

Advancing Educational Inclusion and Quality in South East Europe

Survey on elementary school children parents' attitudes towards and views on parental participation in schools

Macedonia

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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.

Special thanks goes to the whole team of Advancing Educational Inclusion and Quality in SEE, for their support, advice and coordination during the project.

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 a 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 relationship 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.