

## Parental Involvement in Education, Challenges and Recommendations for the Future

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### Abstract

Main purpose of this study is to make a general assessment of parental involvement in education and to give ideas of the way of their involvement to the benefit of a better quality of education for children in Albania. Despite the role of parents in education is considered important in official documents and in the daily propaganda, in reality, the parental movement and parental involvement in education is at low levels and does not provide the necessary influence to a better education of children. Projects and programs implemented by foreign organizations have brought positive experiences in the new conceptions and commitment of activities through the application of contemporary methods and approaches in the field of parenting movement. Nevertheless, these experiences are not sent further ahead and now they have remained just as memories of the past. Based on the principle that the fulfillment of the mission of education can not be done only by school teachers, but it needs the engagement of other factors, among them, parents have an irreplaceable role, the study can assess what is already achieved and can propose ways of strengthening the involvement of parents in education in the Albanian territory.

The study was conducted based on the review and analysis of official documentations of the administration and that of foreign organizations. Questionnaires and interviews were developed and later analysed. As a source of the data collection and analysis were round tables/meetings with stakeholders of education. The study points out that the involvement of parents in education is at lower levels than the pace and goals of education reform in Albania. This situation is due to the insufficient awareness of parents about their role and involvement in education, lack of knowledge and skills of parents to fulfill this role and demotivating policies by authorities at central and school levels to realize the openness to parents.

This is also demonstrated by the fact that the experiences of such programs implemented by foreign organizations in Albania had not achieved their targeted sustainability. This study could not have been completed without the assistance and kindness of many people. We wish to acknowledge and express our appreciation of these people for their invaluable contributions. First, we would like to thank the relevant institutions respectively RED and School management/principals that supported us with official documentation. Second, we owe our deepest gratitude to interviewed teachers and parents as well as all others who have contributed substantially to the quality of this study. We are truly grateful for their time, trust, and commitment.

**Keywords:** Involvement, parents, education, involvement ways/methods, projects, sustainability.

### Introduction

Referring to studies made on education, special attention is paid to the importance of parental involvement in education. As M. Fullan notes, "the boundaries of the school

are now more permeable and more transparent, and this development was both inevitable and desirable.... It is desirable because in postmodern society you can no longer get the job of education done unless you combine forces with others." (Fullan, 2001, 293). Further, this author states that from hundreds of studies on parental involvement in education emerges a message that is remarkable in its consistency: "The closer the parent to the education of the child, the greater the impact on child development and educational achievements (Fullan, 2001, 294).

This phenomenon is related to the complexity of the education process. *Mialaret* explains that "the educational action carried out within the school environment can not forget or ignore what is done in other social settings, in particular, in the family environment. *Postic* goes further, stating that "the study of educational relations can not be separated from the environment in which they develop: the child, and then the teenager exist and develop in the midst of a "welter" of family rapports that have their harmony and dynamism" (Mialaret, 1995, 226). Despite their role in the effectiveness of education in general parents are the child's first educators. They know their children better than anyone else does. They have great interest and are devoted to the success of their children and they also have the knowledge and available skills to provide assistance, knowledge and skills that derive from interests, professions and their place in the community" (Fullan, 2001, 296).

Based on conducted studies on the effectiveness of schools it has been noted that parental involvement practices in education represent one of the 12 factors that distinguish effective schools from less effective ones. (Fullan, 2001, 298).

### **The Legal Aspect of Parental Involvement in Education**

In Albania, historically, in the absence of formal institutions of education, the education of children is carried out only by family and community. Raising up, mental and moral education, equipment with the necessary skills by age were realized through some traditional instruments such as the chambers of men, assemblies, and experiences and models of adults in particular, all these serving to learn manners of living, working, war etc., what was necessary to succeed in life.

The role of parents in the education of children has been evident since the opening of the first Albanian school (in 1887). There are impressive examples where certain parents have offered their land/property to construct schools.

Over the period of communism, parents were organized into "committees of parents' in schools which, in essence, represented a mechanism of dictatorship, who were interested only in educational communist duties and not to protect the rights of children.

Parental participation and parental cooperation in educational institutions after 90s is legitimized by Law no. 7952, dated 21.06.1995, "On Pre-university Educational system". Law no. 7952, dated 21.06.1995 has specified in Articles 12, 18, 19, 24, 40 and 59 the collaboration of parents with educational institutions.

Thus, Article 12 of this Law foresees cooperation of educational institutions with the parents to carry out the tasks provided for these institutions. This collaboration begins since in pre-school, and then in secondary and high schools.

The law has also recognized the existence of public school community, composed of pupils, teachers, the rest of school staff, the parents and their social partners that aim to increase the teaching – the educational level of pupils and their optimal integration in life, the emancipation and progress of the country.

Given that secondary school is compulsory education, parents are obliged to send their children to public or private institutions of compulsory education.

The new law “On pre-university educational system” (2007) has addressed some ways to involve parents in the education process, which have a greater access to parent-school cooperation. In some cases the options granted to parent-school cooperation, are alternatives covered by legal acts in force, but in a more extended form, and in some others they are new alternatives to develop this cooperation.

It should be mentioned that when we analyze current law and compare it with the law no. 7952, dated. 21.06.1995 “On pre-university educational system” amended; we will find a treatment of parent-school rapport far larger than that in the existing law.

If we analyze the ways of involving parents in school, they can be grouped as follows:

- Information on school activities and extracurricular activities.
- Information on the child’s learning achievements.
- The right of free expression/speech (for each activity of the school, teaching staff, for the headmaster, for the personal information etc.
- The right to establish parent’s organisms/organizations (parental participation in school consultative bodies).
- Cooperation with the parent to the child’s education at home conditions (collaboration for tracking the progress of the child outside the school environment)
- Cooperation with parents on all aspects of the institution’ activities.
- Parental participation in developing school-based curriculum.
- Parent-school collaboration on the child’s health condition.
- Cooperation (innovation for the way it is treated) for children with special needs.
- Sanctions for the parent whose child does not attend compulsory school.

## **I. Experience from the Implementation of Projects for Parental Involvement in Education**

In the early 2000s, well-known international organizations undertook initiatives through the education projects, to strengthen parental school movement in Albania. Their experiences are quite interesting, different and worth analyzing.

### **1. The CRS (Catholic Relief Services) “Parent - School Partnership” Program**

The program was applied from 1999 to 2004 in Tirana, Durres, Fier, Elbasan and Kukes regions. The aim of the program was related to parental empowerment movement in school, through close cooperation with teachers and school administrators to improve the quality of education for children. As a strategy were used the awareness of parents and teachers to the need for cooperation, reconstruction of schools involved in the project in order to attract and involve them in the

implementation of project objectives, the allocation of minigrants to implement the mini projects prepared/designed by joint groups of parents and teachers. In this context, there were developed numerous joint activities such as training, inter-regional school visits, conferences and seminars. There were also applied dozens of mini projects which had a positive impact on the conditions of the school premises, enriched didactic tools and made possible the realization of numerous scientific, cultural and sport activities, all these with the massive participation of parents, teachers and students. The project paid attention to parental bodies in schools such as parent councils of classes and schools, ensuring that they function in accordance with normative provisions including their election and take respective responsibilities to help solve the problems in schools. According to project managers it was necessary that parental movements of different schools in different regions of the country cooperate with one another and not be focused within their own schools. In this context, in the districts under project implementation were founded organisms that consisted of parents and teachers, which were named "Coordinating Unit, parent-teacher". Then, these coordinating units elected the leaders and coordinated the actions between parent councils of schools to solve the problems of children education, which were very similar from school to school. A set of training activities to increase the capacities of local units aimed at enabling them to raise the awareness of parents and teachers for collaboration, the designing of projects and fundraising, the conflict resolution, the recognition of child psychology and techniques of lobbying for a better education of children. With the technical and financial support of CRS, these parental organizations were transformed into regional associations were registered as such in the court. Following these steps, the regional associations of parents founded the National Confederation of Parents of Albania. But although the first results were promising, the regional associations and the National Confederation of Parents decreased their impact until today after 10 years, they are nonexistent.

Different generations of parents, mass movements and replacements of teachers, school directors change for partisan reasons are important factors that speak of the lack of achievements sustainability of this program. Another reason is the old mentality and practice of direct actors and beneficiaries of the project who expect only the support of national and international organizations. There is also not enough developed the sense of independence, courage and persistence to solve the problem of their children education by the parents. Parents' feel of volunteering to help in education of their children is at very low levels and they have the view that education belongs only to teacher, school, and state. It is important to note that state institutions that manage education such as teachers, school principal and the Ministry of Education, are not fully opened to the parents and their bodies, because they fear accountability. This acts as an additional barrier for a partnership with parents and the community.

## **2. Care International "Food for Education" Program**

Almost at the same period of time with the CRS program, in Kukes was also applied a program from Care International called "Food for Education". Given that educational institutions abandonment by children was dramatic in Kukes, the largest in the country (Hajdari & Muja, 2015), the philosophy of this program, was that food for children was a way to make children go to school and kindergarten. Seeing the

extreme poverty conditions of the families in this district, it was thought that this intervention would be effective. Millions of dollars were spent to provide daily food rations, quite rich in meat products and fruit for thousands of school children. This had an immediate impact on school attendance. The classrooms and kindergartens were full of children who had earlier dropped out these institutions. Groups of parents and teachers were set up in schools to support this project. They had the responsibility to be part of the tendering procedure of food, to monitor the fair distribution and the quality of food as well as to organize activities at school with other parents, teachers and students. This enhanced their cooperation, and had a great impact on the improvement of the education quality to children. These groups were intensively trained to develop and enhance their capabilities and skills for project designing, to recognize legal acts of parents in school activities and the community involvement techniques in education. After the project completion, the raised groups broke up and students and children who once had abandoned school or those who were inclined to drop it, did it again. In our opinion the main obstacle for sustainability of the products of the program is the lack of interest from the beneficiaries (parents and students). It seems that they were exclusively interested only in material side, food and not in strengthening their role to solve the problem of dropouts or other problems related to education in school. Duration of the implementation of this program was limited by the lack of funds and this had a negative impact on opportunities of enhancing the strategies of the program: in addition to the school dropouts the reduction of food and increase of awareness activities as well as the cooperation between parents and teachers in other aspects of education.

### **3. The Project CDE (Center for Democratic Education), “establishment and strengthening of the Parents Regional Advisory Boards” supported by UNICEF**

Thanks to support and funding from UNICEF Albania, Centre for Democratic Education (CDE), a pilot project was implemented for the parental movement in three districts of the country Kukes, Korca and Gjirokastra. The main goal was to create Parents Regional Boards at the Regional Directorates of education in order to be recognized by the Ministry of Education and Science and later be included in the laws and regulations that govern the operation of RED-s.

Prior to the start date of the project, the CDE (Center for Democratic Education) assessed the current situation on parental involvement in education throughout the whole country (Gjermani & Musai, 2008).

With the start of the project, boards of parents were raised at the educational directorates, whose members were elected and mandated by the council of parents of the schools involved in the project. The Boards of parents were thought as advisory bodies, not as decisiontaking ones. They would operate at the RED-s with a double task: first they had to convey to the parental councils and to other parents in schools the meaning and directions of educational reform. Second, they would address to the RED-s the problematic issues of education, concerns of parents and teachers and propose solutions for these issues. In addition to parents, in the board were included members from the students' governments as well as local media. The Board elects its director every month, a position which functions with rotation and prepares a monthly

action plan in which are included the duties of all board members. The activity of the board to the RED is grounded on a cooperation agreement. This activity is based on a guide that is prepared for the establishment and functioning of the board. It has been foreseen that the activities are held monthly and for every meeting to be kept a protocol/minutes of meeting. It was also foreseen that an inspector from the RED coordinate actions of the two parties. Members of the parents' board will do voluntary work. One of the tasks conceptualized and managed by the board members, was the discussion of the potential improvements to the legislation on parental involvement in education with parents. The main suggestion was recognition of the regional boards of parents.

A summary of this material was made available to the Ministry of Education and Science, but it did not get its approval to be included in the Normative Provisions. It was only, under the pressure made by UNICEF, in 2010-2011 academic year (with active force for only a year) that Ministry of Education and Science recommended the RED-s of the country, to raise the regional boards of parents. It is obvious that after completion of the project, the regional boards of the parents stopped altogether. As it generally happens with other projects, sustainability remains a problem. Regional Boards of Parents and the project for them was an idea of the designers and it did not come as a need of the Ministry of Education or of the RED-s. After years of operation, the Ministry of Education and not CDE experts would assess the activity of this parent boards and their necessity for enhancing the parental involvement in education, to the benefit of children and the fulfillment of their right for a high quality and decent education.

## II. The Current Challenge of Parents' Involvement in Education

### 1. Awareness for the Need of Inclusion

Parents generally associate their cooperation with school to getting informed about their child progress, his behavior at school and his relationship with other students/their friends. Children get more interested in learning if they see their parents get closer/more interested in/to school thus contributing to a better behavior, personality and results as well.

90% of parents say that they cooperate with teachers to their child's success.

10% of parents show a higher degree of awareness of the need for cooperation with the school, noting that this assists teachers in educating their children; they give their opinions on the learning process, learn how they could help their children and give help to improve learning process.

### 2. What do Parents Require/Demand from School?

Parents seek out schools where their children can receive a good education, ensure a secure future, and not leave their country. They are concerned that children receive consistent knowledge and enforce their good behaviour.

According to the parents this is related to the need of schools

- having highly qualified and devoted teachers
- having necessary teaching tools
- providing school uniforms and more available books for children to read.
- Many parents are concerned that teachers must increase the demands on children, apply the rules of discipline and children be treated equally.

### 3. Issues Discussed in Teacher-Parent Meetings

The results obtained from questionnaires to teachers and parents denote that in the meetings teacher-parent-student are mainly discussed the achievements of the children, the discipline equipment of students with school materials, attendance, and learning achievements. In these meetings are also exchanged views on the future of children, is discussed increasing of parents participation in meetings and their commitment to solve the problems related to school, the quality of teaching, teacher-student relations, safety at school, the risk of smoking, alcohol and drugs, as well as hygiene issues, etc.

Teachers claim that parental participation in meetings organized by school is 50-60%. According to the frequency of meetings held at school 64% of parents say they are held once a month, 18% rarely and only a limited part of the parents (10%) attend those meetings once a week or once every two weeks.

Referring to the level of parents satisfaction with regard to the quality of meetings by school it results that 60% of parents are satisfied and 20% are not satisfied. The latter demand that teachers be better prepared, and more parents participate in these meetings.

Regarding the readiness and willingness of teachers to have meetings with parents, 80% of parents reply "often" and 20% "sometimes" or "rarely".

Concerning the opportunity during the meeting to meet and talk with school principal only 50% of parents agree its quite high whereas the rest of them point that it is rather limited or there is little or no opportunity to do so.

To the question 'how was the parents council elected?' 60% of parents answered that the council members have been elected directly by the parents, 30% indicate that the composition simply does follow that of the previous year and 10% say that parents' council is elected by the form teacher. 50% of teachers are fully satisfied and many have good partnerships with the parents of their students, while 50% have reservations and ask for a better one.

### 4. Obstacles to Building an Effective School - Parent Collaboration

Obstacles to building a successful cooperation with parents teachers address to their overload from work (20%), the poor impact of parents on their children (40%), parents do not show interest in learning by their children (20%), parents do not have the educational background to help their children (20%). As we can clearly see, almost all the responsibility of deficiencies in cooperation with parents is a result of these lacks by parents' side.

According to parents the obstacles for their involvement in education are, lack of time (40%), lack of capacity to help their children (15%), lack of requests for cooperation by teachers side (15%), meetings are not well organized (10%). Other parents do not see any obstacle in building good relationships with teachers. It is positive that parents are aware of obstacles raised by them to be involved in education, but on the other hand they have the courage to address critics against teachers and school leaders to enhance their cooperation. 60% of school principals say that teachers have gaps in their preparation for effective cooperation with parents, while 40% think that teachers are well prepared for the process.

### III. Conclusions and Recommendations

#### 1. Conclusions

The analysis of the recorded data shows that parental school movement has been greatly enhanced. This has been enabled by the legal basis of legislation which has created considerable possibilities for the involvement of parents in education and experience gathered from the implementation of specific projects and programs implemented by national and international organizations. Compared to the data of the study conducted earlier (Gjermani & Musai, 2008), it appears that there are some optimistic indications such as the frequency of meetings with parents in school, their engagement in parents' councils and other bodies of the school, a higher awareness of parents to the need of getting involved in solving the school problems, the range of problems analyzed and discussed by parents in school, parents demands towards themselves, teachers and school administrators to enhance and ensure a more productive cooperation between parents and teachers.

The data also show that it is necessary to recognize and face the challenges of parent involvement in education. As can be seen from collected data there is a significant number of cases when parents do not participate in school meetings and the parents councils of school or class are not elected at all or they are elected in a nondemocratic way. Also, a lack of readiness of many teachers and directors exists in the approach towards parents, lack of taking responsibilities by both parties, parents and teachers, to improve their relationship; lack of preparation of a considerable number of teachers how to cooperate with parents and a significant emphasis by parents to the interests of their children and problems related to school in general.

These shortcomings are reflected in the insufficient work that is done on education and access of students to knowledge and learning, causing in that way a decline in the quality of students' preparation for life/their future success.

#### 2. Recommendations

Therefore, as per the duties and responsibilities specified in public school by-law on compulsory education for the role of parents in education and the teacher collaboration with them, we believe that it is necessary to take measures for a full implementation of these duties and responsibilities.

Issues of authentic partnership between the school and family ought to occupy more space and to be more deeply analysed in the annual and development plans of schools. In order to enhance and strengthen teacher- parent collaboration it is recommended to include in the curriculum level, possibilities for teachers to get relevant knowledge and gain the skills during their graduation and qualification.

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