

Towards a Stakeholder-Based Map on Parental Participation in Genoese School Life.

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The aim of this article is to examine the partnership among home, school and community from a micro-sociological point of view deepening the concept of parental involvement in school life from the stakeholder standpoint. Qualitative approach has been adopted. Secondary-source data have been collected on the institutional background and the field research included interviews on a selected non probabilistic sample composed by parents, teachers, experts, school heads, decision-makers and members of parental associations from the Genoese community. In addition to interviews, participant observation of formal and non formal meetings between parents and teachers and principals has been undertaken in some primary and middle schools of Genoa. The main findings are presented in the form of descriptive analysis, illustrating the perceptions of several stakeholders interviewed. Although they are not representative of the whole population, they proved to be helpful to map the dimensions of parental involvement in school life.

Keywords: Home school and community partnership, Parental involvement at school, Parental participation in school life, Parental engagement.

Introduction

Student learning improves in schools that promote parental participation activities (Fan & Chen, 2001; Weiss, Lopez, & Kreider, 2003; Seginer, 2006; Hill & Chao, 2009). Some studies show that parental involvement in school activities is not strongly related to student outcomes (Balli, Wedman, & Demo, 1997; Bronstein, Ginsberg, & Herrera, 2005) but, in general, there is agreement on the positive association between parental involvement at school and student's achievements (Bebiroglu, 2009; Roy-Zen Ruffinen, 2009; Hill & Tyson, 2009). The main question that aims this article is how parental involvement develops in the Genoese¹ scholastic environment.

Assuming that school life regards the cultural, pedagogical and organizational activities and processes that develop in the school environment involving some stakeholders, such as students, school staff (teachers, school head, administrative staff), parents and local associations; the purpose

of this article is to map out the meanings of parental involvement in Genoese school life examining the partnership among home, school and community (Epstein, Sanders, & Scheldon, 2009) from the stakeholder² standpoint.

Epstein and Sanders (2002) showed different aspects of parental engagement in school life to improve student achievement, identifying school-based and home-based activities of parental engagement, school support for parenting and school and community partnership.

Home-based parental involvement consists of educational activities at home to develop children capabilities that require supporting from school to families, such as assisting parents to understand children development, promoting parental training courses and setting home conditions. While school-based parental involvement focuses on engaging parents in school governance, volunteering at school (such as recruiting, organizing and recognizing volunteer's supports occurring inside and outside the school), and school-to-home and home-to school communications. Moreover the authors explained the relevance of the partnership between school and social community to select and integrate the

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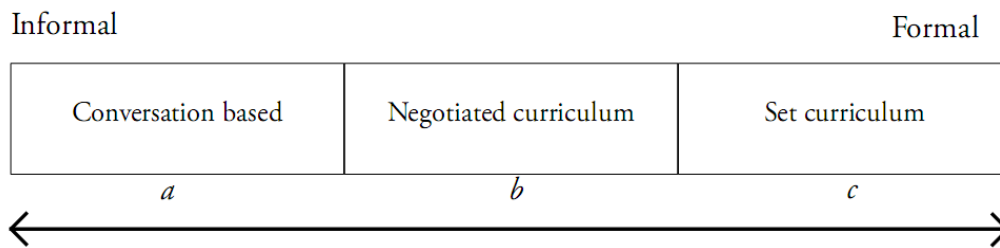


Figure 1 Jeffs & Smith' model of formal, non formal and informal curriculum (Smith, 2001)

resources of the local community to strengthen school programs, family agency and student achievement (Epstein, Sanders, Simon, Salinas, Jansorn, & Van Voorhis, 2002).

From these assumptions, the main hypothesis of this article is that parental involvement in school life is an embedded (Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993) process that arises in formal/institutional environment

the school) to develop such as informal and non formal educational processes. While formal education would be approximate to the top-down scholastic curriculum (c); non-formal education is bottom-up and negotiated (b) and informal education would arguably be non-programmed and based on conversation (a) (Jeffs & Smith, 1999; 2005).

The formal parental participation at school is driven by laws. In Italy, parental participation at school is still regulated by the Delegated Decrees of 1974. Spaces of representative parental participation at school, so called 'collegial boards', had been instituted at different level of the school system: the territory, the school and the classroom.

By time, in line with the broad decentralization and autonomy from central government to local governances³, dialogic and inclusive participation (House & Howe, 2000) has been promoted instead of the representative. The direct stakeholder involvement in the broader

public decision making, according to Palumbo and Congiu (2009), can be distinguished into three key levels of intersections between citizens and institutions, corresponding to three functions to be observed, informing (and, where it's necessary, training); listening and learning; dialoguing and deliberating (dialogic or deliberative democracy).

Assuming that the increase of the school autonomy has changed school responsibilities⁴, introducing innovative problem-solving strategies, to promote the more frequent direct involvement

of stakeholders, and in particular of parents⁵; consulting stakeholders has become relevant to know how parental involvement takes place in school life not only formally but also non formally and informally.

The following paragraphs show the adopted method to know stakeholders' perceptions, the main results and, finally, the stakeholder based map on parental participation in school life.

Method

Participants and procedures

From the methodological viewpoint, this paper shows part of the pilot research of my doctoral research, aimed to identify and to map out some indicators of parental involvement in school life.

The research was focused on the following issues: to know the forms (formal, non formal and informal), the involved agents (individual or collective) and the level (informing, consulting and deliberating) of parental participation in school life and to evaluate its effectiveness and usefulness from the stakeholder standpoint.

The approach of responsive constructivist evaluation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) was assumed. Qualitative and narrative-based research was done mixing 'emic' and 'etic' perspectives (Harris, 1976:334)⁶. The aim was to build indicators of parental participation in school life in a participatory way.

After collecting secondary data regarding the institutional background on parental involvement in school life, a field research was done.

A snowball sample⁷ of stakeholders was done considering macro, meso and micro stages of the national school system⁸. Particularly, at the macro level a decision-maker of Liguria Region was face-to-face interviewed to deepen the institutional background. At the meso-level, two presidents and three members of national parental associations were face-to-face interviewed to study the agency of parental associations at the

macro and micro level. At micro level, face-to-face interviews were done to six school heads, of which three males and three females, respectively of two comprehensive institute (public schools composed by primary and middle school levels), of two pedagogical circles (public schools composed by kindergarten and primary school levels) and of two middle schools. The aim was to study the partnership between school, parents and community. Moreover six teachers were face-to-face interviewed to study the parent-teacher communications.

A semi-structured interview was proposed to the snowball sample of stakeholders. The interviews were audio registered and successively transcribed.

In addition to the interviews, some participant observations of formal and non formal meetings of parents, teachers and school heads of some primary and middle schools of Genoa were done. The conversations were audio registered and, successively, transcribed. Particularly, it had been done a participant observation of four assemblies of the school boards (a school council, an interclass board and a classroom board) to know how formal participation and interaction between parents and school staff (school head, teachers) develop in school. Moreover, to analyze interactions between parents and school staff, I observed also a training course of parents and teachers, an orienting conference organized by the Liguria Region for parents, voluntary working groups of parents and teachers and occasional conversations of parents in front of the school.

Data analysis were done considering the institutional background and aggregating the stakeholder issues. A map of parental participation in school life was built and validated in a participated way.

Results

Data analysis allowed to distinguish between formal, non formal and informal parental involvement in school life. Particularly, the formal participation is based on a set of institutional procedures and can be split into representative and dialogic. Non formal participation is structured but over the institutional setting and based on negotiation; while the informal participation is unstructured and generally based on conversation.

The next sub-paragraphs explain each type of parental participation at school enriched by the stakeholders' standpoint.

Formal parental participation in school life: the institutional background

Formal parental participation in school life was provided by law. It can be distinguished in representative and dialogic. As a matter of fact, at school there are representative institutions where parents participate by elected parents and direct forms of parental participation, that are dialogic and inclusive (House & Howe, 2000).

Representative parental participation in school life

It's possible to distinguish the representative parental participation in school life into two categories: the agency of the collegial boards and the role of the national parental associations in the Italian school system.

The collegial boards

The collegial boards, provided by the Delegate Decrees of 1974, are collective spaces of deliberation. Starting from the idea that the involvement of representatives of social and civic community in school management guarantees school autonomy (art. 1, Delegated Decree 416/1974), local collegial boards, such as the regional educational board and the higher educational council boards (Legislative Decree 233/1999), and school collegial boards were instituted.

At the school level, the school council deliberates the school aims and evaluates management and pedagogical topics, suggesting general criteria on classroom composition, teacher allocation and interclass/classroom board management, and approving extra-curricular activities, such as cultural, sportive and recreational events for students. One of the most relevant activity of the school council is to deliberate the Educational Offer Plan (the Italian acronym is "POF"), after consulting local associations, organizations or voluntary groups of parents.

Collegial boards at the classroom level, so called "interclass/classroom boards", are closer to parents than the school council. Their aim is to facilitate the relationship between teachers, students and parents. In general, parental representatives participate to the interclass/classroom boards to be consulted about proposals on curricular, extra-curricular and disciplinary topics regarding the classroom.

Individually, all parents (mother and father) have the right to elect their representatives and/or

to be elected such as collegial board representatives.

Collegial boards of the school (DL 297/1994)	
Types	Number of members representative of parents
Kindergarten: Board of intersection	1
Primary School: Board of interclass	1
Middle school: Classroom board	4
Secondary school: Classroom board	2
Teachers college	(composed only by teachers)
School board of the primary schools	From 7 to 9 parents involved.
School board of the middle and secondary schools	From 8 to 10 parents involved. The president of a school board is always a parent.
Executive Committee	2
Disciplinary board of the students	(the parental involvement depends on the decision of the scholastic institute; e.g. some decisions can be taken by the school board)
Commission for the evaluation of the teacher service	(composed only by teachers)

Figure 2 The collegial boards in the Italian School System

The elections of parents' representatives of the interclass/classroom board are annual; while of the school council are triennial. Generally, the elected parents have consultative and deliberative powers. They suggest proposals and vote the collegial board deliberations. Particularly, the president of the school council must be an elected parent and has a strong deliberative power. As a matter of fact, he/she collaborates with the school head to define the collegial boards' tasks; he/she chairs the school councils and has the power of suspending the school council assemblies to examine deliberations and motions; in deliberations his vote is worth twice. Moreover he can refuse the external listeners who cause disorder and decide to prosecute the assemblies in a private way. He/she promotes teacher collaboration and best practices also informally.

From these assumptions, the collegial boards are dialogic and deliberative spaces, where parents can be informed and consulted or can deliberate.

The national parental associations. Promoting the effectiveness of the collegial board enabling the elected representatives to carry out their role efficiently is one of the aims of the few national parental associations. Each parent can become a

member of national parental association, paying an annual fee.

The national parental associations are engaged at different levels of participation: listening and consulting by decision-makers at the national and regional level; informing and forming parents at the local level. Particularly, the national and provincial forums have the aims to suggest reforms about the national school system, the collegial boards in particular, and to promote parental involvement at school informing on best practices regarding home, school and community partnership.

At national level, two members per each national parental association take part to the National Forum of Parental Association of School (the Italian acronym is FoNAGS) (Legislative Decree February, 14, 2002), such as representatives of parental associations. Moreover, at the regional level, there are regional parental forums (the Italian acronym is FORAGS) (DPR 301/2005).

Dialogic parental participation in school life

It's possible to distinguish the representative dialogic participation in school life in two categories: the participation at the school level and the participation at the classroom level.

Parental participation at the school level. At the school level, parents can decide to participate to the assembly organized by school to inform on school activities or to organize assemblies directly. While in the first case parents are listeners and consulted by the school; in the second case they are responsible of their agency, so that they manage dialogic participation.

The parent representatives of the school council, the majority of the parental committee of the school or one hundred parents per five hundred students (two hundred parents per one thousand students, and three hundred parents in the other cases) can require to the school to organize assemblies in the locals of the school (art. 15, Legislative Decree 297/1994).

Local associations, committees or working groups can be created voluntarily by parents to care of the problems of the school. Moreover the school has to listen parental groups about the Educational Offer Plan, experimental projects and proposals (art. 3, DPR 275/1999).

Representative and dialogic forms of parental participation are mixed. As a matter of fact, needs and expectations of students and families must be taken into account by the school council (art. 8, DPR 275/1999).

Local parental associations, organizations or voluntary groups can suggest the teacher board to elaborate the Educational Offer Plan that will be published and distributed to students and families to inform on school activities of the current school year (art. 9, DPR 275/1999).

Moreover, parents can be consulted or direct be involved by school to define the document so called "social contract (or pact) of co-responsibility", that will be sign by each parent at the beginning of the school year. The aim is to share rights and duties of the stakeholders involved in school life, students and families in particular.

Parental participation at the classroom level. At the classroom level, general classroom assemblies are organized by teachers to inform parents on aspects such as the teacher staff's organization, pedagogical and disciplinary topics and extra-curricular activities of the classroom.

Moreover, parents can be consulted by teachers to define the classroom social contract, that consists of a social contract between students, teachers and families to share rights and duties of the classroom. The teachers can decide

to involve or not parents into the definition of the classroom social contract.

The main tool of formal and dialogic participation is the parents' teacher colloquia, formally organized during each school year to account student's performances. The parents' teacher colloquia have the aim to know families and to inform families on children performances. If necessary, parents can required to have extra-colloquia with the school.

The non formal and informal parental participation in school life: the stakeholders' standpoint

The increase of non formal parental participation in school life. The formal parental participation in school life was perceived weak and was defined such as a "descending parable" from the interviewed stakeholders.

While in the past, both school and families invested a lot on active engagement in collegial boards, by time, there were resistances from school and parental disaffection in front of the elections of parents' representatives¹⁵. Actually, few parents per school vote their representatives and, often, the parental representatives are not candidates but volunteers. They have not specific skills but free time and motivation of being involved in school activities.

It regards the free rider paradox (Olson, 1965) that is based on the idea that the collective participation is irrational except when selective incentives arise from participating (Pizzorno 1994; Pellizoni, 1998). In other terms, it is better to preserve the autonomy than «being embedded in "communities of fate" (Van Gunsteren, 1998) cemented by the links of interdependence» (Papadopoulos 2002, 5).

Certainly in the past there was a strong engagement of cultural and social capital from parents [...] The elections of the members of the school council were very participated by parents. There were electoral lists, programs, different ideas and electoral campaigns. There was an high ethic political moment of parental participation; perhaps it was exasperated by political parties and Trade Unions, however it was a tank of energy and intent to participate in everything influencing all the scholastic mechanism [...] Actually, if school is such as a company, parents

are such as customers, so that the expected participation of parents is the feedback on the scholastic service (school head).

Potentially, the school autonomy changed the school quality and the meaning of parental participation. However parental participation in school life had been fossilized into collegial boards and progressively transformed in formal bureaucracy (ex school head).

The school head has the task to promote the real parental involvement at school. In the past, parental involvement was perceived such as dialogic participation with teachers and not a counterparty. However teachers were contrary to involve parents perceiving the risk of parental intrusiveness on textbook choice and teaching methods; while parents were interested to know school activities. Participation such as a counterparty was the result so that collegial boards became bureaucratic and lost their usefulness (ex member of collegial board).

At the school level, the social contract of co-responsibility is realized sharing with students and usually informing (sometimes consulting) parents, as well as the social contract at the classroom level.

The social contract of co-responsibility is formal and reduced to a claim for damages... it doesn't exist or it has been done by some school secretary [...] as well as the Educational Offer Plan that provides parental consultation. Really there is no school that deliberates the Educational Offer Plan in a participated way; usually the teachers' board defines the Educational Offer Plan after consulting parents but sometimes schools are not able to consult all parents (member of national parental association).

Differences between top down and bottom up parental assemblies. Generally, top down parental assemblies, such as the general assembly of the school or the classroom assembly, are organized

by the school and participated by parents. Usually, the aim of the general assembly of the schools is to inform parents on topics regarding school level, such as the Educational Offer Plan, curricular and extra-curricular activities and extra didactical aspects, for instance the student canteen and the school finances.

Usually when at school there are critical aspects or emergencies to solve, individual parents or organized by parent groups require to do assemblies.

While top down assemblies were perceived by stakeholders such as a bureaucratic routine; bottom up meetings were recognized such as spontaneous. Particularly, parental participation decreases in general assembly organized by school with the increase of children schooling so that it is high at primary school, it decreases in middle school and it is almost absent in high school. On the contrary, bottom up meetings are aimed by common practical goals that promote spontaneous spaces of co-responsibility, collaboration and creativity.

Volunteering at school. The more spontaneous form of inclusive and responsible parental participation in school life is volunteering. Volunteering is at discretion of parents and depends on the grade of school openness. The schools can decide to organize non formal working groups of both parents and teachers to collaborate to some school activities or ask the parental availability.

Stakeholders perceived the parental usefulness to organize extra-didactical events, doing cultural projects, organizing school parties, sportive manifestations, activities of fund raising and opening the school library to the community. Parents provide their expertise, artistic, cultural or operative. Nice examples of parental availability based on volunteering (sometimes also of grandparents) are managing the home to school and school-to-home student service, so called 'walking school bus', and taking care of the school gardens.

These activities promote the establishment of good relationships between parents and teachers, decreasing the eventual idea of parental intrusiveness.

When I was school head of a primary school, parental involvement was a sensitive topic, because parental involvement was active; however some

teachers were afraid to be swallowed and had resistances on how much parents can be involved (ex school head).

High motivation is necessary to achieve. Institutional parental participation forms don't run, the interclass assemblies in particular, because teachers perceived them heavy and not effective. [...] Formally parents can say whatever they want in the collegial boards but really they do not feel free to say what they like [...] For those reasons, we searched a non formal way to involve parents in school life (school head).

The local parental associations. While at national level, the national parental associations promote the effectiveness of the parental representativeness; at school level the members of the national parental associations can promote information and formation on parental role at school. Generally there are local associations, committees or voluntary groups of parents close to schools that are participated also by teachers. Particularly the longer permanence of teachers instead of parents is relevant. Parents transit from a school to another in line with the transition of their children schooling, e.g. from primary to middle school, except where primary and middle school level belongs to the same scholastic institution. However, local associations close to the schools assume the risk to have not much deliberative autonomy.

The main aim of a parental association is to help parents to understand their parental role... to learn responsibility, sharing and comparing experiences... the school is the context. [...] Mutual responsibility is the focus: the responsibility of another parent moves my responsibility, and so on (member of national parental association).

The experiences of parental committees, autonomous organizations, local parental associations are non-formal forms of parental engagement in school life. In part, they are provide by law such as a possibility and not a constraint [...] Formally a parental committee is based on the sum of parental representatives; however in some other occasions parental committees involve other parents, so that

the committees are diffused into community (ex school head).

Local associations that born and develop into school have not a deep breath, no possibility to convey to decisions (member of national parental association).

The role of informing channels. Parent-school information is relevant to allow mutual collaboration at level of both school and classroom. One of the critical aspects that emerged is the lack of direct accessibility to information such as knowing the members and the activity of the collegial boards per each school. The interviewed stakeholders spoke about the difficulty to know and to inform parents who are elected such as representatives into collegial boards, the presidents of school councils in particular. A possible solution to ensure a systematic information to all parents could be to create a registry of the elected parents in collegial boards, the presidents of school council in particular¹⁶.

The informal direct participation consists of informing parents with effective tools, such as the school website, evaluative or social balance reports, and consulting parents by using special meetings or evaluative tools, such as customer satisfaction survey.

There is aware participation when there is good partnership between teacher and parent: it is the first level of parental involvement at school. Having a collaboration at school level requires more organizational and communicative efforts (school head).

Project works are possible by doing a basilar work such as transferring tools to understand the scholastic reality to parents so that they can be really engaged (teacher).

Sometimes parents are not informed so that there is a total delegation; sometimes they suffer the deliberations. [...] Evaluation is an approach to promote teacher-family partnership (member of national parental association).

Improving information to parents is useful to know parental needs and expectations and to inform parents on our activities so

that all the community develops (school head).

School capability is necessary to become community inside an environment, so that parents are at least a ring of an integrative dynamic inside a broader dynamic (ex school head).

The ways of parent-school communication. Usually, the active parental engagement depends on school will and educational criteria: in some school, parents are actively engaged in school governance; while in some others parents are only listeners and, finally, voters so that their vote counts quantitatively and not qualitatively.

The collegial boards were limited into formal communicative models [...] Actually, it's necessary to distinguish parental involvement into institutional and non formal level. The last one is characterized by vitality and goes beyond the institutional events (ex school head).

Observing some collegial board assemblies had showed a one way conversation from the school head and teachers to parents by using a formal way of communication. The main aims of these meetings were to inform on didactical and disciplinary aspects, student learning assessment procedures and schooling process, at primary school level in particular. Moreover, there was a negotiation on critical aspects, such as the cuts of funds, and on extra-curricular activities, such as monitoring the student canteen, organizing special events and student travels, that involved the economic aspects and responsibilities. Parents were very participative to select a strategy, also non formal, to contrast critical aspects. In that case, parents proposed to invest their skills to 'cover' the classroom without teacher instead of splitting classrooms (nevertheless this aspect is prohibited by legislation). However the school head asked to parents a voluntary economical aid to contrast the financial critical aspects so that parents reflected on how much this financial aid could be 'voluntary' from parents instead of being 'required' by school. Stakeholders spoke about the more parental involvement in private school than in public school.

Parental engagement is simpler in small villages or cohesive neighbourhoods, where there is more familiarity than in cities, where people are subjected to high mobility and transition. In small

village, the representative parental participation is strong as well as the direct one. Moreover, if the school is located in a critical context, for instance where there is a strong concentration of immigrants, the partnership between school, families and social community can facilitate the process of integration of the different cultures.

Actually, foreign parents look for their representativeness in collegial boards. Moreover, schools become central to promote a common learning process, focused on the acquisition of the Italian language, not only for immigrant students but also for their families.

Private schools are more active than public school, because in private school the sense of affiliation is usually stronger than in public school and based on common values both confessional and religious (ex school head).

Perhaps in public schools held in smart villages parental participation is stronger than in the schools held in metropolitan areas (decision maker).

Stakeholders considered relevant the informal and de-structured occasions of parent-teacher communication, such as occasional face to face meetings of parents and teachers. Observing some meetings of parents and teachers, such as school parties, non formal working groups and informal dinners, allowed to focus on the mutual interaction between parents, teachers and students. Particularly discussions were based not only on the learning process but also on feedbacks about the process of growth and autonomy of their children. In those occasions, there was more communicative symmetry than in formal parental engagement; as a matter of fact during non formal parental involvement at school, mutual trust, friendship and collaboration emerged.

Discussion

Data analysis showed that parental involvement in school life is embedded in the formal school environment arising in non-formal and informal processes, that the field research identified focusing on the participatory process based on conversation and negotiation.

The next figure shows the stakeholder based map on parental participation in school life emerged after the analysis of both the institutional

background, the stakeholders' interviews and the participant observations.

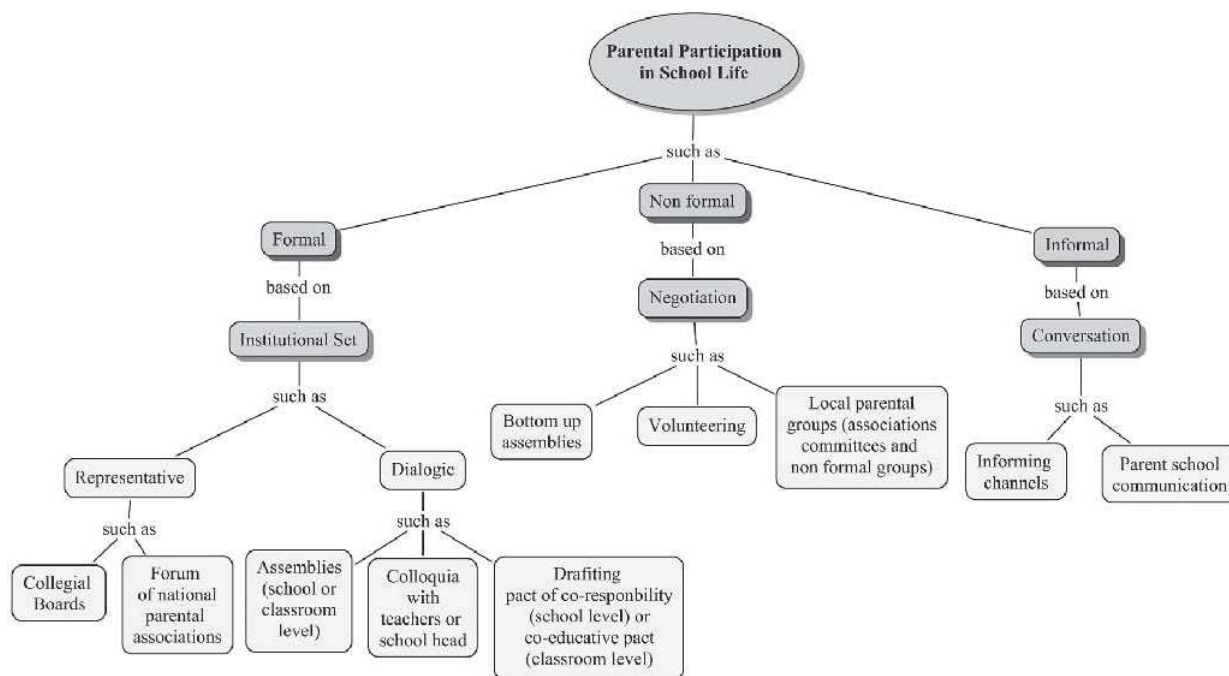


Figure 3 The stakeholder-based map of parental involvement at school

Parents between representative and dialogic participation in school life

Parents can participate in school life by representative or dialogic participatory tools. Representative participation is based on formal procedure; while dialogic participation mixes formal and non formal aspects. Both formal and non formal activities are based on parental voluntary to provide expertise for school activities.

Particularly, the parents would like to be actively engaged in school governance, so that they can decide to be candidates for assuming formally a representative role in the school collegial boards or in special formal committees required by the school, such as the canteen committee.

Parent would like to be informed so that they can decide to participate directly to general school/classroom assemblies, to have colloquia with teachers/school head or to participate at the events and activities organized for parents by school.

Otherwise parents would like to collaborate with school such as volunteers or to become

members of a parental association, committee or non formal working group close to the school.

Generally, the main difference that emerged between formal and non-formal forms of parental participation at school is that while the formal representative parental participation is at the level of decision-making; direct participation is at the practical level.

In other terms, parents participate at school governance through the formal representative participation into collegial boards, and act at practical level, through direct non-formal participation. At the decisional level of school, parents can use 'voice' or 'exit' (Hirshman, 1994) from school according to formal participatory procedures, such as being consulting, voting, abstaining from voting and refraining from assemblies. While at the decisional level collegial board are too bureaucratic and slowed down by formal procedures; the practical level emerges bottom up by parental intentionality and motivation to achieve.

The role of school: informing, consulting or actively engaging parents?

The other side of the coin is the school in term of openness to parental involvement in school life. Three level of parental involvement were selected to understand family and school partnership. The first level was the unidirectional communication, such as informing on deliberations; the second level consisted of consulting and discussing; while the third level was the family-school co-elaboration on curricular and extra-curricular topics at level of both school and classroom.

The analysis showed that parents have more possibility to be consulted than to take decisions in school. Using representative way of parental involvement allows to preserve the power asymmetry between school and families: families maintain their role of representative members of collegial boards, following the formal procedures for being informed, consulted or deliberating.

On the contrary, dialogic and inclusive participation is enriched by non formal agency and informal co-responsibility of all the involved agents.

Particularly, the more or less parental participation in school life is at discretion of the autonomous schools, particularly the decisional power of the school head.

Parents can be 'clients' or 'partners' of the school (Edwards & Red-fern, 1988). The literature (OCSE, 1997) analyzed the theme of the educational skills deepening the possible school-family cooperation. Two aspects emerged: the first regarded the professional function of teachers and parent subsidiary; the second considered the parental role such as the first for children education, followed by that of school, such as complementary and finalized to improve children skills.

However, school is central for the learning process of local community, from transferring knowledge to empower local community, so that school and families concur to develop children socialization. For that reason good communication and collaboration between family and school is perceived really significant to develop student learning process (Riboldi, 2003). Particularly, the results showed that the non formal and informal dialogic parental participation empowers school and family co-responsibility, sharing the sense of achievement and improving the sense of family school and community partnership.

Conclusions

Although these results may not be representative of the whole population of parents and stakeholders involved in school life, they seemed to be very helpful to map the embedded cultural dimensions and to identify indicators of parental involvement in school life.

Analyzing the institutional background, listening stakeholders and observing moments of parental involvement in school life allowed to define the institutional environment where formal parental participation develops and to identify the non formal and informal aspects of parental engagement in school life.

Particularly, some dimension and indicators of the direct engagement of parents at school were selected to realize a questionnaire to study the opinions and attitudes of parents, school heads and teachers on formal, non formal and informal parental participation.

Actually, the main field research is developing with the interest and the informal collaboration of the involved parents.

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Footnote.

¹ Genova is a Municipality of Liguria Region, held in the north-west of Italy.

²Stakeholder is an agent, individual or collective, that has direct or indirect stakes in front of an organization and can affect (or be affected) by the organization policies (Rossi & Freeman, 1993).

³ The decentralization process, instituted by the DPR 275 /1999, so called "Regolamento recante norme in materia di autonomia delle istituzioni", was suggested by the Italian Constitutional reform of the Title V (L. 3/2001). Decisional powers were distributed to Municipalities, Districts, Metropolitan Cities, Regions and Nation, according to the principle of subsidiarity (art. 118). As a matter of fact the Italian Constitution preserved the national school system, instituting national schools at each level of education (art. 33 of the Italian Constitution), but considering the agency of regions and districts. The state has exclusive function to explain the fundamental principles and general norms on education (art. 117, letter n) and basic standards of performances (so called LEP) to guarantee the uniformity of using the educational service in Italy (art. 117, letter m). Regions are between the nation and the schools; they have exclusive legislative functions on education and professional training, concurring on education with the nation and on administration and management with the schools (art. 118). Particularly Liguria Region instituted the educational regional school system, so called "Sistema educativo regionale di istruzione, formazione e orientamento", by deliberating the Regional Law no. 18 (May, 11, 2009).

⁴ For instance, school head changed his role and function, from the role of "didactic director", who monitors the didactic activities, to that of "scholastic manager", who manage the school.

⁵ As a matter of fact, the article n. 16 of the Italian Constitutional reform (L. 3/2001) shows that the scholastic autonomy develops starting from the co-responsibility of all the involved agents, particularly parents and students.

⁶ From the anthropology point of view, «operationally, emic refers to the presence of an actual or potential interactive context in which ethnographer and informant meet and carry on a discussion about a particular domain. [...] The operational meaning of etic, in contrast, is defined by the logically nonessential status of actor-observer elicitation. Interaction between anthropologist and actors is deemed productive only to the extent that principles of organization or structure that exist outside of the minds of the actors have been discovered» (Harris, 1976:331). In social science, the researcher can eliminate the dichotomy between the evidence-based research (etic approach) and the narrative-based research (emic approach), assuming the emic approach (Palumbo, 2004).

⁷ The snowball sample is a non-probabilistic sample. Generally it is useful to well define the research object or when the researcher is studying a sub-group not easily be accessible otherwise. As a matter of fact, in a snowball sample, participants who are already part of the sample are asked to identify others who would possibly be suitable for inclusion in the study. The sample gradually increases in size, like a snowball being rolled down a hill (Palumbo & Garbarino, 2006).

⁸ For further information on the organisation of the Italian scholastic system, please see note n. 3.

⁹ Assuming the scholastic autonomy (DPR 1999, n. 275), schools must publish the Educational Offer Plan (the Italian acronym is "POF"), explaining their mission, vision, curricular and extracurricular activities.

¹⁰ In high education, students can propose suggestions to school about the Educational Offer Plan.

¹¹ The national parental associations are five: Age (Association of Parents), AGeSC (Association of the Parents of Catholic Schools), COGEDE (Coordination of Democratic Parents), Faes (Association Family and School, Centers of School and of Orientation) and Moige (Italian Movement of Parents Onlus).

¹² For example, there is also a national parental day.

¹³ Moreover, at the national level, there is a network of committees that informs and suggests the local parental committees.

¹⁴ In high education, suggestions are also from students.

¹⁵ This aspect is in line with the disaffection of citizens in front of the more broad public policies. It regards the free rider paradox (Olson, 1965) that is based on the idea that the collective participation is irrational except when selective incentives arise from participating (Pizzorno 1994; Pellizoni, 1998). In other terms, it is better to preserve the autonomy than «being embedded in "communities of fate" (Van Gunsteren, 1998) cemented by the links of interdependence» (Papadopoulos 2002, 5).

¹⁶ Actually, in few Italian regions there are associations of the presidents of the school councils. Recently in Liguria Region, the Association of the president of the school councils was established. The aim was to create a register of the presidents of the school councils held in Liguria Region.