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Review by DRAGICA PAVLOVIĆ BABIĆ

Parents and School – Partners or Casual Acquaintances?

Are parents active partners in the educational process? Do they participate in daily school life? Are they asked to make decisions that determine the quality of education and the quality of educational outcomes? As a parent or as a person involved in education in any of SEE countries, you could probably guess the answers to these questions, and it is likely that you have a strong sense of their importance. The monograph “Parent Participation in the Life of Schools in South East Europe,” recently published by the Centre for Educational Policy, reports systematic findings of a three-year research project conducted in ten SEE countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia. This research was conducted on regional and national levels. Although dealing with a relatively unexplored issue, the authors, Tünde Kovacs-Cerovic, Vlasta Vizek-Vidovic and Steve Powell, based their research conceptually on the following suppositions: parent participation in education contributes to its quality and equity; the role of the parent in real school life is underestimated; and the parent’s role in education is an underexplored area, at least with regard to SEE countries.

The foundation of the research design is instruments and methodological solutions inspired by, and directly derived from, relevant contemporary theoretical views of parent involvement. In the short introduction, the authors briefly and clearly review some models of the parent involvement process (Hoover-Dempsey) and conceptualisations of family-school partnership (Epstein, Sheridan & Kratochwill). Inspired by theoretical models, the authors define three crucial perspectives connected with parent participation: 1) dimensions of parent participation, 2) role attribution between schools and parents, and 3) the participation process. However, the central research topic is dimensions of parent participation. The operationalisation of these dimensions is inspired by one of the most influential frameworks of parent involvement, as proposed by Epstein, which includes six main types of activities that connect families, schools and communities, focusing on the key role of the child as a student in

interactions between families and schools, parents and teachers, or the community. The examined dimensions are: parenting, communicating, learning at home, volunteering, decision making and collaboration with the community.

The instruments were developed, and the methodological solutions defined, based on theoretical models. It is typical for research in the field of education to use a simple methodology and there is a tendency to decrease the number of variables included in order to ensure the reliability of the conclusions. In the present case, however, the authors' strategies differ significantly. The methodology is exciting in various ways: the combination of quantitative (survey) and qualitative (focus groups, face-to-face interviews, content analysis of legislation) approaches answers the questions "why?" and not only "how many?"; the research instruments were directly inspired by theoretical viewpoints; there are two perspectives (principals' and parents') and four angles (mainstream parents, excluded groups of parents – mainly Roma parents, representatives of mainstream and excluded groups of parents); and the involvement of ten countries, each represented by stratified random samples.

The main structure and size of the sample is impressive for this type of the research. In short, the sample plan adheres to the following outline: Sample A (mainstream parents): 9,058 – from 784 to 936 parents per country; Sample E (excluded parents sample): 504; Sample B (mainstream parents representatives): 1,354; parent representatives from Sample E school: 85. This way, the authors provide research findings reliability, even in the case of traditionally excluded parents, such as Roma parents.

In accordance with the three main perspectives, the major research findings are reported comparatively for each participating country using graphs, following the structure of the research instruments. The research findings are displayed clearly and comprehensibly, graphic data representation is used efficiently, and the authors successfully avoided the trap of excessive redundancy. In short, the authors display methodology and data fluently and a way that is easy to understand. As expected, it was found that schools do not recognise parents as partners and important resources in any way, with the repertoire for practicing participation consisting of the most traditional forms, such as class meetings and periodical reports. On their part, parents reported the highest interest in participation, but they perceive a typical parent more as an obstacle than an active partner: she or he does not know how to communicate and does not have time. Roma parents are even more excluded than the majority parents, and schools are unaware of, and fail to use, one of the most effective mechanisms for overcoming marginalisation. However, parent representatives are recognised as successful promoters of parental interests, thus their main

role is to reduce the distance that exists between schools and parents. Data even indicate that parent representatives depend on their personal skills and readiness to be engaged, since they lack any systemic support.

Finally, conclusions and suggestions are drawn directly from the research findings. They are formulated in order to reduce the gap between schools and parents, and to provide the space for parents to contribute to better educational outcomes:

- all policy makers, national and local, should invest time and plan action to attract and activate parents to be involved in all of the various dimensions of the educational process;
- the role of parent representatives should be better incorporated and established by national policies, including the selection process and systematic trainings; and
- parents from vulnerable groups, especially Roma, require special effort in order to increase their participation.

Thus we have finally acquired a study that deals with the issue of parent participation in education; moreover, it includes the participation of traditionally excluded groups (e.g., Roma), an issue not evaluated by any research until now. In the context of the efforts made by education systems from this region to advance the equity and inclusivity, as well as the quality, of education, issues such as parents are becoming inevitable topics. The research study in question provides relevant findings and conclusions of vital importance for the creation of further education policies, both in the region as a whole and in each participating country.