

**Advancing Educational Inclusion and Quality in South East Europe**  
**Survey on elementary school children parents' attitudes towards and views on**  
**parental participation in schools.**

Bulgaria

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**Observations on school activity of parents from excluded groups in Bulgaria**

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The survey team is grateful for the support received by the Bulgarian Ministry of Education Youth and Science, especially by making an official commitment to the implementation of 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.

**ABBREVIATION AND ACRONYMS**

BGN	Bulgarian currency (Bulgarian lev)
MEYS	Ministry of Education Youth and Science
MTHS	Multitopic Household Survey
NSI	National Statistic Institute
OSI-Sofia	Open Society Institute – Sofia

**PURPOSE**

The purpose of this survey is to assess the level of parent participation in the school education system in Bulgaria and to make a comparison with other CEE countries. The survey comes in a very important moment for education policy in Bulgaria. Currently a new draft law on school education is being proposed by the minister of education for public and expert discussions. 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 as a wide a consensus as possible before submitting it to the National Assembly. The law envisages a new role for parents in the school education system and eventually the establishment of new type of school boards with a much wider set of powers than those currently held. By examining the attitudes towards and experience of parental participation in school life, the Bulgarian report will contribute to this on-going debate.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The survey data was collected using a two stage sampling design. On the first stage a total of five rural and urban settlements were 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 decided based on the ratio of the corresponding population within the planning region. On the next stage a school was randomly selected within each settlement. The final stage included identification of parents of students enrolled in the school, based on households identified through a random walk within a specified area around the school – 3 kilometers for urban schools and 5 kilometers for rural schools. Between 20 to 40 parents were interviewed in each school depending on the size of the schools. In each school the sample included also 5 parent representatives (i.e. members of the board of trustees or a class council). A booster of two schools situated in segregated neighborhoods 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 organized school life**

The parents' level of education is an important factor for attendance and performance of their children in the schools. Low education of parents or complete lack of formal schooling is likely to involve serious and multidimensional risks for the children's education. First, parents-early school leavers or parents who have received a low or poor quality education are not always able secure the necessary income of the household and therefore the family can not create a favourable material and living conditions for the education of the child (purchase of textbooks and textbooks and supplementary books, creating a comfortable home environment, etc.). The current survey confirms a strong positive correlation

coefficient between mothers' education level and wealth of the household – 0.44<sup>1</sup>. 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 shows that in every 4th household normally nobody from family helps his child with homework (similar is the share of interviewed parents who think that helping with homework is something the school should not be asking families to do). These challenges could probably be somewhat compensated by active interaction between school and parents, but low-educated parents are unable to participate fully in school life and are mostly excluded from the school decisions-making structures designed for parents involvement (parent representatives at class level or parents' councils at school level). Consequently, the interest of low-educated parents in the child's school readiness and performance is limited, children are not motivated by their parents to attend school and the vicious cycle closes as the children most often do not receive higher education than their parents.

The existence of a comparatively high education level: secondary education or higher is a prerequisite for parental participation in organized school life as parent representatives or in parents' councils. Only 3% of the school-active parents hold diplomas for lower-than-secondary education. (See Chart 1). While the country-average share of parents of tertiary education was 16%, their share is doubled for the group of parent representatives and parents' councils.

The data obtained in the survey is indicative for the significant role, which parental education plays with regard to school attendance of the Roma. According to the results from the population census conducted by the National Statistical Institute (NSI) in 2001, the proportion of Roma of secondary or higher education are a bit more than 7%. The OSI and World Bank's representative survey held in 2007 Multitopic Household Survey, showed that the share of Roma of secondary and higher-level education is below 9% for the adult population. (See Chart 2)

This survey reveals clearly that in the group of Roma households, whose children who are attending primary schools, 2/3 of the mothers hold secondary education and only 1/3 of them have primary- or lower education level. On the one hand this means that in the group of Roma households with children the probability that the children would attend school increases with the increase in the parents' education level. (See Chart 3) A survey carried out by UNICEF (Reasons for Dropping Out of School in Bulgaria, 2007) showed that only 1% of mothers of the Roma school drop-outs hold secondary education, 27% did only primary and the rest 72% – even lower education or have never been at school. However, it should

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<sup>1</sup> Here and below all quoted correlation data is significant at  $p < 0.001$ .

be noted, that during such surveys, field workers register high non-response rates of Roma or report that some of the interviewees quite often do not indicate correctly their actual education level either for the purpose to obtain a socially desirable image or prestige, or because of erroneous understanding of education levels classification.

The possession of books is another significant indicator about the parents of high potential to participate as parent representatives or in parents' councils. The book possession has a strong positive correlation with mother's education level (0.49). While for the average households of pupils attending primary school only 27% have more than 100 and less than 500 books, for the households of school-life active parents this proportion is twice higher or about 44%. (See Chart 4)

Among the parents of pupils from the excluded groups, and by this we mean both Roma and Turkish minority, the biggest category is amongst those who do not possess a single book at home, and actually there are no households with more than 50 books on their book-shelf at home (Chart 4). As the graph 5 shows, the number of books owned by households from ethnic minorities, both Roma and Turk is also markedly different from the Bulgarian majority. So indicators such as the number of books in the household clearly differentiate between mainstream and disadvantaged households. Of course buying books is as much a question of education and values as it is a question of affordability. (See Chart 5) So we should avoid the temptation of interpreting book possession as a proxy for education and knowledge related values. It is as much that as it is a correlate of low income and lower level of education. The correlation analyses between background indices shows that the correlation coefficient between wealth of the household and the number of books is very strong and positive and more than twice stronger (0.66) than the correlation coefficient between ethnically excluded groups and books number possessed in home (-0.27), which is also strong enough but negative.

Median income per capita of the household with Roma is twice lower compared to the average index for the surveyed households of children attending primary school. The income in the 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 the Roma households (79 BGN compared to 239 BGN). It seems that becoming a member of any parents' body is strongly related to having at least secondary education, which in practice excludes disadvantaged parents. The low education level and low income of parents from the 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 did not play a role. So it is not a surprise that representation of excluded groups in parent

representatives' boards is very limited. Overcoming of unfavourable factors connected with education and poverty of parents from excluded groups is a long-term process, which demands complex public investments in a diversity of sectors: education, housing conditions, employment, healthcare, etc.

However, the participation of parents in school life, regardless of their education level and income, is a necessary prerequisite for the improvement of parents-school interaction, which is in the children's interest. That is why, in schools where children from excluded groups form a significant share, it is necessary to find forms and mechanisms to ensure the participation in parent representatives' boards also of parents of lower social status and educational level. It seems that schools lack adequate instruments to encourage informed and motivated inclusion of parents of lower education level and income. Such parents could significantly contribute to improving the effectiveness of work with children from excluded groups and to achieve better results in the prevention of school dropout.

### **Problems and troubles at school**

The parents of 3 out of every 4 pupils claim that their children do not have any troubles at school. However, about one fourth 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 6)

The CCSP clearly shows that cognitive and behavioural problems are registered in schools with a large proportion of Roma, in quite many village schools<sup>2</sup>, as well as in some large urban neighborhoods characterized by a poorer infrastructure and a lower socio economic status of the inhabitants. In these schools there is a much higher chance that a student would be confronted with more than one challenge in school, which he or she would not be able to cope with without support. Supporting the student in such situation requires an integrated approach based on interaction between representatives of different institutions pedagogues, psychologists, social workers, community mediators.

The lack of pedagogical staff qualified for the solving of behavioural problems (school psychologists in the schools of small number of pupils), insufficient qualification and experience of both teaching and

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

non-teaching staff in the work with such youths combined with the lack of alternatives for resolving of the problem outside the school (lack of qualified social workers and low capacity for providing of competent support to the family) significantly limit the possibilities to prevent and resolve these problems. 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 of regular class attendance. This, in its turn, intensifies the problems related to learning and further deteriorates educational results. The correlation coefficient between the number of difficulties parent says child has and the school achievements and positive attitudes towards 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 pupils and 9% of the parents of Turk pupils assess the school achievements of their children as poor or below the average, which can partly be a sign of low self-esteem and partly, but it also reflects real gaps in student performance. (See Chart 7)

In the long run, the lack of conditions to cope with these complex challenges increases significantly the risk of dropping out from school. Unresolved problems lead to negative attitudes towards the educational process and the school. Children belonging to excluded and minority groups (ethnic minorities and residents of small villages) declare negative attitude to school significantly more often. Among Roma, 17% of the parents acknowledge that their children have negative or strongly negative attitude to school, while among Turk parents this proportion is 15%. (See Chart 8) For comparison, only 3% of the Bulgarian parents declare that their children do not like their school. So it seems that low performance and lack of capacity to cope with school related problems can generate indifference and passivity or even dislike, which in turn influence negatively performance and chances for being well integrated in school.

### **Sensitivity and initiative 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 their child in particular. So 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 bit more often than parents declare having been invited, but in broad terms from the answers of both school principals and parents we get the same picture. (See Chart 8) More than 3 parents meetings a year are rare. We can reasonably assume that one meeting per term is the widely adopted practice. From the replies of the school principals it is evident also that the class teacher is the most likely participant in these meetings on behalf of the school,

though school principals also report high (probably a bit exaggerated) rates for their own participation in such meetings. This picture fits well with what is known about the content of such meetings. This is an event where parents of students from a specific class get a feedback on the performance of their children during the school year or semester, some information about what lies ahead in the next semester and what textbooks and teaching aids have to be purchased. At such meetings parents are also often asked to contribute some amounts for teaching aids for class use, small repairs etc. Such a format is congruent with a frequency of up to 3 meetings per year. However 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 bit less often, in Roma schools there is usually only one meeting per year.

Parents and school principals also broadly agree on the frequency of parent participation in parent group meetings. (See Chart 9) Most of the 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 organized by the school.

The initiative of the school in the resolving of problems, which pupils from excluded groups and their parents face, depends on a number of factors. Realizing the necessity 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 decentralization 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. Without entering into theoretical debate about the degree to which parental participation is admissible in school life and school managing, we can note that inclusion of parents even in the process of discussion remains limited and inadequate; even more limited is parental participation in the decision-making process on school-related matters in Bulgaria. The school remains typically active in fund-raising for extracurricular activities and building repairs, but not on other matters of importance for both parents and pupils. On the other hand, the deficiency of initiative and measures for empowerment of parents by the school goes together with inactivity and low motivation to participate on the part of the parents (especially among the representatives of minority ethnic groups). While in fact, because of the relatively lower educational results of the children from excluded groups, the interaction between their parents and their schools is even more important. The schools with significant number of pupils from the ethnic minorities have to resolve much more complex challenges than the average mainstream school.

Formal involvement of parents of vulnerable groups in school, as with other forms of civic activity, is subject to very limited interest in Bulgaria. According to the information gathered within this survey from the school principals in about 30% of schools there is no operating body with parents' participation. Research data show that six of seven parents in the last 3 years have not been members of the school board or other 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. It's worth noticing that, low interest in participation in school life of the parents does not make exception to the low level of the overall civic activity in the country. The lowest is the level of participation of representatives of vulnerable ethnic minorities – mainly Roma. For example, the survey Roma in Central and Eastern Europe, 2001 held by UNDP/ILO, reveals that 93% of Roma do not think that their interests are represented well enough at national level, less than 6% of Roma are able to name Roma political party or NGO they do trust. Perhaps the low level of participation is associated with overall high distrust for institutions; the school is seen as part of the institutional setting. Often vulnerable groups put the blame for their severe socio-economic situation on inefficient state controlled bodies. Moreover, there is a trend of parents of vulnerable groups to treat their children as a “bargaining chip” in relations with the institutions (especially with school and social services' officials). For example, some parents from vulnerable groups often use threats that they can stop the children from school unless they receive certain benefits – e.g. social benefits, access to electricity and water etc.

In this analysis, the focus is on the formal involvement of parents as parent representatives or members of parents' councils. Nevertheless, informal ways of participation are even more limited due to lack of initiatives by the school and lack of feeling among parents that they have opportunities to influence school life and school policies. Research data show that in the last year overwhelming majority of parents have never been invited by the school to help with maintaining or improving school infrastructure - cleaning, painting, building etc. (more than 70%), help with sport, social and cultural activities - plays, concerts, field trip, etc (75%), help in the school services such as library, playground, lunchroom (90%) and help with lessons - telling a story, talking about job, playing an instrument, teaching assistance to teachers (94%). Almost 9 of 10 interviewed parents report 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 is inherited from the time of the highly centralized educational system in which decisions are taken by the central state government. Recently initiated decentralization reforms in national school education system

are not able to change those attitudes quickly - more so because they are focused on financial decentralization alone and put little emphasis on the parents' participation in school life.

In order to measure the school proactivity towards the parents in diverse schools, the research team worked out a composite index of school initiative and activity, intended to reflect the information level and parental assessment about the level of openness of the school towards communication and consultation with the parents. The index includes replies to the questions: *How many times have you been invited to a general parents' meeting in the school and individual parent meeting in the school through the last school year?; How many times the school has given you written information about the development of your child, written information about help to your child, about the school bulletin, or other written information through the last school year?*

Data indicates that this index reaches highest values in schools located in municipal centres, while its values are lower in village schools and in schools of significant number of pupils from the ethnic minorities.

The probability of more active initiative on the part of the school towards partnership with parents is higher in places where households have more stable income and higher living standard. On the opposite, 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 high percentage of pupils from the ethnic minorities in the respective school: over 30%).

The data from the survey on parental participation in school life in Bulgaria shows the presence of a significant gap between the potential of mainstream parents and parents from excluded groups to influence school policies owing to lack of knowledge, low income and low self-confidence. This is not by chance that the survey shows a positive correlation between the households' wealth and parents' satisfaction with opportunity to influence decision-making in the school (0.25) and therefore even higher positive correlation with the 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 realized by the schools and by the system of school education as a whole. As a result, the parental trust and the involvement of excluded groups in school life seem to be decreasing. As a consequence children are not provided by their families with the stimuli they need, which is the first step to losing interest in education and being excluded.

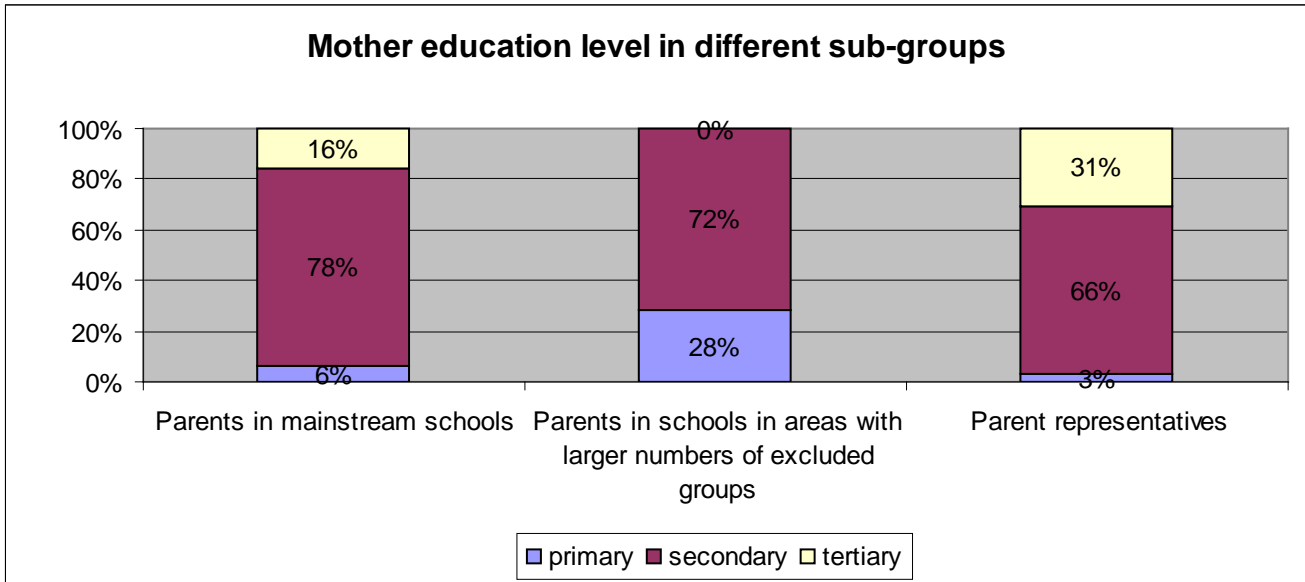
## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The data from the cross-country survey of parents show a clear pattern of segregation of parents into groups, characterized 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 seem also to be concentrated in certain types of schools. Apparently the school system must have as a primary task the compensation for such disadvantages. Currently the CCSP 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 marginalized parents, involving them with school life and upgrading their competence vis-à-vis the education of the of children?”. One of the answers is that to achieve that we need appropriately trained and highly competent and motivated teachers and schools management. Since the teacher career path and the differentiation of teachers’ salaries as been on the policy agenda for many years (without much progress), it is still the 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.

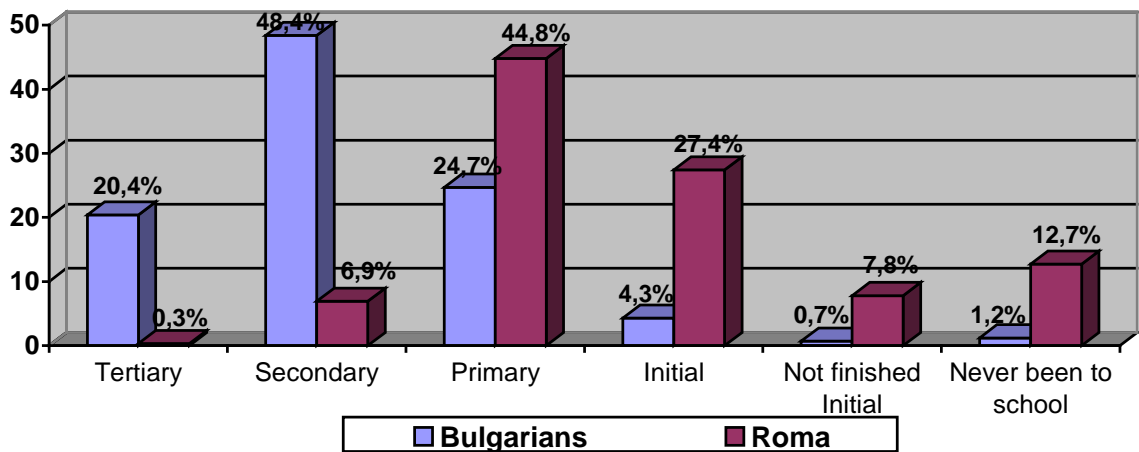
The overall deprivation suffered by parents from disadvantaged areas also is likely to generate higher per student costs of education, should the schools want to provide opportunities for parent involvement. It is in general more difficult to get in touch with such parents. They lack access to the Internet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

## Appendix 1 CHARTS

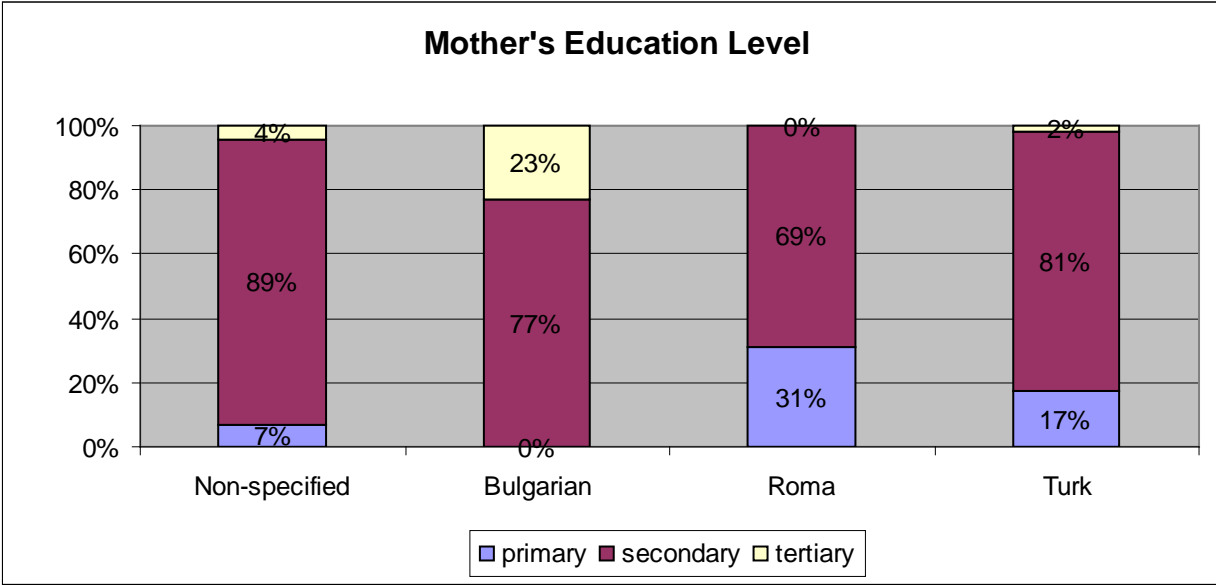
### Chart 1



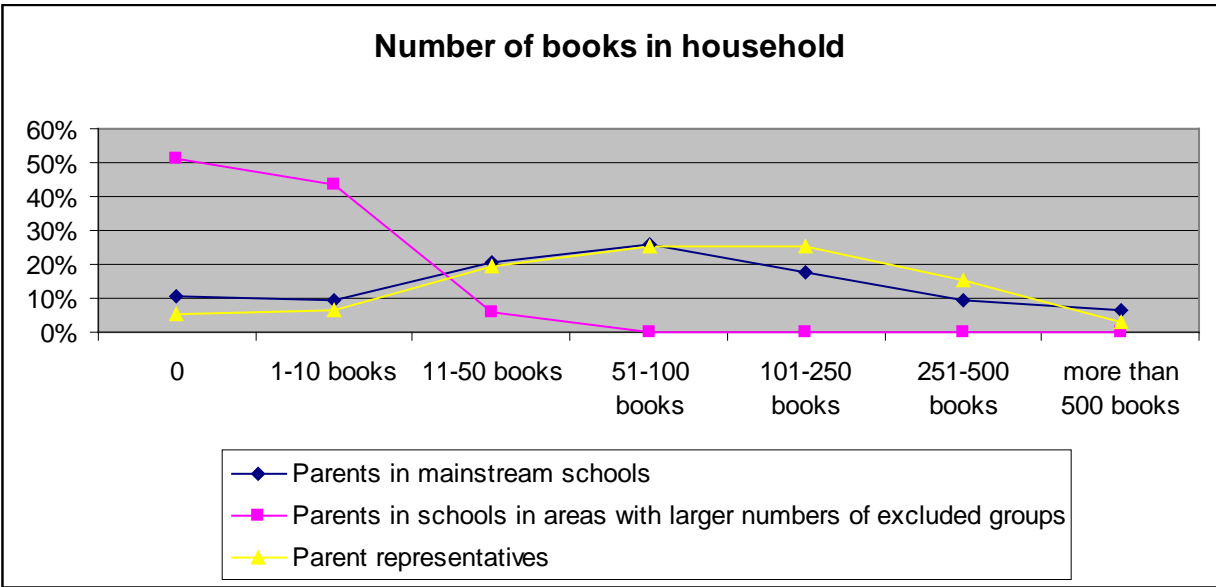
### Chart 2



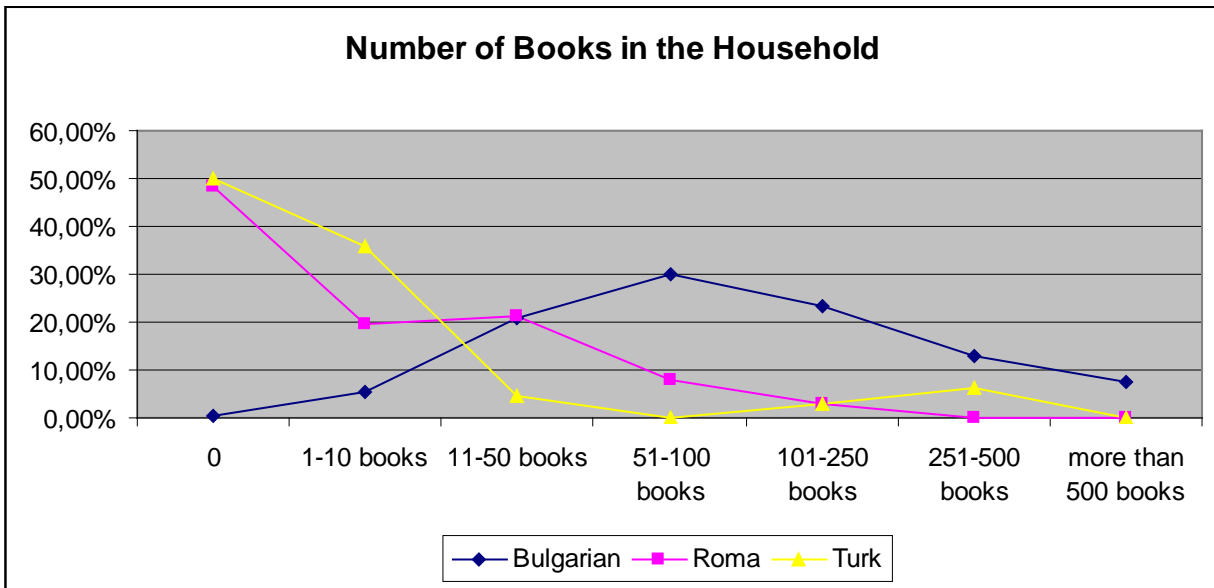
### Chart 3



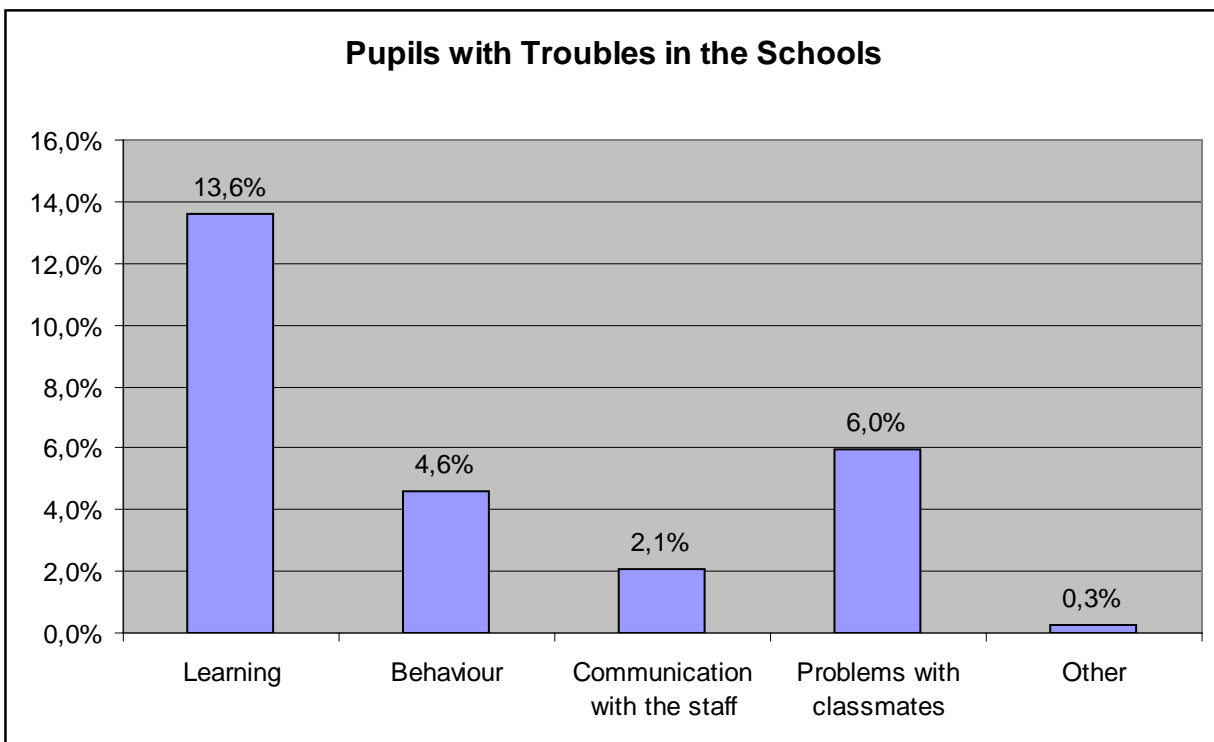
**Chart 4**



**Chart 5**

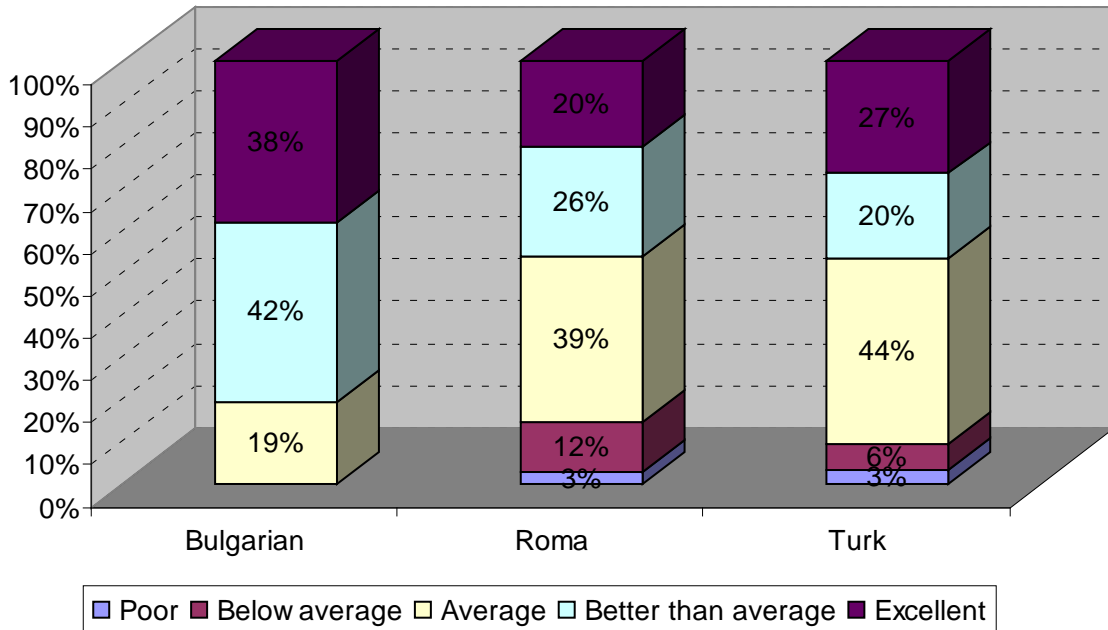


**Chart 6**



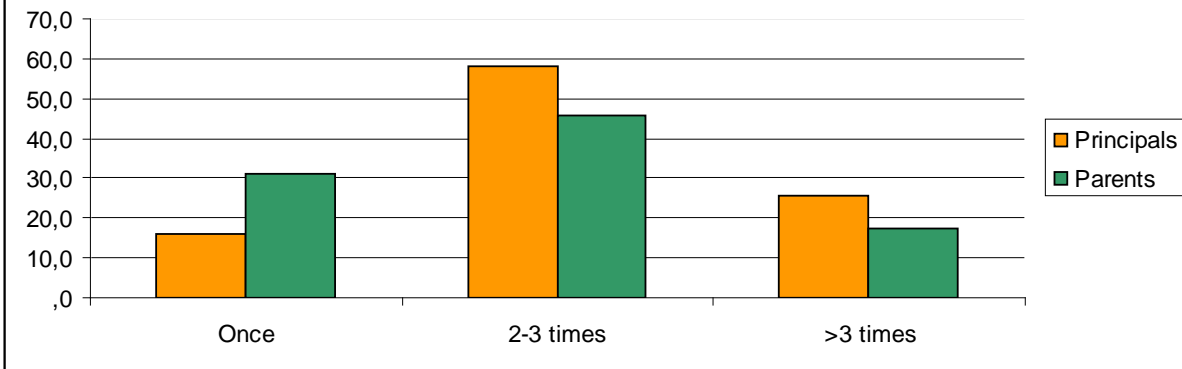
**Chart 7**

**Child school achievement**



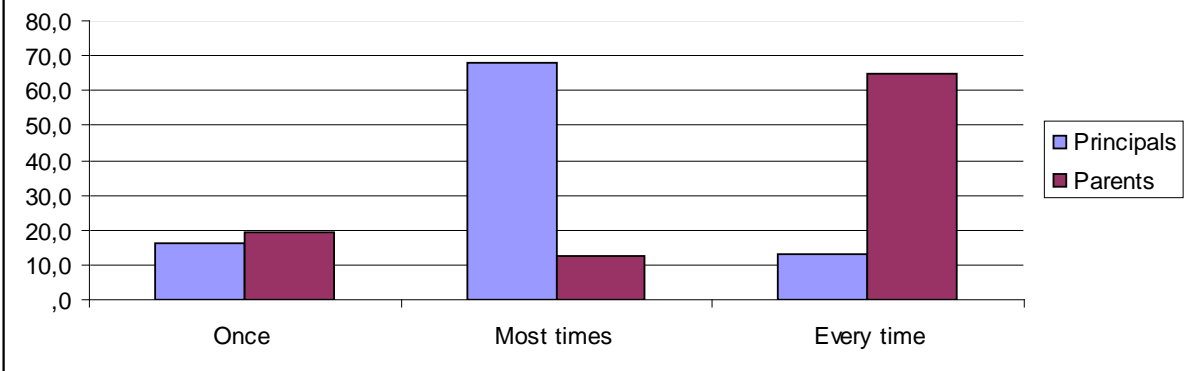
**Chart 8**

**Assessment of how often parents were invited to group meetings according to principals and parents**



**Chart 9**

**Assessment of how often parents attended group meetings according to principals and parents**



**Chart 10**

**Does the child like school?**

