

# IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION BY STRENGTHENING THE COOPERATION BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES

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## Abstract

*Different groups of teachers understand and interpret the issue of quality in education in different ways, but they all converge on the same key words which are reciprocal influence, school-family, interaction, synchrony, and cooperation. The studies conducted so far show that civic education is an ongoing general and multidimensional process. The school-family partnership is an important link in the educational process, but in everyday life the interaction is more spontaneous than motivated.*

*This study focuses on discovering the underlying reasons for the barriers faced by the school-family partnership, which shall help solve the problems which hinder the normal process of cooperation between school and family. To find out the extent and reasons for parental involvement/non-involvement in the issues related to children's education it was used the surveying method to conduct an analysis involving 27 schools, 365 teachers and school principals, 1086 pupils and 924 parents. The data processing will indicate the degree of integration and the different forms of integration of modern elements into the Albanian educational system as well as the causes of the present state of affairs. The study reaches in some findings and proposes some recommendations for improving and reinforcing communication between families and schools.*

**Key words:** communication and interaction, cooperation, interests and opportunities, school-family, technology.

## Introduction

Experience so far has shown that civic education is an ongoing, general and multifaceted process entailing an individual's cognitive, affective and social levels. Providing education on a cognitive level is an institutional responsibility of the school. The family's role is mainly linked to the affective and social dimensions (Bianco, 2009). Scientific research on family partnerships at different periods has found that they have undergone considerable changes. Up until the 1950s the family distanced itself from the school, and as a result a central educational context for the child was created, running parallel to the school. In the period 1950 -1980 the relationship developed on the basis of collectivism. The family and school established a closer relationship mediated by the parents' board. After the '80s the relationship becomes individual. The concept of partnership, which initiates national educational policies, necessitates representation not only through collective forums, but also through family individual strategies (Périer, 2005).

The question of quality in education is understood and interpreted in different ways by different groups of educators uninfluenced by each other, but they all converge into the

same key words: reciprocal influence, school-family, interaction, synchrony, and cooperation (Quite 2003). In everyday life, when interaction occurs it is spontaneous rather than motivated. Teachers and parents would prefer it if there was more cooperation, but it is often too difficult to attain. The obstacles that the school – family partnership has to overcome are powered by motives the identification of which will help solve the problems that hamper the normal progress of the school-parent partnership.

### *Problems of the Research*

Schools and families have a common objective which is the education of the new generation and its preparation for the knowledge society. Nowadays teachers and parents are aware of the importance of the process of civic education. Through the eyes of educators this process reveals great values and arouses interest from the pedagogical point of view. According to L.B. Rosenfeld, there is hardly a professional activity where human communication carries more significance and weight than in education. Communication goes beyond teacher-pupil relationships. It is further expanded into the social space where it undoubtedly greatly affects the family (Rosenfeld 1993) for which this process takes on a special importance. Parents are responsible for the upbringing and human development of their children, no matter what the family conditions (an extended family including the affective and educational values offered by grandparents, or nuclear families) and the respective balances are.

The issue raised here is how to educate the new generation about life in a community; teach them what freedom, rights, participation, respect for rules mean; explain why and how democracy works. Communication is what underlies all of these issues, as a value to be obtained, but also as a strategy for implementing the process of education. This study aims at identifying the degree to which the family - school partnership works; discovering what makes it work or not work; suggesting what needs to be improved in order to reinforce this cooperation to the benefit of the quality of the educational process.

## **Methodology of Research**

### *General Background of Research*

The official document of the Ministry of Education “National Strategy for Pre-university Education 2009-2013” (MOE, July 2009) underlines the importance of the role played by the family in joining efforts to address education. However, lack of reliance on its own strength as well as the unsatisfactory level of parental involvement and responsibility is underlined.

What the Ministry of Education states is fair enough. Family support is required to solve the problems that arise during the education process at school. Its authority, until now exercised in the field of social education, is now gaining ground even in the general development of an individual. The family is increasingly being considered as an educational institutional link in addition to it being regarded as a shelter where one finds affection or meets their basic needs.

The following question arises: is the general public aware of and prepared for this family function? Does the school welcome the extension of its activity? What is the position of the two actors, school-family, on the interaction?

This study serves to elaborate on these questions, based on the processing of the data collected from some schools in the District of Shkodra. Evaluations and opinions regarding the school - family partnerships previously stated in official documents, teacher training projects during the conferences held in Albania or in other countries have also been taken into consideration.

### *Sample of Research*

The study sample comprised parents, teachers and pupils of state schools in the district of Shkodra, selected *randomly*. 27 schools were selected from a list of 304 state schools listed alphabetically, starting with the first listed and then one in every ten schools. The schools selected were then used for the selection of 365 teachers and 1086 pupils based on the same criteria, i.e. one every ten teachers or pupils, following an alphabetical order. The parents were selected in the same way during teacher-parent meetings, based on the time of their arrival at the school, a total of 924 parents. Every participant in the questionnaire constitutes a random sample from the total list of every group, because every individual could have been selected unaffected by prejudice.

In order to gather concrete data about school-family relationships and the cooperation between them the *survey* method with *open-ended* questionnaires was adopted. This method was chosen for two reasons. Firstly, the method provides answers by the target group that are honest and true; secondly, it enables the collection of data within a brief period of time from a large scale sample of schools of different levels. The numerical data and information provided by the answers to the questions were analysed according to the respondent target groups. They helped in analysing as well as comparing the answers offered by the respondents.

### *Instrument and Procedures*

*Open* questionnaires were used since they offer the respondents the possibility to express their opinion their way. **The questionnaires were administered by the authors in a classroom/school setting.** The data collection was done with the participants being aware of it and by communicating ethically with the people involved as well as preserving the data confidentiality.

The questionnaires were devised with the specific target group in mind: parents, pupils or teachers. The questionnaires devised for the parents and pupils were similar asking questions like the following:

Are the parents involved in the school life?

What is the reason for their involvement or non-involvement in the school life?

What are the ways in which they get or don't get involved?

What is the method the school uses to send information to the family?

What should the school improve so as to make the school- family cooperation work?

Meanwhile the questionnaire addressed to the teachers was devised rather differently so as to enable a comparison between the answers given by the parents and the answers given by the teachers. Among the questions asked were the following:

What do you think of the aligned school-family activities?

How does the school involve parents in its life?

What needs to be improved by the school to increase the involvement level?

According to you, which is the cause of parental involvement/non-involvement?

Do you get support from the educational executive structures in handling parent-teacher relationships?

The data gathered appears in separate tables in order to illustrate the different perceptions the parents, pupils and teachers have.

### *Data Analysis*

The teachers and pupils completed their questionnaires during classes with the permission and approval of the Regional Educational Directorate in Shkodra. The parents completed theirs

during the Parent- Teacher meetings arranged by the school after school hours. That is why it lasted almost the whole month - April 2011. 2375 questionnaires were completed in total.

State schools were selected for the simple reason that they feature pupils from all social classes. Their geography is comprehensive, covering both urban and rural areas.

## Results of Research

As with other research, this survey's findings juxtapose perceptions in connection with the parental involvement in the educational process. The following perceptions are included there: a) parents', b) pupils' as well as c) teachers' and school principals'. The perceptions refer to the involvement/non-involvement, ways of involvement, and interventions for improving the situation.

The data in table 1 and 2 below provides information on the reasons for parental involvement/non-involvement in the school life based on parent perceptions.

**Table 1. Parent perceptions of the reasons for involvement in the school life.**

Reasons for involvement according to parents	Number of answers
<b>Group A</b>	<b>357</b>
We are interested in the progress of our child at school	197
I want to know what happens with my child at school	142
We are useful for the school	18
<b>Group B</b>	<b>203</b>
We feel welcome in the school thanks to the teachers and school principals	86
The school arranges meetings with us at convenient times	68
The school and we are on the same page	49
<b>Group C</b>	<b>55</b>
Our child has asked us to.	55
<b>Total</b>	<b>615</b>

As the data in table 1 shows 66.6% of the respondent parents gave a positive answer as regards their involvement in the school life. Based on the similar nature they have, motives can be classified into three groups. Group A (38.7%) consists of parents who are aware of their role as educators and of the need to work in partnership with schools. Group B (21.9%) consists of parents who become involved in the school life prompted by the correct behaviour and convenient times offered by the school. Group C (6%) consists of parents who become involved urged by their own children and not due to the conviction that they have to collaborate with the school.

**Table 2. Reasons for parental non- involvement in schools. Parents' perceptions.**

Reasons for non-involvement according to parents	Number of answers
<b>Group D</b>	<b>213</b>
I think things are on the right track for as long as the school does not contact me;	80
My child's transcript is all I need to see	74
I have no time to go to my child's school	56
I have always been indifferent to my child's schooling	3
<b>Group E</b>	<b>50</b>
The school doesn't care about what I think	19
There is no understanding between the school and parents	15
The teachers have poor communication skills when it comes to communicating with parents	13
I don't know, I don't understand much of school matters	3
<b>Group F</b>	<b>46</b>
I am embarrassed by my child's marks or behaviour	12
The teachers have no time for me	6
Miscellaneous reasons	29
<b>Total</b>	<b>309</b>

The respondents (33.4%) answered the question about why parents are not involved in the school life. Even in this case three groups of motivation behind involvement could be identified. Group D (17.5%) consists of parents who consider education as a one-sided process, something that is the business of the school and the school alone. Group E (5.3%) consists of parents who tilt towards a conflictual attitude to school rather than being cooperative and group F (5.2%) consists of indifferent parents or parents who have kept their distance from school issues.

**Table 3. Ways parents get involved. Parents' perceptions.**

Ways parents get involved	Number of answers
We have taken part in parent- teacher meetings	480
We have read the information the school has sent us	157
We help our children understand the lessons and do the homework	111
We have expressed our opinion about important matters	111
We have done voluntary work for the school	55
No answers	10

As regards the ways of involvement, they remain traditional and routine, thus not meeting today's standards. If the above numbers were shown graphically as a cake-shaped diagram, it could be concluded that half (52%) of the parents limit themselves to participation in the meetings with the parents' board. The other half is divided among other traditional ways such: 17% limit themselves to the information that the school sends to them and 12% to the help they give their children to do the homework set by the school. A relatively small segment (12%) displays more contemporary ways of getting involved, for example by expressing their opinion about important issues when the school asks them to, and a very small number, about 6%, limit themselves to voluntary work done for the school, considering it as a useful and effective thing benefiting the children.

**Table 4. What the school needs to improve in order to encourage parental involvement according to parents.**

What the school needs to improve	Number of answers
The school should inform us of things that are of interest to us parents	259
The school should keep constant contact with the representatives of the parents' board that convey our concerns	240
The teachers and school executives should be able to understand, listen and learn to communicate with us.	231
The teachers and school executives should welcome us in the decision-making process	138
No answers	56

As the data in table 4 suggests the parents' opinions on this issue are divided evenly. 28% of the parents have reservations about the amount of information the school provides, 26% about the functioning of the relationship existing between the parents' board representation and the school, 25% about the way they communicate with the teachers, 15% about the appreciation of the parents' opinion and 6% are indifferent to this issue.

Summarizing the data reported above, can be said that the parents perceive themselves as involved in the school life, aware of the positive effects of collaboration. Non-involvement, according to them, is to be blamed on the school which must organise more frequent meetings to inform them about what is going on there. The chairs of the parents' board are considered the link between school and family and it's their duty to make a list of the problems experienced and refer these problems to the school for solution. In addition, it is implied that there is room for improvement in communication skills of the parents and principals. This statement is an individual judgment, subjective and cannot in itself be a motive for parental non-involvement.

**Table 5. Reasons for parental involvement in schools. Pupils' perceptions.**

Reasons for involvement according to pupils	Number of answers
They are interested in my progress at school	195
The school has invited them (the teachers and the principal), because my parents have no time to come to the school	141
I have asked them myself to come to my school, since my parents are indifferent to my schooling	130
They want to know how I am doing at school	130
They like the communication with the teachers and the principal	87
<b>Total</b>	<b>683</b>

The data (Table 5) show 683 pupils out of the total number of the respondents that gave a positive answer to the parental involvement in the school life. Parental involvement, as perceived by the pupils themselves, is explained more or less by the same motivations and has more or less the same percentages as in the case of the parent respondents. 38% of them explain the parental involvement with the interest shown by the parent, 13% explain it with the parents' wish to show correct behaviour to the school, but not real interest, 12% think that their parents are urged by the children themselves. Based on the pupils' answers it is concluded

that 63% of the parents are involved in the school while the answers of the parents themselves indicate 66, 6% of parental involvement, compared to the data shown in Table 1. As regards the classification of the motives given by the pupils it is concluded that the number of the parents who are encouraged by them to get involved in the school matters is greater than the number of the parents who declare so themselves (6%). The pupils' perceptions of involuntary parental involvement indicate a smaller percentage (12%) than that elicited from the parents' perceptions (21.9%).

**Table 6. Reasons for parental non-involvement in schools. Pupils' perceptions.**

Reasons for non-involvement according to pupils	Number of answers
There is poor communication between the teachers and parents	272
Parents do not know how to solve school problems	54
The school does not take into consideration the parents' opinion	54
No answers.	23

The data based on the pupils' perceptions (Table 6) shows that 37% of them think their parents are not involved in the school life. More or less the same quantity data is provided shown in Table 2, based on which 33.4% of the parents do not consider themselves involved. The motives offered also display the same statistical data; 25% of the pupils argue for parental involvement on the basis of the unsustainable communication between the school and parents, compared to 23% (group D + E) based on the data in Table 2, 5% link it with the parents' indifference to the problems arising from the school education, compared to 5.3% based on the parents' perceptions (Table 2).

**Table 7. Ways parents get involved in the school. Pupils' perceptions.**

Ways parents get involved according to pupils	Number of answers
They take part in parent – teacher meeting arranged by the school	597
They help me with my school work at home	228
No answers	163
They contribute by doing voluntary work when the school asks for it	98

The data in the table above reflects fewer ways to be involved according to pupils, compared to those in Table 3. A larger number is noticed in the participation in parent-teacher meetings (55%), more or less the same as 52% according to the parents' perception. An approximate data is shown concerning the help parents give their children at home (21%) compared to the one in Table 3 (17%). A slight increase in voluntary contribution by parents is noticed as perceived by their children (9%) against 6% in Table 3. What is evident is an increase in the number of those not saying anything about the way parents are involved, 15% against 1% shown in Table 3.



**Table 8. What does the school need to improve in order to encourage parental involvement according to the pupils' perception.**

What does the school need to improve according to pupils	Number of answers
Teachers and school principals should invite parents more often to come to the school	326
The parent-teacher meetings should be at a convenient time because parents are busy	163
The school should inform the parents of extracurricular activities so as to get their permission	152
The school should not reproach parents about our poor results at school	142
The teachers should be more humble and understanding of parents	119
The teachers should inform the parents of our progress in school	108
The teachers should treat all the parents equally despite the social status they might have	76

As the above data also suggests (Table 8) approximately 30% of the pupils seek wider cooperation on the part of the school. This is also concluded based on the parents' perceptions 26% (Table 4). Teacher-parent communication needs improvement as well; 11% of the pupils seek a simple communication on the part of the teachers, 7% respect for the parent figure, 13% ethical behaviour when teachers communicate with parents. Thus, approximately 31% of the pupils consider the communication between parents and teachers as deficient, compared to 25% of the parents who express this concern. 24% of the pupils perceive the information provided by the school as insufficient, compared to 28% of the parents who perceive it as such.

**Table 9. Reasons for parental involvement in the school as perceived by teachers and school principals.**

Reasons for involvement according to teachers and school principals	Number of answers
Parents' education level & family background	175
Positive atmosphere at home	110
Encouragement by the child himself/herself who feels judged by the teacher	58
Pupils' marginal scores	22

The data in Table 9 concludes that 48% of the teachers argue for parental involvement in the school life on the basis of the parents' intellectual background; 30% account for it on the basis of a family's economic and social position which makes parents more inclined to see benefits from their involvement in their children's education; 16% are of the opinion that parents feel imposed upon by their own children to get involved in the school life; 6% are of the opinion that the parents of the pupils with very high scores or very low scores create a more affectionate relationship with the school by getting involved in its life. The motivation stated by the majority of the teachers 48% (Table 9) justifies the reasons given by the majority of the parents 38.7% (Table 1) and the pupils 38% (Table 5), according to which parents are aware of the importance of the interaction with the school.

**Table 10. Reasons for parental non-involvement in the school life according to the teachers' perception and the school principals' perception.**

Reasons for non-involvement according to teachers and school principals	Number of answers
The parents' low level of education	157
Indecent standard of living	77
The negative social phenomena which have surfaced in the transition years in Albanian families	62
Lack of time to engage in school activities	40
Continuation of the long-standing tradition which considers school separate from family	29



According to the perception of 43% of the teachers (Table 10), the low intellectual level of the parents dictates their non-involvement in the school life; 21% reason that the low living standard contributes to loss of interest in children's education; 17% think that families experiencing social problems (blood feuds, domestic violence, unemployment), that abound in our country, have a negative effect on the attitude held towards school; 11% are of the opinion that parents seem to fail to find the time needed to devote to school matters; 8% think that parents inherit an outdated perception of the school from the past. It is considered an authority in itself, separate from family, establishing its own relationship with the child alone. However, the low education level remains the underlying cause of parental non-involvement according to the teachers.

**Table 11. Ways used by the school to ensure parental involvement in the school life as perceived by teachers and school principals.**

Methods used by the school to involve parents	Number of answers
Through periodical meetings at the school	219
Through providing oral or written information concerning the child's progress	73
Through brainstorming about issues concerning the organization and functioning of the school life	55
Through engagement in extra-curricular activities	18

Based on the data shown in Table 11 teachers believe that the school has developed a mutual communication system between his/her families and school; 60% of them think parents are involved only through their participation in the meetings organised by the school; 20% of the teachers reason that the school involves parents by providing them with information about their children's progress at school, their evaluation and achievements, informing them about the curricula, develops the curricular activity plan, contacting the families of the pupils who have difficulty acquiring knowledge and skills or have problematic behaviours; 15% consider taking into consideration the parents' opinion as an involvement method; 5% reason that engaging parents in social, cultural, civic extracurricular activities is an involvement method. Even teachers (60% Table 11) like parents (52% Table 3) and pupils (55% Table 7) consider parent-teacher meetings as the main methods for involving parents in the school life.

**Table 12. What does the school need to improve in order to encourage parental involvement according to the perceptions of teachers and school principal.**

What does the school need to improve according to the teachers and principals	Number of answers
Strategies for guiding parents into how to cooperate with the school	128
To involve parents in choosing the curriculum	88
To organise volunteer work activities with parents	91
To allow community use of the school premises	58

Table 12 shows a more or less equal quantitative distribution of the opinions, in contrast to the extreme one noticed in Table 9, 10&11. The majority of teachers (35%) think that the parent orientation strategy needs to be improved: why and how to cooperate with the school; 25% think that parents should feel they need to be involved even in more specific didactic matters such as choosing the curriculum; 24% reason that the managing their voluntary work

benefiting the school would be an efficient way to involve parents; 16% think that parental involvement starts with more frequent encounters. Thus, the school is open to and welcomes everybody at any time, not only when it comes to classes held at school but even beyond that.

The teachers know the factors that have influenced the parental involvement in the school life. The main reason according to the parents and pupils themselves is the children's best interest. The school principals and teachers blame the non-involvement mainly on the parents. It can easily be seen that the parents' and pupils' perception regarding the reasons for parental non-involvement is different from that of the principals and teachers. Parents do take part of the blame for non-involvement but they blame it more on the school, because they fail to see all the benefits from the cooperation with the school. This is the reason why principals and teachers, based on the survey findings, need to reflect on some aspects of the involvement that need improving.

## Discussion

The study shows that parental involvement in the school life is rarely a conscious thing and it is more involuntary. The parents' interest in the child's progress at school surfaces as a primary factor in their involvement. The level of interest shown is determined by two very important indicators: the level of the parents' education which seems to have a considerable impact on the mode of cooperation, and the living standards. The generation of Albanian parents in the last decade was created and educated during the one-party system in Albania, which means limited chances to attend university due to a limited number of scholarships available. It is concluded that there is a low percentage of parents who have received education. In the period 1980-1990 it was about 15-18% of them, which matches the level of interest shown by a limited number of parents in working in partnership with the school. Secondly, the lengthy transition years in Albania have increased unemployment. Based on the data provided by INSTAT Albania, the unemployment figures in the last decade vary from 97-50% for the 21 to 34 age group and 76-62% for 35 year olds and over, which creates an atmosphere which is not at all positive in Albanian families, a considerable part of which live at subsistence levels (according to INSTAT). As a result, parents are less likely to be interested in their children's progress at school, to appreciate the benefits they might have from cooperation with the school. When there is interaction, it happens as a response to the one-sided action on the part of the school, or as a result of parents being informed by the school or parental involvement in the decision-making.

However, the low level of parents' interest in their children's progress at school may increase without claiming the change of their intellectual background, nor a positive effect on the living standard. This may be achieved by aiming at the parents being oriented towards contemporary methods of interaction with the school. Time has come to put knowledge and technological innovations to serve the community. There has not been any lack of experiences of contemporary communication. Telepresence is one of them and it facilitates communication for anyone who has access to a computer and internet, saving their time, which often motivates non-involvement in the child's schooling problems. Based on a recent study on information and technological communication it was concluded that 74% of the population deems it necessary to use technology. About 41% of Albanians own a computer, 1 in 5 is connected to the internet with a dedicated line or a phone line, 92% use mobile phones from which at least 1 text message is sent a day and 63% of households have a fixed telephone line. Local media such as the radio, television, and the press covers every administrative unit (Puka, 2004). This data testifies to an actual possibility for online communication, several times more frequent and faster than meetings in person.

Improvement of communication provides prompt involvement on a larger scale of

parents in the decision-making process, deciding on the curriculum, boosting the confidence, clarifying the school's mission. Community use of school premises for after school activities, the organisation of activities with the voluntary services offered by the parents shall raise their awareness about school-family interaction.

## Conclusions

The relatively low level of cooperation between schools and families is due to two important reasons: the parents' education level and the inadequate economic conditions.

In order to guarantee the quality of the educational process this interaction needs to be improved and the traditional methods of cooperation changed.

The school must work on improving the communication between teachers, school principals and parents, by regarding parents as an integral part of a single system, who need to be informed on a regular basis about their children's progress. The cooperation between schools and parents proves successful if the school invites them, welcomes them, and provides parents with information, through planned periodic meetings, but also through new technological methods of communication such as internet, text messages and local media.

If parents think of the school as being active, interested in helping their children, they will be willing to cooperate and somehow even "carry" the school home through the help and assistance they give to their children at home, through decision-making not only concerning primary issues, but also those of secondary importance, through intellectual contribution when choosing the curricula to the extent that the powers given to do so and the knowledge they possess allow it, through the voluntary work benefiting the school. This is all very important since it fills children with pride and helps create a positive feeling about school.

Community use of the school premises after school hours is an efficient way to minimize distances. Different training entertaining activities can be organized there for parents, pupils and teachers together, which could help improve communication on a human level.

Lastly, designing policies for involving parents in education remains a project to be finalized by many actors, including the institutions for developing central and local government strategies.

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