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## **The participation of students, parents and teachers in creating educational programs in the Albanian education system: perceptions of students, parents and teachers**

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this study is **to analyse the legislative framework** on the participation of students, parents and teachers and their implementation in creating educational programs in pre-university education. Participation is thereby seen as a need for better involvement in the school management and activities of all the stakeholders, as well as a driving force for a thriving environment for the development of students.

In addition the study clarifies students, parents' and teachers' views on the obstacles they face when they try to collaborate and participate in school life and in designing educational programs.

The study makes use of qualitative methods. The data were collected through documents analysis (legislation, strategies, regulations) for analysing how the law addresses participation of students, parents and teachers' in school and through semi-structured interviews with students, parents and teachers from two primary schools for bringing their perceptions on participation in school life. Each of them were posed to 12 different interview questions. After evaluating the responses, some important issues were identified: The participation of students, parents and teachers in Albanian education system has changed in recent years, even promoted as a key that leads to success. However, because of the monist system, where such participation was neither legally recognised nor culturally accepted, this trinomial collaboration has not been easy introduced in the Albanian educational system. Though, parents do not feel very included in school life, or appreciated when they try to get involved, even though it is legally admitted the need for the collaboration between family and school. They neither take part in the approval of the curricula of the educational institution, nor in the selection of school textbooks as provided by the law. Research has shown that schools as bureaucratic and conservative institutions need to have clear written policies to reach out parents and students participation in drafting an education program. However, when teachers were asked about parents' participation in school, they said that in many cases parents neglect the collaboration with the school and appear usually when there are problems or trouble. While the participation of students in creating an educational program is still a long way to go. They are only asked for the selection of the project's topics.

**Key words:** participation, students, parents, teachers, legal aspects, Albania

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## Introduction

Since the rise of the national school system in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, nation-states have conceived of general education as designed to install a sense of national identification in the individual. Curricula, designed for this purpose, as well as educational programs have usually consisted of the study of the language, literature, history, government and traditions of the particular nation.<sup>3</sup> Later on, the curricula expanded by being liberalized with the introduction of other subjects as an integral part of them. Likewise, the educational programs also changed and enriched with the insertion within them of information from different disciplines. The process of the transformation of the curriculum and educational programs in the Albanian education system has passed into the same stages.

According to the Albanian Law on Pre-University Education System, in nowadays the curriculum is seen as a system consisting of several elements, such as: curricular framework, core curriculum, educational programs and assessment, which, linked to each other, make the education system to be oriented and to function through educational and administrative plans. While an educational program is a program written by the institution or ministry of education which determines the learning progress of each subject in all the stages of formal education (Definitions, educational program, n.d.). Program design offers opportunities for educators, students and the community to create educational experiences. The designer brings resources such as learning theories, research studies and program results. The stakeholders bring insight into the program goals, objectives and classroom activities (How to design, para.1).

The curriculum provides qualitative and equal education for every member of the society, regardless of ethnicity, sex, social position<sup>4</sup>For more, the curriculum framework is the basic curriculum document which describes the aims of the curriculum in general, the core competencies, expected results for students, in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes at the end of basic and upper secondary education, the aims of the fields of learning and general principles of the teaching and learning process, as well as the students' assessment.

The curriculum consists of a core curriculum, elective curriculum, and the curriculum for complementary activities. The legal provisions have determined the Minister of Education as the competent authority to approve the curriculum framework, the educational plan for every level of education, the core curriculum and the subject programs, except for those which are designed by the educational institution. While the curriculum, drafted at the educational institution level, is approved by the director of the institution after obtaining the consent from the local education institution responsible for pre-university education. It is known by the law that the curriculum enables students to make individual choices according to their needs and interests. However, despite the fact that the law sets out clear competences for adapting the core curriculum, the same did not occur for the optional curriculum and the curriculum for complementary activities.

According to the law on pre-university education of 2012, the forms of education in schools are known as:

- a) full-time education;
- b) part-time education;
- c) distance education.

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<sup>3</sup> Gutek, G. (1995). *A history of the Western Educational Experience*, Second edition, Waveland Press, Inc, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Law No. 69 of 21.6.2012. "On Pre-University Education System in the Republic of Albania". Retrieved February 21, 2019 from Official Bulletin No. 87. <http://www.arsimi.gov.al/al/newsroom/ligje/ligj-nr-69-2012-per-sistem-in-arsimor-parauniversitar-ne-republiken-e-shqiperise&page=1>.

On the other side, it is recognized in the law even home-schooling which is foreseen to be offered in special cases for all classes of basic education or just for some of them. The particular cases, criteria and the procedures for offering education in house conditions shall be determined by the minister of Education. Even though the law on pre-university education has entered into force in 2012, there is no further steps towards determining the manner of providing education in house conditions.

Meanwhile, now the school is integrated with community activity and family life. The main principle is to create a system for all students. This would imply the individualization of teaching to meet the needs of a diverse group of students, in order to become an interactive community.<sup>5</sup> The attempts to make parents and students participants into school life are felt even in the pre-university education law of 2012 by the presence of council of parents, school board, government of pupils, as well as by national council of parents. Regarding the contribution to the school curriculum, this assignment is attributed to the school board. The school board is a body made up of parents, students, teachers, representatives of local government and the community. The board contributes to the wellbeing of the educational institution and reports to the council of parents regarding their activities. The law recognises the approval of the curriculum drafted by the educational institution as the duty of the school board. While on the other side, it is still the law which with its ambiguity, lets unspecified how to deal with optional curriculum and the curriculum for complementary activities, by making unclear the task of the school board towards the curriculum of the school.

## Literature review

Encouraging the cooperation of parents, teachers and students should be a priority of the country that aims to improve and develop education.

Several studies undertaken to measure the importance of cooperation and involvement of parents, students and teachers in school life indicate that this trinomial collaboration increases the quality of education of a country<sup>6</sup>, European Commission, 2015, European Report on quality indicators, 2000.<sup>7</sup>

Parents' involvement on activities that directly affect the school life of a child serves as a catalyst for achieving high learning outcomes<sup>8</sup>. In 2018 (Recommendations, para. 1) European school net issued several recommendations on enhancing collaborative teaching and learning in schools, where among other things it is noted that “collaborative learning has a positive impact on students' academic achievement, as well as on the development of social competences”, even though collaborative teaching and learning are not commonplace in schools across Europe yet. At the same time, one of the recommendations relates precisely to engaging parents in school. Thus, engaging parents and collaborating with other schools can really facilitate the process of collaborative learning,

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<sup>5</sup> Senge, P. et al. (2012). *Schools that learn*. Hodder & Stoughton General Division. The United Kingdom. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. p. 495.

<sup>6</sup> Fantuzzo, J., McWayne, Perry, C., M., Childs, S. (2004). Multiple Dimensions of Family Involvement and Their Relations to Behavioral and Learning Competencies for Urban, Low-Income Students. *School Psychology Review*, 33 (4), 467-480. Retrieved February 2, from [https://repository.upenn.edu/gse\\_pubs/438](https://repository.upenn.edu/gse_pubs/438); Epstein, Joyce L. (1995). *In School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action*. Retrieved March 15, 2019 from <http://www.questia.com/googleScholar.qst>; Gjermani, L. Musai, B. (2008). *Parents Involvement in Education in Albania*. Center for Democratic Education. supported by UNICEF. p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> Levenstein, Ph., Levenstein, S. (2008). *Messages from Home: The Parent-Child Home Program for Overcoming Educational Disadvantage*. Temple University Press; Chang, M. et al. (2006). *Parental Involvement, Parenting Behaviors, and Students's Cognitive Development in Low-Income and Minority Families*. Journal of Research in Childhood Education.

<sup>8</sup> Child Trends. (2018). *Parental Involvement in Schools*. Retrieved February 20, 2019 from [childtrends.org: https://www.childtrends.org/?indicators=parental-involvement-in-schools](http://www.childtrends.org/?indicators=parental-involvement-in-schools).

including providing specific training and resources for teaching staff, and developing more flexible classroom spaces to facilitate collaboration.<sup>9</sup>

A volume of a collection of 25 essays, grouped into three parts, on the theme of building bridges between home and school sheds light on how much involving parents is necessary in school life on behalf of the optimization of students' development opportunities, the enhancement of students' educational careers and the improvement of teachers' task performance (Institute, for Applied Social Sciences, 1999).

A report of the European Commission, Evaluation of legislation, policy and practice on child participation in the European Union (EU, 2015) emphasizes the effectiveness of participation practices in EU countries. Through this report we have compared Albania's legislation, structures and mechanisms for implementing child participation with that of EU member states, the barriers to effective participation, child participation within key sectors, and in relation to vulnerable groups of students.

While, Epstein (1992) emphasizes the three spheres of influence where the child learns and develops mostly. The study, defines among other things, the types of involvement focusing mostly on family, school and community and related respectively to: parenting (support the home environment and strengthen families in order to support students at school), communicating (create effective modes of school-to-home and home-to-school communications regarding school programs and child progress), volunteering (recruit parents to support school endeavours), learning at home (share information regarding ideas for learning at home, as well what is going on in the classroom to support family-school alignment regarding educational endeavours), decision making (empower parents to be leaders, and involve them in school decision-making), and collaborating with the community (identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development).<sup>10</sup>

Fantuzzo, McWayne, Perry & Childs<sup>11</sup> describe three ways families participate in the education of their students: (a) focused at home, (b) focused at school, (c) focused on communication. According to them, "family involvement in education has been identified as a beneficial factor in young students's learning. It is, therefore, a key component of national educational policies and early childhood programs".

The European report on the quality of school education "Sixteen quality indicators" (Directorate-General for Education and Culture, 2000) through other factors determines parents' participation and collaboration with teachers as a key factor in order to improve the quality of education. Meanwhile, the report also presents examples of good initiatives to better improve the quality of school education, which can serve as a guide to quality education.

Regarding the Albanian context, parental involvement in school is seen as a very positive process, even though it is not comparable with the European context of parents' participation in school life.<sup>12</sup> In the study Quality of Education Indicators Package, conducted by N. Mita (2002) with the support of AEDP and the Ministry of Education, the involvement of parents is considered as one of the school quality indicators at the institutional level school.

While, in 2008, it was conducted a study on the situation of Parents Involvement in Education in Albania by L. Gjermani and B. Musai, supported by UNICEF.<sup>13</sup> The data for this study was collected

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<sup>9</sup> European school net. (2018). *New European recommendations on enhancing collaborative teaching and learning in schools*, Retrieved March 20, 2019 from <http://www.eun.org/news/detail?articleId=1188053>.

<sup>10</sup> Epstein, Joyce L. (1995). *In School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action*. Retrieved March 15, 2019 from <http://www.questia.com/googleScholar.qst>.

<sup>11</sup> Fantuzzo, J., McWayne, Perry, C., M., Childs, S. (2004). Multiple Dimensions of Family Involvement and Their Relations to Behavioral and Learning Competencies for Urban, Low-Income Students. *School Psychology Review*, 33 (4), 467-480. Retrieved February 2, from [https://repository.upenn.edu/gse\\_pubs/438](https://repository.upenn.edu/gse_pubs/438).

<sup>12</sup> The Open Society Foundation for Albania. (2011). *Parents' involvement in school life Recommendations for a successful Family-Community Partnership*. Retrieved April 4, 2019 from [https://www.osfa.al/sites/default/files/policy\\_brief\\_al.\\_pdf.pdf](https://www.osfa.al/sites/default/files/policy_brief_al._pdf.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> Gjermani, L. Musai, B. (2008). *Parents Involvement in Education in Albania*. Center for Democratic Education. supported by UNICEF. p. 10.

through questionnaires and interviews distributed in 12 districts of the country. Questionnaires were drawn up in three types: for parents, for teachers, and for school leaders. The study shows that parental involvement in Albania has reached a significant level of institutionalization through the presence of parents' councils and school boards. However, it is emphasized that “there are still issues in dealing with the effectiveness and self-organization of these parental organisms. In most cases it is noticed that the roles of parents themselves are limited and teachers and school directors are those who say the main word and in some way give tone to the activity of these parental structures”.<sup>14</sup>

### **Purpose of the study**

Given the above-mentioned issues, this study aims to analyze how the law addresses the problem of the participation of students, parents and teachers in creating and planning educational programs aiming to provide a concrete picture of the situation on what is reached so far for parents' involvement in school life. Also, the study aims to explore students, parents' and teachers' views on certain problems they encounter when attempting to participate, collaborate in order to help improving students education.

Research questions are formulated as follows:

- 1) How does the law on pre-university education foresee the implementation regarding the participation of students, parents and teachers in creating educational programs in pre-university education system?
- 2) How do students perceive their involvement in school about issues directly affecting their education and well-being?
- 3) How do parents perceive the participation/ collaboration process with the school and what are the obstacles they face?
- 4) How do teachers perceive their relationship with parents and does it guide them towards the fact that together with the students they form a trinomial which serves as a basis for success?

### **Research Methods**

The data were collected through documents analysis (legislation, strategies, regulations) for examining how the law foresees participation of students, parents and teachers' in school and through semi-structured interviews with students, parents and teachers from two primary schools for bringing their perceptions on participation in school life. Each of them were posed to 12 different interview questions.

During the administration of the interview process, data collectors explained its purpose, and answered questions from the interviewees to clarify better all questions.

The sample includes 63 students/students, 52 parents (which were selected on the basis of different social strata corresponding to different levels of education), and 29 teachers from two public primary schools.

Students respondents are females and males, with a representative of 58 % of female and 42 % of male gender.

Teachers respondents are females and males, with a representative of 74% of female gender and 26 % of male gender. According to UNESCO Institute of Statistics in Albania since 2011, 100% of primary education teachers are women.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Gjermani, L. Musai, B. (2008). *Parents Involvement in Education in Albania*. Center for Democratic Education. supported by UNICEF. p. 10.

<sup>15</sup> UNESCO (2017). *Albania education policy review: Issues and recommendations*. p. 137. Retrieved May, 10, from <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000259245>.

Parents respondents are females and males, with a representative of 79 % of female gender and 21 % of male gender.

This study has limitations regarding the findings. These include using in-depth interviews with students, parents and teachers taken from only two primary schools, which hampers the ability to generalize the data.

## Results

### *Legal issues regarding the participation of students, parents and teachers in creating education program in pre-university education system in light of the document analysis*

The demand for relevance in education is not a new one. It was the initial impetus to many educational reforms in the past and remains a meaning plea today.<sup>16</sup> This is the reason for a variety of educational reform done in Albania, as well as for introducing parents and students participation in school. On the other side, the recommendation of the Council of European Union regarding key competences for lifelong learning highlights and promotes the fully involvement of the child in society through the acquisition of the necessary skills (Official Journal of EU, 2018, p. 189). And the involvement of a child in society is done best by involving parents in the educational processes, school decision-making and activities.

The need for parental cooperation for creating an education program arises among others from the growing diversity of Albanian society, which reflects the lingering problems during the long transition in Albania. There are cases when families are isolated because of blood feuds, cases of Albanian citizens returning from emigration, or there are times when the families are in very difficult economic conditions which oblige the parents to neglect the students. These cases, and others like these, need the partnership of parents, students and teachers to design the appropriate curriculum, adequate to the level and needs of students.

A typical case of adapting the curriculum according to the needs of the students, beyond the provision of the standard curriculum and the educational programs offered by the state, has been the "Second Chance" curriculum. Through this curriculum, they are helped the marginalized groups, Roma students, and those who dropped out school and wanted to return to the education system. For this purpose, the Ministry of Education has approved the education program called "second chance", which is offered to all students of school age who have either abandoned or interrupted the learning process or have not attended school at all and do not return to full-time or part-time primary school (MES, 2013, p. 6116). Despite the fact that the teaching is offered more summarized than in the normal teaching process, this education program unlike the standard curriculum has been set up to help students who have dropped out of school to reintegrate into the school life.<sup>17</sup>

The pre-university education law provides that the education system functions on the basis of decentralization and the autonomy of educational institutions. Legal provisions do also guarantee the right of students, teachers and parents to organize themselves into variety of bodies sanctioning as well the protection of their rights by assisting in this way in the well-being of the institution. On the other hand, students, educators and parents are given the right to express their views on the quality of educational service and to be heard about these views.<sup>18</sup>

In order that these legal principles to become mandatory, it is imperative to be unfolded throughout the legal framework in force.

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<sup>16</sup> Gutek, G. (1995). *A history of the Western Educational Experience*, Second edition, Waveland Press, Inc, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Commission of the European Communities. (2007). *Commission Staff Working Document. Albania 2007 Progress Report*. Brussels, 06.11.2007. p. 14.

<sup>18</sup> Law No. 69 of 21.6.2012. "On Pre-University Education System in the Republic of Albania". Article 6 of the Law No. 69, 2012, p. 4402. Retrieved February 21, 2019 from Official Bulletin No. 87. <http://www.arsimi.gov.al/al/newsroom/ligje/ligj-nr-69-2012-per-sistem-in-arsimor-parauniversitar-ne-republiken-e-shqiperise&page=1>.

The guarantee of the autonomy in the law of pre-university education of 2012 was introduced for the first time in the Albanian educational institutions. In this perspective, the parents are considered to be the main partner of the educational institution, in the well-being of the child and the institution. The principle of autonomy, as well as the involvement of students and parents in the school curriculum were incorporated in the board's duties to adapt curricula drawn up by the educational institution as well as in the right of the parent to participate in the selection process of school textbooks.<sup>19</sup> Regarding the participation of students, law has made it possible through organisms such as the student government which has the function to protect and promote the rights of students and to assist in the well-being of the school.

A more concrete involvement of parents in the designing of an education program is found in the organization of education for students with special needs. In the mainstream educational institutions, for students with special needs it is drafted a personalized education program by a committee composed of teachers of various fields and psychologists, in cooperation with the parents of the student. The parents' involvement is also required to change the personalized education program within an educational institution. The parents cooperate with the assistant teacher to design the individual learning plan and the objectives for self-help skills and other social skills that the learner has to reach according to the child's needs<sup>20</sup>.

### *The gaps within the law*

As emphasized above, the pre-university educational curriculum consists of a core curriculum, elective curriculum and the curriculum for complementary activities. Since the law has provided that the Minister of Education approves only the core curriculum, it is left unclear in the law, which body or institution has the right to adapt the optional curriculum and the curriculum for complementary activities in the school. In the sub-legal acts, curriculum for complementary activities and elective courses for primary and lower secondary education are foreseen as a joint planned activity with 1-2 classes per week, despite the fact that the law has organised the pre-university educational curriculum with three layers. While school-based curriculum is foreseen in the education plan only in upper secondary education, interpreting that part of this curriculum is covered by community service, while the rest includes inter-curricular projects and other school activities (MES, 2018).

According to the Low Secondary Education Guideline of the Institute for Development of Education<sup>21</sup>, the elective curriculum is part of the overall curriculum which, in contrast to the core curriculum, it is selected from the school and is developed within the scheduled time according to interest of students and school opportunities. This curriculum can be used either for the second foreign language or for subjects, modules or other school activities in order to fulfil the key competencies and the realization of cross-curricular topics. Both of these types of activities are designed by other instances beyond school (IDE, 2017). The Guideline of the Institute for

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<sup>19</sup> Law No. 69 of 21.6.2012. "On Pre-University Education System in the Republic of Albania". Article 47 of the Law No. 69, 2012, p. 4402. Retrieved February 21, 2019 from Official Bulletin No. 87.

<sup>20</sup> MES. (2013). Article 97 of "Normative provisions on Pre-University Education". Retrieved April 10, 2019 from <http://www.arsimi.al/dispozitat-normative/>.

<sup>21</sup> The Institute for the Development of Education conducts research work, provides expertise and advises educational institutions at all levels in the areas of curricular content, didactics and the use of modern teaching technologies, as well as management of school and education as a whole. Decision of the Council of Ministers. (2010). No. 67, dated 10.02.2010. *On the establishment of the Institute for Development of Education*. Retrieved March 20, from [http://www.qbz.gov.al](http://www.qbz.gov.al;); Institute for Development of Education. (2017). *Udhëzues për zhvillimin e kurrikulës së re në AMU (Klasat VI-IX)*. Retrieved April 2, 2019 from <http://izha.edu.al/new/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Udhezues-per-AMU-2017.pdf>.

Development of Education relatively fills the gap created by the lack of legal instruments on procedures and the competent body/organism regarding these the designing of the optional curriculum and the curriculum for complementary activities in school.

The law recognizes the right of the educational institution to design subject programs other than those approved by the Ministry of Education.<sup>22</sup> However, this right has not been further developed in the law, neither within the scope of the educational institution's duties nor on the rights and duties of the teaching staff. On the other hand, this gap is also found in relation to the competences of the school board. According to the pre-university education law, the school has the right to draft school curriculum which would be approved by the school board. While the changes in the law require that the school curriculum to take the approval of the<sup>23</sup> regional educational directory before the approval by the school director.

Meanwhile the role of school board is unclear in the law. Even though the law admits on one side the right of the board (which means even the right of the parents) to give its consent for the school curriculum, on the other side it is still the law which doesn't mention the board and parents' involvement.

In the context of parents' involvement in creating an educational program, it can be mentioned the education in house conditions, sanctioned in the legal provisions.<sup>24</sup> Even though the law states that this type of education is offered in special cases, defined by the Ministry of Education, the lack of these guidelines regarding this type of education makes the role of parents unclear in the context of contributing toward an educational program.

While in terms of parent involvement in educational curriculum design for students with special needs, the legislation needs to be more detailed about what an individual educational plan must include, the actors involved in its formulation and its implementation, taking into consideration the variety of special needs for the students.<sup>25</sup> Such guidelines are not part of the education system in Albania, neither are part of the procedures and regulations of the Institute for Development of Education<sup>26</sup>. Their presence in the legal framework will facilitate the process of creating and adopting an education program for students with special needs, by clarifying the way of participation.

### *Students views on their involvement in school issues*

Participation of students in school issues should be taken seriously by every government that promotes full engagement of all actors involved in education. Enabling students to freely express their views and ideas, taking them seriously and turning their suggestions into reality can contribute to a better school where everyone is being heard, and every idea really matters. "It is well evidenced in the

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<sup>22</sup> Law No. 69 of 21.6.2012. "On Pre-University Education System in the Republic of Albania". Article 45, point 2, "ç of the Law No. 69, 2012, p. 4402. Retrieved February 21, 2019 from Official Bulletin No. 87.

<sup>23</sup> Instruction of the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth, 2018, No. 25, dated 25.07.2018. "On the establishment and functioning of the board of the educational institution", Retrieved April 20, 2019 from <https://arsimi.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/UDHEZIM-NR.25-DATE-25.07.2018.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> Law No. 69 of 21.6.2012. "On Pre-University Education System in the Republic of Albania". Article 17 of the Law No. 69, 2012, p. 4402. Retrieved February 21, 2019 from Official Bulletin No. 87.

<sup>25</sup> National Council for Special Education. (2006). *Guidelines on the individual education plan process*, Dublin, p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> Note: Save the students, prepared in 2017 a Practical Guide to Designing and Implementing an Individual Educational Plan (PEI). Save the students. (2017). *Practical Guide to Designing and Implementing an Individual Educational Plan (PEI)*. Retrieved 22 March, 2019 from <https://albania.savethestudents.net/sites/albania.savethestudents.net/files/library/Udhezues%20Praktik%20per%20Hartimin%20dhe%20Zbatimin%20e%20PEI.pdf>.

literature that the accounts and lived experiences of students and young people regarding their world and how they experience it can contribute significantly and meaningfully to new knowledge and in doing so can enhance services that are provided to students”.<sup>27</sup>

In order to explore what is mentioned above in the Albanian context, we have conducted a series of interviews with students about their views on their involvement in school issues. The interview questions were focused on the following aspects:

- (a) Lack of total freedom in expressing views and ideas related to different school matters
- (b) Rare activities in the framework of the project “School as a community centre” where students, school, parents/community are involved
- (c) Lack of collaboration with parents in organizing educational program
- (d) Participating only in designing topics of the subject and inter-subject projects

*(a) Lack of total freedom in expressing views and ideas related to different school matters*

Evidence shows that “students thrive when they are allowed to get involved in making decisions and given space to ask questions about things that concern them. They learn to communicate well and believe in themselves”.<sup>28</sup> From the analysis of students responses about their perception of expressing their views and ideas, it turns out that most of them do not feel free to express themselves, even the students that are part of the student’s government.

*Personally I don’t feel free to express my ideas related to different issues concerning us as students or the school. As a member of student’s government even when we arise a problem it is not taken into account by the school.* (B. A – student, member of Student’s government, 9<sup>th</sup> grade)

On the other hand, the school where they study does not encourage cooperation between them. They claim that they are not entitled to decision-making on issues related to their education.

*(b) Rare activities in the framework of the project “School as a community centre” where students, school, parents/community are involved*

Involvement of parents and community in school life is essential to the multifaceted achievement of students. For this reason, Albanian government revealed in 2014, the initiative “School as Community centre”<sup>29</sup>, in order to return pre-university educational institutions to centres where students, teachers, parents and community interact with each other.

The core of the “School as a community centre” is the interconnection of a number of aspects that aim at inclusion and placement of students at the centre of attention of all activities organized or related to school life. When students were asked about their participation in activities in the framework of the project “School as a community centre” they said that the school organizes activities, but parents or the community is rarely invited.

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<sup>27</sup> Ashford, A. (n.d.). *Involving students. A guide to engaging students in decision-making*. p. 3. Retrieved April 28, 2019 from [www.childcomm.tas.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Guide-to-making-decisions-booklet.pdf](http://www.childcomm.tas.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Guide-to-making-decisions-booklet.pdf).

<sup>28</sup> World Economic Forum. (2015). *Why students should be seen and heard in school*. Retrieved April 2, 2019 from <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/06/why-students-should-be-seen-and-heard-in-school/>.

<sup>29</sup> Ministry of Education and Sport. (2014). *School Standards as a Community Centre*. Retrieved April 10, 2019 from [https://www.arsimi.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Standardet\\_SHQK\\_2014.pdf](https://www.arsimi.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Standardet_SHQK_2014.pdf). p. 7.

*Several activities have been conducted in the framework of school as a community centre, but the participation of students has been low, while parents have not participated in any activity, especially in those realized within the project of the school community centre. (E. L – student, 8<sup>th</sup> grade)*

*(c) Lack of collaboration with parents and school in organizing educational program*

When students were asked about their parents' participation in school life their answers showed that parents almost do not participate in school-related issues, since the school has never asked their cooperation. Also, along with their students, parents do not take part in organizing or designing educational programs.

*My parents never participated in the design of educational programs. They do not even know they can cooperate with the school for drafting these programs. (K. RR – student, 6<sup>th</sup> grade)*

According to students' responses, parents generally take part in school meetings, mostly to be informed about their students progress in school.

*(d) Participating only in designing topics of the subject and inter-subject projects*

At the beginning of the school year, teachers prepare the annual educational plan. The Law<sup>30</sup> provides that topics of subject and inter-subject curriculum projects to be selected by students. During the evaluation of student's responses, it turns out that this is the only issue for which they are taken into consideration.

*Teachers always involve us in designing the project topics. Sometimes they give us alternatives that help in choosing the most appropriate and interesting topics. (E. M- Student, 7<sup>th</sup> grade)*

*Parent views on participation/ collaboration process with the school*

In order to explore parents' perceptions of their participation in education the interviews were focused on the following aspects:

- (a) Rare visits in students classroom, meeting the teachers and discussing with them
- (b) Lack of participation when decisions are taken affecting child education
- (c) Lack of participation in creating and developing educational programs
- (d) Shortage of time to participate in school, lack of knowledge on how to participate and lack of sensitiveness from the school system

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<sup>30</sup> MES. (2013). Article 72 of "Normative provisions on Pre-University Education". Retrieved April 10, 2019 from <http://www.arsimi.al/dispozitat-normative/>.

*(a) Rare visits in students classroom, meeting the teachers and discussing with them*

In the normative provisions of pre-university education, it is foreseen that teachers hold frequent meetings with parents to discuss various problems relating to students progress at school<sup>31</sup>. From the analysis of parents' responses about the frequency of their attendance at meetings with teachers, it turns out that they mostly go to these meetings at the end of each quarter, which coincides with the reception of results and grades that their students have taken during that term. In rare cases that parents go to their students's school more often, or find other ways to contact the teacher. Meanwhile, after reviewing the annual educational and educational curricula of the school institutions, we have noticed that the communication and co-operation of the school with the parents is addressed in a special section where meetings are planned with the parents in groups and individually at different intervals throughout the school year. The topic of these meetings, according to the data gathered, is mostly to inform, parents about the student's attendance and results, not reflecting any special instruction or advice to help in the development of the students or any specific task that the child might do at home with parent's help.

*(b) Lack of participation when decisions are taken affecting child education*

From the analysis of the answers it turns out that none of the interviewed parents feels involved when it is the case of making important decisions at school which would affect their child education process.

According to them, the only opportunity they have to express their views on the welfare of students at school is the parents' meeting.

*We as parents are not involved when there are taken important decisions about the education of our students. For example, we are not involved in the assessment of textbooks which are supposed to be chosen from school teachers with the participation of parents, nor do we have any means of expressing our disapproval regarding the selection of texts (R. Z – parent, member of the parents' council).*

However, the Albanian law on pre-university education, foresees that the selection of school textbooks should be done by teachers in the presence of the parents<sup>32</sup> and in addition it is required the collaboration of parents for drafting a personalised educational program for students with special needs.

While other parents admit that there are cases when they are simply asked for formalities to participate and give their opinion on issues affecting students's education, where the decision was taken before the meeting took place.

*I don't feel included in decisions taken in school. Sometimes decisions have already been taken without parents' involvement or consent. (Parent)*

According to the instruction on the functioning of the school board of the Ministry of Education (Instruction No. 25, 2018) it is anticipated that when a new teacher (yet not appointed) will work in a specific school being part of the staff, the parent as a member of the board of the educational institution should engage and take part in the procedures of his/her recruitment. However, referring to parents' answers who are board members as well, declare that this does not happen in reality.

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<sup>31</sup> MES. (2013). Article 84 of “Normative provisions on Pre-University Education”. Retrieved April 10, 2019 from <http://www.arsimi.al/dispozitat-normative/>.

<sup>32</sup> Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth. Directive no. 267, date: 15.05.2018 on “The selection, distribution and sale of textbooks of grades 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 of the Pre-university education system for the academic year 2018-2019.

*I am totally committed to give my opinion and assessment for a new teacher after having enough time to consider his teaching performance, but no one has asked me! (Parent, member of school board)*

*(c) Lack of participation in creating and developing educational programs*

One of the questions addressed to the parents during the interviews was related to their involvement in creating and developing educational programs. The answers they give do not directly address the question. Some of them claim that they have given ideas only in terms of extracurricular activities, or in choosing topics for discussion in the educational plan. However, most of them claim not to be involved in the compilation or design of an educational program.

On the other hand, the Albanian law on pre-university education recognises the school board as an organism which has the right as well the obligation to approve the curricula of the educational institution.

*(d) Shortage of time to participate in school, lack of knowledge on how to participate and lack of sensitiveness from the school system*

When asked why they did not participate in school parents' meetings, parents mostly answered that it was due to the lack of time., They have to work long hours, especially in the case of divorced parents, family casualties, and so on, in order to financially support their families.

*I would like to be more engaged in school and help my child more in school activity, but after the death of my spouse I have to work double to ensure a decent living (Parent)*

In some cases, they argue that their lack of participation in school life comes as a result of poor school-related experiences. There are those parents who do not feel welcome in their students's school or they do not feel at the right level to be part of the discussions or issues related to the learning activity.

*I have only 4 years of school learning, what kind of thoughts and ideas I can give for my child's education. Teachers know better than me in these cases. (Parent)*

In some cases, parents' despite of their desire to engage in various school activities, do not have the proper knowledge on how they can contribute. In fact, the Albanian education system needs to work harder in this regard, because parents, being in many cases unaware of the importance of their participation in school, simply neglect it, seeing the teacher as the only responsible person for educating their students. On the other hand, the school should see the parental participation as essential to its progress and must become promoter of parental involvement.

*Teachers' views on their collaboration with parents and students in creating educational program*

Apart from parents' perceptions on participating for creating educational program, a series of interviews with teachers were conducted. The interview questions were focused on the following aspects:

- (a) Meeting parents usually when there are problems and trouble with students
- (b) Shortage of time to involve parents in useful ways
- (c) Teaching open classes in most times is just a show

(d) Socio- economic situation and the belonging to an ethnic group or minority hinders parents' participation in school

*(a) Meeting parents usually when there are problems and trouble with students*

Involving parents in school activities is an inviting way to approach them to school and make them part of their students's' education and a helping hand for teachers as well. However, parental involvement is not a simple process, especially given the fact that Albania did not give parents any special roles in the school participation during communism period. Although today's situation has changed, family-school cooperation is not at satisfactory levels. On the one hand parents neglect their participation and on the other hand the school does not encourage them to become an active part of the educational program.

During the interviews, the teachers claim that in the majority of cases, parents come to school only when their students have concerns or problems at school (unless parents ask the teacher to get acquainted with the students's performance).

*Some parents come regularly and ask about the progress of students, but a considerable part of them come to school only when there are problems such as troubles or insult among students, and in rare cases when students misbehave or fail to achieve high results. (Teacher)*

However, teachers in turn acknowledge that they partially include parents in school life and mostly during the presentation of projects with interesting themes, organization of excursions when there are students with different abilities, concerts or festivities.

According to the answers of some teachers, there are also even those parents who do not show any interest in their child's education, never contact the teachers or the school directorate.

*I feel that parents who don't make time to come to school, don't really care for their students's education. Unfortunately, there are parents who do not know in what grade their students are! (Teacher)*

*(b) Shortage of time to involve parents in useful ways*

Teachers are positively affected when parents take interest to the school. However, most teachers complain of the lack of time, which makes it impossible to engage in a qualitative co-operation with parents and their involvement in school. They are aware that learning as a process does not end in school and that qualitative education also requires parent involvement.

*It is difficult to involve parents in the most efficient way because the time is inadequate, considering that besides teaching, we are also committed to completing school documentation. (Teacher)*

With the implementation of the new curricula according to European models in the Albanian education system, teachers' responsibilities and duties have changed, adding a great administrative workload. According to teachers, this is the reason is a hindering factor not only for co-operation with parents but in some cases it violates the teaching process as well.

*(c) Teaching open classes in most times is just a show*

At the beginning of 2016, the open classes were introduced in the pre-university education system, being applied initially in the first and sixth grades. During these hours, teachers invite parents and other teachers to organize the learning process together. During these hours, parents have the opportunity to look closely at how their students behave during the lesson, how didactic tools, interactive methods etc. are used. However, some of the interviewed teachers claim that the development of these lessons is just a show, which does not affect the improvement of the teaching process.

*In my opinion open classes are just a show and students do not benefit much as these hours are "pre-prepared" resulting in a "show" is not live. (Teacher)*

According to teachers, "it would be more productive that inspectors of educational institutions trained in European Union countries to provide good practices and to present to teachers as experiences to be taken into consideration". (A. D. teacher)

*(d) Socio- economic situation and the belonging to an ethnic group or minority hinders parents' participation in school*

According to the interviewed teachers, one of the constraining factors of parental participation in school is related to their socio-economic status by being part of an ethnic or minority group. Due to financial difficulties, parents need to work long hours and in some cases they work in two jobs to support their family. That is why they almost do not participate in school life, or do not cooperate with teachers in the design of educational programs. On the other hand, parents belonging to ethnic or minority groups tend not to engage in school or various activities of educational character. This indicates that family and school cannot reach effective communication due to cultural diversity.

## **Discussion**

After the 90s, the Albanian education system has been in constant reform. These reforms have affected all aspects related to the quality education of generations, aiming at the development of a school that prepares people capable of facing the challenges of life. To prepare successful students for the future, the Albanian school, adapting the European goodwill, has taken important steps in meeting the standards for a qualitative education. However, as a country that has passed a long transition period these standards have not been reached immediately, because there is still much work to be done.

A very important factor that directly affects the development of education is family-school collaboration. It should be noted that teachers are not just those who cooperate with the students to help them succeed, but parents' participation or co-operation is also a very important factor.

However, in the view of parents and teachers cooperation it can still be stated that there are deficiencies and obstacles, which are mainly related to rare visits of parents' in students classroom, lack of participation when decisions are taken affecting child education, lack of participation in creating and developing educational programs, shortage of time to involve parents in useful ways, socio- economic situation of parents and the belonging to an ethnic group or minority that hinders parents' participation in school.

The results suggested are also supported by various studies and reports according to which parents' participation affect students' education. "The way schools care about students is reflected in the way schools care about the students's families. If educators view students simply as students, they are likely to see the family as separate from the school. That is, the family is expected to do its job and leave the education of students to the schools. If educators view students as students, they are likely to see both the family and the community as partners with the school in students's education and development".<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Epstein, Joyce L. (1995). *In School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action*, p. 701 Retrieved March 15, 2019 from <http://www. questia.com/googleScholar.qst>.

Parents, being an active part of school life, giving ideas, supervising, compiling together with their students and teachers' various plans to how their students can succeed in life and face the challenges of the 21st century, will make possible a better younger generation who will better manage the future. In recent years, education systems worldwide have developed frameworks with an increased emphasis on developing the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>34</sup> In this way, parents, and teachers, enable students to learn based on a powerful new learning modes steeped in real world problem solving.<sup>35</sup> The skills which a child obtains are now multi-dimensional. But to develop these skills it needed a family-school collaboration.

However, preparing students for work, citizenship, and life in the 21st century is complicated. This is even more complicated in countries which have undergone long transition periods, having economic difficulties, or are post-communist countries such as Albania, which has experienced a severe dictatorship for many years, which has affected all spheres of life and undoubtedly in education. In the parental involvement in school activities in former communist countries of South Eastern Europe as in Romania, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Bosnia Herzegovina, Croatia, Moldova, Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia, it affects their economic status. Thus, families with higher socio-economic status feel more efficacious and get involved more in school than those with low socio-economic status.<sup>36</sup>

In Albania, during the communist years, school rules have been strict. The teacher was the main figure for the education of the students and schooling was a matter belonging to the Party. The younger generation was educated with the love for the party. While, the role of parents was totally neglected, as the students under the care of the Party were only entrusted to the teachers and the school.

After the fall of communism in Albania the transitional period towards a democratic system was accompanied, among other things, with numerous changes in the school and related issues. "Reforming of the educational system in Albania, has experienced fundamental changes in form and content (curricula, school documentation, internal organization of school life), new developments at all levels of the education system (hidden dropouts, problems of vocational education, expansion of general secondary education), decentralization and management of pre-university and higher education, and the teacher's role in the Albanian post-communist society"<sup>37</sup>

However, as we have already pointed out parents' participation in school is not at satisfactory levels, especially the participation of parents belonging to different cultures (such as Roma or Egyptian families).

The cultural background affects the relationship between home and school. Henderson<sup>38</sup> states that "parents from racial, ethnic and cultural minorities, especially those of low socioeconomic status, tend to feel less affinity for the school than those in the mainstream middle class".

Factors affecting parents' non-attendance at school are generated by both the family and the school. Regarding the barriers generated by the family, Drummond & Stipek<sup>39</sup>, claim that for many families, the barriers to their effective inclusion in school derive from mainly economic difficulties, such as low incomes, poverty and limited levels of parenting education, while the barriers generated by the school are mainly related to managerial and administrative aspects.

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<sup>34</sup> Saavedra, A. R., Darleen, V. O. (2012). *Teaching and Learning 21st century Skills: Lessons from the Learning Sciences*. The RAND Corporation, p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> Fullan, M., Scott, G. (2014). *New Pedagogies for Deep Learning Whitepaper: Education PLUS*. Published by: Collaborative Impact SPC. Seattle. Washington. p. 6.

<sup>36</sup> Radu, B. M. (2011). *Parental involvement in schools. A study of resources, mobilization, and inherent inequality*. Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology. p. 103.

<sup>37</sup> Sota, J. (2014). *Educational phenomena in Albania in the years of communist dictatorship and the reformation efforts after nineties*, European Scientific Journal, p. 31.

<sup>38</sup> Henderson, A. T. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*. Austin, TX. p. 15.

<sup>39</sup> Drummond, K. V., and Stipek, D. (2004). *The elementary school journal; low-income parents' beliefs about their role in students's academic learning*. Elementary school Journal, 104, 197-213.

## Conclusions

The participation of students, parents and teachers in Albanian education system has changed in recent years, and is promoted as a successful practice for effective schools. The pre-university education law in Albania provides for the functioning of the education system on the basis of decentralization and autonomy of educational institutions. Legal provisions do guarantee the right of students, teachers and parents to organize themselves into variety of bodies sanctioning as well the protection of their rights, assisting in this way in the well-being of the institution. However, despite the legislation in force, after the analysis of the law on pre-university education, instructions, directives and documents we state that these bodies do not function properly and further steps are needed to be taken from the state, in order to make them available. This finding is also supported by the interviewers' responses (students, parents, teachers) who feel that their participation practices in school need improvement.

Students claim that their voice is not being heard, their ideas are not taken seriously and they don't have the right to decision-making, or to be involved in issues related to their education. For this reason, we strongly believe that schools should change the way they involve their students in education issues. Participation is about giving life to their suggestions and promoting schools that are open to every single idea.

Drafting educational programs together with parents and teachers is just one of the variety of things students can do. Thus, this trinomial collaboration can contribute to effective schools, where all are involved and appreciated.

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