



PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT WITHIN THE SCHOOL

AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO QUALITY EDUCATION

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Why involve parents?

The governance of education systems is one of the key factors in ensuring quality of education. In fact, the European Commission recently stated that “*priority should also be given to a greater involvement of stakeholders and social and civil society partners*”.

It is with a view to improved governance through the reinforcement of parental participation that the **IPPE (Indicators for Parental Participation in Compulsory Education)** project was developed. The European Commission’s *European report on quality of school education* also considers parental participation to be an indicator of quality.

Our project has therefore established some indicators to measure parental involvement in European education systems. This information should assist authorities in driving policy and consequently in governing education systems.

To avoid any dispute over the concept of involvement, the consortium wanted to adopt a rights-based approach to education in the development of the indicators, as well as in research methodology and data processing.

We used two Eurydice studies as a starting point. As established in these two works, parental rights are divided into two categories, individual rights and collective rights:

- The category of “individual” parental rights is composed of three rights. The first is the right to choose which school they want their children to attend. The second is the right of appeal, which offers parents the opportunity to express their opposition to certain decisions made by school authorities. Finally, the third right regards the information that parents receive concerning the progress of their children, the organisation of the education system in general and more specifically, of the school.
- The category of “collective” parental rights largely refers to parents’ rights to participate in formal structures organised by the education system.

The IPPE indicators

In order to define the indicators, we used a report by the High Commissioner for Human Rights on the use of indicators for monitoring the implementation of international instruments relating to human rights (cf. HRI/MC/2008/3).

The international instruments that we selected for our research were the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the United Nations Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (CMW), and the Convention against Discrimination in Education (CDE).

And the following regional instruments: The European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR), Protocol n°1 to the Convention for the protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. Finally, in terms of the existence of rights related to parental participation in the education system, we also studied the Constitution and basic standards of education in each country.

The **indicators** that the IPPE project established for the creation of national reports on member countries of the consortium represent the four rights mentioned above: information, choice, appeal and participation in formal bodies. We applied these indicators to the following countries: **Belgium, Spain, Italy, Portugal, Romania, United Kingdom (England and Wales) and Switzerland (Bern, Geneva, Ticino, Vaud and Zurich).**

Indicators of the Right to information

1. What information is made available to parents and of such information what is made available on an obligatory basis?

- Admission criteria
- Organisation of the school system
- Educational project
- Organisation of the school
- School assessment

2. Is the information adapted to the characteristics of the parents of the school? (information translated into various languages, mechanisms to inform risk families)

1. With this first indicator we were trying to find out what information is passed on to parents and which of this it is obligatory to pass on. We established 5 sub-indicators listing the information that to us seem indispensable if parents are to understand the school system, philosophy and competences of the school as well as their rights and duties, and those of their child.

This indicator can vary from 0 to a maximum of 75 points. Each sub-indicator can be rated as 0 if no information on this topic is provided; as 5 if the information is provided but it is not obligatory to do so, and as 15 if the information provided must be done so obligatorily.

2. This indicator will allow us to find out if the information is adapted, and therefore able to reach the most people possible, while also being understood by those who receive it. This would reflect a strong political desire to take into account migrant or minority groups, with a declared will for integration (at least at a scholastic level) of the rights and duties of everybody.

If the information is the same for everybody and no effort has been made to reach the most parents possible, and risk families in particular, we granted no points. If however the information is translated into several languages or mechanisms for risk families are in place, we assigned 10 points. If these two conditions (information translated into several languages + mechanisms for risk families are in place) are met, we assigned 25 points.

If the maximum points total is obtained for both these indicators, the right to information can reach a maximum value of 100 points.

Indicator 1 maximum 75 points

Indicator 2 maximum 25 points

Indicators of the Right to choose

1. Are there varied educational projects?

2. Are there financial measures in place allowing parents to choose schools “other than those established by the public authorities”? (art. 13, ICESCR, al. 3 and 4.)

1. With regards to the indicators for the right to choose, we wanted to find out if the educational programmes offered were diverse, and if they were supported by financial measures.

In order for parents to actually have the right to choose the education they want for their children, there must be a well-diversified set of programmes so that there is a broad range on offer. We have assigned a maximum of 50 points for this indicator where 50 indicates a genuinely diversified range and 0 indicates no

diversity. We also allowed the possibility of an intermediate situation, assigned 25 points, where diversity is not significant (e.g. there is only a choice between state schools and religious schools).

2. The second indicator concerns a very sensitive political issue as it regards subsidies for private schools. Although almost all States award subsidies to such schools, the issue is controversial. We felt that if choice is offered to parents through diversified educational projects, it should not be limited by financial reasons. We have not used the word private, though it is common, in order to avoid ideological connotations, but have adopted the terminology of the Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural rights.

We assigned 50 points where attending schools “other than those established by public authorities” does not result in any additional cost to parents, 25 points where costs are partly covered by the State and partly by the family, 10 points where subsidies are unevenly or infrequently implemented, and 0 points where all costs are borne by the family.

These two indicators combined give the right to choose a maximum value of 100 points.

Indicator 1 maximum 50 points

Indicator 2 maximum 50 points

Indicators of the Right of appeal

1. Are there any mechanisms in place to exercise the right of appeal and on which subjects?

- Admission
- Disciplinary measures
- Assessment
- Right of participation
- Decisions of participatory bodies

2. Are appeal mechanisms effective? According to current standards:

- Is there a deadline which the closest contact must respect?
 - Must the responses be justified?
-

1. This indicator should reveal firstly if this right exists or not, and then which domains it covers. We have nevertheless chosen not to specify the level of appeal in question (within the school, education

or legal systems). We seek simply to determine if an appeal mechanism exists that allows parents to formally mark their opposition to a decision.

With regard to the right of appeal, we felt it should be exercised in the five areas listed above, which are also those most often subject to litigation or dispute. As the two first points are sufficiently explicit, we will proceed directly to those that follow. As far as assessment is concerned, it seems important to us – in particular when decisions are made that entail serious consequences – to be able to appeal. One example is student guidance, due to its importance in the child's future. Regarding the right of participation, we consider it essential to be able to appeal when this right is not respected. Finally, with regard to the last item, concerning the decisions of participatory bodies, it seems equally important to us to be able to appeal if these bodies do not reflect the common will of the parents, but only special interests for example.

For this indicator we assigned 12 points per area offering the possibility of appeal, and 0 if there is no such possibility.

2. As far as the effectiveness of appeal mechanisms is concerned, it seemed vital to know, not only if appeal mechanisms existed, but also if it were in fact possible to use them without being put at a disadvantage by a response that never arrives or arrives too late. That is why initially, we wanted to know whether the closest contact to which the parents can appeal, imposes a deadline. Indeed, if for example a parent appealing regarding admission of their child received no response until the middle of the year, the appeal mechanism, although it exists, would be considered ineffective. It would be the same were a parent to appeal and be rejected without receiving any explanation.

Through this indicator, we wanted to go even further: we were not satisfied with just knowing whether appeal mechanisms exist and in which area; we also wanted to highlight their effectiveness. For this indicator we assigned 20 points if the closest contact must respect a deadline that does not undermine the complainant and 0 points if there is no mention of a deadline or one that harms the student. We also assigned 20 supplementary points if the responses supplied by the appeal mechanisms are justified, and 0 points if they are not.

With these two indicators the right of appeal can attain a maximum weighting of 100 points.

Indicator 1 maximum 60 points
Indicator 2 maximum 40 points

Indicators of the Right of participation

- 1. Do participatory bodies exist for parents (school board, school council, etc) and what are their powers at different levels? (School, Regional, National/central)**
 - 2. In participatory bodies, which type of representation is afforded to parents (minority, equal or majority)?**
 - 3. Does the State regularly collect parental opinion?**
 - 4. Is there a training programme for parents?**
-

1. With the first indicator we wanted to determine the level of parental participation as well as which competences are assigned to them. We consider it desirable for parents to make decisions at all levels – from the conception of educational policies to assessment of the system – in order to make these participatory bodies genuinely effective. However, there are some countries such as Switzerland and Belgium for example, that only possess two levels. As their different regions (cantons or communities) are entirely sovereign in the matter of compulsory education, there is no formal structure for parental participation at a national level.

For the attribution of points we proceeded as follows: Each level (school/regional/central) could obtain a maximum of 20 points when complete autonomy is granted to the participatory body without external intervention; 10 points were assigned when the participatory body may decide, but with limited autonomy; 5 points when the body is consulted when the authorities make decisions, and no points when there is no participatory body. For those countries with only two levels for political reasons as stated above, we assigned 30 points when the autonomy of the participatory body is complete, 15 points when the body can make decisions but with limited autonomy, 5 points when it is only consulted and no points when there is no body.

This indicator is of great importance as it enables us firstly to determine the level of parental participation, and secondly to find out to what extent parents are valued and accepted through greater or lesser decision-making powers. Hence this indicator holds 60% of the weighting for the right of participation, as it can reach a maximum of 60 points if participatory bodies exist at all levels and if these benefit from complete autonomy in the decisions they make.

2. With regards to the representation of parents in participatory bodies at three levels, it seemed important to us to measure their weight. It is clear that a minority representation of parents in participatory bodies will not have the same consequences as a majority representation. That is why no points were assigned if representation in participatory bodies is in the minority or does not exist at all. Five points were assigned if representation is equal, and 10 if it is in the majority. This applies to all three levels, the school, the region and the national or central. Therefore we obtained a maximum value of 30 points for countries with three levels, and 20 points for those with two levels. The division into two or three depending on the country, allowed us to obtain a number of points of which the maximum was 10.

3. With the third indicator, we wanted to emphasise the interest of the State in parental opinion. After some years, parental participation has gained some ground. Everyone recognizes that it is not only beneficial to the learning process of the child, but also to the management of the school. What concerns us here is knowing whether the State consults the opinion of all parents regularly or not at all.

Therefore we assigned no points if parental opinion is not collected, 10 points if it is collected but only every five years or more, and 15 points when it is done at a regular interval of less than five years.

4. The final indicator on the existence of a training programme for parents should be indicative of the State's commitment to their involvement. Indeed we think that authorities should offer training courses for parents. This would allow them to better understand the education system, better follow and target the needs of their children, as well as to participate in decisions made within the school, region or even at a national level.

We assigned 15 points if such arrangements are made by the State on a regular basis and financed by it, 10 points if training is provided but not by the State or not systemised and no points if no training exists.

With these 4 indicators, the maximum total that can be obtained for the right of participation is 100 points.

Indicator 1 maximum 60 points

Indicator 2 maximum 10 points

Indicator 3 maximum 15 points

Indicator 4 maximum 15 points

Results

On the basis of these results, it can be said that there has been significant legislative development on individual and collective parental rights in compulsory education, despite notable differences between countries. Parental participation is measured by the overall indicator which summarises the four indicators of rights that the project studied: the right to information, the right to choose and the right of appeal in terms of individual rights; and the right of participation in formal participatory bodies for collective rights.

According to the research team, only the maximum value for each indicator (100) proves sufficient legislative development. Of course, this was not the case for any country, except for the right of appeal and to a lesser extent, for the right to information. The United Kingdom (Wales and England) and Belgium are the countries in which the rights analysed were most conducive to parental participation. In contrast, all the other countries reflected values below the average of 72 points¹(see figure 1).

Right to information

The value of the indicators concerning the right to information exceeded 60 points everywhere (see figure 2).

Excellence is represented by Wales where indicators for the “right to information” achieved maximum points. The average of the 12 countries/cantons studied rose to 80 points. Only the United Kingdom (90) and four Swiss cantons (Bern, Geneva, Ticino and Zurich) (85) scored above this.

¹ Average of countries and cantons: Italy, Portugal, England, Wales, Spain, Bern, Geneva, Ticino, Vaud, Zurich, Belgium and Romania.

The school assessment sub-indicator reflected a diverse framework and a “two-tier Europe”. One part is represented by Italy, Spain, Switzerland and Belgium, countries in which no school assessment exists (or where the data is not easily accessible). The other is made up of Romania, Portugal, Wales and England, countries in which assessment is included in the information that can be accessed by parents.

According to the results of the national reports, the information is only adapted to parental characteristics in England, Wales and the five Swiss cantons. Portugal on the other hand, had the sub-indicator furthest from the maximum weighting.

Right to choose

Regarding the existence of varied educational projects, all countries obtained the maximum score (50) for this sub-indicator. The situation regarding funding is much more varied (see figure 3).

In England, Wales and Belgium attending schools “other than those established by the public authorities” does not incur any extra fee for parents, whilst in Portugal, Spain, Romania and the Swiss cantons of Bern, Ticino and Zurich the fees are partially covered by the State and partially by the family. In Italy, some regions provide school vouchers to families who fulfil specific criteria. In the cantons of Vaud and Geneva parents who choose these schools for their children are responsible for the entire cost of the fees.

Right of appeal

According to the results obtained, it was found that in almost all countries mechanisms of appeal existed for parents to use against decisions made by schools and educational authorities (see figure 4).

In all the countries/cantons studied, parents can exercise their right of appeal against refusal of admission to a school.

Appeal against disciplinary measures and assessment is a right recognised in all the countries analysed, as is the right of appeal against decisions by participatory bodies. In all the countries, the law provides for the existence of a deadline that does not infringe on the rights of the plaintiffs (except for the cantons of Geneva and Zurich). The standards of all the countries and cantons also state

that any responses given are justified, with the exception of Romania.

Right of participation

The parental right of participation in compulsory education was studied with four indicators: participatory bodies, type of representation, collection of parental opinion and the existence of a training programme for parents (see figure 5).

At school level, the parental participatory body only enjoys total autonomy in Italy, Portugal, England and Wales. In Spain the existing participatory body certainly has decision-making power but its autonomy is limited. In the Swiss cantons studied, the body is consulted but the authorities make the decisions.

At a local/regional level, none of the countries studied possess participatory bodies with full autonomy. In Portugal, England, Wales and Spain participatory bodies at this level have decision-making power but with limited autonomy. In Romania and the canton of Bern on the other hand, the bodies are consulted while the authorities make the decisions. In Italy, Belgium and the cantons of Geneva, Vaud, Ticino and Zurich there is no participatory body at this level.

Only Belgium and Romania have bodies with decision-making power at national level, but in a context of limited autonomy, while in Portugal and Spain these bodies are consulted but the authorities take relevant decisions. In all the other countries no national participatory body exists.

At a local/regional level, representation in participatory bodies is in the minority in all the countries studied.

In Portugal, England, Wales, the cantons of Bern, Ticino, Vaud and Zurich and Romania the State gathers opinions from all parents at a regular interval of less than five years. In the canton of Geneva, data is collected every five years or more, while in Italy, Spain and Belgium, parental opinion is not collected in any systematic way.

For the last indicator, on the right of participation, we wanted to focus our attention on the existence of a training programme for parents.

The results obtained revealed that almost all the countries, except Portugal, have training programmes offered by parents associations and not by public authorities. Only Wales, England, Portugal and

Belgium exceeded the average of the twelve countries analysed. Moreover, of these four rights, it is the right of participation that scores the lowest. In fact, the average of the other rights all stand above 70 points while the average of the right of participation does not exceed 42 points.

Comparison

It was found generally that the four rights analysed followed similar trends. Our analysis shows that participation extends over the four rights which are interdependent. We can observe a clear correlation between the GDP and our indicators.

We also wanted to compare our overall indicator with two other frequently used indicators: the PISA 2009 results (science), and the percentage of GDP allocated to education. There is also a correlation between the PISA results and our overall indicator. From this correlation we deduce that parental participation has an impact on academic results in compulsory education.

Figure 1
OVERALL INDICATOR

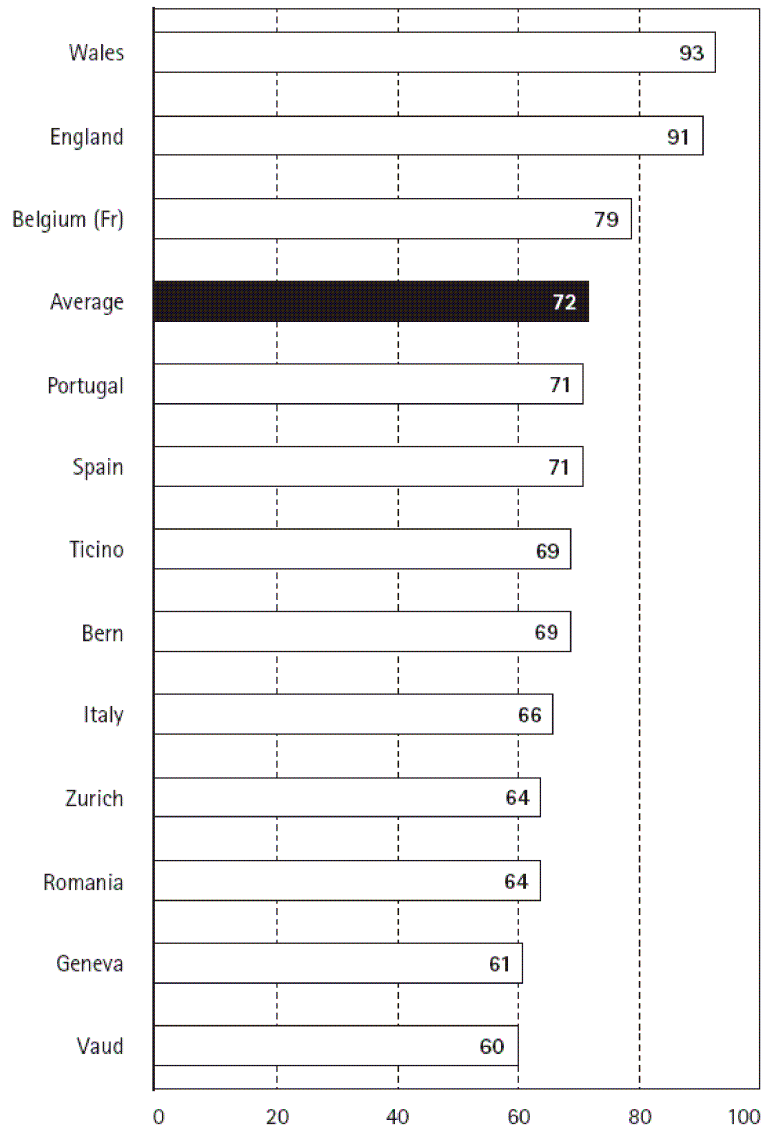


Figure 2
RIGHT TO INFORMATION

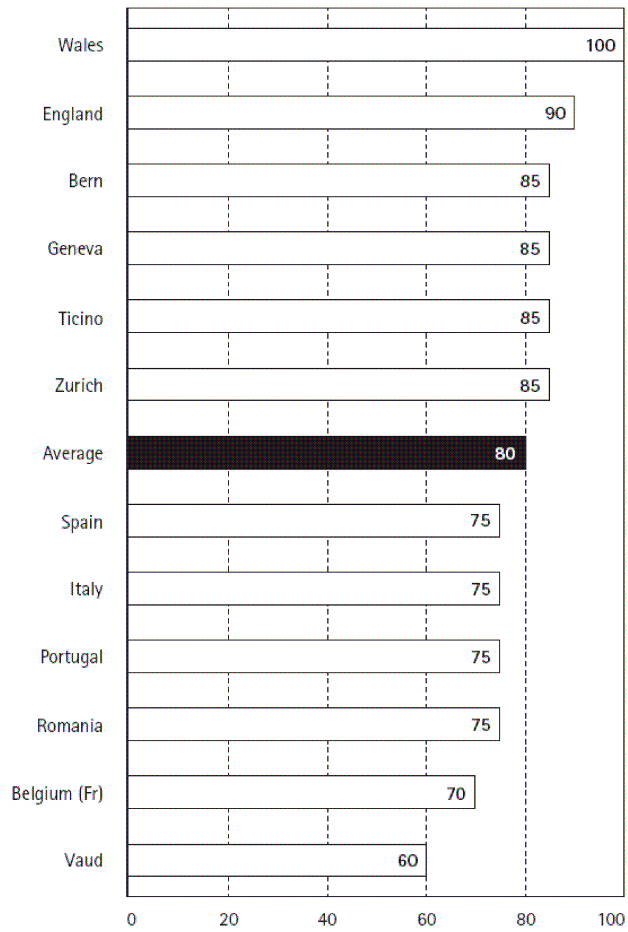


Figure 3
RIGHT TO CHOOSE

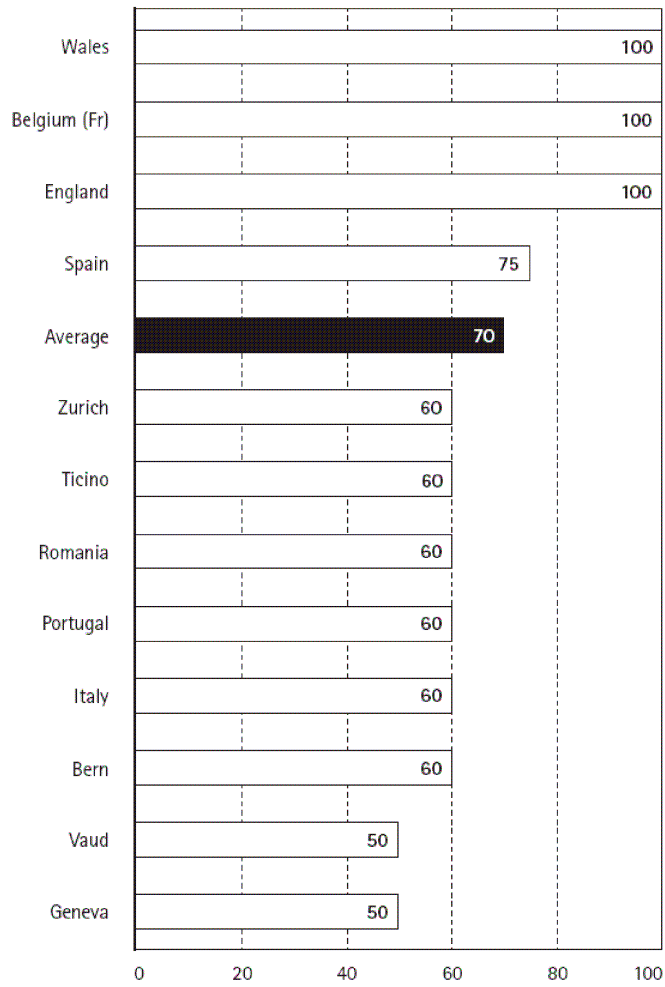


Figure 4
RIGHT OF APPEAL

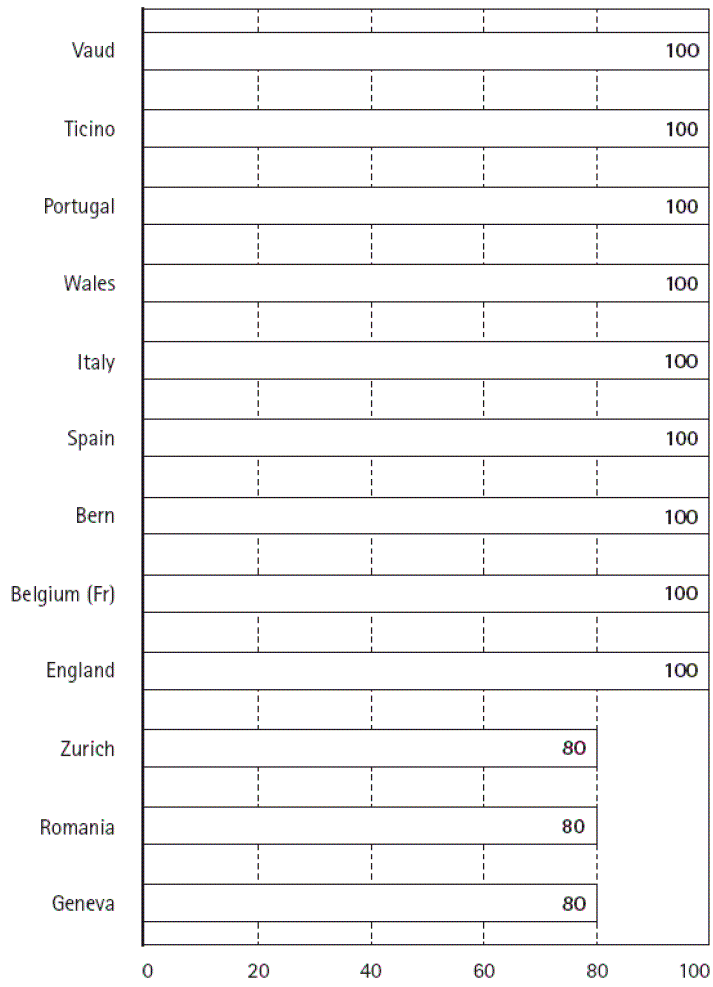
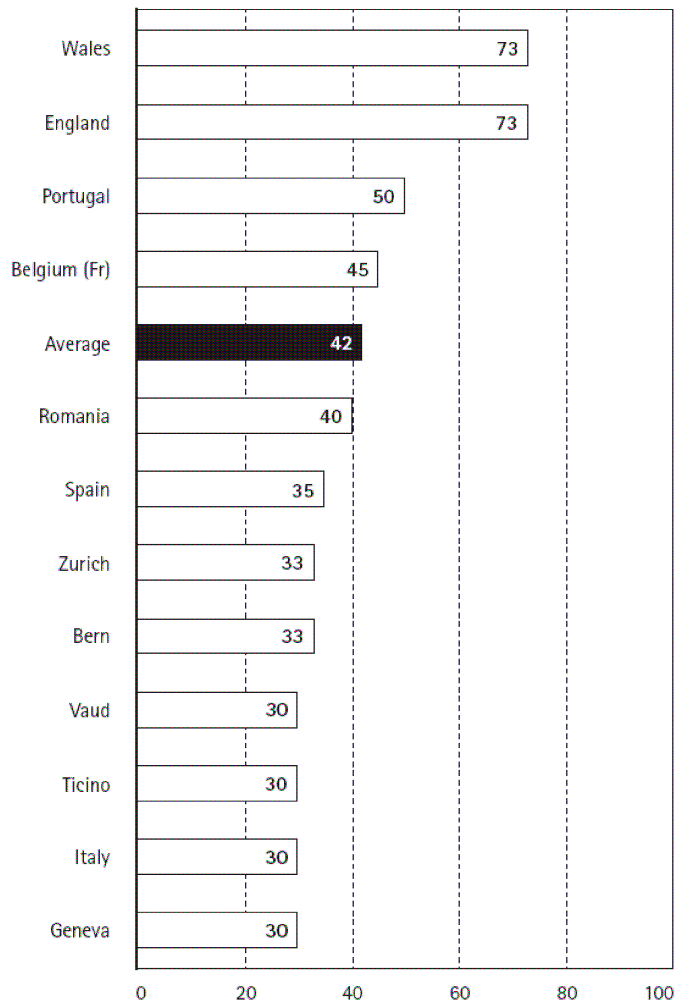
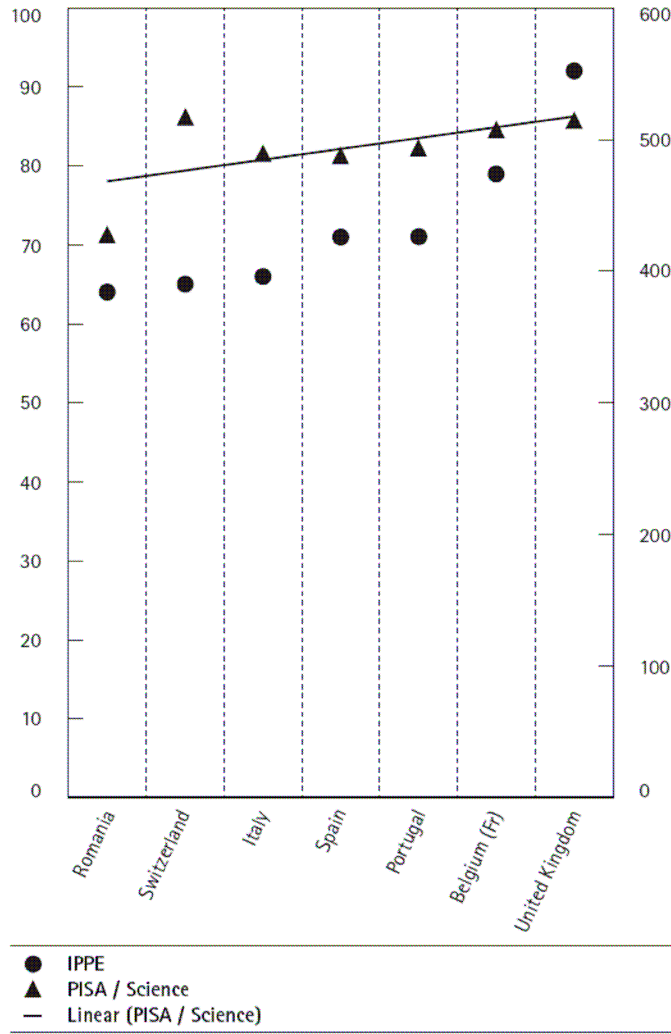


Figure 5
RIGHT OF PARTICIPATION



COMPARISON OF IPPE AND PISA SCIENCE 09



SIMPLIFIED NATIONAL REPORTS

In order to have a broader overview of the situation of parental participation in Europe, we wanted to expand our research to a greater number of countries from different regions of the continent: Germany, Austria, Cyprus, France, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Malta and Sweden (identified hereinafter as “group B”). In order to do so, we developed simplified indicators based on the same structure used before.

We then wanted to make a comparison with the project’s seven partner countries, to which we also applied the simplified indicators (“group A”). This approach allowed us to include 82% of the academic population of the European Union, including Switzerland.

In terms of the **overall simplified indicator** (figure 9), there is a difference of 27 points between the United Kingdom, which obtained the maximum score with 88 points, and Luxembourg, which only scored 61 points. We might consider that for a study involving 15 countries, this difference is relatively small. Over half the countries score above the average of 72 points.

The analysis allows us to identify a trend in parental participation from a geographic point of view. In fact, the three leading countries in the ranking (United Kingdom, Belgium and Sweden) come from North Europe. It is interesting to observe that the United Kingdom and Belgium already scored highest in the overall indicator in our detailed analysis. The five other countries received a score that is barely above the average and so could not be considered significant. The same applies for the three countries that scored just below the average: Portugal, Germany and Romania. Only Italy and Luxembourg differed by more than 10 points from the European average.

The reader may notice a slight variation in the scores awarded to the partner countries (group A) between the analysis of the **National Reports** and the **Simplified National Reports**. This can be explained by the greater number of countries as well as the reduction of indicators and less subtlety in their weighting.

Right to information

For the right to information, the average rises to 79 points dividing the countries into two equal groups, one above the average and one below. The first group includes Sweden, Austria, Romania, Malta, Liechtenstein and Germany (85) as well as Switzerland (82).

The second is made up of Portugal (75), Luxembourg, Italy, France, Spain, Cyprus and Belgium (70). The United Kingdom once again received the maximum score for the indicator (100).

Generally speaking, we can note that the scores obtained for the right to information were very high for all countries.

Right to choose

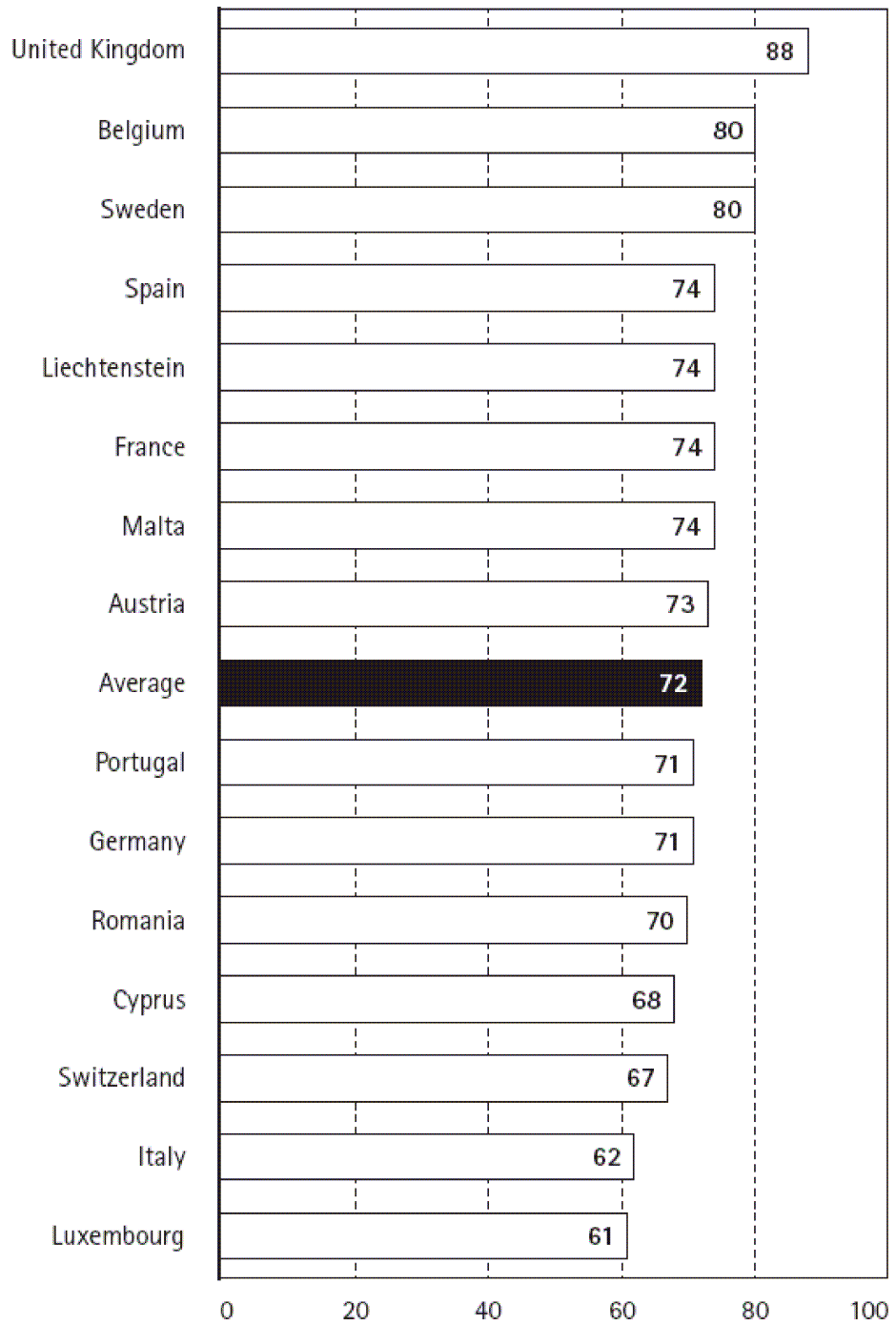
Regarding the indicator on the right to choose, we can again observe that the three countries from the north of Europe (Belgium, the United Kingdom and Sweden) are well ahead of the others, achieving the maximum score. Most of the other countries lie within a range from 50 to 75 points. Only Luxembourg once again received the minimum score, rising here to 25 points, the schools "other than those established by the public authorities" being very few in this country.

Right of participation

In terms of the right of participation, it should be noted that we restricted ourselves to only half the indicators as well as simplifying their weighting. In this context we assigned significant weight to the existence of a training programme on participation implemented systematically by public authorities. We note that this programme does not currently exist in any of the countries studied.

The variation in scores between the countries reduced considerably in relation to the analysis of the group of countries, most of the countries receiving 50 points. Only the following scored below: Sweden, Austria and Romania, who all obtained 33 points and Switzerland with 30 points. Italy brings up the rear with 17 points, due to a complete lack of participatory bodies for parents at a regional or national level.

SIMPLIFIED OVERALL INDICATOR



Conclusions

The research showed the need to establish systems that reflect the expectations and opinions of parents at a European level, through the *Eurobarometer* for example, in order to allow for the establishment of indicators that are closer to reality. This is the first major finding of the research and confirms moreover, one of our working hypotheses. It is true that this lack of information is not specific to parental participation and affects all European education systems: the European Council itself in the *Strategic Framework for Education and Training 2020* expresses concern about this. In fact, the Council wanted “*Well-functioning cooperation using new transparent ways of networking [...] not only between the relevant EU, but also with all relevant stakeholders, who have a considerable contribution to make in terms of policy development, implementation and evaluation*”. (EU Council, 2009, p. 4).

Our research also confirmed another hypothesis, with serious consequences. That is, a general lack of a rights-based approach in EU countries, both in terms of parental participation and the education system in general. The current approach of the countries is “charitable” or “needs based”, to follow the typology of KirkemannBoesen and Martin (2007).

We also found that awareness of European and International standards in the sphere of education and the “big European projects” is often lacking, in particular where the *Education and Training 2010* programme is concerned, and even more so in the case of the new 2020 framework. Furthermore we note that the rights-based approach no longer appears in the *Strategic Framework 2020*. There is an urgent need to introduce this approach into European education and training to address the structural causes of problems (KirkemannBoesen and Martin, 2007) by empowering people to claim their right to education.

For European countries, the democratic governance of education systems has been normative since 2010 with the adoption of the *Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education* by the European Council. This explicitly refers to parents.

We believe that new forms or methods of parental participation must be devised. Increasing the right to vote on education along the lines of the Swiss direct democracy, returning management of schools to parents following the model of English grant maintained schools, promoting the creation of schools directly

managed by parents, and implementing new forms of governance such as charter schools and learning communities would be potential initiatives.

Participation projects based on the idea of a training contract or pact between the school and family could also be developed, which determine the respective rights and duties of educational stakeholders.

To conclude, we think it would be useful to implement a European public campaign to educate parents about current mechanisms for participation, in order to promote “active citizenship” in this field.

Right to information

The level of information available in the countries studied is fairly high (between 70 and 100 out of 100) and covers all aspects of the system. However we found gaps concerning school assessments in terms of transparency of results (international and national surveys). This seems incompatible with the possibility of choice of school.

This situation also seems at odds with the Strategic Framework 2020 which demands from European cooperation “*clear and visible outcomes which should be presented, reviewed and disseminated on a regular basis and in a structured manner*” (EU Council, 2009, p. 3).

We consider it necessary to create new tools that facilitate communication between the school and family by reinforcing the most effective existing mechanisms.

Right to choose

We propose giving parents the possibility to choose by making the compulsory school system free, through the implementation of tax and/or financial measures to help schools “other than those established by the public authorities” or private schools. This right to choose is the only right explicitly named by international and regional instruments of human rights as well as by the *Charter of Fundamental Rights* of the European Union.

In order to promote the right to choose, public authorities should promote diversity within the state and/or private education system, in particular through autonomy of schools and support for pilot projects.

Right of appeal

The right of appeal exists in all countries and at several levels, but its real effectiveness could not be assessed. Nevertheless, the legal complexity in almost all the countries suggests its effectiveness is insignificant. In several countries the need to find solutions to conflicts through other means, was raised. Thus we propose creating, or strengthening where they exist, the role of a mediator between teachers and parents and finding neutral venues to carry out this mediation work.

Right of participation

The complexity of standards and administrative procedures involving schools is a major obstacle to participation. Educational jargon is also a major impediment. In the majority of cases, parents are forced to become almost “participation professionals” in order to play an effective role in a participatory body. This prevents genuine democratisation and may mean a denial of this right. Hence it is urgent to simplify these standards and procedures and translate technical educational vocabulary into current language.

In addition, **increased investment should be made in parental training to promote their participation in school life and in the management and organisation of schools.**

It is of utmost priority to adapt labour law to accommodate the right of parental participation in compulsory education as much as possible, and to organise body meetings at times when parents are available.

Finally, as noted by Benavente, **“policy makers know that between their decisions and actual practices, there is a world of obstacles and mediations, among them the action of educational and social actors and partners. [...] As democracy increasingly becomes a reality to be consolidated in the world, it is clear that development of societies does not take place without the action of citizens and that, in the case of education, reforms only succeed if they mobilise the motivation, knowledge and powers of all partners.** Changes in education require that we articulate public policy, that we mobilise all interested stakeholders, at all levels of society, and that objectives are articulated with flexible, sufficient and continuous strategies. [...]. Therefore the **debate on policy** appears, both in defining objectives and strategies and at the level of concrete action and the establishment of various partnerships, to be a vital tool so as to be in a position to

be willing to, to know how to and to be able to shape a good quality education” (Benavente, A. 2006, p. 5).

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