

Focus Group Report
National Survey of Parents in SEE Countries
Parents' participation
May – June 2009

Introduction

Six focus groups with parents were conducted in four cities of Albania during May and beginning of June 2009. Composition of focus groups was as follows:

1. Vulnerable parents (Egyptian minority and poor families) in Gjirokastra
2. Parents from a rural area in Tirana district
3. Parental Council members from Tirana city
4. Vulnerable parents (poor) in Kukës
5. Parents from a rural area in Korca district
6. Parents from urban area in Korca

Participants were recruited based on some criteria: 1) parents who ideally were not part of OSI or non-OSI sponsored projects/activities; 2) respecting a gender balance in the group; 3) parents must not know each-other (or in small areas such as villages, at least they must not be neighbors or relatives).

The report is structured according the major sections of the focus group guide and is enriched by parents' quotes.

General Mood

Parents and caregivers were asked about how it is being a parent of a school child these days and what are the greatest problems they face. Generally, they describe the situation as very demanding in all terms of development. Most of them mention financial difficulties as the main problem, but also problems with communication and understanding the specifics of the age of the child. They mention challenges of the everyday life and the fact that the children today are "smarter, more curious and more demanding, while you have to be prepared although being in economic difficulty" as a Northern father says.

"Being a parent today is a maximum responsibility. This age is full of problems. My daughter does not like studying. She spends time listening to music. I try to keep her away from bad company. Teachers do not help her, do not motivate or support her."

Father of a 13 year old child, Egyptian, construction worker

"... I have to understand her world and stay close to her, to show her the road she should take... The biggest problem I have is providing for her the necessary tools she needs for school."

Mother of an 11 year old child, poor family

Grandparents who are primary caretakers of the child say that it is a double responsibility for them, because they have difficulty in understanding “the generation’s world.”

“Financial problems are the first in the list for me. Also difference of age and communication. I try to find ways to communicate with him. There are things that influence him wrongly and I feel powerless for changing the situation.”

Grandmother, caretaker of an 11 year old child with divorced parents

“It is difficult because the school has a lot of responsibilities, the program has changed and there are prejudices for students. I feel powerless... There are several problems such as poverty, unemployment, lack of support for parents from the school. My grandson does not study regularly.”

Grandfather, caretaker of an 8 year old child.

“I feel stressed out because their age has many problems in the times we live... My son does not study regularly. He makes absences at school so that he can spend time entertaining. I keep contacts with his class’ tutor teacher.”

Divorced mother of a 12 year old child, dressmaker

Parents generally talk to their partners, close relatives or friends for the issues related to school. The next person they go for help is the teacher who is the tutor of the child’s class. For some, 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. Others say that they found good advice among the other parents.

“I talk to my wife about these problems. We also have a teacher who lives close to us. We watch any program in the TV that could help us with the issues... I have also discussed with other parents in the parents’ meeting. We all think to stay closer to school so that we could get the help we need. But where can I find teachers, when I get back from work?”

Father of a 13 year old child, Egyptian, construction worker

“I talk to my mother because my husband is very busy at work. I also talk to the tutor teacher of my daughter’s class... I have discussed with other parents in the parent’s meetings and with a friend of mine whose daughter is the same age as mine. We do not agree in every aspect. We only talk to teachers and the principal about the time my daughter spends at school.”

Mother of an 11 year old child, poor family

“I talk to the tutor teacher about my grandson. Sometimes also to my son, but he has another family’s obligation so is not very much involved... Together with other parents we have raised the voice to the school principal for the issue of school hygiene.”

Grandmother, caretaker of an 11 year old child with divorced parents

“I talk to my parents and brother as well as to the tutor teacher of my son. Other mothers have the same problems as I.”

Divorced mother of a 12 year old child, dressmaker

"I have shared these issues with parents in my grandson's class and they have advised me that my grandson needed help from his classmates."

Grandfather, caretaker of an 8 year old child.

"We don't talk to teachers about our problems; we solve them on our own."

Father of a 10 year old child, rural area

As compared to other parents, parental council members mention the need that the parent assists with the teaching/learning process, which is often not sufficient.

Reforms

Parents were asked if and in what way the school has changed nowadays. Most parents feel they do not have control over the change and over their child.

"Time has changed for the worse. Children demonstrate an unacceptable behavior which is irritating. In the meantime, their demands have gone up. Teachers are indifferent. They are not responding to the needs and are not willing to work."

Divorced mother of a 12 year old child, dressmaker

"There are good and bad changes. Children are out of control. They get more information from the computers and other means. The school does not respond very much to the needs. People are more and more indifferent."

Grandfather, caretaker of an 8 year old child.

"Nowadays, teachers and parents are passive in regard to school issues and students."

Father of a 13 year old child, Egyptian, construction worker

"Children are raised more indifferent than we were."

Grandmother, caretaker of an 11 year old child with divorced parents

"Time has changed for the better. Books are better, classroom condition is better and there are more school tools... The school responds to the child's needs."

Mother of an 11 year old child, poor family

Generally, parental council members seem more satisfied with the reforms:

"Changes are obvious. The teaching process is contemporary, environment is proper, reforms are good. Everything has changed to adapt to the children's needs."

Mother of 12 year old child, Parental Council Member, Tirana

The only reform mentioned widely by the parents is changing the obligatory system from an eight grade into a nine grade. They also think that having one more year to study as obligatory, might be helpful for children who do not study. However, parents

cannot articulate specifically the purpose why the reforms are undertaken. The parental council members mentioned also the reform of alternative textbooks.

“One reform is passing from the eight grade system to the nine grade system. The purpose is to help with the children’s education. For example, my daughter who does not study a lot has the chance to one more year of study.”

Father of a 13 year old child, Egyptian, construction worker

“The purpose of the reforms is child development and learning how to cope with life.”

Grandfather, caretaker of an 8 year old child.

For most parents students and teachers are the ones to benefit the most from the reforms. Few parents think that together with students, they as parents can also benefit from the reforms.

“Maybe we could benefit too, since our children are benefiting.”

Grandfather, caretaker of an 8 year old child.

Parents were asked what needs to be done in order to improve the school. There are several issues that they raise: from the equality among children, the role of school, the physical condition of school environment, the schedule, the lack of a dental service at school, to the teaching aspects.

To minority parents building a school where all children are treated equally is the first priority. “In this way, my daughter will have more chances to education.” They say that they were not part of the reforms because they were never asked about their opinion. Poor parents are of the same opinion as minority parents.

“The school must educate children so that they become qualified. I want my daughter to become someone... I would help the school in any way I could.”

Mother of an 11 year old child, poor family

“I don’t have a say, but if I had, I would invest for better condition at school... The school must have labs, heating system...”

Grandmother, caretaker of an 11 year old child with divorced parents

“We, the caretakers, must get more acquainted with school life. I could help with making the school classes more practical and understandable by children.”

Grandfather, caretaker of an 8 year old child.

Regarding things to be improved in school, parental council members mention specifically issues such as collaboration between parents and teachers and the need to raise the awareness of parents for their involvement in school life.

Parents' involvement in reforms

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."

Parents talk positively for the elementary system, because the teacher according to them spends more time with the children. While in the secondary school, the students according to parents "get confused by too many teachers."

"The elementary school is ok. The teacher loves the children and relates to them. In the secondary, there are teachers who are not willing to work and children do not want the school anymore."

Mother of an 11 year old child, poor family

Regarding their involvement in the reform, parents generally see themselves as not needed. Only those who are educated can have a say according to them.

"There are some extracurricular activities organized where parents are invited. However, teachers work very shortly with students, only during the class. The parent doesn't have a say."

Grandfather, caretaker of an 8 year old child.

Participation, general

Most parents especially minority and poor ones think that only high authorities like the Ministry and the school principal are responsible for school decisions. Parents are invited into parents' meetings and are given some information but not sufficiently according to them. They say the school informs them at the beginning of the school year and then only asks them about their contribution, and informs them about the children's behavior and grades.

"Text content is teacher's and school directory decision. For other decisions, like the uniform, the internal regulation, excursions, the parents are asked for their opinion."

Mother, Parental Council member, Tirana city

Some ways that parents mention as involvement are: contributing with money at the beginning of the year and fixing the school environment. They say they are only informed about decisions, but are not part of them.

"I don't know how parents can influence decisions. School people should tell us, they are the ones who teach the world... School principals and teachers involve parents only at the beginning to pay money and then they forget about us."

Father of a 13 year old child, Egyptian, construction worker

“Teachers talk about issues only in the parent’s meetings once a month. They must help with ideas of how parents must be involved.”

Divorced mother of a 12 year old child, dressmaker

Parents were asked whether principals and teachers interested in involving the parents in school life. Parental council members think that this is the case, but not the other parents.

“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.”

Grandfather, caretaker of an 8 year old child.

“The parents have the right of expression, but what to do with it, if they are uneducated?”

Father of a 13 year old child, rural area, employed

a. Types of involvement: Parents’ council

Parents (non-members of parental council) were asked whether they knew about the parents’ council, its role and composition as well as their interest to joining the council. Almost all of them knew about the parents’ council and its role to raise issues to the school directory. Some are not happy with its performance. “They have not solved even the heating system issue... They need to explain us what is happening so that we know too.” Also their perception is that only parents who are educated are involved in the parents’ council.

“Parents with an authority and active are elected. They have more experience and more able than the others.”

Father of an 11 year old child, poor Northern family

“Parents of children who have poor grades feel bad and would not participate in such forums.”

Mother of a 13 year old child, poor Northern family

“Parents want to be involved, but there are those like me, who don’t know how to talk. We would be willing to help. They involve parents who are educated because they have right answers. They don’t need uneducated parents like me.” A father says.

Parents who are not involved in the school decision making are those belonging to minorities (Roma and Egyptian), parents who are not interested in the children’s education, and poor parents who are never asked, but who know how to work. The poor parents are inhibited by the lack of time, existence of financial issues and lack of information.

“Many parents have two jobs. By providing for the family, they cannot be engaged as a member of the parental council. They think that by ensuring income; have fulfilled all the child’s needs.”

Father of a 13 year old child, rural area, employed

“In order to be involved, parents need schooling and courage.”

Father of a 13 year old child, Egyptian, construction worker

On the other hand, 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.

Parents were asked whether they liked participating in decisions and what their motivation would be. Parents would be motivated if they knew more about the school. However some of them are not willing to contribute in voluntary basis.

“Parents like to be part of the decision-making in school, because they know this way how to help and teach their child.”

Mother of an 11 year old child, poor family

b. Types of involvement: Other

Parents think that other ways of involvement could be offering teaching classes for children for the subject of their profession. Also they might be invited in classes as auditor. “Teachers only involve us in extracurricular activities. They are afraid to involve us in class.” Says a grandparent. Also, having a personal business will make the parents donate more to the school.

“I would work for designing the school corner, because it is in a miserable condition.”

Grandfather, caretaker of an 8 year old child.

Asking information

Parents ask for information for school and their child to the tutor teacher who is assigned with their child’s class. “We often talk with other parents in the parents’ meetings, but it all starts and ends there. Nothing is followed up.”

“I read some newsletters to learn more about the school today and my grandson’s behavior. I don’t want to share things with others because they see me with mercy and I don’t like that.”

Grandfather, caretaker of an 8 year old child.

Parents’ participation

A. History of parent involvement in the school life

Parents, especially minority and poor ones are not aware of the parent participation in their school. “Nobody said us anything. The school has a board that takes the decisions.” Says a father. “In one meeting the teacher talked us about the collaboration she had with previous year parents.” Says a grandfather.

Minority parents are less aware about projects or initiatives undertaken by parents in their school. Some parents recall that there are initiatives undertaken by parents, but cannot name them.

Some parents can describe initiatives:

“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.”

Mother of a 12 year old child, urban area

“Some initiatives from the parents have been visits in the historic places, fixing the school environment, improving discipline at school, improving attendance situation.”

Mother of an 11 year old, Northern family

Cases when the parents’ council has intervened are: going to the municipality and raising the issue of the school hygiene; deciding with the school directory about the school uniform. A case was reported when parents were organized to expel a teacher who was physically punishing children.

Minority and poor parents were involved only with the main purpose of following their child’s education. According to them, they have not been active, because they were never asked to help and because of work.

“I work. I cannot be involved in school.”

Divorced mother of a 12 year old child, dressmaker

Mostly the mother is involved in the school life more than the father, since the later is busy at work. The father is involved in cases the mother can not and grandparents are involved when they are the primary caretakers of the child.

Fathers who were invited in the focus group discussions were less aware of the parent participation in their school as compared to mothers.

B. Motivation for participation

According to parents, their role in education is to help with the homework, to teach children how to communicate and how to behave, to adapt to their children’ age, to communicate with the teachers. Offering advices is one of the ways that parents are willing to help with. When they are asked about which way they would prefer being involved into school life, they understand it as related to “financial involvement”.

“If I would be involved, I would get information not only about my daughter, but also about the demands of her generation.”

Father of a 13 year old child, Egyptian, construction worker

“I would like to be involved when my daughter needs me, so that I can help her in a bad situation.”

Mother of an 11 year old child, poor family

“I would like to be involved but I don’t know how it works.”

Mother of a 10 year old child, poor family

Minority parents are insecure whether the school would welcome them to participate. They are reluctant, by believing that there are certain teachers who would not be willing to work with “people like them”. The school should be more open for all parents, not only according to minority and poor parents.

“We, the poor ones, should also be part of the parents’ council.”

Grandmother, caretaker of an 11 year old child with divorced parents

“I could be part of the parents’ council; I could advice on school issues.”

Divorced mother of a 12 year old child, dressmaker

According to parents some personal benefits of becoming more active would be a better education of their children. Parents are encouraged by the fact that they would be closer to their children by participating.

“I would know how to behave with the child.”

Grandmother, caretaker of an 11 year old child with divorced parents

“I would become younger in my soul.”

Grandfather, caretaker of an 8 year old child.

C. Initiatives

Parents are not aware of initiatives or projects that enhance parent’s participation.

“I have seen in the TV a program where some girls talk to the parents.” Says a minority parent.

“Information is not enough. Some things are not understandable to us.”

Mother of a 7 year old child, rural area, unemployed

Parent-teacher relationship and mutual trust

When asked directly about the relationship with teachers and the school principal, the parents say that they are good, especially with the principal.

“Some teachers pretend not to see our children at all... we look like flies to them.”

Father of a 13 year old child, Egyptian, construction worker

“Children of parents, who are wealthier, are more spoiled by the teachers.”

Father of an 11 year old, poor Northern family

E. Hindrances to participation

Lack of time but also lack of education, knowledge and information hinder parents from participation.

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

Father of a 13 year old child, Egyptian, construction worker

“Lack of time, lack of knowledge and being timid from the behavior of the teachers are some obstacles.”

Mother of an 11 year old child, poor family

“Parents are attracted by money and work. This costs the education to their children.”

Grandfather, caretaker of an 8 year old child.

“The parent must be educated, have leading abilities and courage... I don’t feel I have the power to speak up.”

Divorced mother of a 12 year old child, dressmaker

“Parents must have sufficient time available to respond to school, be active and not lack ideas and good will for collaboration.”

Mother of 10 year old, parental council member, Tirana

F. Exclusion patterns

Most parents think that Roma and poor families are excluded by school life. “Nobody thinks about them. People don’t want to see somebody who is different from them.” Says a minority parent. One mother mentions also emigrant parents who live away from their family. Only parental council members think that there is no excluded party from the school life. Also, some rural parents think that there is no exclusion of other parents as “the village life makes people stay closer to each-other.”

Parents with disabled children are interested but they do not find the support in teachers. “A neighbor of mine, whose daughter is with only one arm, feels excluded and unaccepted.” Says a mother.

“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.”

Grandmother, caretaker of an 11 year old child with divorced parents

“I don’t want others to know about my daughter’s problems. But teachers do not keep confidentiality.”

Father of a 13 year old child, Egyptian, construction worker

Parents accept that they have prejudices for the minorities:

“We think that the Roma people are very dirty and would distribute skin problems to our children.”

Grandmother, caretaker of an 11 year old child with divorced parents

G. Benefits of participation

Benefits that parents mention from involvement in school life are: learning about the child's problems and his age, influencing on the education of own child, feeling secure and estimated, the child would learn more, the school would have good friends, the child would feel secure by having the parent closer.

Involvement of parents in school would bring benefits to both the parent and the school. “Children would be under a double supervision: from teacher and parent.” Says a mother.

Activities that involve parents and students more could be helpful in increasing parent's participation. According to parents, there are more advantages than disadvantages for parents' participation.

“Parent's participation has a future but it is the school that should take the first step.”

Mother of an 11 year old child, poor family

Concluding remarks

Parents generally believe that the school life is a matter of school rather than theirs. Even in cases when they understand their role, they feel it is challenging and need support. They can identify few reforms that are undertaken, not the purpose for undertaking them, since they were not involved. At the same time they attribute their lack of involvement to reasons such as economic situation.

Parents in general, especially minority and poor parents do not have a complete understanding of parents' participation in school. They believe it is the school's role to engage them in the school life and identify only few of the many ways how they can be part of it and contribute with their resources. Parents describe some good benefits from participation, although they generally understand the benefits very narrowly: only related to their own child, and not to the broader benefit it has to all children, the school and the community.

Parental council members are supposed to represent other parents' voice, but their work is not perceived as good by other parents. Parents want to be more informed about the council's role and achievements. At the same time, several groups seem to be not represented in the council such as the poor, minority and parents of disabled children.

Generally mothers seem to be more informed and more involved than fathers in the school life and more open than the later to contribute. Awareness of fathers must be raised for the role they can play and the ways they can be part of the school life.