

What do parents expect from schools and what do they think schools expect from them? Synthesis of the Focus Group Reports

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Executive Summary

Section One – Identifying some Common Concerns

- Widespread appreciation that **school costs** parents a lot mainly in the costs of clothes and the costs of buying ‘school equipment’, which is both increasing and becoming beyond the means of some parents. One question was whether this was absolute inability to pay or lower significance given by the parent.
- Fears of the **rise in bullying** and aggressive behaviour were common, but in some places, schools themselves were seen as exacerbating matters by downplaying the issue or simply being ineffective. In most cases, the integration of pupils with special needs or from minority backgrounds was seen as depending most on the teacher, albeit additionally supported by changes to the physical environment.
- Parents saw **workload** as an issue both for the child and for them. Workloads could be excessive for the child, but parental involvement ranged from grudging involvement to helpless distance. Excess workload was also closely tied to perceptions of policy failure, mainly at the level of implementation, but sometimes parental reluctance seemed connected to feelings of imposition.
- Some parents hoped the school could take a **bigger role in helping with the upbringing** of their child, addressing not just physical needs, but communicating with them in ways that the parent or grandparent did not feel able to.
- Although, parents were quite happy to lay the blame for school problems directly at teachers’ feet, there was also **appreciation of the wider administrative structure** and the limitations that this imposed on both decision making and teaching quality.
- Whether or not parents talked to other parents about school issues varied very much with the topic, but there were contextual differences concerning the reported frequency of such talks and whether they were seen as then being **matters for individual or collective response**.
- Unsurprisingly, there were shared areas of concern between parents and Principals, some consensus on reforms as creating problems, as well as sympathetic appreciation of the limits of local decision making. Whilst both parties were happy to blame central authorities, parents were **much less reticent in finding fault with the actions of local authorities**.

Section Two – Assessing Education reforms

- Initially surprising was the occasions in which there appeared a **consensus of endorsement** of educational reforms. This was perhaps less related to the merits of individual changes, but more a sense that school was better now than it was when parents were in school. Some dissent of course.
- Some variation in appreciation of existence and working of structures for parental input in educational policy making, note the different emphases over whether participants in such fora were **appropriately qualified or sufficiently representative**.
- Parents weigh reforms by their own school experience and by its ability to meet the current challenges they consider important. **Reform talk ranges** from a general and

- It appeared easier to get parents to express opinions when questions related to specific matters rather than questions concerning direction, ideology and method. **Most common reforms** that parents wanted to talk about were the extension of school life from 8-9 grades and the changes brought about by the curricula reforms.
- **Ambiguous attitudes towards teachers** in respect of childhood experience, less 'awe' than when they were young, but there were lower levels of confidence that teachers were able to address problems such as bad behaviour or motivating children to accept the new curriculum. Widespread comment on **declining social status of teachers**, reflected in lower wages, fewer young people taking teaching posts leaving many who were both rigid and indifferent.

Section Three – Asking about participation: Parents and Others

- If parents felt that central ministries, municipalities and Principals tended to make the **most important education decisions** concerning their child, that did not mean that they saw no chance for local influence over law and policy. The difference was whether local influence was with the teachers, the Principal, the school or the local authority.
- Parents understood Principal's power as **both central and as marginal**, as an intermediary between teachers and parents on the one hand and the central Ministry on the other, as leaders with power and managers without teeth.
- Local authorities and mayors in particular were not mentioned as important in half the countries, but in others they clearly exerted a strong influence. Also clear that **some groups might be more affected by mayoral decisions than others**, decisions over transport and school meals for Roma children in Croatia for example.
- **Few parents said that they were uninformed** about school matters. They did not say they were consulted much, although Principals approached them differently when money was involved.
- It was common for parents to be involved in organising end of term events, festivals and other such days, there were far fewer occasions when parents reported that they had **successfully organised themselves to deal with a school problem**. While there such positive examples, dealing with poor food or inadequate transport, examples were also given of parental **joint actions that failed and resulted in negative consequences** for the children of the parents.
- There were strong support for the view that initiatives for greater parental involvement and invitations **should come from the teachers and the school**.
- Parents were quite clear on areas where they felt there was no invitation to get involved, broadly questions on class education and management, **few believed that there was unqualified enthusiasm for more parental involvement** and many saw that the question of school encouragement depended greatly on the matter in question.

Section Four – The Parent Council

- There was widespread consensus amongst non-members over the **motivations and the resources necessary** for parental involvement in Parents Councils. These included free time, eloquence and a willingness to push for things. Unsurprisingly, members ascribed their motives for joining as furthering what they saw as the common good, although there were surprising numbers who said their principal motivation was to find out more about their own child.
- **Parents rule themselves out** because they are too busy, they were never invited, they are tired of responsibilities, because they were not confident to speak in public or that they consider the council a waste of time.
- Council responsibilities **remained for the most part within the ascribed terms of references** although there were a number of instances where they served as an important element in the settlement of wider parental wishes.
- There were more accounts of disappointment with the council than overall satisfaction. One of the main sources of discontent was that decisions were made elsewhere and **simply presented to them to legitimate**. Other problems were infrequent meetings, role ambiguity, passive fellow members and non-appearance by parents to invited meetings.
- PCs might play an important part in maintaining decent physical environment, but few non-members seemed to attribute such influence to them.
- On a few occasions, PCs were involved in disciplinary matters, mainly as a support for school wide actions but sometimes, being directly **involved to curb bad behaviour**. At the same time, there were a number of occasions when non-member expressed reluctance to complain to Councils about poor behaviour, lest the complaint get back to the family of the child in question.
- There was next to no enthusiasm for PCs to get involved in matters to do with teaching quality, but there were different emphases when it came to the question **what makes an effective PC**. Some focused on the important of the chair and the principal, others laid the emphasis with the members, others said it depends on the meaningfulness of the work given and whether parents saw the PC as being able to change anything.

Section Five – General Participation II

- **Intra-parental relations** spanned the range from friendly to dislike, there was a suggestion that their intensity varied according to the age of their child, there being greater engagement when the child was younger and more needy.
- Some parents clearer felt awkward in front of others and admitted to having little contact with others.
- There was a **huge variation in remembering past parental actions**, some could only recall dimly, others listed exhaustively. The range of contributions was wide much money, helping out at events, supervising children on trips to overseeing building works.
- Parental initiatives tended to be seen as **problem oriented**. Sometimes parents mobilise to address school wide problems and to support the school's lobbying of higher authorities, but in other cases, the parents get together because the school has failed to adequately address their concerns.

- There were a number of instances of **thwarted parental involvement**, perhaps being contested because teachers rejected parental responsibility over the issue, in these cases, professional development and teacher attendance.
- Mothers tended to be the **primary everyday contact** with the school, fathers might be involved in supporting homework or, in some cases, attending all the important meeting.
- Homework offers a good illustration of the sometimes **conflict over expected roles**. There were many cases when parents complained they had to intervene in order for their child simply to keep up. Whilst the original source of the excessive workload might be external, teachers were still blamed as imposing duties on parents or passing on their responsibilities.
- Parental explanations for why others did not get involved often contained **explicit moral judgements**, even when the excuse for non-participation might be work related. There was little expectation for every parent to be involved and this fact was **less a matter of regret than a statement of fact**.
- Few FGs talked in terms of exclusion, in the sense that teachers or the parents were **deliberately preventing parents** from getting involved in their own child's education or school matters in general.
- Where the **source of the perceived exclusion was the child's special needs**, then if such a child was not well supported and was seen as creating difficulties for the others, it sometime became an issue for the PC.
- Parental relations with teachers ranged considerably. In some cases, all was reported as well, in others though, problems arose over teachers being seen as indiscreet, with parents feeling as the opposition or **inadequate in their presence**.
- Although some FGs wanted to stress better community relations in small rural schools, there were other villagers who reported being shunned and ignored by their local school.
- The idea of **parental participation being risky** was brought up several times, with parents fearing that the teacher, the school, or another parent would seek revenge if they complained.
- Less conflictual but with the same result was the idea that schools were in competition with other activities for the scarce resource of parental time.
- The benefits from greater parental participation are seldom solely for the parents own child but usually have wider effects. **Private gain itself does not undermine the validity of parental involvement save where it supports the maintenance of corrupt practice**.
- Rather it would be better to distinguish the different kinds of roles parents play in relation to their child's school with varying combinations of private and public gain, but also with different time and resources implications. **Volunteering to organise a school fair is not the same as helping with homework**. Policies to encourage greater parent participation should recognise the difference.

What do parents expect from schools and what do they think schools expect from them?

This report synthesizes the ten focus group reports. As we planned, the focus groups were an opportunity to identify the different practical ways that parents said they related to school, and to identify their attitudes towards involvement. From this perspective, and thanks in large part to Veljko's guide, the Focus Group (FG) discussions turned out to be a very good source of ideas and suggestions. In the report, I will try and focus on some of the differences between and within the countries as well as the common ground. As agreed, there will be some reference to the Principal's report especially in the first section, apart from that the majority of information is taken directly from the FG reports themselves. As the aim is to use the FG to inform the questionnaire, I included some references to the ways in which different questions, phrases and topic areas seemed to have been interpreted by the different focus groups. Hopefully this can help in perfecting our questionnaire. The structure of the report follows that of the FG guide

Section One - Identifying Common Concerns

This introductory section allowed FG leaders to ask some general settling in questions about what it is to be parent. In some groups, parents took the opportunity to talk about a wide range of social and economic issues, whereas in other groups, parents limited themselves to principally schooling matters. In the discussion about the main problems currently facing the school, there were many issues raised, some which were explicitly directed to the school to solve, but others were more general complaints that were directed at everyone and no-one in particular.

1.1. Costs of education

Paying for education was raised as a serious issue in many of the reports. There seemed some division between those whose economic problems are related to general poverty, compared to those who economic problems relate to the actual costs of school. There were occasions in which the parent or grandparent mentioned that they could not afford to pay for something and the kinds of consequences that they connected to that. For example, in a

number of cases, parents brought up the costs of ensuring that their children had good clothes for school. In Bosnia, for example, the question of clothes was mentioned in the context of a Roma girl dropping out of school. In the parent's eyes, as they could not adequately clothe their child in the way they and she wanted, the result was that the girl was picked on, and as the school's intervention did not solve the problem, the girl gave up ('looses the will to go to school') and dropped out. Similarly, in Moldova, one parent said that pupils 'need more clothes, but parents do not have the necessary resources to ensure them. Consequently a competition between pupils arises.' Another educational cost that was frequently mentioned was the need to buy textbooks, notebooks and general 'equipment'. The perception of cost varied; in Montenegro, for example, parents were expected to supply their children with 'a considerable amount of school equipment', in Moldova, 'books are very expensive today and we need a lot of money for them.' For those who did not buy all the textbooks expected, there might be some provision, for instance, the chance to buy single manuals that covered a whole range of subjects, but these did seem to be looked on as a poor substitute at best.

In some cases, the discussion was not so much about the inability to pay expected costs, but rather the interpretation of the child's real needs or priorities. In Bulgaria, for example, there was a suggestion that some parents do not value education and consequently are unwilling to spend much on educational equipment even if they would clearly have money for other things. In that case, it was clear that the implication was the parent was making a free choice, albeit, seen in the report as not the best one. However, the question might be approached from another angle, where there are limited funds, then it might be seen as more important to ensure that their child is not picked on because she is not wearing the right clothes, rather than having all the 'equipment'

1.2. Behaviour and Integration at school

Poor pupil behaviour was raised as a problem in a number of countries and it will be something that we will come back to. In Bulgaria, it was mentioned as a big issue, as it was in Moldova, Montenegro and Serbia. The problems were various, that bullying was increasing, that schools were ineffective in dealing with them, that aggression was too easily accepted as fact of life. For instance in Kosovo, whilst there were plenty of instances where

parents did think that violence was a growing problem, they felt that the school itself considered it to be a minor issue.

Whether it was the pressure to get good marks or the amount of work expected of them many parents feared that their children might easily be distracted by drugs, alcohol, or just play. Alcohol was only mentioned once as an issue (Bulgaria) but drugs were mentioned in two cases (Bulgaria and Montenegro).

For the parents of special needs children, the main challenges they faced were material problems and what they thought were attitude problems towards their child. In Montenegro, for example, it was stressed how the physical layout of the school presented a difficult environment for their child. At the same time, there were also problems with teachers and pedagogues being unprepared. Although there are more opportunities to enrol in regular schools, for some parents the choice was still a hard one between social integration and educational quality.

In some instances, discrimination was brought up in the first section. For some of the rural Roma parents, there was a problem in the way the school treated their children. Some complaints were more general in tone ‘Our children have problems with learning (Bulgaria), others were spelt out in more detail.

‘Our children are segregated from the others. They are usually sat in the back rows of the classroom. When I asked teacher why they were sitting in the back she told me: “They are fine. They are doing very well”. And, when we see the marks, they are all 2’s (satisfactory) (Kosovo).

In Montenegro, it was said that ‘the teacher doesn’t treat the children well, because of their bad hygiene’ whilst in Romania ‘there are some examples of teachers, older, that give lower grades to Roma just because they are Roma’. There were counter views as well, which will be explored in more detail later. In Romania, the FG reported a sharp difference between Roma attitudes in urban and rural settings, with the former thinking that there were few instances of direct discrimination and speaking of many initiatives to improve the physical conditions of the school

1.3. Workloads

The issue of workload figured large in the reports and it is another matter that we can return to. At this stage, it is enough to start by saying that workload was seldom a matter that parents felt they could talk to the school about. They might find other parents who share

their view, but they did not feel the same towards the teachers. Assessment of the workload varied, in Croatia and Bosnia, it was felt that not only were the children expected to learn too much, but that it was expected that the parents had to get involved as well. In Croatia, the example that was given was of a parent complaining he had to help his son with his reading until midnight and then finish it off in the morning before school. The impression was that, whether or not it was ever actually asked, the school effectively required the parent to help the child because they said they had to read with someone. In this case, the parent was unhappy because when he was a child, any homework was done alone. ‘Why can’t they study alone, without help?’

A second issue connected to workload is the difference between those who say that it is too much but say they can help, and those who say it is too much and they can’t help because it is too complicated, for instance, this was acknowledged several times in Moldova. In Bulgaria, there was this quote ‘I do not know English – how can I help her in English?’ The problem of complicated homework, albeit burdensome, was less a problem in Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo and Macedonia. A different but related problem was the illiteracy of some of the parents, mentioned for some Roma parents in Montenegro.

What is closely tied to the question of excessive workload is a feeling that the weight of educational reforms has fallen onto parents, whether this was by design or default. Sometimes there might be so many reforms introduced at the same time, that confusion and frustration is the outcome. It might be that reforms are badly implemented (Romania, Croatia) or that the merit of reform itself is challenged (the introduction of a book reporting assignment in Croatia, for example). The following is a good illustration of this belief

‘Compared to when we were at school and with our parents then, now we have more duties. I can't really define why. Whether it's because the material is too big or we taught our children that way, the teachers ask too much from us.’ (Macedonia)

1.4. Care and Upbringing

In this first section there were several instances of parents describing the problems in bringing up their children. In Bulgaria for instance, there were a number of illustrations of the disconnect between parents and their children, whether this was over dress, attitudes to older people, sexual questions or a general feeling of permissiveness. Disconnect was also a theme for the Albanian grandparents who worried about their lack of influence over their grandchildren and their inability to talk to them. They seem very anxious that the school

would make up for their weaknesses. In a couple of cases, it was the absence of wider familial networks that caused upbringing problems, for instance, in rural Romania, being a single mother left a parent feeling they had few options with their child. The demands of having more than one job to ensure enough money was also mentioned frequently as meanign that parents could not spend enough time with their children. These discussions opened up the question of effective responsibility and who should it have it in relation to what matter. In some cases, the issue might be very practical and demonstrate how parental expectations towards schools might be unmet, for example, there were those who thought the school should provide breakfast in Moldova. In other cases though, it might that parents thought that the school 'have escaped their responsibility for upbringing'.

1.5. Apportioning responsibilities

There were some interesting variations in the division of blame and responsibility for school problems – the physical state of the school might be appalling, for example, but whose fault that was another question. In Macedonia, for instance, when it came to school building, it was the central ministry that was clearly to blame, and there was open sympathy for the school - 'The teachers can't do anything to improve that.' In other fields though, parents felt that teachers were at fault. Sometimes it would be because they were unmotivated and apathetic ('old and tired of life' Moldova). In other cases, the problems came from curriculum reforms that, for some parents, had put too much demand on the pupils and left it that there was often not enough time to do all the assigned work in school. In these cases there was more overt sympathy for the school – it's not their fault. In Macedonia, again, parents appreciated the administrative structure that the school worked within, and parents would admit to talking to teachers about problems facing the school, even though they know that the important decisions were made elsewhere.

1.6. Talking with other parents

It was hard to get a good impression of patterns of discussion viz-a-viz school problems. Every country gave examples of parents talking to other parents without usually spelling out what were the common points of conversation. Some parents felt that whether they talked to another parents depended entirely on the issue at hand and this may well be the case for us to explore in the questionnaire. However, there were some noticeable differences in

terms of the frequency of communication between parents. In Croatia, for example, after saying that parents do talk to each other, this was followed by the qualification ‘but not very often, because they do not see each other frequently’. In Macedonia, the following is an instructive quote, highlighting not only the frequency but also one of the purposes of parental talk.

‘We always consult with other parents as well. We will talk to other parents to check what really happens in school. If we need to react together we will, if it's an individual problem we will react separately.’

The Serbian case brought in another consideration, with the suggestion that whilst informal ties were wide ranging, they tend to be amongst parents whose children are younger, over time, school and homework problems are discussed among peers, not their parents.

1.7. How does this compare with what Principals think?

Given the numbers of Principals involved in the first survey, it is unsurprising that there were many common concerns over reforms, teachers, finances and buildings. In this section, we will simply highlight some shared beliefs as well as identifying some of the different approaches to seeing those problems.

It was surprising that some issues that were mentioned by the Principals were not brought up at all, for example in Albania, Principals complained of overcrowding in classes as a ‘top’ concern. The only possible related reference in the Albanian FG talked of teachers working ‘very shortly’ with pupils. This was not to say that sometimes parents and Principals did not identify the exact same problems. In Bosnia, Principals complained that educational reforms were unclear, ‘imposed’ with inadequate preparation and allocation of necessary materials. To this view, parents were very sympathetic, identifying the reforms and the way they had been brought in as central to many of the problems faced by the school and their children.

In Kosovo, there was a similar consensus over the main problems facing the school and the difficulties the school had in dealing with them. Parents, for example, ‘tend to identify poor infrastructure as one of the major causes of low quality education’. It was high on the Principals concerns too, and yet, the FGs clearly went on to identify the lack of local autonomy over decision making as impeding their ability to redress the problem. Whereas Principals bemoaned a ‘lack of financial autonomy which means that even minor expenditures require complicated centralized procurement procedures’, the parents ‘acknowledged the readiness of school principals to improve the quality of provision in

schools, but pointed out extremely limited possibilities to act autonomously in that direction’.

Teaching quality provides an interest case of the differing perceptions between Principals and parents. In Macedonia, the Principals clearly felt it was an issue and, it was one that was brought up by a number of parents, albeit without many instances of outright condemnation. Rather there seemed to be a fairly perceptive appreciation of both the autonomy of teachers in relation to the Principal, (“The teachers don't answer to the Principal no matter how much we dislike that it’s like that.”) but also a sympathy for the formers’ predicament with a heavy workload and an ill implemented curricula reform. Parents and Principals in Moldova both pointed to the problem of some teachers’ low level of motivation.

In relation to the question of money, there were some interesting connections between how Principals saw the problem and how this then appeared to affect the involvement of parents. In Montenegro, as in other places, financial matters seriously impeded the school’s ability to provide the kind of education that they said they wanted to. This was well appreciated by some of the parents on the Parents Committee, so much so that they talked of wealthier parents being deliberately pushed forward to take part in PCs because it might encourage them to contribute to excursions or even repairs to the school building.

Both parents and Principals brought up aggressive and generally poor behaviour as problems that needed addressing, and both admitted that lack of parental support made the matter worse. If the child has no proper motivation to learn at school, they can disengage and drop out or they can be disruptive.

Finally in relations to the problems raised, there are interesting comparisons between how Principals and parents viewed the school in relation to other authorities. With the former, there tended to be relatively unqualified praise for the local authorities, whereas it was the central Ministries that were seen as creating all the problems. For those who did, parents also targeted central ministries as being responsible for many of their school and their children’s problems, but they were also not so willing to see the local authority contributions in such glowing terms, there was instances when parents pointed to what they saw as failed election promises and unhelpful political interference.

Section Two - Assessing Educational Reforms

To the question, compare schooling today with when you were a child, it would be easy to assume that parental replies depended on who was talking and, therefore, there would be variations within parent groups. It was surprising then that, in some countries, the views on the state of current schools were ‘unanimous’; in Romania, for example, parents were positive about the physical state of the schools, the quality and the quantity of work done and the degree to which they were genuinely encouraged to express their views on many school matters. Later on, there were some dissenting voices, with complaints about the curriculum being unable to properly prepare students for life and that the reforms were ‘imposed’ on schools and parents. In Croatia there also seemed to be widespread agreement - ‘Most of the participants agreed that today’s school is better suited to serve the needs of children and their parents and that it is more responsive to students’ needs than before.’

2.1. National education matters

Most FGs explored the extent that parents felt they had a say in national education matters. In this respect, it is important to note how parents felt that they were able or not able to influence national educational policy. The discussions raised different questions. In some instances, the problem was that there was no forum that was there for allowing parents to have a say in educational policy. In other cases, there were fora, but the people taking part were ‘amateurs’ (Romania), a variation on that was that those taking part in such planning were unrepresentative. This raises a wider point that comes up again in the discussion on the Parent’s Council. Do parents expect other parents to talk on their behalf and, if they do, what exactly do they expect of them? In Croatia, there was the complaint that there was no dialogue between the Ministry and parents, but there was also the accompanying concession that ‘when they want to include us, we don’t have time and that’s a problem.’

In terms of parental appreciation of recent educational policy, there were possibly two levels in which these can be seen, the first is a direct comparison with their own childhood on a broadly ‘better or worse’ scenario, second, the primary focus is the present, and the object is how far education reforms addresses the problems that parents see as problems. These discussions overlap of course and people could compare current reforms to their own childhood experience. One additional way in which parents talk about reforms was in terms

of overall changes to the system of education as opposed to specific changes in school organization. Someone might feel that the fundamental direction of change is wrong, and this might be expressed in broad statements such as ‘the school is escaping its responsibility for upbringing’ (Bulgaria) or by way of some manifestation – ‘What I’ve seen from this reform so far is that I need to work with my child every day. I wonder what the teachers are paid for if I’m going to teach my child’ (Serbia).

From our point of view, we need to be very careful about how we phrase questions about reform. If we ask questions that seek opinions on the general direction of educational reform, then, on the basis of the answers in a number of FGs, we might end up getting a lot of don’t knows. It might be that the parents did not understand exactly what was being got at or that they did not feel qualified to pronounce on the quality of the reforms. Not to labour the point but here are some illustrations of when this came up. ‘Parents are neither able to say if the reforms are heading in a good direction, nor if it can be expected for the reforms to succeed.’ (Serbia) ‘When asked in general about their feelings about the reforms, minority parents were reluctant to say an opinion. “Those who prepared the reforms are more educated than us.”’ (Albania)

Alternatively, if we are interested in parental assessments of specific reforms, then we can work around those that were brought up most frequently. In a number of countries, for example, there has been an extension of the school life from 8-9 grades (Albania, Bosnia, Macedonia and Montenegro) and this has been discussed widely, in terms of its general merit as well as how it is being implemented. For example, in Bosnia, the Ministry does not seem to be so well ahead in designing the new curriculum in time to have textbooks available at the start of the school year, whilst in Montenegro, there were complaints that the classrooms weren’t renovated as promised.

A second area that was frequently mentioned was the changes to the curriculum. Assessing curricular reform offers some interesting comparisons in both tone and content. There are also differences in manifestations, whether the change is seen in terms of the new textbooks, (common) new approaches to teaching (less so) or in the overall weight of the reforms. ‘Everyone’s been talking about the reforms. Reforms are a change, that’s the meaning of the word reform. From what I see, the backpack of my kid is getting heavier and heavier’ (Serbia). In some countries the ongoing introduction of new subjects is seen as a ‘disaster’, overwhelming both child and parent, and forcing any well meaning parent to spend 5-6

hours per day (Bosnia). The source of the problem is not the teacher, it is the number of different topics and the amount of study expected. The outcome was that the learning was superficial, easily forgot and of poor quality. In Serbia, curricular changes were viewed with some ambiguity and there were some negative comments about the amount of classes and the suitability of some elective courses, but there were some positives – ‘the textbooks look better’ and the language of comment was generally not as strident as in Bosnia. In Kosovo, reform to the curriculum was seen as creating too much work for the children and was not supported with decent textbooks. In Bulgaria, there seemed to be very positive assessments of curricular change alongside complaints that the textbooks were far too advanced for the children they were set for. In Croatia, the curriculum was both too demanding and too narrow. There were various interpretations offered for these parental attitudes, for example, whilst dissatisfaction with the reforms was common, there were some FGs where the conclusion was that the parents were not well informed. In this sense the problem with the reform was not to do with the substance of the reform, rather it was more a presentational matter than any real disagreement (Montenegro).

2.2. School responsibilities for effective reform

In terms of asking parents to reminisce, we also get the issue of whether parents are attributing to the school the responsibility for causing or at least not mitigating wider social or cultural changes. In many places, for example, parents did not think that children were as well behaved as when they were in school, they complain of an excessive personal freedom which they see in lack of respect towards figures that they held in respect – their teachers and their elders were the examples most often given. (Albania and Bulgaria, for example). The difficulty is identifying how far this was seen as being the responsibility of the school both in terms of cause but also in terms of being the body to address the problem. There was a lack of confidence in teachers in many of the FGs - ‘Teachers are indifferent. They are not responding to the needs and are not willing to work’ (Albania). It might not be that the teachers were indifferent, more than too much was expected of them. In Montenegro, for example, the problem was a overloaded curriculum alongside discipline problems ‘Teacher is there more to keep discipline and there’s less and less of it’ and the result is that they do not cover enough of the subject, which leaves the child confused and obliges the parent to get involved.

Without any other source of information, the issue of teaching quality is a very difficult one to approach using the FG reports. There are some very broad brush assertions that teachers are this or that, but we don't know what is the basis for that belief, never mind whether it is representative, well-informed, ill-informed or atypical. It is possible to group the assessments according to how parents see teacher involvement in the reforms. Do they see them as critical for making the reforms a success? Do they see them as blocking positive reform? In Moldova, for example, there seemed a strong belief amongst parents that teachers had lost the authority that they had when they were children. For that reason, they were no longer as able to take things forward. They were not well paid, for example, they had to grow their food 'next to simple peasants' and so there were fewer younger, more flexible teachers and too many 'conservative and rigid' older teachers. There was also the problem that some teachers charge money for marks and even penalise those who do not pay, something is very detrimental for school/parent relations. In Serbia, there was less status talk and more talk about who was implementing the reforms. It was the school teachers themselves who were 'putting a heavier burden' upon parents; it was they who were 'insisting' on involving them in both teaching and homework. And this was definitely something that did not happen when they were children. Another strand was ambiguity towards changes in the nature of relations between teachers and pupils. Many commented on the huge change in attitudes towards teachers from when they were in school. There were a few instances where there was unqualified support for the abandonment of the older, more distant relation between teacher and pupil (based on 'awe') in favour of one that was more individual, 'friendly', based on 'respect' and 'rights'. At the same time, there were outright rejections of the change in pupil-teacher or even adult-child relations 'Everything is freer. 'Before it was impossible for a student to beat his teacher in school,' and 'If you scold at a child – it says: I am going to call the Child Protection Agency.' (Bulgaria)

Who else was seen as being responsible for educational reforms? Alternatively, who else was to blame if they did not work? In some instances, parents see the school as powerless without their financial contributions (Moldova). In other cases, it is not so much the school lacks funds, more that it is not the actual responsible owner of its property and therefore has to defer to decisions made by central authorities. In Montenegro, the matter was further complicated because whilst the schoolyard belongs to the local municipality, the buildings

belong to the Ministry of Education, the implication of the example was that these two don't work very well together.

Section Three – Asking about parental participation I

There were contradictory opinions as to where the 'most important' decisions are made. In several cases, the most important place for decision making was simultaneously the Ministry, the Municipality and the Principal so it is important to understand how parents understood the question. In Macedonia, the report referred to 'big decisions' concerning 'the structure of the system, the curriculum and the reforms' and here, parents as a group, did not feel they had much influence. However, this was not to say that there was no discussion; there were 'huge public debates', including judicial hearings and subsequent 'friction between the Ministry and the ruling coalition on one side and the Constitutional Court'. In Romania, by way of contrast, there was a quotation from a parent who clearly understood importance differently. He was the one to make the most important decision – 'After all, it is I who motivates the child to go to school, to learn, to see that the school has meaning and value.'

3.1. Local power and influence

Whilst there was almost no occasions in which parents claimed to have influence on nation wide policy, this did not mean that there was no local influence on how both law and policy was implemented. The differences came in identifying where discretionary power lay. Was there an opportunity to 'modify' or 'adapt' national directions. In Croatia, for example, parents felt that 'a lot depends on the Principal' or that 'teachers were most important', in Montenegro, the most important decisions were made by the Ministry 'and school management', in Romania, there was more of an explicit hierarchy, with the Ministry first, 'then .. the school director and administration council. Their role is to apply what it has been told.' There was a similar story of administrative styles in Bosnia, where parents argued that 'all decisions are made by the ministry'. This view was not unanimous though, Roma parents said that it was the principal who 'makes all the important decisions related to school life.' In Kosovo, the view was that the most important decisions are taken by central Ministry or the local education authorities with the Principal having 'very limited possibilities to act autonomously'

It is important to identify other local actors who are seen as influential in the running of the school. There were significant differences in the roles of the local mayors, the local education authorities, principals and what were sometimes called the 'school administration'. These were important discussions partly because they focused on how different people saw local power. In Macedonia, for example, in a very revealing quotation, it was clear that, despite the law which says that the Principal was 'accountable to the School Board' the respondent viewed the Principal as being directly subordinate to the local mayor. The Principal had less of a 'balancing' function and more of a 'managerial' role, albeit with limited influence over teachers. In the view of the respondent (a parent on the Parent Council), the Principal's power was constrained by his or her lack of sanction – 'They can't punish anybody'. Similarly in Bulgaria, the 'most important decisions were usually made by the municipality.' On the other hand, there were some countries in which local authorities were hardly mentioned as having any influence over school decisions. Although we should be careful from inferring that they had no influence over local schools, local authorities were conspicuously absent in Albania, Romania, Serbia, Moldova, and Bosnia. In Croatia, it was only the Roma parents who mentioned the mayor as having direct influence over schooling: 'The parents see the mayor as a representative of the city government, which is very much involved in schooling of their children by covering the cost of meals for all Roma children during their stay in the school, and by covering the cost of transportation of children from the settlement to the school and back.'

3.2. Being asked and being informed

There were a huge variety of means through which parents were informed over decisions that directly affected their child. These could be in writing, given orally at a parent-teacher meeting, passed on through their child, or found out from other parents. There were occasions when teachers made home visits and there were a couple of instances where parents reported phone calls from form masters. On the whole, there were few instances where parents said that they were not informed. Perhaps the dividing line is over matters that were more in the way of simple notification – upcoming school events, excursions, dates of meetings – versus matters that the school appeared to be asking for parental input. Perhaps one of the easiest examples to investigate the matters parents are simply informed of and matters that they are asked about is the financial contributions that parents are

sometimes asked to make. The way in which parents make financial contributions, the frequency they are asked and the degree to which they feel they have a say over how that money is spent varies. In Bulgaria, parents were asked to contribute towards repairs and painting and here it was not so much they had influence over the kinds or cost of works, more that they were aware that repairs ‘depended’ on them. Whilst they might not have had much say, they did say they were approached ‘tenderly’ by the school.

In Albania, ‘school principals and teachers involve parents only at the beginning to pay money and then they forget about us.’ In Kosovo, it was felt that money changed relations. Whereas normally ‘principals are interested to maintain the control over school operations without involving parents’, this was not the case ‘when they need their financial support’. In Serbia, parents were ‘consulted about different actions/initiatives for which they need to donate the money’, whereas in Moldova, whilst ‘all the school repairs and renovations are financially covered by parents’, it was less a matter of consultation but simple information. In Bosnia, Croatia and Romania there was no record of parents being asked to contribute financially to the maintenance of the school. In Montenegro, there was no mention of parents being asked to contribute to school repairs, rather it was admitted that ‘In some areas, where the schools function in more difficult material (financial) context, parents elect those representatives who can support school financially’.

3.3. Getting involved: Successes and Failures

It is vital that participation in school life is distinguished from formal positions on bodies such as the School Council or the Parents’ Council. The aim of this section of the FGs was to find out about collective action that was self-organised, in this sense, it differs significantly from actions that a parent takes that are directly concerned with the individual education of their own child or children. So for example, in Bulgaria, it was said that ‘every class has 2-3 active parents, and they collect money for celebrations’. Parents were also involved in differing capacities in celebrations in Macedonia. These were actions that are part of the regular school culture and parents expect that they will be involved, whether this is simply attending, contributing financially, or helping out on the day.

What needs to be distinguished were instances when, on their own initiative, parents decided to act on an issue. In this section, the focus is not so much on the issue itself, although that might be important in offering some prompting illustrations for the survey, but more on the

process of the action – how it emerged, how it proceeded and to what extent it involved co-operation with established school structures, such as class councils, school councils and the like. In Macedonia, normally the municipality decides on the food supplied to the school. Although the example was brought up by members of the Parents Council, the respondent was at pains to stress that the initiative (to petition the mayor for an improvement in school food) came from the parents ‘it was discussed by the Council of Parents, and we implemented the initiative’. At least from the initiators point of view, Macedonia offered a second example of a successful self organised parental campaign. There was another successful attempt to change something in Bosnia, ‘There was a problem with transportation for pupils. In cooperation with the principal, the parents went to GRAS (Public Transport Enterprise). Before, children would have to travel 10 km to school. The problem was solved by a joint effort’. On the whole however, there tended to be few clear examples these kinds of intervention.

On the contrary, there were examples of parental actions that were not only unsuccessful, but that had negative consequences for those involved, albeit actually their children. In Bosnia, there was the following example, ‘The group of parents (not members of the Parents Council) stated that they have no influence on decision making related to school life. They cited an example when parents of children from one class were dissatisfied with the work of a teacher, and after they voiced their concern at a Parents Council meeting, this teacher took it out on their children.’ The idea that there are risks attached to getting involved was well appreciated by parents in a number of countries and will be examined in more detail later.

3.4. The question of invitation

What was much more common than parent issue based campaigns were direct invitations from teachers to parents to get involved in some aspect of school life. Below is a list of occasions when parents said that they were invited to take part in something at the school besides the regular parent-teacher meetings

- Teachers invited parents to show the class where they work or to come to school and talk to children about their job.(Croatia)
- Teachers only involve us in extracurricular activities. They are afraid to involve us in class. (Albania)

- Parents 'are asked more often about school level issues like choosing a uniform model, choosing supplementary books or notebooks from an offer, about organizing some events like school's days or open door day, etc.' (Romania)
- We had computer teaching in third grade. The parents got questionnaires to see who can help with the teaching of that subject. They have that twice a week so some of the parents agreed to help as the teacher can't control all 20-20 computers at the same time with those children at that age it's really hard. So whoever was free went and helped. (Macedonia)

For some parents, being invited by the school was an essential pre-requisite as the following quotes show: 'Participation is something that begins with an invitation from the school, Inspectorate or even from the Ministry' (Romania), 'If a given parent is not wanted at school, they do not invite him/her at the parent-teacher meetings' (Bulgaria), 'When they invite us, we come.' (Croatia), 'Roma parents feel unwelcome at the school, no one ever invites them to come' (Bosnia). 'Participants believe that the school should initiate cooperation with parents, not the other way around'. (Croatia)

3.5. Parental appreciation of the extent of the invitation to get involved

In terms of believing that the school wants them more involved, there was a great range of views that can be grouped into three categories no, yes and it depends. In the no camp, it might be that parents see a strong reluctance to share decision making: 'The principal in the neighbourhood school does not allow [a parent decision making group]. [Even though] There was such a group during the 80s', (Bulgaria). Alternatively, it might be that parents feel that they would be blocked, 'If we try to express some objections regarding the quality of teaching, teachers wouldn't let us,' (Moldova). Some parents doubt that the school sees them as having anything to contribute. 'The teacher and the school principal look at me as an uneducated, tired and boring old man. Some teachers are interested but others are bothered even by the greeting.' (Albania). Some parents are sympathetic to the difficulties a school might have ensuring everyone has a say: 'I think that teachers and director want to be left in peace. They propose something, we are informed in different ways, especially through children, we receive some written notes, and we respond. Yes or no; we agree or disagree. It's difficult to gather and to merge all the opinions and then to satisfy all. It's too much

trouble. It doesn't matter if all the parents vote. The teacher or director or the form teacher marks that he asked parents, and that's it.' (Romania).

There were fewer instances where parents felt that there was unqualified enthusiasm for greater involvement. Even in cases where parents mentioned that the school welcomed parental involvement, there was still mention of limits and qualifications. In Macedonia, one of the Albanian parents in the focus group said that 'Our school has an open doors policy' but then immediately qualified this by saying 'if we are interested'. In Bosnia there were 'schools that have opened their doors to parents [and that] enjoy the highest rate of parent participation in school life. In such schools, parents feel welcome and mainly go to the schools to inquire about their children. These schools tend to support most parents' initiatives and consult them on many important issues.' Even with such endorsement, parental participation still 'depended': 'If the principal is unavailable and against parent participation, there will be no parent participation in such schools.'

There were many instances in which parents said replied it depends. On some occasions parents would see their involvement as limited: 'Roma parents believe that the principal and teachers are very interested in parent participation, but only when the parents are supposed to help out the school'. (Bosnia) One of the key issues then it to compare the situations or occasions when parents feel they are 'supposed to help', the second part to the comparison is, if they are supposed to help, what should be their contribution? In Moldova, there was a clear appreciation of the areas in which parents were supposed to be involved and which they were most definitely not. 'The school is more interested in the financial aspect of parents' participation and it has almost no interest in parents' involvement in the didactic process'. In Kosovo, as we have seen 'principals are interested to maintain the control over school operations without involving parents, except for cases when they need their financial support'. A more explicit illustration of this marking of respective territories came from Albania; 'Text content is the teacher's and the school directory's decision. For other decisions, like the uniform, the internal regulation, excursions, the parents are asked for their opinion.'

Section Four - The Parent's Council

'It doesn't matter if a special Council exists or not. What does matter is the fact that there are always some active parents in every class.' Moldova

In every country there are legally guaranteed opportunities for parents to be involved in decision making at the school level. There are differences in terms of the relations between Parents Councils (PCs) and other school level decision making bodies. For example, in Macedonia, 'according to the law as Council of Parents we can only elect two three members of the School Board, we don't have any other right.'

4.1 Membership: Who gets there, how and why?

In most cases there is a mixture of election and selection. In some cases, the member says that he or she was asked by the form teacher to put his or her name forward. In Bosnia, for instance, a teacher might select the parent to be on the PC, and this can lead to allegations and criticism, for instance, a person was chosen because they were a member of a particular political party. The following quote, again from Bosnia, offers a good illustration of the qualities and perceived motivations of PC members

'... the general opinion is that these are 'eloquent' parents, and even those who are less informed or less educated, the main characteristic being that they are eloquent. Usually, members of the Parents Council are chosen by other parents and are people that others have recognised as having the will and ability to fight for their children. Still, the group opinion is that most parents in the Parents Council are there only to score points with the teaching staff that they can later use for the benefit of their children.'

It can be useful to compare why members think they were asked with why others think they were asked. For example, we can use this portrait from Romania as a little indication of the public profile of the PC, 'Members of parents' council are communicative persons, with time to spare, interested of school's actions and not very shy persons.' In other instances, there was more explicit description of the kind of person who takes part in PCs: 'One mother irritated everybody, but it turned out great in the end, because she fought for everything. She always... complained, or demanded something and then they (the parents) figured out that was very useful. (Croatia)

Another consideration of the kinds of person voted or nominated related to what people think the role of the PC is. For example, in Montenegro, one of the functions of the PC is

to ensure that the fabric of the school is maintained and to organize excursions. As such, it was seen as sensible to elect people who can financially contribute to that work, even if their interest in other educational issues might be slight. There were other cases though where PCs were seen as able to contribute to making major decisions about the School, including firing the Principal (Montenegro) although this was not reported in any other case. There were relatively few cases where people went out of their way to get onto the PC. Again, the Romanian report offers a nice illustration of the ambivalence felt to membership. 'Parents are not forced to be a part of parents' council, but they are not happy either. They feel it as a duty.' On the other hand, there were those who consider that there was some prestige involved, 'I see it as an award for myself if I'm proposed to be in the Council'. (Romania)

The motivations for taking part in PCs varied. In some cases, parents considered that they were clearly there to represent their class; 'Some parents said that they were glad to be elected as parents' representatives and they wanted to justify the trust others had in them.' (Serbia). Others seem to say that they got involved because there was a particular issue they felt strongly about and they wanted to do something about it: 'I wanted children from the first and the second grade to go to the school only in the morning shift, because they are too little and in the afternoon they cannot concentrate. We succeeded in changing the school schedule' (Serbia). Some were quite happy to admit that their main motivation was their own child: 'I wanted to have my son "on a short-lead" and to stay in touch with the form mistress in order to know more about his behaviour at school' (Bulgaria). 'I got involved only because of my child, because I want my child to make something of his life' (Bosnia).

4.2. Who does not get onto PCs?

Some parents rule themselves out and we can compare the different grounds by which they explain their decision. There are cases in which someone seems to say that they would be prepared to be part of a PC but, for some unspecified reason, it doesn't happen. This example from Croatia, for example, 'I would like to be a member of Parents Council .. but they do not choose us.' Then there are those who rule themselves out and again there were various explanations proffered for why they could not see themselves on the Council: 'They asked me to be in the Parents' Council, but I refused. I am tired of responsibilities; I don't feel like doing such things any more' (Croatia). 'The parent must be educated, have leading abilities and courage... I don't feel I have the power to speak up' (Albania), 'We are poor

people and we don't have time to come to school and participate to meetings. And we don't speak beautifully, no one listens, so we come for nothing (Romania).

The final set of reasons offered for why a parent feels they cannot be part of a Parents Council, as well as be more actively involved in the school concerns the question of time. This figures large in many of the reports, and it is worth considering the different ways in which participation in school life is seen in terms of time. One view, for instance, was that those who have 'free' time are the ones that get more involved, including the PC (Bulgaria). 'None of the parents from the (FG) group is involved in the Council of Parents. They say that the parents that have more free time and are prepared to volunteer get involved.' (Macedonia). Another fairly common one was that volunteering for or getting involved with the PC was a 'waste' of time. The advice from one parent to a would be PC member in Bulgaria was, 'don't bother, you are wasting your time'. Again from Macedonia, 'if the parents feel that the decision they make are implemented and their engagement is effective, they meet more often and if they feel that's a waste of time they'll say once a term is enough, my voice doesn't mean anything anyways'. A third and probably the most oft cited reason for not getting involved in the PC was that parents had 'no time' or 'lacked time'. In some instances, the reason that they had no time was explained in terms of their work, 'No matter if you are doctor, police officer or baker, you have to maintain two jobs to support your family. We do not have enough time to pay attention to our children' (Kosovo) In other cases though, it was not specified or was given a more general explanation: 'The poor parents are inhibited by the lack of time' (Albania) 'On the other hand, when they want to include us, we don't have time and that's a problem. Since our children entered kindergarten, when we had to come it was always a problem, because we always have to run and don't have time for anything.' (Croatia) It is worth coming back to the perception of the time involved in participation.

4.3. Fields of Actual Competence

The following quotations cover all the major activities of the PCs

'One of the initiatives of Parents' Council that they know of is an initiative to expel a student from school. This initiative was successful' (Croatia)

'The law is very clear that the Council of Parents only observes the teaching process and gives an opinion' (Macedonia)

'The most important responsibility of Parents Councils is to collect money for a certain school problem' (Moldova)

‘They have not solved even the heating system issue’ (Albania)

‘They are responsible for camps, excursions, concerts, necessary equipment, school uniforms, school celebrations and school awards’ (Bulgaria)

PCs in Serbia decide ‘how much money parents are suppose to give to school (“parents’ dinar”), the way the money they donate could be spent, how high fees for teachers who are taking students on a field trips and excursions should be’.

Parents from the village are asked and consulted, but domains are rather small in importance: weeds cutting, cleaning the school, flowers plantation, etc (Romania)

In terms of the actual experience of being part of the PC there were some cases where there was clear disappointment on the part of PC members. ‘Unfortunately, more and more frequently the board of trustees meetings are just a principal’s monologue.’ (Bulgaria) and again from Bulgaria, ‘Being part of the parental council is nothing special. We see each other from one parent-teacher meeting to another. However, otherwise the children are trying to avoid our involvement in their school life and we stay aside. The source of the disappointment might be the view of its real powers, ‘The Council of Parents is more of a parade. Let's not tell lies here, we are all adults. If the Principal wants something, then it will happen, end of story. The Council of Parents is just a cover for that decision to be supported. It's a pity but that's how it is.’ (Macedonia)

A feeling of general satisfaction with their involvement was only reported in one instance (Serbia), in most other cases there was dissatisfaction, albeit for different reasons. In some cases, it was the fact that other parents who had been invited or elected did not show up for meetings: ‘The parent is in the Council of Parents but doesn't show up to any of the meetings and doesn't come to the parents meetings as well. The parent volunteered for the Council and never showed up.’ (Macedonia). In a small number of cases, there was the slightly strange situation where someone had been nominated or elected to the PC but then seems to have never been informed about its meetings. ‘I was a member of Council of Parents. And I was never asked to go to meetings. I want to get involved but I never received any message about a meeting of that body. We were three members from that age group and we were never invited (Macedonia). Alternatively, parents might feel dissatisfied with the actual importance of the work: ‘In fact, nothing depends on the board of trustees. .. We have only formally to legitimize the principal’s decisions, to sign that we are agree because they give an account of the spending.’ The Bulgarian Council is formal – we had a few meetings, we had to listen all the statistics, why do I have to listen about that? (Croatia) Thirdly, it might be that despite being a member, their role is not very well understood, ‘The

role of Council of Parents is not clear to the most of parents. Even those parents who are members of the Council are not satisfied' (Croatia).

4.4. Illustrations of Impact and Assessments of Influence

There are limitations in using the FGs to understand the impact of the PCs. We do not have much information on how decisions concerning school maintenance, planning of trips for the children etc were done before the creation of the PCs. Nor do we have the assessments from the school administration on what they consider the impact of the PC. That said, parents who were not part of the councils were asked what they thought of them (after they were first asked whether they were aware of them) and this offers a good complement to the self assessment of the members.

In some instances, the contributions were viewed by the PC members as being modest: 'Parents that are a part of the council, classroom council, say that they do not remember some great achievements of their organization, but were some achievements, for sure. Nothing memorable, though.' (Romania) In others, parents admitted that they might not like some of the parents who are PC members, but they accept that they have a role to play. 'Parents who join the Council are pushy mothers, never fathers, who want to be leaders, and parents like that irritate them. However, they admit that pushy mothers can sometimes be useful, because they can fight for pupils' interests' (Croatia).

In some rural areas, the school clearly relies upon active parental involvement to meet basic building needs. 'Parents' councils are more likely to take initiatives supporting infrastructure projects and mobilize community to provide financial resources for needs of schools (Kosovo). In some cases though, even where the PC is actively involved in maintaining or improving the physical environment, other parents are unaware of their contribution. In Moldova, for example, where 3 parents from every class take part in PCs and where there is an annual rotation of members, there are still those who think the PC is only there to collect money: 'I don't know any positive practice of our PC and besides financial contributions, I don't know any actions taken by them' (Moldova). It may well be the case that the respondent is expressing a common opinion. The point about how to assess impact is that even when the action of the PC is highly visible, such as organizing a festival, parents still might not see it as the work of the PC, but the work of the school or just parents in general. The following quote is relevant: Parents who are members of the parental council have a

better and more positive perception of the role of the council as compared to other parents.
(Albania)

There were very few cases in which PCs reported any direct involvement in classroom matters. There was one occasion in which the PC played a direct and apparently successful role in dealing with a disciplinary matter: 'During a meeting of the Parents Council members have discussed with pupils who had inadequate behaviour. These pupils were breaking current school rules and regulations and they were troubling other pupils. The effect was an immediate one. After that it was not necessary to take these pupils to the Chamber for Minors from the regional police office (Moldova). Although problems to do with poor behaviour were common in many of the reports, there was only one other case of such an action which was the expulsion of a pupil in Croatia. In one country it was explicitly mentioned that discipline was one of the topics for discussion in the PC (Serbia). In another case though, there was a fear that bringing up disciplinary matters to the PC might have bad consequences. In Bosnia, it was said that a 'frequent occurrence' is when parents know of a problem, but 'they do not bring it to the attention of the Parents Council, because they are afraid of retribution against their child. Usually, if the child is problematic, the parent will also be problematic.' In other words, there was a fear that complaints could be traced back. As mentioned earlier, parents were very wary about making complaints concerning the quality of teacher's work and there was little evidence of this being discussed within the PCs. There were a few occasions in which such matters were raised but there was clear reluctance to take the matter further '...the maths teacher has problems with alcohol, a big problem even when I was in that school, and you can imagine what it is after twenty year and more. You know, it's a small town and one is not willing to cause somebody to lose their job. I said it to the class-teacher on the parents' meeting, and other parents murmured only – what can we do – they have excellent marks. Believe me, for them, excellent marks are only important' (Montenegro). In another example from Montenegro, the PC admitted that they could have a say on teaching matters, but were careful to acknowledge that it was not their responsibility nor were they obliged to get involved. 'Each problem concerning the teaching plan is in the principal's personal policy. We may point out some problems'.

4.5. What does effectiveness depend on?

Although there were common explanations for the PC's effectiveness or lack of effectiveness, there were differences in emphasis. For example, in Bosnia, there was one respondent who believed that the activity of the parents in the PC 'depends on the chairperson'. In Montenegro, 'for the successful functioning of these bodies, [the] attitude of school management has great importance'. In Macedonia, it was not so much the internal organization and leadership in the school that mattered but outside bodies as well: Person 1 '...whether we can change anything and do something... even if we are in the Council of Parents, or the school generally...It all depends on many other factors. Person2: The Ministry and bureaucracy.' Other cases place the emphasis on the parents. 'In order for a PC to work better, there has to be active parents, leader parents who could have time and take initiatives' (Moldova).

In terms of the Principal's contribution to the effectiveness of the PCs, opinion varied. In Moldova and Romania, for example, the principal appeared to have little or no apparent influence over the functioning of the PCs, in other cases, parents felt that it was important that the success of the PC depended on how far the Principal was 'open', (Bosnia). In another case quoted earlier, the respondent was frustrated with the absolute power of the Principal. 'If the Principal wants something that will happen, end of story. The Council of Parents is just a cover' (Macedonia). In this sense the effectiveness of the PC might depend on the degree to which it does not contradict the Principal.

Section Five - General Participation II

This final section explores in more detail the ways in which parents involve themselves aside from the PCs.

5.1. Relations with other parents

The FGs tried to find more about relations between parents in respect to the school. Unsurprisingly, there were all kinds of social relations, from close and friendly, to more distant, as well as active expressions of dislike and disdain. In this section, we include both the different expressions of intra-parental relations as well as trying to record the topics of discussion that parents mentioned. It is also worth recording the place of meeting and any

expression of frequency. For example, in Albanian one parent admitted that ‘We often talk with other parents in the parents’ meetings, but it all starts and ends there. Nothing is followed up’. ‘We just talk with each other but nobody has started any action.’ (Macedonia) In several cases, it was clear that parents appeared to rely upon other parents for sources of information about school matters when their child was young. For example, in Serbia, there was the following quote from one of the parents,

‘Informal chains of communication do exist between parents of children in the first years of schooling. Other parents are contacted in order to get the information on the schoolwork or some school problems, and sometimes it is centred on the organization which of the parents are going to pick up or drive the kids to school or for some extracurricular activities. These links between parents get weaker in time, since when children grow up parents get less involved, and school and homework problems are discussed among peers, not their parents.

There were opposite cases reported though. In the following quote, it is perhaps noteworthy that the respondent says that she has contact with other parents in her older daughters class, but none with the parents in her younger daughter’s class:

‘There are parents that do not want to be in touch with Romany women. My older daughter collects my younger daughter and I don’t communicate with the Bulgarian parents of her classmates. Well, I am in touch with the parents of the classmates of the older. But even then I am careful – may be they are ashamed to walk beside a Romany woman in the city downtown’ (Bulgaria)

Some people say that they would not talk to other parents about school matters because of the way they think they are seen. One grandparent from Albania said that ‘I don’t want to share things with others because they see me with pity and I don’t like that.’ In other cases ‘talking to other parents did not result in a good experience: some of them say they do not agree on the issues, or are not interested in other’s opinion, or do not know the other parents well enough’ (Albania). In Bosnia, members of the PC acknowledged that ‘another problem that was pointed out is the communication between Roma parents and non-Roma parents.’

5.2. History of parental involvement

Some good traditions have disappeared; for example, there were voluntary activities that gathered many people who met and solved several issues. Nowadays it is very hard to gather parents for some common interest activities. Moldova

This part offered an opportunity to see how people remember things. Some parents were able to recall a whole series of activities that they ascribed to parents, in Albania for example, “Use of uniforms at school, the school hymn, the school emblem, the school newspaper... reconstruction of the school yard, painting the classrooms and the school front door.” Others, by contrast, knew that parents were involved with the school but could not give any examples of what they had done. Some parents recall that there are initiatives undertaken by parents, but cannot name them (Romania).

There are a huge range of actions that parents reported were their own doing. The following quote encapsulates some of the main areas in which parental involvement is reported. ‘Some initiatives from the parents have been visits in the historic places, fixing the school environment, improving discipline at school, improving attendance situation’ (Albania) There are important differences in the kinds of involvement that parents might have as well as what contributions parents make in each of them. For example, in terms of being involved in excursions, parents might be involved in raising money to pay some of the cost, but they also might go along to help out. When it comes to fixing the school environment, the contributions vary from money, to labour, to actual commissioning and supervising of work. As we saw earlier though, parents see their role in improving discipline very differently. Reducing truancy and drop out rates was not something that many respondents talked about, and there were only a handful of instances in which it was brought up as a matter that parents, as a group or through the PC, should do something about. There is no need to list all the individual actions, here the attention is more towards reflections on times when parents did get together to do something.

‘We succeed in most of our initiatives. Of course it is because we are taking only “possible to do” decisions’ (Bulgaria)

Initiatives are usually launched only when a problem arises. ‘Parents who are satisfied with their child and the class he/she is attending have no initiatives’ (Bosnia). Sometimes parental action is directed against the school, implying that they have failed to address a problem that forces the parents to get involved to put pressure on the school. For example in Albania, ‘A case was reported when parents were organized to expel a teacher who was physically punishing children. Similarly and as mentioned earlier, although this was including the PC, there was a case in Croatia of where parental pressure led to the expulsion of a pupil. In other cases though the action is less pressuring the school, than supporting it to lobby

external agencies, there were several examples of this, in Bosnia again, parents and the school lobbied the Ministry about what they considered the excessive workload of the curriculum.

There were a couple of cases of what could be called thwarted initiatives and they offer some insights into the question why not all contributions are as welcome as others. In Moldova, for example,

‘Intellectual parents, had some initiatives for organizing methodology seminars with teachers, including practical introductions to using new interactive techniques and methodologies, but teachers were quite reserved’.

In this example, we might infer that one of the areas of disagreement, albeit expressed passively, was the responsibility of parents for teaching the teachers. There were many instances of critical comments from parents about teachers in Moldova, but from this instance, the role parents themselves can play in improving standards might seem uncertain. The following quotation offers another illustration of an unsuccessful initiative, in which the teachers acted to block what they, or at least some of them, did not want. There was an attempt to promote the learning of the Roma language, which although initially successful, later fell apart:

We had an initiative to ensure that all schools in the municipality have one or two teachers covering Roma language as an optional subject. This was in 2007/2008. Then the law on elective subjects changed. After that, we did another round of parental initiative in 2008/2009 but that was unsuccessful because the staff on all the schools were discriminating against the Roma. They influenced the children by telling them ‘you will study Roma language during the break of after the end of regular school time. They wanted to obstructing the teaching of Roma language as an elective subject in the schools. They invited parents to schools, told them stories and the parents said ‘why should my child stay more in school?’ (Macedonia)

One final illustration of an unsuccessful initiative again reflects the ambiguity of responsibility to intervene when something is felt to be going wrong.

We have this lady, who was Roma assistant in school before, and she helps mothers to make contact with school, they talk to her first. We complained last year, we asked teachers to spend more time in school. We have the schedule, but teachers don’t respect it, so my husband and I went to solve that problem. They respected what we had agreed for a longer period of time but they stopped doing it again. They used to stay in school from 9 to 12.30, and now from 9.30 to 11.30. They have no complete school teaching. They had it in 2006. (Montenegro)

Although in this case, the parents thought they had been able to get teachers to do their work, they were unable to make it last, and without any way to enforce the 'arrangement', it was clearly open to be ignored.

5.3. Family involvement and role division

In general and not as much of a surprise, it was mainly the mothers who were the primary connection between schools and parents. There were few explicit discussions involving fathers, something that was perhaps reflected in the absence of fathers from most of the FGs. The involvement of fathers in school was not brought up (at least in the reports) in Bosnia, Kosovo, Serbia and Romania. When they were involved it was because, for whatever reason, the normal practice could not be followed: 'The father is involved in cases the mother can not' (Albania), although this quote can also be read as identifying areas in which it was not expected for a mother to be involved. In some cases, the invisibility of the fathers to the school is almost total: 'My husband collected the child once and then the form mistress finally believed that I am not a single parent' (Bulgaria). In another case though, there was a clear expectation that the father would attend school meetings 'Generally, fathers go to school meetings more often than mothers, while mothers work more with children at home' (Croatia)

'Macedonian parents from the urban areas declare that parents have shared responsibilities in raising the children, Macedonian parents from the rural area and the Albanian parents say that the mother are more involved in the children's everyday upbringing, but the fathers are involved in making important decisions'.

The following quote is revealing of the difficulties of lone decision making

..the big problem was to decide whether to send the child to a specialized school or not. Family support, my mother as a teacher didn't want to intervene, my father kept his distance. My husband left it over to me. And that's the most difficult part of my life, when I had to make a decision' (Montenegro)

Homework was an issue that was brought up in every report. The most common topic was the extent of the homework, which we will look at a little later. It does offer the occasional chance to see role divisions within a family. Again, when it was brought up, it appeared to the job of the mother to ensure that work was done, but it sometimes the father steps in.

‘When she does not want to study at home, I speak with her father. Then she reads an hour or hour and a half’ (Bulgaria).

5.4. Explaining different kinds of involvement

As mentioned earlier, the FGs offered some good insight into the areas that parents felt they were already involved, the areas they sometimes would get involved with and the areas that they did not to get involved with. Again, we can use homework as a case study for illustrating different kinds of parental involvement. In a few cases, the matter was stated simply and without comment ‘According to parents, their role in education is to help with the homework’ (Albania). What was more common was for parents to express an opinion about the extent of homework, the difficulty of homework and whether they were willing or able to get involved. In a number of instances, parents reported what might appear as extraordinary demands on them. In Bosnia, for example, there was the following quote: ‘A parent who wishes to help his/her child must set aside 5-6 hours a day, because with such an extensive imposed curriculum, the teacher is unable to go through everything.’ There was a similar report from Moldova; ‘Parents are many times asked to do pupils’ homework so that their children could be able to cover the curricular program’. The following quote also implies that the parent considers they are doing the job of the school, and this was not what they expected nor wanted: ‘They should cut home-work. Some home-works are too hard for the child, and parent has to do it. I do not want to go to school again’ (Croatia).

Then there were the cases in which parents said that they did not get involved in homework, either because the child was able to complete the work without the need for their involvement or that even if they wanted to help, they could not because the subject matter was too difficult for them. In Montenegro, for example, there was ‘an additional difficulty in the fact that their parents are illiterate, so they cannot help them in completing their school obligations.’ In Moldova, where there were several complaints about teachers not being able to get through the curriculum, there were several parents who admitted ‘I cannot help my child with homework.’

5.5. Explaining why others don’t get involved

Occasionally, parents offered explanations for why they felt other parents did not get involved in school. The following quote from Moldova offers a good overview:

Usually only a group of parents are being involved – parents who really care about the future of their children. The rest .. are reticent and don't want to participate. ..We have two categories of parents who are not involved in school life: 1) rich parents – they don't want to contribute financially, because they think that the local mayoralty or the state has to cover all the educational need of their children; 2) poor and socio-vulnerable families, who are totally out of this process.

In the following case, the reason for non-involvement are twofold, not speaking the language of the school and being under pressure to meet the basics of life and therefore having no interest in additional responsibilities: 'Parents from the slum quarter are totally not interested in the education of their children. They have no money for bread, so we cannot expect participation. They are not able even to speak Bulgarian.' There were lots of cases where parents explained others absence because of their work commitments: 'Roma FG participants say the main reasons behind their lower rate of participation in school life is that usually both parents work, so they spend all their time trying to make a living (Bosnia) In the following quote from Macedonia the parent argues that non-involvement, in this case of Roma parents, was partly because of poor education but partly a matter of choice too.

They don't want to get. They don't want to, they really don't want to because...I don't want to offend anyone, but the parent doesn't know the material and they can't help the children and are lucky if their child is in a good class so they can work in group with more advanced students and they can get better as well. [...] But the parents don't want to get involved in anything, they want to be free.

This can lead us onto the FG sections that dealt with exclusion. There were very different views on the existence of exclusion and the reasons for it. In Albania, for example, members of the parents council and people living in rural areas said that no-one was excluded from school life, at same time, 'most parents' felt that Roma and poor families were excluded. In Romania, there was near unanimity that no-one was excluded, something that was 'firmly affirmed' even after some pushing from the moderator. The opposite was found in Bosnia where 'Roma are completely excluded from school life.' In Croatia, parents acknowledged that there was social distance between them and Roma parents, but did not feel as if they were responsible for creating that distance 'We have a Roma child in class (...). His mother waits for him in front of the school, but she never comes to parents' meetings. But I think it's her decision, other parents did not exclude her; she has other five or six children so she doesn't have time'. There was a similar difference of opinion in Moldova: 'Children from rroma families don't differ from us. However, these families think

that their children are somehow discriminated?. In one occasion the discussion turned to the choice of school and the feeling that the local educational authorities, or more specifically, the Principal was refusing to allow more local Roma children to enrol, instead directing them to another school, further away. For the parents affected, this was a classic example of how they were treated by schools (Macedonia).

There were different questions raised in the discussion of exclusion in relation to children with special needs. In some cases, the feeling was that either the child or the parent suffered because of some shortcoming on the part of the school. The following shows that successful integration is not just a question of the school being willing but also being able to enrol children with disabilities: 'The fact is that it is not always problem in schools' resistance of accepting children with disabilities. Sometimes, simply, there are not proper conditions, even if principal and teachers give their best' (Montenegro). There are a number of countries in which there have been significant changes in enrolment policy towards special needs children and there were a number of examples of where parents felt they had to struggle to get their child into a mainstream school.

'Teachers can be a particular barrier to the children with special educational needs and their parents. In spite of the fact that individualization is a teaching principle and inclusion regulated in law, some teachers do not want to accept those children and they do everything to prevent their parents from enrolling them in regular classes' (Montenegro).

There were numerous examples in which the parents were heavily committed because they knew that the school was not able to help their child settle in alone and in that sense, they sometimes became teaching support staff in all but name and salary. Whether it is fair to bring this up solely in the context of exclusion or a question of the appropriate limits of parent power, there were several cases in which other parents raised objections to the enrolment of special needs child: 'A disabled child is in my grandson's class and all children like him, but parents want him out, because they think he hinders the teaching process' (Albania). 'There's a hyperactive child who bullies other children and his mother says on the parents' meeting – 'What can I do, my child is hyperactive.' But those children are not there to be bullied' (Montenegro)

5.6. Relations with teachers

‘When asked directly about the relationship with teachers and the school principal, the parents say that they are good, especially with the principal’ (Albania)

‘All parents think that the relationship between parents and teachers and the relationship between parents and school leaders are good’ (Croatia)

Despite these two quotes, it is difficult to generalize on the relations between parents and teachers. There were examples of broadly positive relations to explicitly hostile. Instead, we can look at the different ways parents talked about their relations with their child’s teachers. In Moldova, for example, one parent complained ‘It is very hard to trust a teacher who does not have a communication culture – there are teachers who tell different negative things about children in front of other parents or pupils’. In Albania there was a similar case where a parent felt that teachers were indiscreet: ‘I don’t want others to know about my daughter’s problems. But teachers do not keep confidentiality’. In Serbia, the discussion about teacher/parent relations was talked of in an oppositional way. ‘For most parents teachers are seen as opponents, not partners.’ Occasionally a parent would admit that they did not feel confident talking to teachers and that they were made to feel timid by the behaviour of the teacher.

Were teacher/parent relations different in rural and urban areas? There were a couple of cases in which reports seemed to say that there were differences concerning the openness of the school, the topics of conversations, and the teacher’s knowledge of individual children. In Romania for example, there were more positive examples of parent/school relations in rural areas compared to urban ones, with the explanations appearing to be do with the smaller size of the school and the closer social relations between parents. And in Serbia, there was the following observation: ‘rural schools are small and there is by far more communication between the parents, and most probably the communication between teachers and parents is more open’. However, it is important not to overstate this, as in some places, there was no reported differences between rural and urban areas when it came to parent teacher relations (Croatia, Montenegro). There was also the following quote came from a rural area in Albania ‘We don’t talk to teachers about our problems; we solve them on our own.’

5.7. Obstacles to involvement

This section covers those obstacles that we have not already covered in some way or other. As we have seen, the forms of parental involvement vary from actions that are directly supportive of the school to those that can bring parents into conflict with the administration. One important issue that was brought up in several cases was the idea that getting involved was a risky business. We have already referred to the case when some parents complained about a teacher only to then feel that he took out his anger on their children. The following quotes offer further perspectives:

‘Parents do not have time. They don’t know many things and they fear to raise their voice because of the teacher’s revenge’ (Albania)

‘Most parents fear the reaction of the teacher’ (Bosnia)

‘Parents fear of talking much ‘against the school’ because of consequences for their children’ Croatia

‘Parents .. fear or simply have a kind of feeling – why react when someone could suffer consequences? This is by no means a rare situation when whole generations of children are damaged because teachers do not teach even according to minimal standards’ Montenegro

Another way of seeing the obstacle question is to acknowledge that schools are in competition for parental time with other activities.

‘Parents are attracted by money and work. This costs the education to their children’ (Albania)

‘We harvest the fruits of democracy. The people have no time for intellectual things. We open our shop in 8 AM and close in 10 PM. How could I be more active?’ Bulgaria

5.8. The question of benefits

In terms of talking about the benefits of parental participation, it is categorise the different ways in which these were expressed. The following quote from Albania shows the mix of tangible and intangible benefits that can come from parental involvement

‘..learning about the child’s problems and his age, influencing the education of own child, feeling secure and estimated, that the child would learn more, and that they would feel secure by having the parent closer.’

Again, in a quote from Albania, there was a feeling that children benefit by being ‘under a double supervision: from teacher and parent.’ This was also mentioned as a being a benefit in Bulgaria although there was a slight different emphasis. Here it was expressed more as a ‘help’ and ‘support’ to the teacher rather than some kind of shared labour.

These quotes open up the fairly confusing question of beneficiary, in other words, who gains from greater parent participation? Is the gain wholly private and, in most cases for the parent's own child, or are the benefits somehow shared within ever decreasing circles? Some felt that the benefits of greater parental involvement go mainly to the child, feeling secure perhaps or being helped in homework. But then there can be other benefits that would go to the parents, which could be feeling part of something, feeling recognized by peers and included. Thirdly there were the benefits to the teacher, which include having parents on the same side and being able to raise problems with a view to seeing them solved or at least addressed, and, fourthly, there were the benefits for other children. Here, parental encouragement of the importance of education can support the general classroom, learning environment, reducing disruption and distraction, but it can also be through contributing to the organising of activities and the like.

This last area is important to explore in some detail because, whilst it was only a minority in most case that showed no interest in their child's life at school, the majority of parents in the FGs were involved, albeit to differing degrees, in their own child's school life, with the various motivations and situations dealt with above. What was seen as a different kind of work was volunteering to offer some kind of service that would, hopefully, be for the benefit of the whole class or perhaps even a larger group. As we have seen, despite the range of problems identified in schools, all volunteers are parents, but not all parents are volunteers. This division is not the same as that between active versus passive parents because there were occasions, for example, especially in relation to children with special needs, when the parent freely admitted that the main reason that they were more involved was for the sake of their own child. The problem that perhaps we need to address is that talking about and asking about parental participation sometimes conflated both kinds of involvement, even though they were seen as being quite different by most parents. When the FGs discussed why do some people get involved, the answers seemed to be about the particular assets that they had or could bring, whether this was their 'free time', their 'eloquence', their education or their bank account. If getting involved and participating was something that is seen as requiring these kinds of resources, then those who feel they don't have them can easily excuse themselves.

In other words, using the FGs as a guide to making recommendations seems to require a clear separation between the roles that parents might play in relation to school life. In

particular, there needs to be a distinguishing between parental interest and activities in support of their own child from their interest and support to all the others. The first set of actions might be seen as what was naturally expected of them as a parent and, as we have seen, parents had both general and specific expectations towards schools, children and other parents. The second set of actions though, places participation as principally a contribution to the general good, to the smooth working of the school, to the improvement of conditions and the reduction of unmet needs. In this category, there was sometimes a feeling that motives for involvement in these actions needed to be altruistic rather than self regarding. This is perhaps best illustrated in the following quote

If parents who really want to work for the benefit of all children were involved, the situation would improve for everyone: the teachers and children and school administration and other parents. ..The disadvantage of parent participation is that some parents become involved purely in the interests of their own child, for example, when they try to negotiate better grades, etc. (Bosnia)

In other words, although the example of the actual private gain given is one that few would support, the implication is that deriving any private benefit from participation is morally suspect. If by parental participation in schools, our interviewees understand this to mean fundamentally something that is done only for the common good, they may well see participation as dependent on having time, money, education, and social confidence. In that regard, participation will remain the activity of the few. On the other hand, if we see parental involvement in other terms such as expectation – what do they feel is expected of them from the school, from the teachers, from their child and from other parents – then we start from the presumption that all parents are involved in school life, it is just the quality, quantity and occasion for parental involvement that changes.