

Subject	Focus group report		
Date	15.06.2009		
Status	Final		
	proMENTE socijalna istraživanja: www.proMENTE.org	Lead researcher: Steve Powell	steve@proMENTE.org
		Field researcher and report author: Esad Bratović	eso@proMENTE.org
		Field researcher and report author: Ivona Čelebičić	ivona@proMENTE.org

Table of contents:

1.1	Conclusions	2
1.2	General mood	4
1.3	Education reforms.....	4
1.4	Participation, general.....	6
1.5	Members of parents' council.....	9
1.6	Other types of involvement	10
1.7	Parent-teacher relationship and mutual trust	10
1.8	Benefits and disadvantages of parents.....	11

1.1 Conclusions

- Schools where the principal and management are open to parent participation, i.e. schools that have opened their doors to parents 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. According to the statements of focus group participants, the principal is the most important link for parent participation. If the principal is unavailable and against parent participation, there will be no parent participation in such schools. It will remain on a purely perfunctory level (a Parents Council will be formed), but it will be made up of "suitable" parents.

Parent of child going to urban school: "The problem in most schools in the Sarajevo Canton is that the principals or the school administration see parents as attackers".

- Parents agree that they can contribute much to the work and life at school and see great potential amongst themselves that should be put to use for the benefit of their children. Still, the influence of the parents council along with parents who are not members of the council does not go as far as to affect decisions they believe to be the most relevant such as the scope of the curriculum. They believe their work would have more effect if parents councils were to be better organised.

Parent of child going to urban school: "A lot could be changed, if the parents were united and if they weren't afraid it would negatively effect the education of their children. Individuals who speak out might fare the worse for it, but the numerous voices of parents could change a lot".

- Roma are completely excluded from school life. Only one out of 16 Roma parents from the two focus groups had ever heard of a parents council. Their greatest problem remains the unjust attitude towards their children and poor relations with parents of non-Roma children.

Roma parent: "I was on my way to go see the principal, and I run into the cleaning lady, and she shouts... there go the Roma" I complained to the principal and he told her she will be out of a job if she continues to behave that way. What's the difference if it's a Serb, a Croat, a Muslim or a Roma?"

- Parents of children with special needs are comparatively more involved in school life. Such parents have little choice due to the lack of professional staff at schools attended by their children.
- It was generally noticed during the discussions that parents cite a greater number of negative aspects of participation. Very rarely do they mention positive examples and few believe the current mode of parent participation in school life is conducive to positive changes. Still, generally speaking, the parents are optimistic about the future of parents councils and participation in general, and blame the current situation on the reform of the school system.

Parent of child going to urban school: "We as parents can't do anything, we can only see our children go in and out of school, that's it".

- In general, the level of parents participation in school life is low, parents are poorly informed about the parents council, their rights and obligations. They believe that if they

were better informed, they would most probably participate more in school life. Also, parents exhibit quite a level of disinterest.

Parent of child going to urban school: "The best tactic these days is: Just leave it, someone else will take care of it".

- The most frequent cause of lack of parent participation is the lack of time, the fast rhythm of life. It is interesting that the parents of children who disturb the class, i.e. those who should be coming to school the most, are actually the ones who visit the school least frequently. The reason for low participation rate of Roma parents is that they spend most of their day trying to make a living and because they do not feel welcome at the school. A discouraging finding is that very many parents who are members of parents councils are there only for the benefit of their own children.

Parent of child going to urban school: "Most parents are passive – they don't think anything can be changed".

- The foremost complaint about education reform is the extensive curriculum. Today, children are overburdened, they have too many tasks, tests, verbal exams, homework, which leaves them little time for other activities, and the parents would like to see their children active in sports, not in the street. 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. Also, the curriculum determined by the Ministry is designed for the average child. Children with special needs, including those with above-average abilities, are not taken into account.

Parent of child going to urban school: "What we get is children force-fed huge amounts of information. The quality of their knowledge is poor, and when they get to secondary school, they know so little, because they learned superficially, they never had time to process everything and they quickly forgot the last lesson in order to make room for the next."

Parent of child going to urban school: "Today, children are without the joys of childhood, as if children can no longer be children. We need to give them back their childhood".

1.2 General mood

Members of parents councils state that being a parent today is a great responsibility, that parents must understand their roles, completely devote themselves to their children and actively participate in the work of educational institution or school, both in terms of education and in terms of upbringing.

Many have no time to devote to their children due to the rapid pace of life. Also, many parents today are worried about the security problem in our society. Marks are becoming increasingly important, unfortunately, and today all parents worry about is whether they will be able to enrol their child in a good school if he/she does not get good marks.

Parent Council member: "In order to actively participate in school, we have to form good partnerships, we have to be open towards one another".

Parents must come to understand that they can and should give their suggestions at Parents Council meetings.

The problem in most schools in the Sarajevo Canton is that the principals or the school administration see parents as attackers.

Roma parents point out that the greatest problem in terms of education and school is material in nature. Few of them are able to provide for nice clothes, textbooks, notebooks and school supplies, and this is one of the reasons children are either not enrolled or drop out of school. Parents with larger numbers of children (5, 6) have an even harder time.

Roma parent: "You can't send a child to school if you're unable to dress her and clean her up properly... she'll just get teased – gypsy... gypsy... look how dirty you are, and your clothes are rags – and the child loses the will to go to school. I talk to the teacher and she calls in the parents and tries to tell them to stop insulting my daughter, but it didn't help. My daughter dropped out after that".

Roma parent: "Sometimes we have problems with parents who aren't Roma... but we talk about it and solve things... it's all kids from the neighbourhood... if they get into a fight today, tomorrow they'll be playing together again... that's how it goes".

1.3 Education reforms

Parent of child going to urban school: "Education reform is very well conceived, but applying it in practice is very difficult".

Parents believe nothing has been gained through reforms, especially in view of nine-year education. Children have just become overburdened, the curriculum is a disaster, a child in fourth grade has far too many obligations, tests, verbal exams, homework and when compared to eight-year education, it is the same as nine-year education. Children have also changed due to the rapid tempo of life.

Still, some parents believe things are improving. They believe reforms are a good thing, but are happening too slowly. Some things are being resolved, but results are not always evident.

In the past 10 years, schools have not been adapting. Reforms are moving forward, but they're carried through by individuals who have been educated and who want to work. In a canton with 72 schools, some 30 schools implement reforms. Older teachers cannot participate in the reforms, they are "old school". You have to be progressive.

Parents Council member: "There's no difference, we've just stolen another year of our children's lives".

They also mention that the ministry has not defined a curriculum for all 9 grades. The first generation of children following the nine-year curriculum is now in the 5th grade, and the ministry is working on the curriculum for the 6th grade. Before, they could take the textbooks from the previous generation or buy them before the summer holidays. Now, even at the beginning of the school year, it is not certain which textbooks will be used. For example, there is a choice of authors and publishers for textbooks for each subject. Lessons are thought with different textbooks, so there are situations where a child in a school competition with 20 questions has never heard of 5, because different textbooks were used for the classes.

Parent of child going to urban school: "There are a lot of subjects that are completely irrelevant for primary school children."

Children are not guided by their proclivities or desires. For example, in the 7th grade, they have 15 subjects, and in the 8th, they have 17, so that if the child spends 10 minutes on each subject, he/she will have no time left for other activities, and parents would like to see their children active in sports, no out on the street. Many obligations are transferred onto the parents, they have to work a lot with their children at home. 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.

Parent of child going to urban school: "What we get is children force-fed huge amounts of information. The quality of their knowledge is poor, and when they get to secondary school, they know so little, because they learned superficially, they never had time to process everything and they quickly forgot the last lesson in order to make room for the next".

Parents of children with disabilities believe that most schools started education reform and inclusive education unprepared.

Parent of child with disabilities: "In BiH at the moment, there is this situation where parents have to be grateful for something that should go without saying".

Roma parents are not familiar with education reforms and do not know what they entail. Still, they point out that things have changed for the better. However, apart from a better attitude towards the Roma population in general, they only mention the material side of things and offer examples of better bathroom facilities, cleaner schools, better hygiene, etc. All these changes are attributed to the new school administration.

There are, however, contrary opinions among Roma parents to the effect that the old system was much better. Children learned more and knew more. In their opinion, there was discipline and order. They also think children used to socialise much more before.

Parents from the rural school believe children have a much larger workload in the new system, the curriculum is too extensive, lessons are run through quickly and superficially. As a positive side of the reform, they point out more interesting textbooks, since the old textbooks were uncreative and had small print.

Today, there's too much administration, teachers waste too much time writing unnecessary things, and have very little time to devote to the children. The curriculum determined by the Ministry is designed for average children. Children with special needs, including those with above-average abilities, are not taken into account.

Today, schools generally do not make an effort to adapt to the needs of the children, although there are a few bright examples. The school is not making an effort, and neither are the educational authorities, the Ministry, the Pedagogical Institute, or the parents.

Parents say that every novelty is a challenge. A new system is encroaching from the West, and there are still remnants of the old socialist system. The two systems clash. A big problem is the existence of many so-called experts, who are not educated, do not want to work and cannot effect changes. This is one of the main reasons why reforms are not progressing in the right direction. Change requires a systemic approach.

In terms of inclusion, parents of children with disabilities remember how before inclusion was introduced into schools in BiH, many parents of children with special needs felt dreadful and unsafe, because they were not offered the choice of schooling for their child. Now, the situation is much different, and it is very important that parents now have this legal right. The school administration also acts differently, which is a facilitating factor.

When asked what they would change in the education system, almost all parents cited either decreasing the number of subjects or reducing the curriculum. They believe there should be priorities in what a child should learn. Children should have more free time to play and engage in other extra-curricular activities.

Parent of child going to urban school: "Today, children are without the joys of childhood, as if children can no longer be children. We need to give them back their childhood".

Children have to carry too many textbooks, and their schoolbags are too heavy. Parents have said that they could not carry such heavy bags to the school. Today, parents drive their children to school.

Parents Council member: "Parents are forced to pick up their 12-year-olds from school, so the child doesn't get a spinal deformity".

Parents from the rural school believe there is need for a comprehensive education of parents so that they could help their children, recognise their needs, see when the child is lying. That would make it a lot easier for both children and parents.

When asked about what would be the best way for parents to advocate their interests, the most frequent response was that it is difficult to achieve anything or start an initiative, because most parents are so unresponsive.

1.4 Participation, general

Members of the Parents Council remembered how at the beginning, the Parents Council was seen a group of parents that got together because they wanted something, but they later fought for their status and became equal partners.

Parents believe that all decisions are made by the ministry that has the least contact with children. Parents often wonder if ministry representatives ever visited schools to see what goes on there. Therefore, the parents believe that ministry staff are not competent to make decisions. What is worse, they also determine the curriculum.

Parent of child going to urban school: "We as parents can't do anything, we can only see our children go in and out of school, that's it".

Members of the Parents Council also believe that the Ministry of Education and the Education and Pedagogy Institute is making all of the important decisions. The school has no influence, let alone the parents. Decisions in the school are made by the principal.

According to the new system, the school principle is authorised to make independent decision.

Roma parents believe it is the principal who makes all the important decisions related to school life. He/She usually consults with parents before making a decision. An example is a school that received a donation, and the principal consulted the parents about how best to spend the funds.

The group of parents who are not members of the Parents Council has 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.

Parent of child going to urban school: "A lot could be changed, if the parents were unanimous and if they weren't afraid it would negatively effect the education of their children. Individuals who speak out might fare the worse for it, but the numerous voices of parents could change a lot".

Also, parents complain about the fact that according to the law, children with special needs attend school along with children of typical development. In one cited case, when a particularly aggressive child (with developmental problems) was admitted to a class, neither the parents of the other children nor the teacher were consulted. They believe their children are being treated like "guinea pigs", where this aggressive child gets all the attention of the teacher and the pedagogue and the principal, and other children get less attention. Parents believe this was a bad decision and they blame the error in judgement on the Ministry. On the other hand, children can be quite cruel, and they will often make fun of a child with special needs.

Parent participation depends a great deal on the school administration, its interest and attitude. A lot also depends on the support of other parent.

Example: The principal was replaced and the situation greatly improved.

Example: one parent made 14 individualised learning programmes with the help of an expert for her child. The main motivation was the parent's fear: how will the child fit in.

The group of parents who are not involved in the work of the Parents Council believe that teachers and principals are in favour of greater parent participation, because this means help and support for them and the parents certainly will not refuse.

Parent of child going to rural school: "They are interested, but if the parents aren't interested in cooperation, no one can force them".

Parents of children who go to school in rural areas believe that parents always have access to the principal, teachers and school administration, but everything depends on the interest of parents be informed.

There are contrary opinions as well. Some parents are quite sceptical, they believe the school administration does as it pleases and is not open to parents' suggestions.

Parent of child going to urban school: "Maybe the Parents Council can do something, but only in small matters".

At parents council meetings, burning issues are not discussed, instead unimportant matters are. Little is said about the teacher-pupil and teacher-parent relationships, instead the new fence is discussed. The Parents Council influences matters related to excursions, whether to have an excursion inside BiH or to go abroad. The group believes that the Parents Council does not hold sway over decisions on "important matters".

On the other hand, parents of children from rural schools see the Parents Council as a very influential body, although its function is advisory.

Parent from the rural school: "If a parent is interested, he can do a lot through the Parents Council".

Most Roma parents do not know about the Parents Council. They only know about parent-teacher meetings. They are not familiar with the work of the Parents Council, or with their rights and obligations.

No Roma parents are members of Parents Councils, and they give the following reasons for this:

- the teacher selects parents for the parents council
- lack of time and household duties
- lack of education of Roma parents.

Parents of children with disabilities believe that the Parents Council is in a position to effect numerous changes, but they point out that in their schools the Parents Council is not sensitive to issues of children with special needs.

When asked which parents are involved in the work of the Parents Council, 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. Another frequent occurrence is when parents know of the problem but 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.

Parent Council members: "Most parents are passive – they don't think anything can be changed".

People do not have the time or the interest.

Today, the best tactic is, "Just leave it, someone else will take care of it".

It is interesting that the parents of children who disturb the class, i.e. those who should be coming to school the most, are actually the ones who visit the school least frequently.

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. Also, Roma parents feel unwelcome at the school, no one ever invites them to come. Roma parents cite examples of teacher who are not sympathetic towards Roma children and Roma in general, and with whom they have a lot of problems. There are also examples of children leaving school due to being badly treated by teachers, and especially interesting are some examples of segregation of Roma children by individual teachers.

Roma parent: "Why does my child, even though he is Roma, does not have the same rights as all other children in the school? When it was sports day, I took out 10 KM to pay for my child, but they wouldn't take him along".

Roma are not informed about their rights and do not know how to help their children. Still, the situation varies from school to school, and in their opinion it all depends on the school administration. Another problem that was pointed out is the communication between Roma parents and non-Roma parents and the lack of initiative on the part of the school to involve Roma parents.

Parents who are not members of the Parents Council believe they would probably be more involved in the life of the school if they had more information about their rights and obligations.

The most active parents are those with the knowledge and education – those educated about education. Parents with more children are more involved.

Members of the Parents Council stated that it is generally difficult to get parents to attend meetings. What is possible and useful is to involve the principal in all the activities. In order for parents to be taken seriously, it is important that the Ministry provide instructions to schools about how parents are selected for the Parents Council so that the best people who want to make changes get the job.

Parents of children with disabilities believe that an initiative should be launched where all schools would demand from the Ministry that the law is implemented, i.e. that teaching assistants for inclusive education are provided.

Parent of child going to urban school: "If principals from 70 schools in the canton were to demand assistants, something would happen".

1.5 Members of parents' council

Parent of child going to rural school: "I got involved only because of my child, because I want my child to make something of his life, not to be left to the vices of the street".

The Parents Council has influence on decision making in the school. It is important that Parents Council members want to work, that they are communicative and prepared to pull along a group of parents interested in getting involved. The Council has fought for participation in decision making, but on a case by case basis, it is not the same in all schools. There is a problem in some schools of parents being selected for the Parents Council based on party membership.

Parents are passive, and their activity depends on the chairperson of the Parents Council. Turnout at meetings depends on the members of the Parent Council. Example from a school – a problem is identified, the mayor is involved, e.g. to put up traffic lights at Dobrinja, to close off the ramp to Mercator (a local hyperstore) for the children's safety – the problem is solved. The principal must also be open. It is necessary to talk openly about the best interests of the children.

Parent of child going to urban school: "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".

The situation can be improved by educating teachers and parents. It is possible to motivate parents to become involved if they understand it is for the benefit of them and their children and if they are given concrete tasks.

1.6 Other types of involvement

Roma parents show great enthusiasm and a desire to participate in the life of the school and to help any way they can. They give examples of helping renovate the school, fundraising for the purchase of a TV and DVD to be used in the classroom. The general opinion of the group is that Roma parents are not familiar with the activities of the Parents Council.

Parents from rural schools gave an example of a recently organised fundraising activity to help children in poorer economic situations join the excursion. The school administration, teachers and parents participated in the project.

Parent of child going to urban school: "In my daughter's class, there's a girl with disabilities, who is also in a difficult economic position. We organised an activity with parents and teachers to buy some clothes, books, etc. for this girl".

In terms of information about their children's life at school, apart from parent-teacher meetings, parents receive most information from their children who tell them daily about the goings-on at school. Also, parents of younger children receive information in front of the school when they drop off and pick up their children. There is very good communication between parents involved in the Parents Council and those who are not. At collective parent-teacher meetings, parents from the Parents Council give exhaustive reports on what was discussed at Parents Council meetings and ask other parents about what other problems should be considered at the meetings. However, few parents have questions, and it is usually the same few parents who speak up.

Most parents fear the reaction of the teacher, and there are examples of parents making trouble.

Parent of child going to urban school: "Many parent react aggressively and rudely to irregularities, which creates additional problems".

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.

Similarly, 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.

As an example of an initiative, members of the Parents Council point out the Platform for Reducing the Curriculum that was supported by the principal. The Ministry and Pedagogical Institute do not take the Parents Council seriously, while most principals do. As an institution, the Ministry mainly does not support initiatives of the Parents Council.

There are formal initiatives by the Ministry and similar institutions when it comes to involving parents in school life, and they are usually related to organising tournaments, fieldtrips and similar activities.

1.7 Parent-teacher relationship and mutual trust

Parents assessed their relationship with school staff as good, the staff are very accessible, they find time for the parents before or after school hours and they make an effort for the children. Others believe that this is usually the case in the first grade, where teachers are invested in their class, while the relationship with the principals is not that good. They rarely attend meetings with parents, and show up for Parents Council meetings only occasionally. Usually, the pedagogue/psychologist or vice principal are present at Parents Council meetings. The group assessed that they have the best relationship with the pedagogue, who has the most time and with

whom the children have established the best relationship and who has the most positive influence on the children.

Parent of child going to urban school: "At the beginning, it all looks great, but after a while, you begin to see all the shortcomings".

Some parents point out that there is a problem in the parent-teacher relationship; the problem may be underestimating the teacher and also teachers often being very vain.

A smaller number of school principals provide material support for the Roma. A smaller number of Roma parents have pointed out that they can approach the principal or pedagogue for help in buying school supplies and transport to school. They pointed out that the attitude towards Roma parents varies from school to school.

Due to the parent-teacher/principal/pedagogue-pupil relationship, some Roma parents have opted to transfer their children to special schools – schools for children with disabilities.

Roma parent: "I was on my way to go see the principal, and I run into the cleaning lady, and she shouts... there go the Roma" I complained to the principal and he told her she will be out of a job if she continues to behave that way. What's the difference if it's a Serb, a Croat, a Muslim or a Roma?"

Parents from rural schools say the relationship between them and the school principal is good.

Parent of child going to rural school: "Whenever we needed some information, the principal was always ready to help, and the parents can talk to any teacher. What I like is that every teacher, the pedagogue and the principal know each child and can talk about the children, their progress and behaviour. It's very good that they have so much interest".

There were also opinions about the need to work more transparently and provide information, so parents do not have to wander around looking for information.

Members of the parents council believe that additional financing is needed, teacher and parent education, increasing human resources, extending school co-financing, organising round tables to increase parent participation, even though financial support is not absolutely necessary: with just a bit of good will, a lot can be achieved.

According to Parents Council members, parents of children with special needs are more involved, they want to and have more motivation to help their child, and they hope this will be recognised and their children will make progress.

1.8 Benefits and disadvantages of parents

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. Juvenile delinquency would be reduced, because when parents do not come to the school and show no interest for their child, the child get the message that he/she is invincible, because if the parents cannot control him/her, why would a teacher, principal or pedagogue be able to?

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.

There is a mass of parents and they present huge potential, but need more information and networking. They must not fear the minister, members of the Parents Council must stick to their

views and network with Parents Councils from other schools. In order to change something, you need 10 enthusiastic people. The interest of such parents should be their children's welfare and a feeling of having changed something for the better.

Parent of child going to rural school: "By getting involved, both the parent and the child stand to gain a lot. Everything that is in the interest of the child's welfare is useful".