

Incentives and sanctions for achieving parental participation in the school life

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1. Introduction and methodology

1.1. Introduction

In the last years, beginning with the political and economical changes following the post-communism period, the educational system in every South East Europe (SEE) country changed constantly. A multitude and overlapping short term and long term reforms took place in the past two decades in the educational systems of the SEE countries, which encountered numerous challenges and demands. New regulations and legislative improvements had been enforced. Part of these regulations are structural and comprehensive aiming to decentralisation of the educational system for example, while others are focused on particular issues, such as inclusive education for the minorities and vulnerable, socio economically disadvantaged children as well as children with disabilities. There were national reforms in education and training, as well as regional platform and initiatives of cooperation among countries in the field of education and training. For example, for the period 2005-2010, the thematic areas of interest for educational reform in SEE region were quality of education and equity in education, lifelong learning, and European and national qualification frameworks². There were structural changes in educational systems from preschool level to higher education. The implementation of the new educational policies at the school level was not every time successful. There are few evidences of the results of the implementation of anti-discrimination legislation and new democratic school governance rules and the general achievement of the pupils in schools are still poor. Researches made both by governmental institutions and civil societies organizations often showed the inequality of access to quality education for minorities, as well as for the children with disabilities. The weakness of pupils and parents participation in school life is also identified by the educational experts and Open Society Institute (OSI) representatives as a common shortcoming for the education in the SEE countries.

Two cross-national surveys were launched in order to explore the current status of parental participation in the school life and to devise recommendations for improvement. The first survey was conducted in 2008 with a sample of 2273 principals of primary schools from 9 countries. The second survey took place in 2009 and used a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods (focus groups) trying to grasp the parents and principals' views of the school-parents relationship.

The results of 2009 qualitative research are analysed below. This paper addresses the perception of the parents and principals from 10 SEE countries regarding reform in education and role of the parents in school life. The paper offers a snapshot view about how parents and principals perceived the changes in the educational field (infrastructure and educational materials, human resources, decentralisation of the educational system, changes in the curriculum). The first part of the paper includes an overview of the education reform results in the selected countries as perceived by the parents and principals, the main subjects of the survey. The second part of article provides a brief overview of the current status of parents' participation in school life, the types of the participation, and an explanatory account of the involvement of parents in the school decision making process. Finally, we conclude and make recommendations regarding the mechanisms which could raise the parents' participation in school life.

1.2. Methodology

This paper represents a secondary analysis of qualitative data gathered from the 2009 Cross-National Survey of Parents in 10 SEE countries. Data were collected in every country by a different team of local researchers who elaborated also the research report³. These reports were used as a secondary data sources, together with the legislative frames (country context reports) which were also

² http://www.sarajevoconference.uns.ac.rs/docs/ERI_SEE.pdf

³ The focus groups reports, the country context reports (legislative frames) and the survey' instrument (interview guide) could be seen at <http://www.see-educoop.net/aeiq/outputs.htm>

drafted by every country's team members. The secondary analysis of the qualitative data has the benefit to put into a single frame the different perspectives of the countries reporters' views and to reveal the similarities and differences between countries on similar topics. The analysis below took into account the data provided by a number of 58 focus groups (FG) with parents and 16 FG with school principals. In total, a number of approximately 600 persons (an average of 8 persons per FG) were interviewed. The parents were selected to have different backgrounds such as rural / urban area, different ethnicities and economical status, being part or not of school councils and boards. It was also tried to achieve a gender balance for FG participants although it is well known that mothers are usually frequenting the school more often than fathers, therefore the number of the female interviewed was bigger than the number of male. The principals were selected from the primary schools (attended by pupils from 6 to 15 years).

The objectives of the focus groups were the following:

- identifying the overall perception of the parents and principals regarding nowadays school and education in general
- identifying the perception of reforms in education (changes, benefits and suggestion of improving) and the role of parents and school's stakeholders in the reform implementing process
- identifying the level of parents' participation (types of participation, motivations, benefits, obstacles) and the mechanisms of improving the participation in the school life

The qualitative research took place in May-June 2009 in the above mentioned SEE countries.

2. An overview of the education reform

2.1. General educational issues

The educational reform means for the respondents a series of laws followed by changes in the educational system. The general perception of the school headmasters about the reform in education is that the reform is good in principle but rather poor in the implementation. The main weaknesses of the reform are the **slow pace of progress** (because of many and contradictory changes) and the evasive and **incomplete laws** associated with the reform. From countries like Moldova, Romania, Serbia and BiH the principals are signalling the **lack of stability and continuity in the process of reform**.

„We are going through a constant change, we change the change itself; each minister started a new reform, new experiments” (Romania); “We still don't know what the goal of the education system is, what we want to make out of the student. And when we seem to know it, someone else comes along the next day and changes everything, so we have to start over again.” (Romania); „Many issues concerning school life are not regulated by law” (Serbia); “frequent changing in the educational law” (Romania); „lack of standards and regulations” (Albania)

Some principals and parents believe that the **quality of education** of the new generations of students (after the communism broke down) is **lower** than the education of the former generations of students. The parents measure the quality of education through the level of achievements reached by the pupils. The relatively high level of functional illiteracy (students who cannot read or write in a fourth grade) is a proof of educational systems malfunctioning in countries like Serbia, Kosovo, Romania, Bulgaria and Montenegro.

„[...] evaluation criteria for knowledge and discipline of the students are set very low” (Serbia); “The overall training of students gets worse from one generation to another.” (Romania); “the school act as a provider of the degrees but not a provider of education” (Romania); “I don't know how these teachers behave and approach the children but children know nothing.” (Bulgaria); “There is devaluation of the higher education and of the education as general.” (Bulgaria); “Child can't read or write in the fourth grade.” (Montenegro)

Rural schools have the advantage of a better communication with parents and a higher participation of parents in the school life because of the small social distances among people from villages. However, the rural schools usually have precarious school equipment, less qualified school personnel and a greater fluctuation of personnel. Even though the parents from rural communicate easily with the school staff, they do not feel themselves as part of the school. Usually, they are not participating to the school decision making and they do not have almost any functions in the school

structures. Their communication with the school staff is considered to be superficial. The lack of extracurricular activities is a problem encountered in the rural areas.

„*We are not involved in anything. The parents from the town are.*” (Macedonia); “*They have poor relationship with the teaching staff, they rarely see the professional support staff and the Principal and do not have access to the Council of Parents and other school bodies.*” (Macedonia); “*There is no summer camp for children in our village.*” (Moldova); “*There are almost no extracurricular or additional activities; in rural areas, children who have skills related to art, music, sport, painting cannot develop their talent.*” (Moldova); “*There are almost no extracurricular activities for them – no special classes, no club nothing.*” (Moldova)

In general, the principals have the tendency to see **Roma parents' participation** as being better than it is seen by the Roma parents themselves. The principals usually have a good collaboration with Roma parents and they quoted successful cases of Roma participation in the school life. When intercultural communication difficulties with Roma parents occur, those schools, which employed Roma teaching assistants (mediators) or are in partnerships with local Roma NGOs, deal with these difficulties more efficiently. On the other hand, Roma parents consider that they are almost completely excluded from the school life. They never had functions in the School Council of Parents even if sometimes the number of Roma students in school is large enough to legitimate their participation at school decision making. Roma parents have very weak interactions with the non Roma parents from school. The experience of exclusion is mainly manifested in segregation of Roma pupils from their non Roma peers. Roma parents feel that their children are marginalized by other students or even by the teachers and that the school is not welcoming their children. As a consequence of school segregation the achievements of Roma students' are low.

A problem encountered in some countries (Bulgaria, Kosovo, Montenegro) is the increase of the **violence phenomenon** in schools. This problem is especially a concern of the parents but it was also mentioned by the principals.

The decentralisation of the educational system is an educational model taken from the USA and Western European societies. In the SEE countries decentralisation is perceived being rather formal and incomplete (especially on the financial aspects). In few countries (Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania) a barrier for an effective decentralization process is claimed to be the political interference that schools are facing with. This political influence is reflected in an authoritarian style of decision making inside of the hierarchical structures of the educational system (decisions are coming from top to down and follow up the party political line with a small place for being adapted to the local context). The parents share with the principals the view that the school is tributary to the politics. Immersion of the politics in the educational system modifies the power relationships in the school. In the parents' view the Ministry of Education and the Mayor are those who are making the rules and sometimes these rules do not match with the needs of the school. The principal and the representatives of the Council of Parents are viewed rather as insignificant players. The parents are not aware about the process of decentralisation of educational system because the changes of this process are not perceived that affecting them directly.

2.2. School infrastructure, human resources and curriculum changes

Following the educational reform and decentralization process, some of the schools have been supplied with equipment over the last few years, especially in regard with the infrastructure but also with the educational materials. Nevertheless, there are countries (BiH, Kosovo, Moldova) in which the lack of educational equipment and the poor infrastructure still negatively influence the educational process. The material improvement of the schools is mostly generated from donations and different projects and not yet part of a routine national and local budgetary policy making. This situation is especially encountered in the Western Balkan countries and in Moldova. In Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina the issues of overloaded classrooms and crowded school classes is still seen as one of the main problems disrupting an appropriate educational process.

In the principals' view, a strong point brought by the reform is the **in-service teacher training** component which enabled some of the teachers to improve their professional skills. This training was helping the teachers to learn and apply in the classroom the new educational teaching methods. Unfortunately, not all the teachers and principals not even a critical mass of them participated in the different thematic trainings. The effectiveness of the in-service teacher training is

also diminishing because of the relatively high fluctuation of the school personnel. In some cases the teachers trained through different programs left the school soon after they were receiving the training (Montenegro).

In some countries (Albania, Macedonia, Moldova, Romania) the quality of the human resources (the qualifications of the teachers) is seen as being low even by the principals themselves.

As a general trend, parents' perception is that the quality of the overall training (in-service and pre-service training) of the teachers is decreasing over the years. Parents consider also that the actual generation of teachers is less motivated and have less authority and prestige as compared with the generation of teachers who educated them few decades ago. Overall, the parents believe that the professional performance of the current generation of teachers is rather poor. Principals' evaluation on teacher performance is more positive than that of the parents.

„[...] the level of quality of teachers decreased a lot” (Macedonia); “The human resources (the teachers) are less well-trained, especially the young generation.” (Romania); “professionalism and qualification of teachers is a major problem” (Albania); “The intellectual preparation of teachers is decreasing.” (Moldova); “[...] teachers do not have the same motivation of working with children; they also do neither have the status that they once had” (Moldova); “Time has changed for worse. [...] Teachers are indifferent. They are not responding to the needs and are not willing to work.” (Albania); “Teachers have no authority” (Croatia); “Teachers have to be more restrictive.” (Moldova); “discipline and rules that were respected during our childhood is not anymore respected.” (Moldova); “[...] they [teachers] are not motivated because of the low salaries” (Moldova); “Teachers are not devoted to their work” (Serbia)

In Albania, Kosovo, BiH, Croatia and Montenegro the introduction of different versions of **school books** and the alternative textbooks is perceived as a problem both by the students (who are confused by the variety of the alternative books offer) and by the teachers (who may have not enough time to select the manuals and be prepared for teaching). The new textbooks are attractive and are made in a creative manner but the numerous options create difficulties when students are participating in national standardised competition because some of them are familiar with certain textbooks while others are not having the same readings. Usually, the textbooks are chosen by the school (teachers) and parents are just informed about the changes at the beginning of each school year (although in some countries the regulations are that a majority of parents should decide on this issue). Even though the parents are not experts in evaluation of the school curriculum, many of them are complaining about the quantity and sometimes about the quality of the curriculum.

One of the main gaps of the actual curriculum of investigated schools of the SEE countries is the lack or the insufficient physical education classes and / or facilities. A better awareness of the need for more physical education classes in schools could be obtained if every Ministry of Education will be renamed using the word <sport> in the title (for example, Ministry of Education and Sport).

3. Participation of the parents in the school life

The traditional attitude of parents towards school is that the main role of school is to provide education and social survival earnings to their children while the role of the parents is more or less passive. A survey (Matsagouras, E., Poulou, M., 2007) shows the gap between perception of parents and teachers' roles from an axiological point of view. This study revealed that “[...] parents perceived distinctly separate roles between teachers and parents. Teachers were perceived as “experts” in academic domains, while parents were perceived as “guardians” of children’s social and emotional growth.” The limited role of parents regarding school life was met in another evaluation study case from Bosnia Herzegovina and Kosovo: “Parents themselves had only a limited understanding of what their role could be.” (Catholic Relief Services, p.7). This finding of a different role expected to be performed by the teachers and the parents could be helpful in designing the educational policies. It is more feasible to train both parents and teachers accordingly with this perception of distinctive roles than to challenge and change this deep rooted perception. **The educational policies have to be addressed separately to the parents and to the teachers.**

The partnership or collaborative approach to schooling issues between the family and the school are defined primarily by trust. But what happens when the trust is diminished to disappearance? How is possible to reconstruct the trust between school and family? One of the main inferences that can be made accounting for the findings of the 2009 Cross-National Survey of Parents in South East

Europe is that the increase of the parents' involvement in the school life could start from the students themselves' involvement in the school life. This approach of addressing children in order to have the involvement of their parents was recent discussed in an article (V. Vyverman, N. Vettenburg, 2009). This article based on survey findings shows that the children tend to rather like parent participation and that this attitude is related to the extent to which parents participate. Children from "deprived" schools tend to like parent participation better.

The lack of educational competencies, real or perceived, in regard with the school requirements for participation make some parents discouraged in providing educational support for their children. The working class parents and more generally the parents who are lower on the social class hierarchy are putting the same value on education as the more socially privileged parents. The lower social class parents are failed in their relationship with school rather due to the lack of skills in helping their children to achieve school results and to the lack of financial resources needed in order to ensure their children a longer school career.

„[...] the main problem is how to keep their children in the school. They [Roma parents] are very interested in education and they value education, but if they do not get support, their children will soon drop outs.” (Serbia)

3.1. Main characteristics of the parents' participation

3.1.1. Low level of communication

In the 2009 Cross-National Survey of Parents in South East Europe countries the general participation of the parents in the school life is characterized as **infrequent** and **formal**. The participation of the parents in the school life depends almost always on the school initiative. Even the principals - who usually are less critical regarding school-parents relationship - consider that the communication channels between school and parents are not enough and seemingly. At a discursive level, the parental involvement is welcomed by the principals and it is appreciated like a strategic chapter of the educational reform and considered as unavoidable, although neither the teachers nor the principals found appropriate ways on how to address it. In most cases the results already obtained from the partnership with the parents are very weak. The focus groups results illustrate causes for weak relationship between school and parents as following:

- the lack of free time from both parts (parents and principals);
- the lack of motivation (both extrinsic and intrinsic); extrinsic motivation is represented by financial incentives;
- the educational gap between parents and principals / teachers;
- anxiety of principals / teachers that a deep involvement of the parents in the educational process could reveal a low level of general education given to the students.

The analysis of the focus groups results also reveal that the **parents' participation in the school life is decreasing with the increase of the grade level of the student**. The following reasons are explaining this tendency:

- the increase in the number of teachers leads to difficulty to communicate with the students;
- aging of parents is diminishing their physical and emotional resources (other smaller children in family could also diminish the interest for the older ones);
- previous disappointments of parents in relationship with the school' staff and / or the slow pace of school changes. Not only the parents who have children in secondary school manifest a low level of interest but also the teachers are paying more attention to the younger students.

For some parents, the school is a black box because of the lack of any dialogue. Sometimes school doesn't encourage the communication and appear as a closed institution for parents.

„We as parents can't do anything; we can only see our children go in and out of school, that's it". (BiH); “[...] meetings are just a principal's monologue” (Bulgaria); “There was a sign on school: <the entrance of parents in all spaces of the school is forbidden without permission of the school management>. School should be widely open for parents – it belongs to teachers, parents and local community.” (Montenegro)

At the foundation of the parents' school participation resides the communication approach of the two involved parts. In a power oriented relationship (such as that between principals and parents)

it is difficult to maintain a continuous communication flow. Moreover, from the part of the parents there is a lack of communication with other parents, too. The main reason for this lack of communication among parents is their different social and economic statuses. These different statuses are expressed entirely in a communication pattern in which the parents avoid each other and also avoid the school staff. The parents do not know each other well. They are afraid and ashamed to reveal their thoughts and feelings in public, for example in the parents' meetings that take place in school. They are afraid of rejection or simply of being analyzed or even evaluated by other parents and by the teachers. They do not have enough confidence to express themselves into an unknown and unfamiliar environment which is school.

The parents themselves have for their weak participation in the school life a series of justifications. The formal and the most common excuse for this behaviour is the lack of time especially evoked by the active parents, by the poor parents and by the single parent who receive more the pressure of going to work. The lack of education is also an excuse for parents missing from school meetings. These reasons are appropriate descriptors of the parents' behaviour but the explanation for the behaviour is rather psychological: the fear for disclosing themselves in an unfamiliar situation. The poorer the parents, the less educated and belonging to a minority, the more fear and discomfort to visit the school they have.

„We are poor people and we don't have time to come to school and school and to participate to meetings. And we don't speak beautiful, no one listen, so we come for nothing.” (Romania) *“They [the parents] don't know many things and they fear to raise their voice because of the teacher's revenge.”* (Albania); *“The most active parents are those with the knowledge and education – those educated about education.”*(BiH); *“a parent is more likely to listen than to express his/her opinion.”* (Kosovo)

The few parents who once spoke in a school meeting will speak every other time because they have overcome the reluctance towards school; the rest of the parents remain unvoiced. Moreover, there is a lack of communication among parents not only with the school' representatives. Different social statuses among parents are expressed entirely in a communication pattern in which the parents avoid each other (and also avoid the school staff). The parents are afraid and ashamed to reveal their thoughts and feelings in public, for example in the parents' meetings that take place in school. They are afraid of rejection or simply of being analyzed or evaluated by other parents and by the teachers. They do not have enough confidence to express themselves into an unknown and unfamiliar environment which is school. Sometimes not only the parents are afraid of the teachers but also the teachers are afraid of the parents. The participation of the parents in school is rather weak and formal because neither parents nor teachers want to expose their weaknesses as they are embarrassed by each other.

„I don't want to share things with others because they see me with mercy and I don't like that” (Albania); *“The parents must be educated, have leading abilities and courage...I don't feel I have the power to speak up.”* (Albania); *“[...] it is usually the same few parents who speak up.”;* *“Most parents fear the reaction of the teacher [...]”* (BiH); *“Teachers only involve us in extracurricular activities. They are afraid to involve us in class.”* (Albania); *“I think that teachers don't like when community intervene. Everyone in school knows weaknesses of others and they protect each other in that way.”* (Montenegro)

3.1.2. Unidirectional participation

In a traditional way, the stakeholders' participation in education means the participation of the teachers and the students. The participation of other stakeholders (e.g., parents) is not seen as an issue because (1) it is not a tradition in the education field and (2) it is not envisioned in the law. We can assume that if the law would stipulate the involvement of other stakeholders in the educational process, we can expect that the changes of the traditional way could occur. In order to increase the chances for having the change, the laws (or the amendment of the existing laws) should clearly define and set the margins for the involvement of the parents in the educational process.

The participation of other stakeholders in education is rather an unusual process in many South East European countries. In some cases, little steps were made by the non-profit sector or by the local initiatives of the parents. Nevertheless, the current study reveals that the interactions of the

stakeholders in the educational process have a **one way course: from school to families**. The opposite route, from the families towards school, is not an option because in most of the cases the families are not aware about their power of influence and their obligations. The accepted social norm is that the teachers have to teach and the students have to learn. The parents are missing from the educational process and from the school life because they have learned from their previous experience to conform to this pattern.

The educational system is often a bureaucratic and hierarchic organism having the information and decision making flowing from the Ministry of education to regional / county inspectors and further to school principals and finally to the teachers. Even at the teachers' level there are very well established hierarchies. This closed system does not allow spontaneous, *ad hoc* changes, initiatives and creativity. The majority of the representatives of the educational system are looking for orders, regulations and procedures for every small step forward. The students are seen not as a vivid part of the school life but rather as means through which the final purpose of the system (education) should be achieved.

At a discursive level the parents' involvement is welcomed by the principals. The parental involvement is appreciated like a strategic chapter of the educational reform and considered as unavoidable, although neither the teachers nor the principals found appropriate ways on how to address it. In most of the cases the results already obtained from the partnership with the parents are very weak.

3.1.3. The authoritarian school headmasters

The principals are sometimes seeing themselves as authoritarian managers with full power to conduct the whole school while the parents are expected to be thought and educated in the same manner as the students in regard with pedagogical issues and/or inside school relationships. Principals relate to the parents in the same pattern as they relate to the students: the parents are not able / skilled to teach, have to be obedient and without initiatives. Otherwise we talk about a "*general decay of value systems*." This attitude is part of the authoritarian leadership style of a large number of principals accustomed to be the absolute rulers of the schools for long periods of time (sometimes all their professional life).

„[...] most of them [principals] are employed in the same schools for more than 10 years and some of them are in the education system for more than 20 years.” (Macedonia); *“I have been teaching for over thirty years, it's always been like this, old habits die hard.”* (Romania)

Many parents (especially with a low social, economic and educational status) seem to have no interest and no initiative in the school life because they pay a tribute to the “authoritarian heritage of previous school system”⁴. Therefore, parents adopted a submissive attitude towards principals and teachers. The relationship between parents and school' staff is not equal. In fact, it is a power based relationship in which the authority is represented by the school (principals and teachers) and the subordinates are the parents and their children.

„[...] they [the parents] admit they are not qualified, they are ashamed to communicate, to them teacher is the authority, for them school is authoritative institution...” (Montenegro); *“Of course they are participating financially, but not all of them have the necessary skills or competences to propose some ideas, initiatives etc.”* (Moldova); *“If summoned parents get involved in extra-curricular activities, but they don't have the initiative.”* (Romania)

3.2. Types of parental participation

3.2.1. Informal participation

Parents and principals have relatively similar opinions regarding the role expectations from parents. The data collected disclose the specific activities in which parents are usually involved such as (1) raising money for materials or equipment; (2) supervising extra-curricular activities; (3) organizing special events, and contributing to refreshments for parties; (4) helping with maintenance

⁴ This phenomenon of the “authoritarian heritage” that was typical to the educational as well as to the entire social system in communism was well observed and described in the country report realized by Montenegro team.

or painting classrooms; (5) helping in their personal and professional domain; (6) school teaching activities. Less often is mentioned the professional involvement of the parents in the educational process (Croatia, BiH).

This type of participation could be categorized as informal because these activities usually are not imposed by the law and take place on a voluntary agreement with school representatives.

There is a difference in the type of parents' involvement in the school life between urban and rural. Whereas the urban parents are eager to support financially the school, the parents from rural areas prefer voluntary services instead of monetary contribution.

Parents' suggestions about their actual and / or potential involvement in the school life are similar with their existing role expectations described above:

- volunteers in cleaning and decorating the school / classrooms
- participating as auditors in the classroom or as observers of the school life
- contribution at teaching classes depending on their professions and skills

By comparison with these suggestions given by the respondents, we are listing below the guidelines for building parent partnerships made by Epstein (2004). The trend obtained by the empirical measurements is almost the same with theoretical construction. Epstein assets that parents involved in their children's education are those who are demonstrate parenting skills, communicate with the school staff, volunteering in the school's activities, help their children at home at the learning school's requests, being involved in the school decision making and collaborate with school-community at large. What is need to be developed at the case of many parents from SEE countries is a more trust and exercise for their parent skills (including communication skills) and a better sense of community. These successful skills for parents could be gain in certain conditions: adequate school budget conditions, adequate school facilities and available time for teacher for activities development (Hara & Burke, 1998).

The principals do not disqualify parent's involvement in the instruction process but draw attention to the limited number of parents with a corresponding education level for teaching and to the limited possibility of some schools to host these classes.

3.2.2. Formal participation

The main type of the parents' participation in the school life is a formal one, the participation in the Class Council of Parents. In different countries besides this Council of Parents there are other different types of the parents' bodies with overlapping activities and responsibilities (School Council of Parents, Parents Associations, School Board, Teacher Council, Pedagogical Council, School Board of Trustees and School Council). Some of these structures are imposed by law; some of them have a voluntary base. The school bodies are viewed by the principals as being mainly formal (Romania), sometimes are considered powerful but not accountable (BiH, Serbia, Albania) and in isolated cases are even seen as aggressive in their requests (Serbia). The fact that most of the parents are unaware of educational legal provisions make the educational laws inefficient regarding parental involvement in the school life as well as the rights and duties of the parents.

The parents who are members of different school bodies could participate to the decision making process but legally they do not have any responsibilities. They have only a formal role and the entirely responsibility belongs to the principal. On the other hand, the principals are not eager to share their authority and power with the representatives of the parents' councils and do not perceive any concrete help from these parent bodies. The school principals are not pleased to have partners, especially in the decision making process referring to the school policy and the allocation of resources. The principals don't have the exercise to share the power.

The School Council of Parents is a formal structure and has a very little efficiency both in the principals and parents points of view. The School Council of Parents is perceived by the principals as being helpless because of the lack of technical knowledge of the parents.

The parents have an even worse opinion about the School Council of Parents. They doubt about the correctitude of the election in this school structure because only the educated parents are usually called to take part in the school councils. Nevertheless, majority of the parents recognize the legitimacy of the educated parents to be part of this school body. The parents also observe that the poor and the parents belonging to the minorities are not part of school structures. For this reason, the

School Council of Parents is seen as an elitist school structure. Sometimes, the participation in the School Council of Parents is directed by political membership.

The general opinion of the parents who participated in the School Council of Parents is that the council is a formal and administrative body which doesn't encourage the communication and the initiatives from the parents' side. The parents inside the council do not know each other and the communication among them is blocked. They are rather passive and they couldn't develop the abilities to *ad-hoc* organize themselves. The school representatives just inform and do not consult the parents from the School Council of Parents.

The parents from the Council inform the parents from every classroom but the communication is again unproductive because the parents from the classes cannot answer, improve or change the decisions taken in the School Parents Council (unilateral communication). The Class Parents Council is a less formal structure and, for this reason, a better one than the School Parents Council. The common interest and the better communication on the class level are the strong points of the Class Parents Council structure.

In the Council of Parents the parents are rather inactive. They do not have the feeling of participation to the school decision. Majority of the parents consider the participation of the parents to school decisions as being formal, not transparent, time consuming, helpless and a frustrating experience. The rule is that the parents are not involved but only informed. Another rule is that the decisions are coming (and have to come) from top to down and the parents represents the last important part of the ruling school mechanism.

Moreover, some of the parents recognize that they are not able to take the best decisions for school (and implicitly for their children education) because they do not have the necessary knowledge, especially educational knowledge about the school curriculum. For example, the involvement of the parents from different school boards to take decisions like choosing the textbooks exceeds their abilities. In fact, not the parents are choosing the textbooks but the **parents are manipulated by the teachers to choose a certain textbook.**

One of the parents' reasons to participate in the school councils is the perceived benefit for their own children. This benefit is rather social than educational (for example, a mother accepted a position in the parent' council in order to become important in the eyes of her child).

Conclusions and recommendations

The 2009 Cross-National Survey of Parents in South East Europe (SEE) countries reveals that principals and teachers are rather looking for an **external assistance** to change the perception, the attitude, and the behaviour of the parents regarding school and to increase the parents' participation in the school life. The representatives of the school are waiting for initiatives coming hierarchical from ministries and central educational authorities. The parents are looking for initiatives coming from school to improve their relationship with the school. They are rather **passive** because they do not have a real sense of a community. Parents from the rural areas could act as a small community and could better communicate but the school facilities and the quality of education is worse comparing with urban areas. Another relevant issue obtained from the focus groups discussions points that **the main role of the parents is to support** the school and **not to participate to decision making** process. In the decision making process the parents are involved only formal (when they are involved). The parents feel themselves as being powerless and without connections with school. Roma parents are excluded from the school decision making process because of their ethnicity but also because of their low socio-economic standards.

In addition with the low and formal parents' participation in the school life, the focus groups also disclosed a **low level of students' participation**. The principals have a tendency to regard them not as an "active part" or "stakeholders" of the educational process but rather as "victims" of education reforms such as the changes in the curriculum and in the assessment / examination procedures.

The findings of the study are leading to a series of recommendations that may contribute to the designing of the public policies in order to increase the parents' participation in the school life. These recommendations include a mix of incentives and sanctions that could raise the implication, motivation and also the overall proactive attitude of the parents.

1. **Increasing the students' participation in the school life in order to increase the parents' participation.** The improvement of the students' participation would be an efficient strategy to reach the parents' participation. The children are the best interface between school and families because they know both the school environment and the potential of their families. The strategy of making the parents to participate would be accomplished in a non directive manner by involving more the students in the school decision making process and developing active citizenship and democracy culture among pupils. Making partnerships directly with the students could be more efficient than addressing directly the parents.

The students' participation is recommended to be increased both for the curricular and extracurricular activities. An example of the successful involvement of the students in the school life is the **students' council** which is already functioning in some of the schools. A class council made by students could be more effective than one made by the parents because the students know each other well and could have common requests and proposals. It is easier to reach the consensus among students than among parents. The proposals could be brought in the School Council of the Students after meetings among students at the class level. The **involvement of students in school decisions** (at least beginning with fourth, fifth grades) instead of involving the parents could be more efficient because the students are better knowing how the school is running and could develop better initiatives than their parents. The students could also influence in a positive way their parents to follow the requests of the school if they are motivated to make changes and to participate actively in the school life.

The informal participation among students also needs to be increased, for example through activities such as the following: (a) organizing and intensifying the competitions among classes and moreover the competitions among schools in sciences and sports; (b) organizing clubs on different topics after school (including homework clubs). Simultaneously with the informal participation of the students, the school have to enforce the informal mechanisms to bring parents in school and to trigger their interest.

2. A **system of incentives** for parents' participation should address with priority the mothers as the key persons who maintain the relationship with school. *Social networking* for mothers could be such an incentive. Schools could encourage the mothers to create social networks and to gather in informal settings / events in order to have genuine communication in regard with school issues. *Symbolic rewards* for active parents would stimulate and ensure their continuous participation in school. For example, celebrations of the parental achievements, even the small successes, are an incentive for consolidating the informal groups of parents or the associations of parents.

3. A **system of sanctions** to stimulate the parents' involvement into the school life should be rooted on the social norms of the local community. *Shaming* is an effective *tool* for achieving parental involvement in those places where a sense of community is already in place and parents feel the benefits of being members of that community. For example, the shaming tool applied to the parents could be used for combating the absenteeism of students. A parent whose child is regularly missing from school or a parent of a child who is violent in school could be invited by law to spend a school day in the classroom or school and participate in school activities. Especially for the parents who are not usually involved in the school life this type of shaming (obligatorily school attendance for a determined period) could be successful. There are also some initiatives and proposals regarding the introduction of the financial punishments for parents (Romania). These initiatives assume that parents have to pay proportional with the number of the absences of their children. Otherwise, the parents will have to work for the school or the students will be punished by not receiving all the benefits that are provided free of charge by the school or by being excluded from certain (extracurricular) activities of their classroom / school.

4. Keep the parents connected by improving communication. Strengthen the **communication with parents** by introducing a system of transmitting some school information via mobile phones or e-mails. The information has to be sent to the parents periodically and should consist in administrative issues, educational progress issues, and attendance reports of every pupil. Establishing and maintain social communication networks among the parents from a school class by using the mobile phones or

available IT technology whenever this is possible. When social networking is not possible due to barriers in accessing the IT, the social networking among the parents should be stimulated by the school principals starting with simple tasks of disseminating school related information.

5. Encouraging the development of the **associations of parents**. (a) Supporting the informal groups of parents to become legally constituted associations of parents. The support could consist in offering the *technical assistance* on the judicial issues of establishing an association and also technical assistance regarding the accountancy of the organization. In some cases these technical assistance needs could be covered by the qualified parents or by the school staff. (b). Establish *training sessions* for the parents who are constituted as formal parents associations. These training sessions should teach the parents how to do an effective management of their organization and how to fund raise for the extracurricular activities, according with the needs. The associations of parents are acting like non-profit organizations and could involve the parents if they perceive a concrete benefits for their children. Through these associations, parents could substitute some of the shortcomings of the school. For example, associations of parents can employ and pay for qualified teachers who could provide extracurricular activities or even curricular activities if these are considered to be insufficient (e.g. sports, IT hours, foreign languages, after school supervision). (c) Rethinking and take action for changing the legal educational framework in order to facilitate the setting up and the functioning of these associations of parents. In order to have continuity and to be more efficient these associations of parents could be established not at class level, but at the school. For instance, one association of parents for primary school (I-IV grades) and another one for secondary level (V-VIII grades).

6. Increase the participation of parents by encouraging the **skilled parents** to take part in the educational process. This way the role of the parents to support the school will be consolidated. We already observed that the parents are hesitating to become part of the school decisional process but they are willing to provide personalised help. This involvement of the parents in the school life should be clearly specified by the law because some of the principals do not trust the parents' contribution to the educational process.

7. The classical parents' class meetings have to be avoided because they are considerate formal and inefficiently. These meetings could be replaced by the **individual discussions with parents** organized once at three months. It is unethical to discuss individual children achievements in group of parents and counterproductive to have this exercise in group. The decision making is also difficult to be taken in a group. The individual meetings with parents should assess the educational progress of the student, his/her strengths and weaknesses, as well as a future development plan. The individual discussions with parents are not time consuming at all. It could be scheduled in a single afternoon day of meetings when every teacher could have the opportunity to meet every parent for 5 to 10 minutes.

The educational reform in SEE countries is still at a low level after two decades of implementation especially from the quality of education point of view. In other words, the educational achievements of pupils are low. The increasing of parents' participation in the school life is proved to be successful but in practice the parents' participation is formal and passive. The increasing of pupils' participation as real stakeholders in the school life could be a tool for stimulating the parents' participation. The parents are very sensitive to the wellbeing of their children. If the children ask them to do something for the school the parents immediately respond positively. For this reason, managing the parents through the students is the best solution for achieving parents' involvement.

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