

SCHOOL BASED ACTION-RESEARCH IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

"PARENTS – SCHOOL PARTNERS"

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Abstract:

In this article I will present project Action research in which I will briefly describe the Project relating to the participation of parents in school life. Action research project have been development in two primary school in Sarajevo. The project was followed after a series of studies on this subject and present one significant contribution to the improvement of one of the segments of education: the participation of parents. This project was funded by Open Society Institute. According to the results of earlier research and the interests of schools we selected two primary schools in Sarajevo.

Focus groups with representatives of school management, teacher and parents. were held before the intervention (action). These interest groups have proposed a way of action in schools and created a project that was implemented in schools. After action in schools, focus group with same participants have been made in order to obtain data on the usefulness of the project.

Keywords: parents' participation, parents' workshops, parents' conference, parents' actions.

Introduction

This action research is part of "Advancing Educational Inclusion and Quality in South East Europe", a project of the Education Support Program (ESP), which is financed by OSI (Open Society Institute) and jointly implemented with Center for Education Policy Studies (CEPS, University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Education), National Soros Foundations and Education Civil Society Organizations in the above SEE countries. The project aims to address the problem of rising disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes continue in the South East European (SEE) countries Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia.

Parents meeting in primary school are of informative nature where teachers report parents about their children's progress in school. There are also plans for the formation of Parents Councils. However: in the majority of primary and secondary schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina, an efficient mechanism for the inclusion of parents and community in creating quality schools and creating a democratic process of decision-making is lacking. Although the Law on primary and secondary schools includes plans for the formation of Parents Councils, the activities of these bodies are often just a formality and are at best extremely sporadic.

From the previous research with school principals we found that many schools have quite frequent, but limited, contact with parents. However this contact is very much one-way, from school to parent, with the most frequent activities being sending information about pupil performance and school activities. Parents are also invited to parents' meetings, at which attendance is relatively good overall. However there are some groups of parents who attend much less frequently. In general principals are not convinced that parents should have much influence in their schools, and if so, primarily in areas such as social activity planning. In BiH, parents participate more in bigger schools who consider themselves to be relatively well resourced and in which the principal is convinced of the value of participation. These schools are better at encouraging and assisting parents to support their own children's education, with a range of activities which can be called "home-school activities" or "parenting services".

The Action was implemented in two elementary schools in Sarajevo Canton. One school is urban, the other suburban. The intention was to include both urban and suburban school in order to see whether there are differences in the level of parents' inclusion in relation to the environment of the school. Before implementing project activities which were proposed by the schools, one focus group with teachers and parents was held in each of the schools. The same was done after the implemented action so that the opinion of parents and teachers could be compared, as well as the reasons, intention, will and wish for inclusion/not inclusion of parents in the school life before and after the Action.

Place and dates of implementation:

Both projects were implemented on the territory of Sarajevo Canton, Bosnia and Herzegovina. The projects were implemented in period June – November 2009. Due to summer holidays, a longer break was made in implementing project activities.

Objectives & Expected outcomes:

The project goals defined by the schools as main and most important are: deepening the cooperation with parents, strengthening the role of family, developing qualities of communication and active listening, developing awareness of the importance of contribution to better and healthier environment, all with the purpose of encouraging the cooperation school – parent.

Expected results:

- better awareness of parents about their rights and obligations, and the ways of inclusion in the school work;
- increased parents' participation in the school work;
- improved communication/connection among parents as such, and between parents and teachers;
- promotion of positive experiences and practices with the purpose of creating
- better conditions for better quality of participation of shareholders and beneficiaries in education system;
- school which is open and respects the parents' attitudes and initiatives – established good partnership of parents, school and local community.

Participants

The participants were the students of 5th, 6th, 7th and 8th grades of elementary schools, their parents and teachers. Three classes of 5th grade, five classes of 6th grade, their parents and subject teachers participated in the project "Parents can be a part of school" in the school Skender Kulenović, and the participants in the project "Parent – partner of school" in the Second Elementary School were students and parents from 2 classes of 5th grade, two classes of 6th grade and two classes of 7th grade and their subject teachers.

Methodology

The main technique was the action-research. Along with it we used, for the research part, focus group discussions, interviews, document analysis and questionnaires. For the action part, embedded in the research, we used narrative report writing and content analysis.

Implemented steps & activities

The proMENTE Country team contacted the schools and organized an initial meeting. It was decided that these would be the schools which had already had active Parents' Councils so that the pilot project could be "tested" in the schools which we expected to have good cooperation with. When these two schools applied with their projects according to the criteria made by proMENTE in cooperation with Open Society Fund, and when they answered all the requested criteria in the final phase, the implementation of the activities started.

After the initial focus groups in each of the schools, the implementation of the approved projects started in these two schools.

In this article I will give an overview of activities for one of the schools in which the project is implemented.

“Parents – school partners” implemented in the Second Elementary School.

Step 1: Round table on the topic “Importance of cooperation between family and school”.

The members of the school working group, led by project leaders (English language teacher and geography teacher) participated in the implementation of the activities; they were assisted by the President of the Parents' Council. In the implementation of the activities, first the contacts with parents and school management were established for agreeing on organizing a training course and a round table. The participants were contacted several times by phone or in person so that the dynamics of activities could be set. Then the meetings were held with the school representatives at which the agreement was reached on the dates for training courses, the most suitable time for training courses, what the school should do so that the activities could be performed in the best possible way, the premises were provided, as well as the presence of all elected members of the Council, etc. After the preparation activities, the training course and round table started.

The general result of this activity is that the parents are informed about the importance of the cooperation and partnership relations between parents and schools, as well as about the ways of accomplishing this cooperation. The Parents' Council members are trained and prepared for work in the Council in the school, as well as with the legal framework of the work of the Parents' Council. The Council members are instructed in practical ways on how and in which way the action plans for the school 2009/10 year are prepared.

Step 2: Education of parents and teachers on communication skills (presentation and workshops)

- Presentation on the topic „Communication skills”

The Project Team members led by the project leader (English language teacher), activity leader among the teachers of this school, took part in implementing this activity; they were assisted by the President of the Parents' Council. In order to accomplish the desired goal, the contact with the school management was established for making an agreement on organizing an educative workshop, using premises and materials, and providing refreshments for the participants. Also, the material for making multimedia presentation was provided; invitations with all necessary information on the activity were made.

- Workshop „Nonviolent conflict resolution”

In implementing these activities, first the contact with the school management was established for agreeing on the workshop, using the premises and materials, and providing refreshments for participants. The teacher who was the activity leader designed the workshop "Nonviolent conflict resolution", provided the necessary material, and made invitation with all necessary information about the activity. The project leader discussed all the details necessary for the activity implementation in person or by phone.

The goal of the presentation on the topic "Communication skills" was to inform and educate all participants about communication skills. The advantages of successful communication were pointed out, as well as its efficiency in our relation with other people. In addition, the participants were informed about the characteristics of nonverbal communication and its importance, as well as active listening as the key factor of successful communication.

This educational presentation was preceded by activities such as establishing contacts with parents, agreement on presentation and a meeting with the school management.

The goals of the workshop "Nonviolent conflict resolution" were acquiring knowledge and skills as possibilities for nonviolent resolution of conflict situations, possibility of estimating the conflict results, benefits and losses for participants, as well as change of behavior according to insight in benefit or losses. The participants had an opportunity to exercise to transfer from exclusively insisting on their opinion and position to identification of joint interests and needs. Through this activity, the encouragement for conflict resolution in a peaceful and creative/constructive way, which provides benefit for all involved sides, was made.

Step 3: Joint parent – teacher conference of subject teachers and parents of the 8th grade students

The activity leader, subject teachers and the President of the Parents' Council took part in implementing this activity. As in previous activities, in implementing this one, first the contact was established with the school management for agreement on the meeting, use of the premises and materials, and provision of refreshments for the participants. The activity leader prepared the necessary material with instructions for subject teachers and made invitations for all participants.

The organization of joint parent-teacher conference enabled the parents to meet the subject teachers, and get information from each individual teacher about the work and behavior of their children. As parents usually turn to class teachers, in this way they were given an opportunity to establish contact with subject teachers. At the very beginning the parents kept a certain distance, but soon they engaged in very dynamic communication with teachers grasping the opportunity to ask about all they wanted to know and get the answers directly from the respective teachers.

Step 4: Presentation on the topic "Addiction prevention – school and educators"; discussion

The goal of the presentation on the topic "Addiction prevention – school and educators" was to inform and educate all participants about the problems of drug abuse, risk factors, and the ways in which educators and parents could act preventively. The importance of proper education was emphasized, as well as the environment in which children were spending their time. Also, they talked about risk family factors which are applied on school at the same time.

Step 5: Joint field trip of parents and teachers – Trip to Mostar and visit to Blagaj -Buna

The members of the project team led by the project leader, activity leader and the President of the Parents' Council participated in implementing this activity. First, a meeting with team members was held for agreeing on the date of organizing the trip, destination, and organization of transport. The project leader made invitations with all necessary information on the activity. The President of the Parents' Council, in agreement with the project leader, made an agreement with transportation agency and the owner of the restaurant in which a lunch was planned. The project leader discussed all the details necessary for implementing the activity with the members in person or by phone.

The goal of the joint field trip for parents and teachers was to enable parents and teachers to get to know each other better in a more relaxed atmosphere, and to exchange ideas, experiences and opinions regarding the partnership between the school and them as parents. The goal, among other things, was to remove the existing prejudices to a certain extent, and to have both participating categories understand how much qualitative communication and partnership are important.

This field trip was preceded by activities such as establishing contacts with parents and teachers, agreement on the trip, and a meeting with the school management.

Problems in implementation

The only difficulty, which should be taken into consideration in the future, is the procedure of transferring financial means to the school account and limitations on using the means imposed by the Ministry of Education and Science of Sarajevo Canton

Action evaluation

After each activity implemented within this project, its evaluation was done through evaluation lists which gave an opportunity to the participants to express how much they agree or disagree with the offered statements. The analysis of the valuation lists produced results which showed that most participants gave best grades to the project, and especially important are approvals and suggestions on their continuation in increased scope than now.

In the program evaluation in this school, the comparison was made of the opinions received from focus groups with teachers and parents at the beginning of the activities and at the end of the activities.

Results achieved

The expected results of the project “Parents – school partners” implemented in the Second Elementary School, listed in the project proposal were accomplished through all five project activities. Parents are better informed about their rights and obligations, as well as the ways of involving in the school work. Parents are now more interested and ready for cooperation, as well as inclusion in many activities. Mutual communication/connection among parents, as well as between parents and teachers improved significantly, and this project opened many doors to qualitative partnership relation. Through this project activities, positive experiences and practices were promoted, which definitely created better conditions for more qualitative participation of shareholders and beneficiaries in education system. The school showed satisfactory level of openness for respecting parents' attitudes and their positive initiatives, which can be a good way of achieving good partnership of parents and the school. A joint comment can be given to the evaluation results of all 5 activities – most participants evaluated all aspects of the given activities as successful. Almost all of them agree that it is necessary to have as many as possible of such ways of cooperation and inclusion of a larger number of teachers and parents. The benefit for parents and teachers is in removing the existing prejudices which are an obstacle for partnership, education and development of partnership relation. Through the implementation of the project activities, the school principle had a chance to get insight in the existing situation regarding the cooperation of parents and teachers, and to see which activities can be of great use for improving the cooperation in the future work of the school. This project really enabled the existing cooperation of parents and the school to be improved, and it gives encouragement to the school management to introduce certain activities in our school practice because of the success we made. It is necessary to attract parents to the school with such positive projects and encourage them to get involved in the school work and become its partners in the true sense of the word.

We reached a conclusion that the activities implemented in school gave positive results in the context of parents' inclusion as well as increasing parents' awareness about their roles, responsibilities and possibilities. In a small scale, the activity included parents of older grades, and the result was much attended workshops, meetings and a trip they organized. Parents now come to school more often to talk with teachers than it used to be the case before the implementation of the project activities when most of them used to come only when they were invited or wanted to see grades. The trip resulted in seeing parents and teachers in different light, meaning not in the school premises and not on the level teacher – parent. This activity is often mentioned as the best project activity, and many „walls” between teachers and parents were torn down.

Participatory action taken (products & achievements/impacts)

Creative participation of schools and parents offers great possibilities and an opportunity for improving the life in school, as well as the life in family. What a child has adopted in its family is background for each educational work in school. Teachers and parents are in partnership relation equally responsible for the child's progress and development.

In order to have better quality of the partnership between school and family, it is good to know the shortcomings and advantages influencing motivation to partnership participation, and all with the purpose to put child in the center of attention through a partnership relation parent – school, and provide good quality of upbringing and education; so that it can exit elementary education as a healthy person, with well developed positive relation to itself, its family, friends, and wider social community, which is the way of preventing negative influence of the environment.

Conclusions

One thing is for sure – the school management, teachers and then parents themselves are responsible for the desired inclusion of the parents in school.

When the activities at schools which will give importance to parents' presence are designed, and when the same language is spoken by teachers and parents, then parents will be able to include in the school life without concern and prejudices.

Upon finishing the intervention in schools, the Country Team was extremely satisfied with the changes that were heard in focus groups.

After the implemented activity, it is definite that the parents included in the projects saw the ways of inclusion in the school work, to satisfaction of teachers, management, their children and their own satisfaction. The parents expressed positive stands regarding each of the implemented activity; they think that such activities should present a foundation for long term activity of involving parents. This is the way in which they saw new ways of participating in the activities enabled by the school.

The activities of this program showed teachers, parents, school management that all of them have the same goal – that is the welfare of the students.

We think that the joint activity of parents and teachers (trip to Buna) achieved best efficiency for breaking down the existing prejudices.

Parent: "The trip that was organized with children and parents made a closer connection between parents and teachers. Good communication between parents and children was made; parents and teachers improved their communication and experienced something new. The project accomplished one positive effect."

Teacher: "We are coming to a neutral field at which we communicate through playing; parents and teachers; some stories which would never be told are coming. On the bus we behaved as children, we almost started singing. Everyone feels so differently, some stories which otherwise wouldn't be told are told, and then you have the whole day at your disposal to get to thousands of topics."

Still, if we take the total number of involved parents in both schools into consideration. It is clear that only small steps forward were taken by these projects. These activities established a basis for future cooperation. The continuous implementation of the same or similar activities would contribute to establishing a better relation between parents and school, and thereby, parents would feel invited to the school. When a parent really feels that the school doors are always open for him/her, he/she will then take a more active parental role in their obligations in school and enter it as an active parent.

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