

Advancing Educational Inclusion and Quality in South-East Europe
A survey on primary school children parents' attitudes to and views on
parental participation in schools
Romania

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Acknowledgements

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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

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

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.

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 +/- 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' 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.