an interest in reading, the survey proposed to identify the amount of books owned by families. Thus, replies to the question *How many books do you have at home?* (both children's books and adult literature) showed the following: there are no books in the house – 13.1%; 1 to 10 books – 39.8%; 11-50 books – 28.6%; 51-100 books – 10.2%, 101-250 books – 5.1%; over 500 books – 0.5%; "I don't know" – 0.6%. In rural areas, the number of families without any books is double the figure for urban families. This is alarming, especially in today's information era, when the average IQ is expected to grow in a geometrical progression, and moreover in a European country, small as it is, whose citizens are expected to realise that in order for the country to wholly integrate into the European community we need citizens with well-developed intellectual capacities.

Positions, functions of parents in the school. Parents can be involved in decision-making in four ways: (i) as members of the School Council; (ii) as members of the school Parents' Committee; (iii) as members of the Parents Association; and (iv) as members of the class Parents' Committee. The survey data reveal that some school principals do not perceive all of these possibilities. Thus, only three-quarters of all headmasters mentioned that the school regulations stipulate that parents must be members of the School Council. They also specified that three or four parents are involved, but the parents from these institutions anyway indicated that they are part of the School Council. However, in five institutions the School Council does not involve any parents at all (4 rural, 1 urban school).

While the situation of the School Councils was not very clear, when it comes to the Parents' Committee, each of the 30 institutions has an average of 10 members in such Committees, according to both the managers and parents. As to Parents' Associations, they only exist in 19 institutions of the 30 that were visited. Membership varies between a few to several hundred parents, depending on the institution's capacity, student numbers etc.

At the same time, over 60% of the parents said that within the previous 3 years neither they, nor anyone else from their family had represented the class; 16.7% had done so once; 7.7% twice; 11.1% three times and more; while 1.6% could not recall. Over 63.3% of the parents had never been members of the School Council, Parents' Committee or other such organisation, while 8.5% had been in them three or more times. According to the focus group discussion, the parents are unfortunately not motivated to participate in school life because they do not see the real benefits of Parents' Councils – in fact, they do not understand their role, and some of them do not know what a PC at the school level is.

The perception of **volunteering** and supporting activities such as sport events, social functions and cultural initiatives – school plays, concerts, trips etc. – is exploited at the medium level by both parents and teachers: thus, during the last year over 52% of parents had never been asked to become involved in school life on such occasions, although over 70% of those who had been asked had responded positively. Thus, the school does not use all available opportunities for involving parents as volunteers. The parents' opinions are divided as to whether the school ought to ask for the parents' help in such activities: *no* and *probably not* – 15%; *I don't know* – 5%; while 76% believe that parents ought to volunteer for school activities, only half of all respondents do this when they are asked.

Participation in decision-making. The majority of parents (46.5% – never and 14.4% – once) said that in the last year their opinion or the family’s opinion has never been consulted as to how the money raised from parents and money from the state are spent by the school, although those who have been asked (69.4%) have always expressed their point of view, and the school has mostly (36.1%) or entirely (44.9%) taken it into account. Further, 56.6% believe that the school should ask for their opinion in such cases.

Regarding extracurricular activities – sport contests, arts (outside the school curriculum), organised school events – anniversaries, trips (not just helping) and discussing problems of health and security – guards, road crossing, CCTV, drugs, relations with the police etc., the managers believe that they had asked for the parents’ opinions on average 2-3 times a year. Yet a huge number of parents (62.6%) asserted that no one had asked for their opinion about any of these matters during the last year. At the same time, both the managers and parents recognise the importance of talking and of parental involvement in decision-making on all the aforementioned activities.

According to the data analysis, the parents have tried to influence certain aspects individually only, focusing on specific issues faced by their own children, and have usually obtained a solution. Unfortunately, the parents are not yet used to combining their efforts in order to obtain a decision concerning a common issue (85% have never tried this).

School and parents are two very important educational partners in ensuring the harmonious development of children. Their capacity and openness for efficient and empathic communication provide the conditions of a sustainable partnership. Based on the survey results related to the perception about parental participation forms in school life and the reasons that influenced the parents’ level of involvement in school life, we found a generally positive attitude to the openness of the school and parents. Thus, the great majority of respondents (both parents and directors) did not agree with the statement that *parents and school are usually in conflict relationships* (parents: 72.4% – do not agree at all, 19.8% – somewhat agree).

Asked about the factors that would negatively influence a parent’s involvement in school life, both the parents and principals mentioned in the same proportion the following: large numbers of absent parents (due to migration), some parents’ little interest in their children, a lack of time, and low living standards.

Conclusions and recommendations

By way of a general conclusion, we found that both parents and headmasters have a largely positive attitude to parents’ participation in school matters and the school-parent partnership, but the degree of parental participation in school activity at different levels and in various aspects is still quite reduced due to migration, some parents’ little interest in their children, a lack of time, and low living standards.

When analysing and comparing the managers’ and parents’ conclusions we see that, although the managers count on parental participation and recognise its importance, usually in every class there are only 2-3 parents to actively collaborate with, while the others are only convinced to attend group meetings and in certain critical situations. The following conditions/factors might contribute to boosting the efficiency of Parents’ Committees: better collaboration between parents and the school; involving the parents in various activities; efficient collaboration between members of the Committee, care for extracurricular activities and collecting financial resources.

Traditionally group meetings and verbal messages from teachers to parents via children prevail over other forms of communication. Written bulletins are only sent very rarely, partially due to a lack of resources, and partially because not all managers acknowledge the need for that, even today, in the information and Internet era.

To understand parents' needs better, and also for improved communication between the parties involved, it is important to make daily collaboration and co-operation between schools and parents a natural occurrence.

It is regrettable to see that meetings with school psychologists take place very rarely. Most parents (89,3%) replied that they had never been invited to such meetings, and the managers corroborate this finding. We find this situation deeply disturbing since, according to the latest data, one-fifth of all RM children are growing up without the physical presence of one or both parents, and require a special, individual psychological approach. At the same time, the Psychology Departments of five universities in the country are preparing school psychologists, with the majority of them becoming unemployed or leaving the country in a search for work.

Because of some parents' inability to help their children with their homework, it is important for specialists in education to analyse and thoroughly discuss this problem. It would be good to create an initiative group that could encourage and motivate other parents to also be involved in their children's school life: here, a Parents' Club would be an excellent idea.

There should be a special educational policy for increasing the degree of parental participation in school life, especially for village schools, because the survey results show differences in parental participation between rural and urban areas. In rural areas, the level of participation is lower, while the number of families with no books at all in the house in rural areas is double the figure for similar urban families.

According to the parents' answers about optimisation of the partnership, it is necessary to consider certain measures: greater transparency must be ensured in the administration of the money given by parents; changes must occur first at superior levels, which are most affected by corruption; parents should be involved in common projects; it would be good to organise meetings in which children could participate, as well as the school administration, teachers and parents; a more positive attitude must exist in schools, there should be no difference between poor and wealthy children, the teachers should treat them equally.

National survey of parents in Montenegro

Dr Dijana Vučković

Acknowledgments

This survey could not have been realised without the contribution of the 1,156 parents who willingly participated and expressed their opinions and attitudes. At the same time, we thank the Ministry of Education and Science, the Bureau of Educational Services, the National Parents' Association and OSI Montenegro for support they provided throughout the survey.

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Background and purpose

This paper presents a summary of the national report on parents' participation carried out in Montenegro with 1,156 parents while, at the same time, being a continuation of the survey conducted with school principals. This research was conducted within the framework of the regional research project *Advancing Educational Inclusion and Quality in South-East Europe* launched by the Education Support Programme.

The project aims to address the problem of continuing growing disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes in South-East European (SEE) countries. To address these issues, a series of international meetings were held involving the participation of Open Society Institute (OSI) representatives of 10 SEE countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia). The OSI representatives of the 10 SEE countries identified the following common priorities that should be addressed by the OSI in the region:

- a) inequity in education, more precisely the gap between existing policies and their implementation, and the neglect caused by various forms of discrimination (e.g., in relation to minorities, special needs etc.); and
- b) insufficient participation by stakeholders – particularly students and parents – in education systems.

Survey methodology

In this survey, the sample comprised 1,156 parents. This is a stratified sample which covers all three Montenegrin regions, including both urban and rural settlements. The survey was conducted during the second half of 2009. The parents were contacted in person and interviewed. An agency was engaged to conduct the survey.

A questionnaire was used that had been compiled by the central research team on basis of focus group interviews with parents, as well as relevant literature on parental participation in school life.

The most important research findings

The total number of surveyed parents is 1,156. This is a stratified sample which covers all three Montenegrin regions, including both urban and rural settlements. The sample consists of: 936 parents (A), 146 parent representatives (E), 64 parents from schools in which the level of exclusion of particular groups is higher (B), and 10 parent representatives from B schools.

Besides general information and indicators (educational level of mothers, welfare index, number of employed in the family, number of books in the household, an estimate of the child's success at school, the level of aspiration etc), the introductory part of the questionnaire primarily sought **parents' opinions on some basic areas of possible co-operation between parents and the school**. As types of co-operation, we analysed:

- parents' meetings;
- written information from the school;
- helping children with studying;
- volunteering; and
- participation in decision-making.

For each of the stated types of participation, we established its frequency, the response from parents and their estimation of their own competence to participate in such work. The main communication was considered, taking three main elements into account:

1. frequency of the school inviting parents;
 2. frequency of positive feedback from parents to the school; and
 3. an estimation by parents of their own competence and ability to participate, of their feeling of any obligation towards the identified activities, and all the offered types of communication were valued in relation to their possible help for their children.
- We established that **the most frequent type of communication** a school practices with parents are **group parents' meetings** (66.4%), followed by **written information** (certificates and student record books) about a child's progress (52%). In the situation when the school contacts parents by inviting them to a parents' meeting (group or individual) or sends them particular written information, a high proportion of parents (each time over 80%) **respond to such an invitation or read**

the information they have received. The respondents emphasise their belief that parents' meetings and written information on the child's achievement **are things that each school should practice, but other types of communication should also be a school's obligation** (individual meetings with parents, sending information about the process and contents of learning, about drugs, violence and health). When it comes to estimating their own ability to actively participate in school life, **more than 70% of parents feel competent** or think that some of their family members are capable of using the possibilities of communication with schools in the right way. They are also aware of the fact that it is not only their duty, but also a way to help their children additionally when it comes to school.

- One form of the most intensive participation of parents in their child's schooling is **helping children do their homework**, as we were told a number of times during the focus groups¹. More than half of the parents from our research sample (52%) believe that the school has the right to expect parents to help their children with their homework. The respondents are very self-confident when it comes to their (own or some of their family members') competence to help children do their homework. **Up to 90% of them point out they feel capable of helping their children with education, around three-quarters of parents state that the family is obliged to help children with homework, and even 90% of parents stress that assisting with homework is something that can significantly help their children achieve.**
- During the previous school year, **most parents (over 63% when it comes to helping with the organisation of cultural-entertainment and sports activities, maintaining or improvement of school infrastructure (87%), assistance in teaching (83%)) did not receive an invitation from the school to participate in any kind of voluntary activities. A high share of parents who were invited to help did so (maintaining or improving school infrastructure (70.3%), organising cultural-entertainment and sports activities (64.4%), and assistance with teaching (59%).**
- **When it comes to parents' attitudes to volunteering in relation to the school – in the sense of whether the school should have the right to ask them for such help, an almost U-distribution was noticed, meaning that we have quite extreme attitudes.** The dominant attitude of 41.6% of parents is that it is definitely not their job to help maintain or improve school infrastructure; by frequency this is followed by negation of the need to help with school services (31.7%), or help with teaching (28.8%). Still, we cannot disregard the responses affirming all of the mentioned elements of a voluntary relationship towards the school.
- The responses to questions seeking an **estimation of the degree of parents' involvement in school management show that only a very small number of respondents had ever been consulted when it comes to finances (over 80% had never been consulted) and educational issues such as: the content of lessons, books, choosing and evaluating teachers' performance, homework** (which obviously represents a *safe area* of teaching staff), and even other elements (deciding on extra-curricular activities, issues of safety and discipline, organising sports and cultural events etc) were mentioned by parents as something the school had never consulted them about. 87% of parents had never been consulted.
- **When it comes to situations in which parents' opinions were sought on some issues related to school management, all responses (except when it is about overall school management, in the sense of shifts of work, opening and closing schools and classrooms, changes of location, type of school etc) tend to be positive – the opinion given by parents is usually respected (a higher percentage of answers 52–62%) and completely respected (26–34%).**

¹ "Improving inclusiveness and quality of education in Southeast Europe"; method – focus groups, 2009; Forum MNE and CEPS

- Around 65% of parents state that the opinions they had given in relation to the overall organisation of a school regime (shifts, closing and opening of schools, classrooms etc) had mostly not been accepted.
- The significant dispersion of parents' answers to the series of questions (management of the school's finances; organisation of extracurricular activities; organisation of school-based events; decisions in relation to issues of pupils' health and safety and to educational topics; overall management of the school – shifts, opening time of the school, merging or closing down of either schools or classes, changing of location) is also evident in relation to school management – in the sense of whether that is something about which the school should consult them – almost completely, on all statements we obtained a U-distribution of answers.
- Over 55% of surveyed parents thought that dealing with the financial issues of the school is not and cannot be the job of parents. Accordingly, they should not even be invited when such issues are on the agenda. Attitudes can be interpreted differently – respect of the internal organisation of the school by parents, showing trust in the school management, lack of parents' interest in such issues, lack of trust in their own competence, lack of time etc. Still, we cannot disregard the opinion of 30% of parents who stress that the school should ask for their opinion when it comes to financial management.
- Almost 75% of parents thought that school management should consult them more when it comes to extracurricular activities, and the health and safety of students should surely be on the list of priorities for school management about which 85% of parents would like to give their opinion and make a relevant contribution to improving those areas. Deciding on educational topics should be something that is talked more often about with parents, in the opinion of 57% of respondents. There are even more (three-quarters of the sample) of those who emphasised the issue of discipline as an area about which parents should definitely be consulted.
- The opinions of parents when it comes to their role in overall school management were almost divided – the number of those who considered that this area of co-operation should be more intensive is almost the same as the number of those who did not agree.
- A significant percentage of parents (83.2%) had never independently, or even in co-operation with other parents, tried to present their opinion in relation to school issues.
- 179 examples of the self-initiative participation of parents were noted. In the largest numbers, parents had expressed their opinion in relation to school marks (61 answers), followed by: being disturbed by another child (20), discipline (15), conflicts among peers and a teacher's attitude to a child with 14 identified answers each.
- When it comes to assessing their own competence to participate in decision-making, and also assessing the degree to which that is a family's duty and whether that is something that can be of help to a child, a significant percentage of respondents (each time over 70%) had positive judgments. Namely, parents said that participation in decision-making is their duty; that they can help their child with that, and also that they feel competent to be engaged in that.
- A number of parents emphasised that during the previous school year the school offered them help, mostly in the form of textbooks (59 answers).
- Over 80% of respondents were not on the list of classroom representatives in the previous three years but, considering how this issue is legally regulated – 1 classroom 1 representative, the answers are not discouraging. Still, almost 20% of parents stated that in the last three years they had been chosen to be parent representatives in parents' councils.

- **Almost three-quarters of respondents were not active members of any other bodies in the last three years**, such as school boards, associations of parents and teachers etc.
- **Parents very positively estimated their competencies when it comes to their possible participation in the work of different bodies or associations at the school level** (70% of them thought that they or some of their family members are capable of undertaking these duties). They also thought (over 50%) that this is their responsibility, by virtue of which they can provide additional support to their children.
- Parents also estimated the degree of the presence of various barriers in communication between them and the school. **Seen as a whole, the results are really encouraging – parents thought that most of the mentioned possible barriers do not represent a true obstacle.** Their answers are concentrated at the levels *I do not agree* and *I mostly do not agree*.
- **More than three-fifths of parents were categorical in their attitude that the school and parents are not in any kind of conflict.** If we add to that the 30% of answers given at the level *I mostly do not agree*, we may conclude that, at least when it comes to parents' assessments, the situation is more than suitable for intensifying co-operation.
- Further, **relations between parents and teachers were not seen as a communication barrier by around 80% of respondents.**
- The respondents' answers indicate that parents have enough time² (76%) **and interest (74%) in more intensive communication with the school.**
- Besides the mentioned predictors, parents independently added a number of those which, in their opinion, represent a **problem in co-operation. These were: usually a negative practice (20), parents being too busy (too long working hours – 15), the school does not invite and inform parents (11), parents are usually invited when a problem becomes serious (3), parents cannot influence anything (2)...**
- Parents were also asked about their opinion on the possibilities of communicating with different persons from the school (class masters, teachers, psychologist, pedagogue, principal), but also about relations with other parents. Generally speaking, attitudes here were very positive. **Parents estimate that communication is possible, that teachers (especially class masters) treat them with respect, which is a positive foundation for any type of co-operation.**
- The research confirmed the usual practice that, within the school, **the least present communication is that between parents and pedagogues and/or psychologists.** We are of the opinion that this reflects the long-running practice in the traditional school system whereby visiting such a service meant that a child had learning or behavioural difficulties.
- **The surveyed Roma estimated their own and their child's competencies when it comes to using the language of instruction (Montenegrin/Serbian/Croatian/Bosnian). More than 80% of parents are satisfied with their language competencies, and 87.5% of parents stated their belief that their children speak the local language.**
- **More than half of the Roma thought that the school is equally difficult for their children as for other non-Roma children.** Nevertheless, a large percentage estimated that obligations related to the instruction process, as well as those which continue at home with homework, are more difficult for Roma. As reasons for this, parents mentioned: a weak financial situation

² The statement does not correspond to the attitudes highlighted by the focus groups where it was pointed out that a lack of time and interest are the greatest barriers to the more intensive involvement of parents.

and lack of conditions for work, and even basic living conditions (19); inadequate reactions, and even insults by other children (11 answers which, given the size of this part of the sample – 64 parents – is almost one-sixth); a child does not have a good command of the language of instruction (5); missing textbooks (3); children find it difficult to follow the lessons (2)...

- If a school had offered help to Roma, which was the case for 46.9% of surveyed parents, it was about provision of free textbooks. In the opinion of the respondents, schools could help a lot more. Besides the serious and warning statement that **all help is welcome**, the respondents also mentioned other possible types of help, such as: **the provision of free clothes, textbooks and other school stationery; better protection for Roma from other children in the school; and introducing additional teaching for these children**. We believe that these are indeed humble requests. It may be high time to look around and see how our neighbours live – it is evident from their suggestions that this population group is unable to meet its basic biological and social needs.
- **Over 90% of parents stated that the schools their children attend do not have Roma assistants**. How then to include these children in the regular teaching process? Are we honest enough when we make statements about the need to build an intercultural democratic society in which each child has equal rights, including the right to education?
- Like the beliefs of parents that we encountered during the focus groups when it comes to their awareness of issues concerning existing ways of the functioning of various associations of parents at the school level (the functioning of parents' councils differ crucially from school to school. On one side, we have very active councils who are doing their best to help remove barriers in the school's work (this especially relates to material/technical help), but we also noted comments by members who had never attended council meetings, and some of their personal initiatives had even been refused without justification)³, the opinions of those who were surveyed also differ a lot. **We identified a large dispersion of answers to every statement, which leads us to conclude that the situation is quite different from school to school – on one side, we have responses of people who are completely aware of council issues and, on the other, there are those who had witnessed that in their schools things do not function by the same principles**.
- However, the differences were generally biggest in the attitudes of parents regarding whether the councils in schools attended by their children function by the principle of activities. Around **20% of parents emphasised that councils are active, while around 28% of respondents agree with them to a significant degree**.
- **Somewhat more than 50% of parents believed that representatives advocate on behalf of parents fairly well**. Still, the number of those who did not share that opinion is not small.
- The sample covered 156 parent representatives, and almost 70% of them have played the role of a representative for more than a year. **They came to this function in various ways: by a decision of other parents (62.8%), by responding to the request of a class master (21.8%) or a principal (10.3%)**.
- With our questions we also wanted to obtain an insight into the motivation of parents to be included in councils, school boards and other bodies at the school level. According to their answers, **the main reasons which made them accept the role of parent representatives are the following (in the order of frequency): representing all the parents and initialising the resolution of issues of importance to everybody (important – 31.4%, very important – 61.5%), a wish to change a particular thing concerning all the children (important – 34.6%, very important**

3 "Improving inclusiveness and quality of education in Southeast Europe"; method – focus groups, 2009; Forum MNE and CEPS

- 48.1%), and the wish of other parents for a particular person to be their representative (important – 32.1%, very important – 49.4%). As reasons which did not at all motivate them to accept the role of a representative they stressed the following: persuasion by some person (important – 13.5%, very important – 2.6%) and benefit for their own child only (important – 18.6%, very important – 14.1%).
- Parents’ representatives emphasised that their contribution had mostly been present during the organisation of sports and cultural events in the school, and extracurricular activities, and they participated in financial issues the least.
 - In the opinion of representatives, parents should be included in all fields of school management. Still, some domains were pointed out as being areas of potentially stronger involvement (celebrations and excursions, issues related to health and safety, violent behaviour in the school etc, extracurricular activities and educational topics), while finances were seen by half the respondents as an area where parents should not be included too much.
 - The representatives were of the opinion that other parents see them in a very positive light. The smallest number of them agreed with the statements: “*They think that I am doing this only to show off and I am doing this only for my child*”, and most of them agreed with the statement: “*They believe that I can represent them efficiently and they support me in expressing joint concerns*”.
 - The parent representatives thought that their relationship with the school administration is very good, and this opinion is best illustrated by over 50% parents who *positively* and *very positively* assessed the statement that they *are trying to understand my attitude and usually take it into consideration*. The representatives believed that relations between parents and the school could be improved by the following factors, listed in the order of frequency of answers (the highest frequency is 19, and the lowest is 1): constant communication between the school and parents; agreement on many issues; a larger number of meetings; more frequent visits to the school; respecting council decisions; better communication in general; more active participation of parents; better communication among parents themselves; parents to be more interested; the school to be more interested; the choice of adequate representatives; responsibility; objectivity in approach; stronger involvement in issues of school discipline; good organisation; more efficient work and parents’ awareness about the existence of a problem. There were also 48 “*I don’t know*” answers.
 - When it comes to estimating their own competencies and other conditions which make their task easy or difficult, the parent representatives positively evaluated statements related to: their own attitude (*as a parent representative I efficiently advocate our interests*), communication competencies (*I can easily talk to parents about anything which concerns them in relation to their child or classroom*) and activity (*I am active as a parent representative*). The most problematic aspect refers to how much they know other parents and the frequency of contacts with them. It is evident that the fact of not knowing other parents and the rare contacts do affect the quality of communication which has a direct impact on the process of resolving many problems related to various aspects of parents’ engagement.
 - In relation to that part of the survey where we wanted to shed light on the level of presence of traditional and partnership relations between the school and parents, the parents’ opinion was that co-operation or equal participation in some areas has to be achieved to a greater degree. Joint work, in which both school and parents should equally invest, consists of the following elements: doing everything so that a child is successful at school, doing everything so that a child is happy at school, motivating a child to study, intervening if something is wrong

at school, followed to a smaller degree by: raising a child to become a good person, knowing what is best for a child, doing everything so that a child does their homework. It is interesting that no factor was in a significant percentage qualified as an exclusive responsibility of parents, whereas three, with over 45% of answers, were listed as the exclusive responsibility of the school. These are: teaching (doing everything so that the teaching is good), establishing a good extracurricular programme and doing everything so that a child is safe at school.

- The last survey questions sought to obtain concluding statements by parents referring to the final assessment of their satisfaction with the school and their child's position in it. We analysed child-related aspects: their satisfaction, achievement, possibility to enjoy other activities apart from obligatory school contents, the safety of children, the quality of teaching etc. Further, concluding statements referred to communication between the school and parents, then the influence which parents, in general, have on school life. On the basis of the results it is **completely realistic to state that parents are significantly or completely satisfied with these elements.**
- As key factors which could help improve the partnership between the school and the parents, the following were listed: more teacher and parent meetings (91), parents to be more interested in participating (46), better communication (20), a better exchange of information and generally parents to be more informed (19), greater dedication of the teachers (16), improving conditions in school (16), respecting the opinions and attitudes of parents (12), respecting the needs of children (10), including parents in extracurricular activities (9), less study materials (contents), a larger number of different activities (8). However, a great number of parents (875) did not have any suggestions here.

National survey of parents in Romania

Daniela Dumitru, Alexandru Cernat¹

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Context

Parents' involvement in school life is one of the objectives of the educational policies designed and implemented in Romania in past and present reforms. Attracting parents to become involved in school life is now more of a wish than a reality because schools and the education system are incapable of making parents feel like they are an organic part of the system that educates their children.

Many reasons explain the parents' lack of interest. The cultural background is an important factor: Romanians' levels of participation in any kind of voluntary activity are among the lowest in the European Union, with only 5% of the population doing so. Over the years people have been taught not to interfere in the education system or to take on an active role. The partnership idea is quite new and will take some time for voluntary practices to change. Last but not least, the school itself is not prepared for a closer partnership with the local community. However, the decentralisation process is advancing slowly, but still advancing, in education and it is becoming imperative to enable a closer relationship between the school and the community by stimulating parents to take on a more important role in school life.

In this context, the project *Advancing Educational Inclusion and Quality in South-East Europe* proposes an international comparative research measuring parents' opinions about their involvement in school activities and how the current situation may be improved. The project is financially supported by the *Open Society Institute* and is being implemented by a consortium of NGOs from 10 South-East European Countries. The Romanian partner is *Foundation Center Education 2000+*. This report presents the findings of the research in the country.

¹ Alexandru Cernat prepared the Roma parents' participation chapter and carried out all of the statistical analyses and interpretations.

Methodology

The research undertaken in Romania consisted of two phases: preliminary qualitative research (six focus groups with parents from urban and rural areas and Roma parents) and quantitative research (a survey). The results of the qualitative part were used to calibrate the instruments of the quantitative research. The decisions on the sampling universe, sampling design and questionnaire design were made by the central (international) research team.

The six focus groups were attended by parents from small cities, big cities, rural areas and Bucharest. They were parents with children in primary and secondary school. The discussions took place in June 2009 at the schools attended by their children. The interview topics and guidelines were those previously set by the main research team. The topics approached are divided into four sections: education system reform; general aspects of involvement; and parents' participation (history of participation, motivation for participation, initiatives, teacher-parents relationship, mutual trust, obstacles to involvement). A summary of the conclusions drawn by the focus groups is included in this paper.

The survey used a random monostadial stratified sample consisting of 700 parents with children enrolled in grades I-VIII and 300 principals from similar schools. It is representative of the target population with an error margin of $\pm 3\%$ at a 95% confidence level. The interviews were carried out by professional operators using the face-to-face method in October-November 2009. Data gathering and data entry were provided by a professional company, namely *IMAS – Marketing and Polls Institute*. Both questionnaires are included in Annex 2.

Findings of the survey

Concerning **periodic meetings**, namely, in response to the question *How many times during the last school year has a member of the family been invited to school to meet the class or a group of parents, including group parents' assemblies?*, 57% of the parents declared that more than three times they had been invited to the school, 36% declared that had happened 2-3 times and 5% only once. The situation changes if we ask about individual meetings concerning a child's education when 60% of the parents said that they had never been invited to the school, 19% more than 3 times and 15% 2-3 times. The school directors also prefer group meetings with the parents, but have a clear preference for meetings where the class master is present: 61% of the directors declared they had more than three class meetings in the past year.

These meetings are informative because written information is poorly represented among the possible communication methods. 64% of the parents said they had never received written information about the child's progress, an alarming 82% of parents said they had in the past year never received written information about how the child could be helped to learn, to learn about the school, about rules and about lesson contents. Also, 82% of the parents had never received a school or class newsletter. In response to the question *Do you think that the school should send such information to parents?*, a large share (between 81% and 91%) of the parents answered that school should do this with all areas concerning written information.

A surprising situation was revealed with the answer to the question *Did you try to influence/change something upon your own initiative, not together with other parents (without being asked by the school) – for example, to dispute a mark, to complain about another child etc.?*, where 92% of the parents answered that they had tried one, two or three times, yet they (86%) also answered that they had never obtained what they

wanted. This begs the following questions: 1. did they have the right communication method?; and 2. what was their initiative about? The same situation emerged in the case of *groups* of parents having an initiative, 90% of them had not obtained what they wanted.

The vast majority of parents feel capable of participating in school meetings (90%), and also to read the information they had received from the school (91%).

Participation in decision-making is a perhaps the most important domain in which the parents wish to be involved. This is proven by the high share of parents who believe they should be asked about the school's budget (yes and probably yes – 83%), extracurricular activities (yes and probably yes – 89%), school event organisation (yes and probably yes – 90%), health and safety issues (yes and probably yes – 91%), educational activities (yes and probably yes – 87%), violence and other discipline problems (yes and probably yes – 83%), school management (yes and probably yes – 81%).

In addition, 68% of the parents said that they express their opinion concerning the school's budget every time, and 15% most of the time. About school management, in general the parents said that they express their opinion every time (76%), and most times (17%). About educational activities, parents said they express their opinion every time (76%), and most times (17%). All other areas of parent participation received high percentages concerning the frequency of expressing their opinion (between 72% and 76%), meaning that every time parents express their opinion about important issues for the school (extracurricular activities, health and safety, organising school events, violence and other issues concerning discipline).

Yet, if we look at this the other way around, namely how many times school had asked the parents, the pyramid is reversed. The parents say that they had NEVER been asked about the school's budget (72%), about extracurricular activities (76%), about organising school events (76%), health and safety (74%), school management in general (75%), educational activities (76%), or violence and other issues concerning discipline (72%). The parents indicated they say what they want concerning the above issues TO THE SCHOOL without being asked. They made their comments anyway.

The parents thought it is important that they are asked about: the school budget (83% – yes and probably yes), extracurricular activities (89% – yes and probably yes), organising school events (90% – yes and probably yes), health and safety (91% – yes and probably yes), school management and organising (82% – yes and probably yes), educational activities (87% – yes and probably yes), and violence and other discipline problems (83% – yes and probably yes).

Parents' representatives – motivation and participation

The interviews show that 34% of the parents who are either class or school board representatives never contribute to discussions concerning financial management of the school, while 35% said they had made a certain contribution. 49% said they had contributed to organising school events. A relatively big proportion of the parents (between 33% and 46%) said they had never contributed the important parental participation themes: extracurricular activities, health and safety, school management and organising, educational activities, or violence and other discipline problems.

These figures are complemented by another fact; the parents' representatives said they had made a certain contribution (relatively small) to the themes listed above, namely between 23% and 35% of the parents' representatives. When cumulated with the above percentages, we may conclude that more than half of the parents' representatives feel they had made no or a small contribution to the school's decisions. That is quite alarming because this is the whole point of having parents' representatives, namely, to participate and represent parents when decisions are being taken.

Parental volunteering and teachers' help is another subject that completes the participation picture. In response to the questions *During the last year, how many times was your family invited to help with maintenance and improvement of school infrastructure, to help with sport, social and cultural activities, to help with lessons by telling a story, talking about a job, playing an instrument, assisting the teachers, to help with the library, playground and dinner?*, the parents answered in a vast majority (between 79% and 95%) that in the last year they had never been invited to those activities.

Using a regression equation in which the dependent variable was the responsibility of the family to become involved in voluntary work, we found that:

- the fact that a parent is a representative increases with a probability of 127% the likelihood that that parent sees him/herself as responsible for volunteering;
- there is a positive relationship between mother's education level and family responsibility for volunteering, meaning that the higher the mother's education level, the more family responsibility for volunteering increases (a mother with a better education is more likely to motivate her family to engage in volunteering);
- there is a positive relationship between a child's age and the family responsibility for volunteering, meaning that the older the child, the more family responsibility for volunteering increases; and
- parents from the Roma community are much less likely than Romanian parents to become involved in voluntary work for the school.

Co-operation between the school and the community looks like a one-way road. The school claims co-operation, but is not involved in community life; for example, in family life (58% of the parents mentioned that the main help they had received from the school are supplies like notebooks, pens etc., while 42% of the parents mentioned supplies as the second most important form of help from the school). Other possible themes, like medical help, scholarships, free meals, sponsorships were not mentioned by many parents as first or second help from the school (between 3% and 19%).

Concerning **Roma parents**, the survey revealed that they attend school significantly less meetings significantly less than other parents, Roma mothers have a significant probability of having only completed primary school studies, they have significantly higher chances of never having attended a training course (lifelong learning), and significantly more Roma mothers than non-Roma mothers responded that they are not interested in training courses.

Concerning the frequency of invitations to school meetings, there are no differences between the Roma and non-Roma parents. Yet there are significant differences when we talk about actual participation at meetings. The Roma parents attend significantly fewer group meetings than non-Roma parents.

The Roma parents are significantly more frequently invited to the school than non-Roma parents, but they do not attend those meetings.

This might be explained by the fact that Roma children have more problems at school than non-Roma children, and that there are many cultural differences between the Roma and the majority, and more meetings are needed to resolve those differences.

However, in the survey findings the Roma parents declared that they are unsure whether someone from their family is capable of attending group meetings at the school.

We found that Roma parents did not feel it is their duty to participate in school meetings and they did not think they are helping their children by participating in school meetings.

Conclusions and recommendations

The general picture is somewhat surprising since parents stated they are invited to the school, they communicate their opinions, but have the feeling that they have achieved nothing. The principals pointed to a lack of interest on the parents' side but, at the same time, they do little to involve parents in school life; the parents said they are not consulted on the main issues of overall school management. These are the general trends revealed by the statistical analyses. We have to take into consideration that in bigger schools in the cities the situation is different to that suggested by the qualitative research. In small rural schools parents are not trained to understand and are not helped enough to cope with the new, demanding information society (as shown in the focus groups). In addition, it is important to mention that some schools are doing better than others in terms of communication and parental involvement.

Based on the findings of the research, several policy recommendations may be formulated. They are currently only general ideas, but they are worth pursuing:

- to focus on developing a written communication system between schools and parents (official information about the reform of the education system, but also about current school/class organising issues or problems);
- to develop parenting courses where it could be explained why they need to volunteer for some activities, why they, the parents, are more important than they see themselves for the school management;
- very importantly, in our belief, to concentrate on discussing issues and not just on informing parents;
- to increase the school's capacity to interact with the community by giving the chance for the school to actively participate in events, town/village/city celebrations, social activities like helping the elderly, supporting causes (ecological, ethical etc.);
- to give schools the possibility to apply for grants and funds to start school renovation work, for school projects of helping parents to offer them assistance, for school actions together with local authorities;
- to continue research to add the perspectives of other stakeholders: pupils, local authorities, NGOs, or other community actors; and
- to create a collection of good practices and disseminate them across the country.

National survey of parents in Serbia

Jelena Vranješević

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Preface

This subject of this report are results of a survey of attitudes held by parents, their representatives (in parents' councils and school boards) and primary school principals in Serbia concerning possibilities of parents' participation in school life and the current participatory practice. The survey is part of a regional project carried out by the Open Society Institute (OSI) and the Education Support Program (ESP) entitled *Advancing Educational Inclusion and Quality in South-East Europe*. Within this project, several surveys have so far been conducted in Serbia involving: a) primary school principals in Serbia¹ i.e. a survey of their attitudes about possibilities and forms of parental participation in various aspects of school life; 2) action research entitled *Fostering Co-operation between Parents and Teachers and the Inclusion of Parents in Classroom Life*, which aimed at surveying various possibilities and forms of co-operation between parents and schools and fostering that co-operation; and c) a survey of parents' attitudes concerning possibilities of co-operation with schools and how they perceive their role in that co-operation. The last survey mentioned is the subject of this report. It was preceded by conducting focus groups which involved parents who are members of parents' councils (PC) and school boards (SB), parents who are not included in school management structures and parents of children from marginalised groups (children with special needs and Roma children) with the aim of obtaining a clearer picture of how parents perceive their role in co-operation with the school.

¹ A report about national surveys in Serbia and all surveys in countries participating in the project can be found at www.see-educoop.net/aeiq/.

1. Introduction

The main provisions of the *Law on Foundations of the System of Education* (introduced in 2009), and in particular the section Basic Principles of the System of Education (Article 3) envisage that “*the system of education with its organisation and contents shall also ensure: 1) effective co-operation with the family by including parents i.e. guardians, for the purposes of successfully accomplishing the set goals of education; and 2) various forms of co-operation with the local community and broader social environment in order to achieve full harmonisation between individual and social interests in education.*”

However, even though the law envisages and precisely defines parents’ participation in the decision-making process in school and explicitly emphasises the importance of parents’ participation in the process of educating their children for raising the quality of the education process (*The Strategy of Development of Vocational Education in the Republic of Serbia*), there is still a discrepancy between the idea of participation as it is codified and its practical implementation. The results of previous surveys conducted within this regional project show there is a lack of a *clearly defined strategy* of communication with parents among the schools: opportunities to provide information to the parents or consult their opinion in schools are rare; when they are actually given a chance to become included in school life, it is mostly as organisers of auxiliary school activities, namely extracurricular activities, to organise sports events, or design school premises and humanitarian campaigns. Parents have very few chances of becoming included in their children’s education process by participating in areas such as the formal curriculum and organisation of school life, although they said (during the focus group discussions) that they would like to be more included in the formal school curriculum, which would also be in line with the Law on Education.

According to the school principals (in the first survey carried out in the project involving 200 school principals in Serbia), the greatest obstacle to communicating with the parents are the **parents themselves**, that is, their lack of interest in communicating with the school and their lack of communication skills. Action research conducted in 2009 with parents and teachers shows that parents, by contrast, maintain that the reason for the non-inclusion of parents in school life is a lack of information, namely, parents often do not know in which ways they can participate in school life and they expect the school to make the ways and possibilities of co-operation clear. The parents are not fully satisfied with communication with their representatives who sit on the parents’ council (PC); some do not believe that the PC truly represents their attitudes and needs; others feel there is no two-way communication and they are not sufficiently informed about the decision-making process within the council. Some parents are afraid that their attempt to participate will be interpreted as unnecessary interference in the professional role of teachers. Most parents (both parents’ council representatives and other parents) want to be more included in the educational process so they can gain a clearer picture of the continuity of the education process and school curricula.

2. Survey aims

The main aim of the survey was *to provide an insight into attitudes held by parents and school principals concerning parents’ participation in school life and the current participatory practice in our schools*. The survey attempts to find answers to the following questions:

- I. In what way are parents included in various aspects of school life? Which dimensions of parent participation, in the opinions of principals and parents themselves, are most common in our schools (provision of information, consultation with parents or their inclusion in the decision-making process), and in which areas?
- II. What is the current participatory practice like: how much influence do parents exert on the decision-making process? To what extent are parents included and active in school boards? In which areas of school life do parents' councils exert an influence and what kinds of initiatives do they pursue (including volunteering)?
- III. Which factors aggravate/facilitate implementation of the principle of parents' participation in schools? What kinds of parents get involved and why?
- IV. How do parents and principals perceive their roles in the education process?

3. Survey methodology

3.1. The sample

The sample encompassed 32 primary school principals in Serbia who had also participated in the previous parent participation survey. The parent sample encompassed 1,153 parents whose children attend schools managed by the interviewed principals. The parent sample was divided into four subgroups: mainstream – regular parents sample, encompassing those parents who are not representatives in PCs or SBs and do not belong to minority groups (926 parents); a subgroup of the parent sample consisting of those who belong to minority groups (parents with Roma nationality – 67 parents); a subgroup of parent representatives (sitting on a SB or PC – 150 parents); and a subgroup of the parent sample that included parents with Roma nationality who are parents' representatives (10 parents).

3.2. The procedure

The survey was conducted in November and December 2009. The school principals and the parents of children who attend schools managed by them were personally contacted and interviewed. The Ipsos Strategic Marketing Agency was tasked with conducting the survey.

3.3. The instruments

The survey used the instrument of a *structured interview* which came in one of two forms: one for parents and the other for principals. The structured interviews were designed by the survey's headquarter team on the basis of focus group interviews of parents in the region, and on the basis of relevant literature about parents' participation in school life.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Dimensions of parents' participation

In the opinion of both parents and principals, parent-teacher meetings are the most common way parents obtain important information (**more than 95% of all four groups of parents said that they are invited at least 2-3 times per year to those meetings**). They are mostly attended by a teacher, a head teacher or an individual school subject teacher or, in rare cases, by the principal or administrative service. Individual meetings occur very rarely in our schools (62% of Roma parents, 67% of mainstream parents, 70% of parent representatives and Roma parent representatives said they are never invited to those meetings) and mostly involve behavioural or study problems encountered by pupils and are often attended by professional assistance staff such as psychologists or education specialists. However, the issues about which parents are informed mostly concern pupils' marks and their behaviour. It is far less common to inform parents about other aspects of school life such as teaching (school developmental plans), developmental issues of interest to parents or to provide them with concrete information about how to give learning assistance to their children (Table 1).

Table 1 – Percentage of parents who never receive information about different aspects of school life

	Mainstream parents	Roma parents	Parent representatives	Roma parent representatives
Written feedback on the child's progress	13	39	17	40
Information on how to help the child learn/school/ rules/ content of lessons...	86	97	82	100
School or class newsletter	84	100	70	90
Written information on other issues (health/drugs/violence...)	75	82	58	70

Assistance with homework is one of the areas about which parents are informed and **have a chance to become included**. Although the parents were divided in terms of whether the school should ask them to help with homework (half the parents think it should and half disagree), most of them (more than 90%, including the Roma parents) agree that they are competent to provide assistance with homework and that it is their duty to do so (70%) because it is in the best interest of the child (84%)

As far as other areas in which parents can be included on a voluntary basis are concerned, the practice in our schools is mostly not to include them: they do not have a say when it comes to designing and refurbishing school premises, various school services, and the process of teaching (such as teaching assistance). The Roma parents (including the Roma representatives) are never invited (100%) to help with lessons or assist a teacher in any way and to help with the school services. They are almost never invited to help with sport, and social and cultural activities: plays, concerts, field trips etc. (only one parent from the Roma parent representatives sample said that he/she was invited to help with that).

Other parents said they are generally not invited (more than 80% are not invited to help with sport and social and cultural activities, and more than 90% of them said they are not invited to help with lessons/assist teacher or to help with school services).

The parents and school principals agree that the school should not include parents in school services and the designing and refurbishing of school premises, but all four groups of parents maintain that the school should include them in the education process (50%) and in extracurricular activities (57%) to a far greater extent than now.

When it comes to **consulting** the parents, the parents feel they are not being consulted about any significant area (except homework) of school life: most parents say they do not have a say when it comes to school management and finances, issues concerning the education process and teaching, disciplinary measures, or issues of children's health and safety. Even when it comes to extracurricular activities and the organisation of celebrations and school events, only half of all parents say they have been consulted about such issues (Table 2).

Table 2 – Percentage of parents who are never consulted about different aspects of school life

	Mainstream parents	Roma parents	Parent representatives	Roma parent representatives
School financial management	90	100	61	50
Extracurricular activities (extra sports, foreign languages, arts)	76	66	52	40
Organisation of school events (celebrations, excursions etc.)	50	84	13	0
Health and safety issues	62	72	30	30
Overall school management	93	99	83	40
Educational matters – content of lessons/textbooks, teacher assessment, pupil workload, homework	86	84	78	100
Pupil violence, expulsions and other pupil discipline issues	85	90	57	80

More than 90% of all parents state that their opinion is acknowledged only in the rare cases when they are asked for their opinion. They confirm that they always give an opinion when asked (more than 90%).

4.2. Participation in the decision-making process in school

The fact that there are few situations in which parents are consulted also leaves a mark on their proactive stance, that is, their engagement to help accomplish individual and group goals concerning the well-being of their children. Even though most parents (including Roma parents) maintain they are competent to take part in the decision-making process in different areas of school life (such as the organisation of social and cultural activities, school events, teaching assistance, health and safety issues

etc) and that their participation in decision-making is in the best interest of the children, very few of them (from all parent sample subgroups) say they have actually tried to take an initiative either individually or as part of a group in order to influence decision-making in the school. This corroborates the perception of the principals that the parents are not sufficiently proactive in their efforts to become included in school life. The initiatives around which parents are united (or try individually to solve a problem) mostly concern school marks, problems they have with certain teachers, peer violence, the organisation of school life (shifts) and the refurbishing and equipping of school premises. The Roma parents are additionally engaged in issues of discrimination against Roma by other children or even teachers and other parents.

The general picture of the parents' (non)-involvement in the decision-making process in schools is confirmed by **representatives sitting on the parents' council**. Most of them are motivated to become engaged as parent representatives in the council or the board either because they think this gives them an opportunity to contribute to the solving of problems common to most parents or because they feel honoured to have been appointed by other parents to represent them in those bodies. However, they also feel that their influence in areas such as school management and finances, issues of education and teaching (curriculum contents, textbooks, intensity of requirements, homework etc) and even extra-curricular activities and issues such as school discipline and violence in schools is negligible (Table 3).

Table 3 –Perceptions of parent representatives concerning their contributions as a member of the parents' council in different areas of school

	not at all	a little	moderately	a lot
Financial management of the school – How money is spent in the school	59	16	21	5
Extracurricular activities (extra sports, foreign languages, arts etc.)	45	23	23	8
Organisation of school events (celebrations, excursions, etc.) –influence on decisions	14	24	41	21
Health and safety issues (watchmen, road crossings, cameras, drugs, relationship with police etc.)	27	17	37	19
Educational matters – content of lessons, textbooks, pupil workload, homework etc.	60	15	17	9
Overall school management – shifts, opening times, merging or closing classes or schools etc	70	13	12	4
Pupil violence, expulsions and other pupil discipline issues and procedures etc.	42	31	21	6

They consider that the impact of parents in those areas is in any case minimal. To a somewhat greater extent they maintain that they have contributed to the organisation of various events and celebrations at school, to the health and safety of their children, and that in those areas the possibilities to exert an influence are somewhat greater than when it comes to the previous set of issues.

The perception of their relationship with school management and administration is another indicator of the marginalised role of parents, of the misuse of parents' councils for the purposes of decoration and manipulation: more than half the parents maintain that school management is not very interested in their contribution, that they only want parents to support their ideas (a presentational role of parents), and that their opinion is not even taken into account when it is formally required (manipulation). It is interesting that the principals perceive the role of the council differently, maintaining that the council is empowered to make decisions in various areas and they are satisfied with the co-operation they have with the parents sitting on the council.

Another problem seems to be the (in) frequency of communication between the parent representatives and other parents because almost half of both the mainstream and Roma parents (47%) say that the parent representatives do not contact them frequently enough, while the parent representatives maintain there is sufficiently frequent communication with the other parents.

4.3. Obstacles to/opportunities for parents' participation

The principals think that **the main obstacle** to the successful participation of parents are the parents themselves: they are not interested in participating, they are too busy, they do not have the time to become informed about various school activities and do not know how to constructively communicate with the teachers. The parents also think (but to a smaller extent than the principals) that the lack of interest of most parents and lack of information are the greatest obstacles to participation but, unlike the principals, they do not agree with the statement that parents do not know how to communicate with the school. When asked about other possible reasons for parents' non-participation, the parents said that it is because of the *lack of information* provided by the school, as well as the fact that parents *cannot influence* many things in the school that they do not become included. Like the principals, they also do not think that teachers are the problem (their capacities and interest in communication or a lack of time for communication) or that the problem is that the school lack capacities to enable the participation of all parents.

As a way to *foster the participation of parents*, the principals mostly mention co-operation and better communication between the family and the school (establishing a partnership with parents), secondly, *more frequent meetings* and some *common actions* and the better *provision of information* to the parents, while the parents say that the way to improve participation is through the better *provision of information*, more *frequent meetings* with school representatives, *consultation* with parents and taking their opinion into consideration, as well as *more commitment* on the part of the teachers and acknowledging the needs of children.

4.4. Perceptions of the parents and principals of their roles in the education process

Both the parents and principals perceive their relationship as a partnership when it comes to children and their best interests, although the principals are more than parents willing to take joint responsibility for knowing what is in the best interests of the children (almost 50% of the parents and 80% of the principals think this should be a joint responsibility). Only 17% of the principals think that it is only the parents' duty, compared to 46% of parents who think that should primarily be the parents' job). For both principals and parents the areas which concern children, their success at school, their satisfaction with the school, study motivation as well as solving problems which arise should be areas of joint concern of both the family and the school. The quality of teaching and extracurricular programmes, as well as the issue of children safety in school, according to both the parents and principals, lies within the purview of the school rather than the family.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

Even though general provisions of the *Law on the Fundamentals of the System of Education* emphasise the need for and importance of efficient co-operation with the family and inclusion of parents in the education process, actual implementation of the principle of co-operation is a very complex and long-running process. In order to achieve successful implementation, i.e. to improve co-operation between the family and the school and foster parents' participation in various aspects of school life, it is necessary to introduce simultaneous changes at several levels:

I Working with parents

Including parents in various ways in the life of the school helps them understand the way the school functions, its structure and organisation, school curriculum and boosts their competence for co-operating with the school (Cotton 2000). Therefore, it is important to offer parents diverse types of activities within a well-planned and long-term programme in which they can be included in accordance with their preferences, obligations and capabilities/skills. In order to **avoid the merely decorative role** of parents in such co-operation, and given that a substantial number of parents said they would like to participate in various aspects of the education process, even in teaching itself, parents should be encouraged to **become included in the education process in various ways (all of them being mentioned in the Law)**: a) as teaching assistance, especially when children are at a younger age; b) as child educators in areas in which they are professionals/experts; c) as educators of other parents about problems relevant to the parent population and as to which some parents are experts; d) participation in various educational projects going on in the school or in which the school is included; e) as evaluators of the educational work and quality of the institution; and f) the parents of children from vulnerable or marginalised groups should take part in individualised educational plans.

II The relationship between parents and their representatives in the parents' council

Since the PC has an important role and jurisdiction in regulating the life of the school, it is important to establish a mechanism through which two-way communication is enabled: from parents to their representatives in the council and from council representatives to the parents who appointed them. It is important to continually **assess the needs and expectations of parents** (through meetings, questionnaires and polls) in order to reach decisions in the best interests of the children. This implies consulting parents in order to pool ideas about various actions and initiatives in school as well as about ways to overcome certain problems rather than merely offering ready solutions with which parents only need agree (or disagree).

III Teacher training: the principle of co-operation with the family as an important part of continual professional advancement

Since parents mostly need to co-operate with teachers and have the most frequent contacts with them, teachers have an important task to create an atmosphere in which parents are encouraged to become included in various ways and to contribute to the life of the classroom/school without a fear of being seen as interfering in various roles i.e. interfering in the professional role of teachers. The good

communication skills teachers have (according to parents in the survey) are not sufficient: teachers have to know how to empower parents in order to foster their participation in various aspects of school life. Therefore, teacher training and professional advancement are tremendously important: it is important for teachers to be stimulated to think about the possibilities parent participation affords in the school context, as well as the various ways in which co-operation with the parents facilitates their work and boosts child development. The principle of participation, i.e. co-operation with the family, should be established as an important part of: a) the **competence of teachers** and one of the criteria for their work; b) teachers' **professional advancement programmes**; and c) a **training programme of their mentors**.

IV Changes in the school structure and organisation: co-operation with the family as one of the basic principles on which the school's functioning is based

This is a very important step in implementation of the principle of co-operation since *reculturalisation* by itself, i.e. a change in the attitudes of teachers, parents and members of management structures, is not sufficient to bring about change; what is also required is *restructuralisation*, i.e. a change in the school system in terms of values, norms and procedures so as to make the changes sustainable (Fullan 1991). In that sense, the principle of co-operation with the family, i.e. the participation of parents in the life of the school, should become an important benchmark in assessing *the quality of work of a school*. An assessment by a team of monitoring professional education specialists should contain a standard pertaining to participation. The principle of parents' participation should hold an important place in the creation of school development plans. The school should **develop procedures** to encourage and foster participation and make it sustainable. In that way, participation will become part of school practice rather than an isolated example which depends on the motivation of certain schools and the individuals in those schools to improve co-operation with the family.

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