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## Parental Involvement as a Factor of Equality and Justice in School

A society with multiple opportunities and knowledge should ensure the fundamental human rights and values of modern society for all individuals. In this article, we focus on the most important aspects in implementing the basic principles of equality, equity and equal opportunities in education. These are issues which are still relevant today and are the subject of much debate among shareholders in the field of education. As reported by Lakota B. and Sarđoč (2015), in OECD and EU member states, there is a general consensus among both experts and education policy makers on the importance of ensuring equal educational opportunities and fundamental human rights within the public education system. Over the last decades, most of the mentioned countries have increased their efforts to guarantee equal opportunities both in educational institutions and in societies in general.

The main strategic document for the development of the education system is the *White Paper on Education* in the Republic of Slovenia, hereafter referred to as the White Paper (Krek & Metljak, 2011). As the authors of the *White Paper* point out, "education and training are a necessary condition for all citizens in modern societies, which are based on liberal and democratic principles, to have an equal chance to succeed in life" (Krek & Metljak 2011, p. 14). It identifies four basic principles of education, namely human rights and responsibility, autonomy, equity and quality (ibid.). Equity is closely linked to ensuring equal opportunities for all citizens to succeed in life, which requires equal access to education. According to the *White Paper* (ibid.): "Since the equality of opportunities that a person has in society depends to a large extent on his or her access to education, a country striving for a just society must first ensure equality of educational opportunities through a variety of measures." (ibid., p. 14). However, education is influenced by a range of other factors, many of which are already present in the pre-school years. School is a meeting point for different groups of children from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. This raises the question of how to offer such a diverse population equal educational opportunities in the education system.

If discussions on the equity of public schooling are at the heart of debates on the issue of ensuring equality and on the acceptance and respect of diversity (Kodelja 2006), the issue of ensuring equal educational opportunities is its logical continuation, since the social status and social mobility of an individual are strongly dependent on his or her achievements or performance in the process of schooling in general. This is why the debate on the equity of public schooling is central to the issue of ensuring equality and on the issue of acceptance and respect for diversity (Kodelja, 2006). The author (ibid.) points out that too little attention is still paid to equity in education, and adds that it is particularly troubling, because it is one of the fundamental virtues of social institutions (Rawls & Kodelja, 2006), which undoubtedly include kindergartens and schools. As Novak (2004) notes, the principle of equal opportunities in education means that "Every child should have an equal opportunity to an education that fits his or her life plan or that of his or her parents." (Novak, 2004, p. 133). The author (ibid.) thus concludes that the state has a duty to ensure that all children have an equal starting point. With the democratization of the school environment, other stakeholders besides children and teachers are increasingly entering the school environment, especially parents.

Bronfenbrenner's (1994) cultural context theory is based on the assumption that the child develops within the changing life environments with which he or she interacts. The author presents the environment as a set of interconnected systems, in which a person's/child's everyday life takes place and which have a significant impact on his/her development. Thus, within the framework of the theory, he identifies four levels of environmental influences on the child, starting with those close to the child, and in which he/she is directly involved, to those quite distant from him/her, and in which he/she is not directly involved. The author stresses that the child is at the center of the system, while the layers of the environment spread around him in concentric circles and influence his or her development to a greater or lesser extent. The parents are the closest to the child in the first system, which Bronfenbrenner (ibid.) calls the microsystem. It is thus quite understandable that parental influence and parental involvement in children's education is an important factor that became of interest to researchers and stakeholders (parents, educators, teachers, etc.) involved in the child's microsystem decades ago.

In this article, the authors focus on the fundamental theoretical principles of equality and equity, which underpin the principle of equal opportunities in education. The objectives are to identify how the principles of equality and equity are implemented through the education system and how parental involvement in their children's education influences the implementation of these principles. The research questions are: What is the impact of parental involvement on children's education? How are the principles of equality and equity reflected in the education system? How can parental involvement be considered as a factor in the implementation of the principles of equality and equity?

The article is based on a descriptive method of pedagogical research. The comparative method and the methods of analysis and synthesis are used to compare and analyse the findings of different researches in the field. In doing so, we will draw on Slovenian and foreign literature.

The authors note that the theory of family law defines parenthood as the exercise of the constitutional rights and duties of parents and that it has the character of a fundamental human right (Novak, 2004), which is implied in the parental right or parental care, which also includes parental care for the upbringing and education of children (Kraljić, 2014). Kraljić (ibid.) points out that modern parents approach parenthood with excessive seriousness, which can lead to intrusive parenthood. In addition to the involvement of parents with children, Ule (2015) points to the dimension of parents' involvement with schools. Menheere and Hooge (2010) highlight a distinction between two concepts – parental involvement and parental participation. Parental involvement is the involvement of parents in their own child's education, both at home and at school, while parental participation is the active contribution of parents in school activities (Smit et al. 2007; Menheere & Hooge, 2010).

Epstein (2011) pointed out that in the last two decades of the 20th century, the concept of the relationship between family and school changed in a way that gradually moved away from the idea of a separation between the two towards one of increasing collaboration. This raises the question of how to bring the factor of parental involvement in children's education closer to respecting the principles of equality and equity in the education system.

The general understanding of equality in education is that schools should offer the same education to all children. This will ensure that all children have the same opportunities. A common understanding of educational equity is that all children should be provided with the education they need to achieve certain outcomes. Both ideas seem relevant at first sight and are clearly linked to ideas of equity. However, if these ideas are used to guide policy approaches, unintended consequences can arise (Forum of the American Journal of Education, 2016). Rawls and Kodelja (2004) also distinguish the principle of fair equality of opportunity from formal equality of opportunity.

With regard to parental involvement as a factor of equality and equity, we highlight the findings of Epstein (2011), who concludes that stakeholders in the educational process (educators, teachers and practitioners) are trained to teach or organize the pedagogical process, but also that most are unprepared to work effectively in an area that, as the author contends, is "a constant in life" – working with children's families. In search for answers to dividing responsibilities between parents and teachers, the questions that most often come to the fore are the advantages and disadvantages of involving parents in school and the obstacles that prevent this involvement. In an empirical study conducted as part of the *Factors of Successful School-Home Cooperation project* (Kalin et al. 2008), researchers set out to address a number of research questions related to school - home cooperation. The authors (ibid.) concluded that it is important for a teacher to be aware of the parents of all the children in class and to take into account the diversity of their experiences and needs in his or her professionalism. Parents consider it fundamental to build appropriate interpersonal relationships.

The school's primary responsibility is to keep parents informed about the school's curriculum and their children's progress through good communication. To this end, the school can use a variety of means – from written communications, notices, newspapers to parent-teacher conferences and the use of modern information and communication technology (e-mail, school websites, internet forums, etc.). According to Košak (2010), teachers must be sensitive enough to recognise the diversity of children and take into



account positive discrimination against the disadvantaged, even in cases not covered by legislation. And as the author points out (*ibid.*), collaboration with parents is a very important element in ensuring equality and equity, because through communication and the development of a mutual partnership, the teacher can identify their wishes and needs and, together with them, co-create "a safe and successful space for every child in school" (Kořak, 2010, p. 18). From the analysis carried out by Menheere and Hooge (2010), the results suggest that schools should also take into account differences between parents in their approaches to increase parental involvement in school activities.

Research shows that parental involvement in children's education has a number of positive effects on children's academic achievement, as well as on their socialization and motivation. The key to parental involvement lies in the development of appropriate interpersonal relationships, where teachers take into account the diversity of parents' needs, experiences and skills. Research also shows that a significant barrier limiting parental involvement with schools is a sense of inferiority, so we conclude that more proactive and tailored ways of engaging parents are needed, based on what parents are good at, or based on what parents know rather than what they do not know.

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