

Determinants of Parent Involvement in Romanian Schools¹

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Abstract

The paper is focused on exploring the factors that facilitate parent involvement in their child's education and school life. A sample of 670 Romanian school principals from the Cross-National Survey of School Principals in South East Europe (SEE) countries 2008 was used. Two-step linear regressions were run in order to predict parent participation in school meetings, parent engagement in school activities and parent influence in school governance, as reported by school principals. The results indicated that the level of parents' organizations influence on school governance, school administration, and teaching methods is as important as the school background (size, location, budget, principal's experience, and shares of vulnerable children).

Keywords: School Principals, Parent Involvement in School, South East Europe

Theoretical background

Parent involvement encompasses a broad range of parenting behaviours, from supervising children's homework to attendance at parent-teacher organization meetings (Feuerstein, 2001). Parent involvement has been shown to be positively related to children's educational performance in international research (Barnard, 2004; McWayne et al., 2004; Jeynes, 2003; Fan & Chen, 2001; Feuerstein, 2000), prompting us to examine whether the same relations have been found in previous Romanian studies.

Tufiş (2008) and Agabrian (2007) found meaningful associations between parenting and children's school performance. Haragus et al. (2009) also found, in the case of Romania, that contextual factors (such as the support received from parents and teachers) have a significant effect on children's educational performance. Agabrian and Millea (2005) examined the role of parent support in children's school achievement based on Epstein's *theory of the intersection of the influence spheres* and built a model that included parenting, home support for learning, parents' involvement in volunteering activities and in decision/making in school, their involvement and collaboration to solve community issues, and overall communication between parents, schools and communities. Given that the results of the studies conducted in Romania highlighted a significant relationship between parent involvement and children's educational performance, and that parent involvement is seen as a positive factor for children's school success, the present study will focus on exploring the factors that attract parents to school activities.

The article is informed by an ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), that describes the developmental process as an interaction of several subsystems: the *microsystem* (the setting

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in which the individual lives: immediate family, school, community, peer-group, etc.); the *mesosystem* (the relations between microsystems); the *exosystem* (experiences in a social setting in which an individual does not have an active role but which nevertheless influence experience in an immediate context); the *macrosystem* (or the cultural context in which individuals live); and the *chronosystem* (the patterning of environmental events and transitions over the life course). The present study is focused on the importance of the mesosystem, more precisely on the interrelations between family and school. In doing so, the article mainly considers three types of activities from Epstein's (1996) framework of parent involvement: *communicating* (attending school-meetings), *volunteering* (engaging in school activities), and *decision-making* (influencing school governance).

In identifying the determinants of parent involvement in school, the author was inspired by Feuerstein's (2001, p.29) observation that there is a need for a new research agenda that moves beyond individual-and family-level demographics to school-level characteristics that may be more easily manipulated by teachers and administrators. This decision was also supported by the results of a recent Romanian study (Hatos, 2008) indicating that school-level characteristics (like the quality and the intensity of the cooperation between students and teachers, between the teachers themselves, the distribution of material resources, facilities and human resources) have a significant impact on academic results. Haragus et al. (2009; 2010) also found significant associations between pupils' academic performance and contextual factors, such as children's relation to teachers, to parents and to other community (neighbourhood) members, as well as school and community characteristics.

As Feuerstein (2001) noted, most studies on school-effectiveness focus on the relationship between school-level factors and student achievement, rather than on the relationship between school-level factors and parent involvement. Studies that have investigated school-level influences on parent involvement reported a variety of factors that can be grouped under three broader categories: staff characteristics, student characteristics, and school characteristics. Thus, staff characteristics, such as age, experience, racial composition, disposition toward parents may affect teachers' ability and interest to work with parents; student characteristics, such as socio-economic status and minority composition play a crucial role in determining parent involvement; school characteristics, such as location (urban, suburban, rural), size, academic focus, climate and sense of community may influence levels of parent participation (Feuerstein, 2001, p. 32).

The theoretical framework of this study is provided by the theory of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977), a theory that often helped explain the differences in parent involvement. According to this theory, schools represent and reproduce middle-or upper-class values and forms of communication as school teachers come from predominantly middle-or upper-class backgrounds. Parents coming from similar social backgrounds can easily relate to teachers and get involved in school-life, while parents who belong to working-class find it difficult to do so. These differences in parent involvement may lead to the reproduction of status relations among groups (Bourdieu, 1977). This is of particular interest in disadvantaged areas where most parents are working-class and schools benefit from less facilities and qualified personnel – which could diminish cultural differences between the school environment and parents' background. Coleman (1988) developed the notion of social capital to refer to the social networks available to parents that enhance students' academic opportunities. According to Coleman, all schools have the social structures that influence students' performance, but some schools possess more social capital than others. However, Coleman does not question social inequalities, but rather states that social networks are resources available to all parents. It is worth noting that, for the present study, the social networks available to parents are understood as parents' organizations. The role of parents' organizations is to represent parents' interest in all interactions with school and to communicate with parents and on behalf of parents, thus constituting a meaningful social network for parents in general. The current study considers this assumption when analysing the overall parent involvement in school.

The school-level factors that influence parent involvement can be of considerable interest to school policy-makers as some of these factors (school climate, inclusiveness, consideration of

parents' and parents' organizations interests) may be influenced more easily than the individual factors (e.g. socio-economic status). Thus, the paper intends to identify the conditions in which parents tend to be more engaged in their children's school-life.

Method

Data for this study were taken from the *Cross-National Survey of School Principals in South East Europe (SEE) countries 2008* that was collected from a nationally representative sample of school principals in ten SEE countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia, Moldavia, Serbia, Kosovo, Romania, Montenegro)³. In Romania's case, the survey used a random monostadial stratified sample consisting of 670 principals from schools with grades I to VIII (primary and middle schools). The sample is representative of the target population (6.135 schools with grades I-VIII) with an error margin of +/- 3% at 95% confidence level. The questionnaire was structured in 7 modules: school background information, school-parent communication, opportunities for parents to support school activities, parenting training services for parents, parent involvement in school governance, general attitudes, and a country-specific module. As the instrument was designed to measure school principals' reports on parent involvement, a major limitation of these data is the lack of objectivity and the absence of third-party information.

The main research question of the study is: What are the factors that influence parent involvement in Romanian schools? In order to answer it, school-and parent-related factors shall be considered from the perspective of cultural and social capital. Previous studies found that parent communication with schools, parent volunteering and membership in parent-teacher organizations were more heavily influenced by school characteristics (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996; Kerbow & Bernhardt, 1993). Such findings imply that only some schools have the ability to improve levels of parent participation in the schooling process, depending on their social capital (Coleman, 1988). Therefore, the following research question emerges (RQ1): How does parent involvement vary according to the school background?

In Shatkin and Gershberg's (2007) findings, schools where parents are given meaningful decision-making authority and principals actively facilitate parent involvement, report improved school performance and school-community relations. As parents' organizations represent important social networks for parents, mediating their interests in the relation with the school, we shall assume that there is a significant association between parents' organizations activity and the degree of school involvement on behalf of parents in general, thus formulating another research question (RQ2): What is the relation between parent organizations activity and parents' overall involvement in schools?

Parent involvement was defined, using the variables provided by this questionnaire, through three types of activities that also appear in Epstein's (1996) framework: communicating (attending school-meetings), volunteering (engaging in school activities), and decision-making (influencing school governance).

In order to measure the parent participation in school meetings, the question used was "Please estimate the percentage of parents in your school regularly (at least half time of meetings) engaged in: a) form-teacher – parents meetings, b) teacher – parents meetings, c) school principal – parents meetings". Four answer choices were provided: 1) less than 25 percent, 2) over 25 but less than 50 percent, 3) over 50 but less than 75 percent, 4) over 75 percent, along with no response options. The internal consistency of these 3 items is good (Cronbach alpha > 0.8). To create the *parent participation in school meetings* variable, the items measuring parents' attendance to all three types of school meetings (with form-teacher, teachers and school principal) were summed up.

³ For more information, see <http://www.see-educoop.net/aciq>

To measure parent engagement in school activities, first an open-ended question was used: *which do you consider to be the three school activities in your school that most successfully engage parents?* All responses were coded and it resulted that the three most successful school activities: school festivities, administrative activities, and extracurricular activities. Second, another question was used: *Please estimate the percentage of parents that have engaged in: a) school festivities, b) administrative activities, c) extracurricular activities.* Four answer choices were provided: 1) *less than 25 percent*, 2) *over 25 but less than 50 percent*, 3) *over 50 but less than 75 percent*, 4) *over 75 percent*, along with no response options. The internal consistency of these 3 items is acceptable (Cronbach alpha > 0.7). The *parent engagement in school activities* variable was created by summing up parents' total participation in these three most successful school activities. However, this variable was composed from an open-ended question, and we considered only the cases where the 3 most popular activities were quoted when estimating the percentage of parents engaging in them. Therefore, for this variable we have only 247 valid cases for analysis (out of 670).

For measuring the overall parent influence in school governance, the following question was used: *Indicate the extent of influence in general parents in your schools have in practical school life in the following: a) evaluation of teachers' performance, b) hiring and firing of teachers, c) selection of textbooks and other teaching materials used in class, d) setting priorities for the school budget, e) social activity planning, f) development or up-dating of school policies and regulations, g) decisions taken at classroom level, h) decisions taken at school level.* Four answer choices were provided: 1) *not at all*, 2) *little*, 3) *some*, 4) *to a great extent*, along with no response options. The internal consistency of these 8 items is good (Cronbach alpha > 0.8). All items in this variable were summarized to create the *parent influence in school governance* variable.

Originally, we intended to create a global indicator of parent involvement, therefore we correlated these 3 variables (Parents' participation in school meetings, Parents' engagement in school activities, and Parents' influence in school government). However, only *Parents' participation in school meetings* and *Parents' engagement in school activities* correlated significantly ($r=0.531$, $p<0,001$). Due to the high number of missing cases in *Parents' engagement in school activities* variable, we opted to analyse the two indicators of parent involvement separately, so as not to diminish the total number of cases entered in the regression analyses. Also, *Parents' influence in school government* correlated poorly with *Parents' participation in school meetings* ($r=0.163$) and with *Parents' engagement in school activities* ($r=0.172$), therefore it cannot be included into a composite variable.

Table 1 shows the frequency of parents' engagement in various school activities as reported by school principals. It can be seen that in most schools there is an increased parent participation in school meetings (between 50-75% of the parents attending such meetings in nearly one half of the schools in the sample). In over 50% of the schools a high share of the parents (between 50-75%, over 75%) engage in the three most successful school activities as mentioned above. However, in most schools (88.8%) parents have little or no influence in school government.

Table 1: *Descriptive analysis of parent involvement*

| Parent involvement variables | % |
|---|------|
| Parents' participation in school meetings | |
| Less than 25% | 8.0 |
| Over 25%. but less than 50% | 22.2 |
| Over 50%. but less than 75% | 48.4 |
| Over 75% | 21.4 |
| Parents' engagement in school activities | |
| Less than 25% | 12.1 |
| Over 25%. but less than 50% | 34.5 |
| Over 50%. but less than 75% | 37.2 |
| Over 75% | 16.2 |
| Parents' influence in school government | |
| Not at all | 32.8 |
| To little extent | 56.0 |
| To some extent | 6.9 |
| To a large extent | 4.3 |

These figures suggest that some schools are more successful than others in involving parents in their children's school life. In order to find out what makes the difference, factors related to schools' background were examined (Table 2).

Table 2: *School background variables (N=670)*

| Variables | % | Dummy variables |
|---|------|--|
| <i>School principal's gender</i> | | <i>Gender</i> |
| Women | 51.9 | Women = 1 |
| Men | 48.1 | Men = 0 |
| <i>School location</i> | | <i>Location</i> |
| Urban | 25.2 | Urban = 1 |
| Rural | 74.8 | Rural = 0 |
| <i>School size</i> | | <i>School size (3 var.)</i> |
| Small (≤ 99 pupils) | 23.9 | Small = 0; Average, Large = 1 |
| Average (100-499 pupils) | 63.7 | Average = 0; Small, Large = 1 |
| Large (≥ 500 pupils) | 12.4 | Large = 0; Small, Average = 1 |
| <i>School budget</i> | | <i>Budget</i> |
| Sufficient | 77.5 | Sufficient = 1 |
| Insufficient | 22.5 | Insufficient = 0 |
| <i>Principal's experience as a director</i> | | <i>Principal's experience (3 var.)</i> |
| Low (≤ 5 yrs) | 51.3 | Low = 0; Average, High = 1 |
| Average (6-15 yrs) | 28.7 | Average = 0; Low, High = 1 |
| High (≥ 16 yrs) | 20.0 | High = 0; Low, Average = 1 |

School principal positions are equally distributed among women and men. However, the sampled schools are located predominantly in rural areas (74.8%). Principals were asked to *estimate the total number of pupils enrolled in your school in the academic year 2007/2008*. In order to create the "school size" variable, schools have been broken down (according to the reported number of pupils) into three categories: *small* (schools with up to 99 pupils), *average* (schools with 100 to 499 pupils) and *large* (schools with over 500 pupils). Most schools in our sample were of average size (63.7%).

Principals were asked to describe *the school budget for the 2007/2008 school year* in terms of being able to pay the utility bills, using a categorical scale of four levels: 1) *very good*, 2) *sufficient*, 3) *insufficient*, 4) *extremely bad*. To create the variable measuring school budget, the four categories were reduced to two by summarizing the first two under the label *sufficient* (covers all utility bills) and the last two under the label *insufficient* (hardly covers the utility bills). Nearly a quarter (22.5%) of the sampled schools had an insufficient budget for the 2007/2008 school year.

The principals were asked to *report the number of years you have been the director of this school*. A variable indicating principal's experience was created, by grouping the reported number in three categories: *low* (up to 5 years), *average* (between 6-15 years) and *high* (16 years or more).

The school background variables were recoded into dummy variables (Table 2) in order to be used in regression analyses predicting parent involvement patterns.

An important factor in the school background profile is the percentage of children belonging to vulnerable categories (Table 3). Principals were asked to estimate *the share of children that: a) come from a household without regular income, b) come from single parent households, c) come from households with one parent working abroad, d) come from households with both parents working abroad, e) come from orphanages, f) belong to an ethnic minority*, using a categorical scale of four levels: 1) *less than 5%*, 2) *more than 5%, but less than 10%*, 3) *more than 10%, but less than 25%*, 4) *more than 25%*. The above mentioned items cannot be used as a scale measuring vulnerability, as its internal consistency is low (Cronbach alpha > 0.5), therefore the items shall be used independently. According to principals' reports, the biggest problems that occur to over 25% of the children in their school are poverty (63.2%), migrated parents (11.6%, 4.2%) and being a member of the Roma minority (11.3%). Each item was recoded into a dummy by splitting values into two categories, by summarizing the first two under the label *under 10%* (=0) and the last two under the label *over 10%* (=1).

Table 3: Shares of vulnerable children in schools

| Share of children who: | <5% | >5 to <10% | >10 to <25% | >25% | Dummy var. |
|---|------|------------|-------------|------|-------------------------------|
| Come from a household without regular income [<i>No reg. income</i>] | 10.6 | 12.1 | 14.1 | 63.2 | Under 10% = 0 Over 10% = 1 |
| Come from single parent households [<i>Single parent</i>] | 57.8 | 28.2 | 11.3 | 2.7 | Under 10% = 0 Over 10% = 1 |
| Come from households with one parent working abroad [<i>1 migrated parent</i>] | 50.2 | 22.7 | 15.5 | 11.6 | Under 10% = 0 Over 10% = 1 |
| Come from households with both parents working abroad [<i>2 migrated parents</i>] | 77.5 | 13.1 | 5.2 | 4.2 | Under 10% = 0 Over 10% = 1 |
| Come from orphanages [<i>Orphans</i>] | 97.2 | 1.4 | 0.7 | 0.7 | Under 10% = 0 Over 10% = 1 |
| Belong to an ethnic minority [<i>Ethnic minority</i>] | 72.7 | 8.5 | 7.5 | 11.3 | Under 10% = 0 Over 10% = 1 |

Other factors that must be taken into consideration when analyzing parent involvement are parent organizations: *School Board* (SB), *Parents' Committee* (PCOMM) and *Parents' Council* (PC). As the questionnaire was addressed only to school principals, the activity of parent organizations is evaluated in terms of principals' degree of satisfaction.

In order to measure principals' level of satisfaction with School Board, principals were asked to answer the following question: *How satisfied are you with parental members of the School Board (SB) from the view of: a) the attendance at SB meetings, b) the input provided at SB meetings, c) the SB support provided to solve problems related to school life, d) the extent at which SB decisions*

are communicated to Parents' Council. Four answer choices were provided: 1) *not at all*, 2) *to a limited extent*, 3) *to some extent*, 4) *to a large extent*, along with no response options. The internal consistency of these 4 items is good (Cronbach alpha > 0.8). Therefore, the items of the scale were summarized and divided to four in order to form a single variable: *principals' satisfaction with parent members of the SB*. It resulted that principals are rather satisfied with School Board activity (Table 4). Besides ensuring a very good communication with Parents' Council, School Board members attend and provide quality input at school meetings in a quite satisfactory manner; however, principals tend to be less satisfied with the support provided by the School Board to solve school-related problems.

Table 4: *Principals' satisfaction with parent members of the School Board (SB)*

| Principal is satisfied with: | Not at all (%) | To a limited extent (%) | To some extent (%) | To a large extent (%) |
|--|----------------|-------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|
| a. The attendance at SB meetings | 2.4 | 15.2 | 55.6 | 26.8 |
| b. The input provided at SB meetings | 5.8 | 20.1 | 54.4 | 19.7 |
| c. The SB support provided to solve problems related to school life | 7.5 | 24.6 | 49.0 | 18.9 |
| d. The extent at which SB decisions are communicated to Parents' Council | 3.0 | 11.2 | 58.7 | 27.1 |

The question *How much does the Parents' Committee influence the following areas in the daily life of your school: a) pedagogical methods used by teachers, b) content of lessons, c) the planning of extracurricular activities, d) the planning of school infrastructure development, e) helping pupils to value education, f) facilitating increased involvement of parents in school life*, was used to measure principals' perception of Parents' Committee (PCOMM) influence on the daily life of the school. Four answer choices were provided: 1) *not at all*, 2) *to a limited extent*, 3) *to some extent*, 4) *to a large extent*, along with no response options. The internal consistency of these 6 items is good (Cronbach alpha > 0.8). Therefore, the items of the scale were summarized and divided to six, in order to construct a single variable: *principals' perception of Parents' Committee influence on the daily life of the school*. According to Table 5, Parents' Committee has little or no influence on the teaching methods used in class and even less so on lesson content. Parents' Committee is not expected to shape the educational process, but rather to play a complementary role, helping pupils to value education and facilitating other parents' involvement. Parents' Committee also plays an important part in planning extracurricular activities and planning school infrastructure development.

Table 5: *Principals' perception on Parents' Committee (PCOMM) influence on the daily life of the school*

| PCOMM can influence the following: | Not at all (%) | To a limited extent (%) | To some extent (%) | To a large extent (%) |
|---|----------------|-------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|
| a. Pedagogical methods used by teachers | 56.2 | 34.4 | 7.4 | 2.0 |
| b. Content of lessons | 74.0 | 22.2 | 3.0 | 0.8 |
| c. The planning of extracurricular activities | 15.6 | 29.4 | 49.0 | 6.0 |
| d. The planning of school infrastructure development | 27.4 | 36.7 | 31.1 | 4.8 |
| e. Helping pupils to value education | 10.4 | 19.9 | 51.8 | 17.9 |
| f. Facilitating increased involvement of parents in school life | 8.1 | 23.3 | 53.3 | 15.3 |

School principals' perception on Parents' Council (PC) prerogatives was measured using the question: *In the case of your school, are members of the Parents' Council entitled to: a) participate at meetings where school level decisions are taken, b) actively participate in the elaboration of new school policies, c) initiate the modification of existing school policies, d) initiate the adoption of new policies, e) veto the adoption of rules they disagree with.* Three answer choices were provided: 1) *under no circumstance*, 2) *by invitation only*, 3) *without restrictions*, along with no response options. The internal consistency of these 5 items is good (Cronbach alpha > 0.8). Therefore, the items of the scale were summarized and divided to five, in order to form a single variable: *principals' perception of Parents' Council prerogatives*. In what concerns the prerogatives of Parents' Council, it appears that participation at meetings where decisions are made and taking part in the elaboration of new school policies are the two most popular activities exerted with no restriction or by invitation (Table 6). Principals are more reserved regarding Parents' Council's right to initiate the adoption or the modification of existing school policies and to veto the adoption of rules they disagree with.

Table 6: *Principals' perception of Parents' Council (PC) prerogatives*

| PC has the right to: | Under no circumstance (%) | By invitation only (%) | Without restrictions (%) |
|---|---------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| a. Participate at meetings where school level decisions are taken | 0.6 | 24.9 | 74.5 |
| b. Actively participate in the elaboration of new school policies | 5.0 | 28.1 | 66.9 |
| c. Initiate the modification of existing school policies | 16.8 | 22.2 | 61.0 |
| d. Initiate the adoption of new policies | 20.1 | 22.3 | 57.6 |
| e. Veto the adoption of rules they disagree with | 11.1 | 19.5 | 69.4 |

From the previous descriptive analyses concerning parent involvement, at least 2 categories of schools emerged: (1) *schools with low parent involvement* (participation in school meetings of under 50%, engagement in successful school activities of under 50%, influence in school governance to little extent or not at all); and (2) *schools with high parent involvement* (participation in school meetings of over 50%, engagement in successful school activities of over 50%, influence in school governance to some or to great extent). By relating parent involvement to schools' background and parent organizations activity, the study aims to investigate the factors that facilitate parent participation.

Results

Factors favouring parent involvement

In order to answer the research questions (RQ1 and RQ2) and identify the factors that lead to increased parental involvement (participation in school meetings, engagement in school activities, influence in school governance), variables concerning school background and parent organizations activity were used as predictors in two-step linear regression analyses.

Parent participation in school meetings. The proportion of variance in parent participation in school meetings accounted for by the 2 sets of variables along with the standardized beta coefficients are reported in Table 7.

It appears that 8.2% of the variance in parent participation in school meetings is due to school background related factors. Thus, a higher participation in school meetings is more likely to occur in schools with a sufficient budget ($p < 0.05$), located in rural areas ($p < 0.001$), having a small size ($p < 0.01$) and lower rates (under 10%) of ethnic minority children ($p < 0.001$) and lower rates of children from poor families ($p < 0.05$).

By adding parent organizations activity to the model, some of the school background variables

become insignificant (school budget), while others (poverty level) decrease in significance ($p < 0.01$). Factors related to parents' organizations activity added a 10.9% increase in the variance explained. Higher levels of parent participation in school meetings is associated with principals' high level of satisfaction with the activity of parents school board members ($p < 0.001$), with principals' perception that Parents Committee has a high influence on daily school life ($p < 0.05$) and with principals' belief that Parents Council has unrestricted prerogatives ($p < 0.05$).

The final regression score for parent participation in school meeting was $R^2 = 19.1\%$, $p < 0.001$. The variables related to parent organizations activity added more explanatory power to the model than demographic variables, indicating that they are more important than the variables related to school background.

Table 7: Two-step linear regression results

| Variables | Parent participation in school meetings (N=468) | Parent engagement in school activities (N=167) | Parent influence in school governance (N=467) |
|---|---|--|---|
| 1 st Step Results | | | |
| School background | | | |
| Budget (0 = insufficient) | 0.092 * | 0.184 * | 0.142** |
| Location (0 = rural) | -0.107 * | -0.183 * | -0.016 |
| Principal's experience (0 = low) | 0.062 | 0.156 * | -0.037 |
| School size (0 = small) | -0.119** | -0.118 | 0.060 |
| No reg. income (0 = under 10%) | -0.139** | -0.131 | -0.114 * |
| Single parent (0= under 10%) | 0.029 | -0.077 | 0.028 |
| 1 migrated parent (0 = under 10%) | -0.004 | 0.132 | 0.011 |
| 2 migrated parents (0 = under 10%) | -0.028 | 0.089 | 0.012 |
| Orphans (0 = under 10%) | 0.013 | 0.037 | 0.085 |
| Ethnic minority (0 = under 10%) | -0.122** | 0.002 | -0.017 |
| 2 nd Step Results | | | |
| School background | | | |
| Budget (0 = insufficient) | 0.041 | 0.163 * | 0.079* |
| Location (0 = rural) | -0.106 * | -0.193 * | 0.008 |
| Principal's experience (0 = low) | 0.064 | 0.169* | -0.032 |
| School size (0 = small) | -0.131** | -0.127 | 0.010 |
| No reg. income (0 = under 10%) | -0.104 * | -0.143 | -0.070 |
| Single parent (0= under 10%) | 0.056 | -0.055 | 0.047 |
| 1 migrated parent (0 = under 10%) | 0.001 | 0.144 | -0.002 |
| 2 migrated parents (0 = under 10%) | -0.052 | 0.065 | 0.027 |
| Orphans (0 = under 10%) | -0.010 | 0.011 | 0.047 |
| Ethnic minority (0 = under 10%) | -0.115** | 0.015 | -0.010 |
| Principals' reports on PO activity | | | |
| Principals' satisfaction with SB members | 0.266*** | 0.200 ** | 0.068 |
| Principals' perception of PCOMM influence | 0.104 * | 0.051 | 0.095 ** |
| Principals' perception of PC prerogatives | 0.088 * | 0.093 | 0.582*** |
| Step 1 Variance explained (df=10) | 0.082*** | 0.157 ** | 0.044 * |
| F: | 4.079 | 2.905 | 2.119 |
| Step 2 Variance explained (df=3) | 0.191*** | 0.222 ** | 0.423*** |
| F: | 8.243 | 3.359 | 27.275 |
| R ² Change: | 0.109 | 0.065 | 0.395 |
| F change (df=3): | 20.392 | 4.266 | 106.237 |

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Note: PO = Parents' Organizations; SB = School Board; PCOMM = Parents' Committee; PC = Parents' Council

Parent engagement in school activities. Table 7 summarizes the beta values and the predictive power of the two-step regression model for parent engagement in school activities. School background variables account for 15.7% in the variance explained. Higher levels of engagement in school activities are associated with sufficient school budget ($p < 0.05$), with rural location ($p < 0.05$) and with the principal's higher level of experience as a school director ($p < 0.05$).

As variables related to parent organizations activity are entered in the model, the beta coefficients of these variables slightly decrease, but maintain the same level of significance. Principals' perceptions on parent organizations activity variables provide an increase of 6.5% in the explained variance. Thus, parent engagement in school activities is positively associated with more satisfactory levels of School Board members activity ($p < 0.01$).

For parent engagement in school activities, the final regression score was $R^2 = 22.2\%$, $p < 0.01$. This score indicates that school background characteristics have a stronger impact on parental engagement than parent organizations activities.

Parent influence on school governance. The regression coefficients and beta values of the two-step regression model predicting parent influence in school governance are reported in Table 7.

School background variables account for 4.4% in the variance in parent influence in school governance. A higher parent influence is more likely to occur in schools with sufficient budget ($p < 0.01$) and with lower levels of poor students ($p < 0.05$). However, when adding variables related to parent organizations activity to the model, higher parental influence is found only in schools with sufficient budget ($p < 0.05$).

When entering parent organizations activity variables, the explanatory power of the model increases with 39.5%. Parent influence in school governance is higher in schools where Parents' Committee is more involved in the daily life of the school ($p < 0.01$) and where Parents Council has unrestricted prerogatives ($p < 0.001$).

The final score of the regression model for parent influence in school governance is $R^2 = 42.3\%$, $p < 0.001$. The most important variables associated with parent influence on school governance are related to parent organizations activity rather than to school background. By offering parent organizations the power to make decisions concerning curricular and extracurricular matters, the overall level of parent influence in school governance increases.

Discussion

The two-step regression models provided some insight into the types of variables that may lead to improved levels of parent involvement. The results demonstrated that in order to increase parents' participation to school meetings, the school background (rural location, small size, higher poverty levels, Roma ethnicity) is nearly as important as the activity of parents' organizations. In smaller schools and in schools located in rural areas, parent participation in school meetings seems to be higher, probably because smaller communities of parents tend to be more united. On the other hand, parents who do not have a regular income and parents who belong to the Roma minority are less willing to participate in school meetings, probably because, although poverty and social disadvantage have a serious impact on parenting, perceived deficits in families are likely to make parents feel powerless and perhaps less capable of building productive bonds with professionals (Hartas, 2008). Here, satisfactory parents' organizations' activity is associated with higher parent participation in school meetings, perhaps because these organizations function as social networks for parents and motivate them to get involved.

In regards to parents' engagement in school activities, the results showed that the school background (sufficient budget, rural location, principal's higher level of experience) plays a more important role than the activity of parents' organizations. Parents seem more willing to engage in school activities in schools that have enough funding and where principals are more experienced

and know how to encourage them. Also, higher engagement levels were found in rural schools, as in rural areas parents have more time available for such activities.

However, parents' influence in school governance is more significantly shaped by the activity (and authority) of parents' organizations than by the school background. It seems that, regardless of school characteristics, if parents' organizations are active, parents in general acquire more power of decision in school governance. In this case, parents' organizations function as networks that represent parents' interests in the relation with the school.

To answer RQ1, school background has a strong impact on increasing parent participation in school meetings (through factors such as rural location, small size and lower shares of poor and minority children) and parent engagement in school activities (factors such as sufficient school budgets, rural location and more experienced school principals); however, school background does not have a strong impact on parents' influence in school governance.

To answer RQ2, parent organizations activity has a strong impact on increasing levels of parent participation to school meetings (factors such as School Board's activity, Parents' Committee influence on daily school life and Parents' Council's unrestricted prerogatives), on increasing the level of parent engagement in school activities (School Board's activity), and mainly on increasing levels of parents' influence on school governance (through factors such as Parents' Committee's influence on school life and Parents' Council's unrestricted prerogatives).

The findings of this study support Feuerstein's (2001) conclusions according to which, on the one hand, student characteristics, such as socio-economic status and minority composition, play a crucial role in determining parent involvement, and on the other hand, school characteristics, such as location and size, influence the levels of parent participation. Moreover, parents' organizations seem to be effective mediators between schools and parents, their satisfactory activity being positively associated with parent involvement. Nonetheless, it must be noted once again that these data represent principals' perceptions, therefore the findings must be treated with caution.

Recommendations for improving school policies

These findings may prove to be useful to school policymakers, as involving parents' organizations may be influenced more easily than the factors pertaining to pupils or to school backgrounds. Teachers and school administrators who seek to improve the levels of parent participation are therefore advised to provide more prerogatives to parents' organizations.

Parent and community participation in school governance may have positive impacts on community development by fostering improvement in school performance and school-community relations. These outcomes may occur where parents are given meaningful decision-making authority in schools and principals actively facilitate parent involvement (Shatkin & Gershberg, 2007). Thus, principals may actively shape pupils' school performance by simply providing more decision-making power to parents' organizations (Parents' Committee and Parents' Council), which will lead to an increase in the level of parent influence over school governance. This will also result in establishing a stronger bond between the school environment and the home environment, which often leads to better student achievement and outcomes.

Russel and Granville (2005) found that the majority of parents want to be more actively involved in their children's education. However, patterns of communication and cultural norms and expectations may pose barriers to their involvement. Furthermore, the requirements of parents vary: some may need advocacy, guidance, or information about education and parenting, whereas others may have the capacity for advocacy and are ready to share power and responsibility with the professionals (Hartas, 2008). As the study shows, parents with more knowledge about school governance and better communication skills should be included in parent organizations. Through their activities, they can and should involve less informed parents in the schooling

process. Parents' values, culture, and socialisation practices shape the decisions they make about their involvement with schools. Thus, building on these forms of social and cultural capital is likely to foster stronger connections between schools and parents. This can be done by stressing the similarities rather than the differences between children with different social backgrounds (ethnicity, income etc.) and by focusing on the positive aspects of each disadvantaged group.

In a study of family learning and community development, Ranson and Routledge (2005, p. 69) stress the need to move from the focus on the "external and instrumental" to the "internal goods" present in families and communities, and build on them to support parents' functions as active citizens and advocates of their children's rights (Hartas, 2008). In order to do so, a greater focus on vulnerable families is needed. It is suggested that school policies should encourage the potential resources and capabilities of disadvantaged families and develop strategies to include these parents in school life. In doing so, schools might build on parents' values, culture, and socialisation practices, as an improved relation between family and school means higher levels of school performance for disadvantaged children. This means that teachers need to consider the needs of children and parents from vulnerable categories and to relate to them accordingly – something that may be acquired by introducing various intervention programs in schools with low levels of parent involvement.

It is equally important that resources are allocated particularly to schools with lower budget and with higher shares of vulnerable children, as their need for professional support personnel and for implementing intervention programs is the highest. What policymakers need to bear in mind is that by increasing parent involvement they also increase children's school performance. On the long run, this means lower public costs⁴ produced by school failure⁵.

In conclusion, this paper presented the factors that foster parent involvement in Romanian schools. However, the findings of the study are limited, as they only account for school principals' perceptions. For greater validity, this data set needs to be triangulated with parents' reports on school involvement and also with third-party data on families' socio-economic status (SES), parents' education, children's school performance, etc. Future studies may address the relation between increasing parent organization activity and overall parent involvement in school, as well as their impact on children's school performance.

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⁴ According to Psacharopoulos (2007, p.7), the public costs associated with school failure are social (increased criminality; lower positive spill over effects on co-workers; lower rate of economic growth; lower intergenerational effects on children and parents; lower public health status; higher level of unemployment; lower social cohesion) and fiscal (lower tax revenues; higher unemployment and welfare payments; higher public health expenditures; higher police expenditure; higher criminal justice expenditure).

⁵ Psacharopoulos (2007, p.4) defines school failure as: a school system failing to provide services conducive to learning; a student failing to advance to the next grade and eventually becoming a drop-out; students leaving school without having acquired competencies and skills that are demanded in the labour market.

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