

National Survey of Parents in SEE Countries – Parents' participation Croatia: Focus group report

1. CONCLUSIONS

a) For most parents school is too hard, parents have to work with children every they. If they do not, children have bad school marks. There is not enough time for everything, especially book reporting.

They should cut home-works. Some home-works are too hard for the child, and parent has to do it. I do not want to go to school again.

Mathematics is especially hard. Even I can hardly follow the program (3rd grade).

b) Parent's opinion is that children have wrong, extrinsic motivation. They mostly learn because they must, to get good marks, they would rather do something else.

When we went to school, we learned to remember. I still remember some things. Our children learn to get good marks.

c) Parents are not content with the curriculum. Most of them think it is too demanding. They blame Ministry of Education for that.

Lot of things they learn are not important.

d) 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. For example, school in Solin has 55 classes, each class has a representative in Parent's Council. It is too big, parents can not discuss the problem, it is more formal. Parents who are in the Council rarely give feedback to the class.

Council is formal – we had a few meetings, we had to listen all the statistics, why do I have to listen about that?

e) Most parents are not interested to participate - it is one more burden for them.

*We are terribly busy. When I have to go to school, I become sick...(Zagreb school)
Parents are guilty, they don't attend school meetings (Roma parent.)*

Those who would like to participate sometimes are not accepted. For example, in spite of the fact that more than 40% of pupils in Kutina school are Roma, no Roma is member of the Parents' council. Parents don't remember that they were ever informed about the work of the Parents' council. The representative of Roma parent would like to be a member of the Council because he thinks he could

mediate between school and other Roma parents.

f) Parents do not complain much on school staff. Sometimes they even pity them.

They have no authority. They have too many kids in the class. No one listens to them. 90 percent of teachers are OK. The rest should improve.

g) The most of parents have easy access to the teachers and other school professionals.

The school is good, I have only positive experience. You could talk to teachers, psychologist, principal also if you need.

h) Parents have the impression that Ministry is not that much involved as local community . For example, for children with special needs in Solin (small place on the coast) local community organized transport, they made fund raising for assistant in the class, and Ministry just gave the permission.

Local community also reacted to parent's initiative to put additional traffic lights on the road to school.

Our major was a member of Parent Council when he had kids in school, he understands.

- i) Parents of children with special needs in regular schools are the most satisfied group of parents, because they are happy their children are included in regular classes and receive additional help (assistant in the class, extra classes with psychologists and special pedagogues).

I wanted her (child who has cerebral paralysis) to go to regular school, but I was afraid they would not accept her, so I am more than happy that everything functions well.

2. GENERAL MOOD

- Our participants can be classified in two groups: those who believe that it is hard being a parent today, and those who believe it is easy (much smaller group). Respondents who feel that it is hard being a student's parent these days believe that it was easier for their parents when they were children:

It is extremely hard. Maybe I am subjective, but I have big problems with my older son, he's been using drugs, he is 37 years old, I don't know what is wrong with him. My younger son has many obligations; he studies German and English after school, I have to put great effort into that. Maybe that is because I had such an experience. I am in second marriage. I blame myself because I divorced my first wife, in 1990. My younger son is 14. That's why I think it's hard, I come to his school very often, I am very active.

It is hard for me, too. When I was a child, my father used to ask my mother: "In which grade is our kid now?", she told him and that was it, there weren't any problems. With my children, it is different.

I am so happy when summer holidays begin. The biggest problem for me is psychological preparation for the beginning of school.

It differs a lot from the time we went to school. It is more complicated today. I was excellent pupil, we all were and none learned too much. I do not know any parent today who does not work with the child and we did everything on our own.

Parents write homework, especially book reporting.

- Respondents who think it is easy being a parent say that they do not have problems with their children, they are good students and do not ask for their help very often:

I have a daughter who is in a third grade (...). She is an excellent student and she is good in all subjects, so from my perspective, there is not enough homework and tasks for them in school. In three years I did not have any obligations related to her school

I also have a daughter; she is in a second grade. There are really no problems with her studying.

- There are two categories of problems of a school parent these days: children are under great pressure in schools and parents have to work with them a lot:

I have noticed that these children are already under a lot of pressure. For example, all the test results are in percentages. So my kid comes home with a best grade, but she didn't score 100%, she scored 94%. And then I have to spend 45 minutes to explain to her that it is not that big a deal.

I am not satisfied, I have to study with them all the time, you know, it's a lot of work. Yesterday I had to help my son with his readings until midnight, and today we had to get up at half past six to finish up. There are moments when I think: "When I was young I studied alone, why can't they study alone, without help?". I think school was easier when we were children

- Respondents sometimes discuss their problems with other parents, but not very

often, because they do not see each other frequently. Other parents usually agree with them in their opinions about the problems. They did not find appropriate to discuss problems they mentioned earlier with teachers. Also, they mentioned that parents' meetings with teachers are focused on plans for school trips or children's behavior, so they do not have time to discuss subject matter, methods and curricula with teachers.

I didn't tell the teacher. I mean, it would be a little inappropriate for me to ask her why she measures test results in percentages, you know. (...) With other parents, I didn't go in such details (...). But, two or three other parents thought so too, they are parents of excellent students and they also thought that the percentages are too much.

You know what, every parent meeting is basically a talk about childrens' behavior. We rarely talk about school program and studying.

3. REFORMS OF EDUCATION

- Respondents think that things have changed compared to what they were when they were in elementary school. Most of them think that today's school curriculum is too demanding. They also said that today's textbooks are badly written, although they have many illustrations and look better than the books they used to study from. However, some of them felt that the curriculum today is too narrow and that children are preoccupied with Internet and television.

If I had a possibility to talk to the Minister of education, I would say to him that curricula are too large... Besides that, I think that some of the books today are written awfully (...). There are too many details, for example in geography.

I wouldn't agree that they have too many school obligations. I would say that they have too much of everything else. I always had tons of extracurricular activities and I was an excellent student – but we didn't have Internet to distract us. (...) I hear parents talking: "They are overwhelmed with school obligations". I always disagree with that.

- 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. It is especially emphasized by the parents of children with special needs. They also agreed that working in school is much more demanding for teachers than it used to be.

Principal is a beautiful person, teacher and assistant, too. My kid (child with special needs) has been assisted from the first day in school. They observed her for the first three months. Once a week she spent an hour with psychologist. My

girl has adapted to school very well and class to her. They take out books for her, help her...her teacher is willing to help her in private time also...

Maybe it is a problem for teachers. I think it is very hard for them today; it is a lot harder than it used to be. Today's children... you can't just "sell" them anything. They ask questions, they want to know everything, they state their opinions. It is a result of how we are raising children today and teacher gets 20 kids like that and has to deal with it.

Children have too many rights today. Teachers have no authority.

- In order to improve the school, participants feel that schoolyard should be left for children to play after school, and not rented for other activities. They also think that there should be more sports activities and that they should be better organized. Parents in another school complain about lack of possibility to buy anything for drink/food inside the school or in the courtyard.

It was our schoolyard, children used to play here in the morning, in the afternoon, in the evening; you could bring your child here. Now it is all rented (...)

In second grade there is a sports group for girls. First there was nothing organized for them, and now it turns out that if they want to go to the sports group, they have to play basketball with girls from the sixth grade. It looks terrifying to them, they are in second grade and those girls are in sixth grade.

School does not let them go out during the break. Some kids do not take anything from home. They should put a kiosk inside the school yard.

- Parents feel that they do not have a say in initiating and implementing school reforms and that the cooperation between the Ministry of education and parents does not exist. However, they admit that if somebody wanted to include them in decision-making, they would probably not have time for such an involvement.

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.

4. PARTICIPATION, GENERAL

- Parents think that most of the important decisions that affect education of their children are made by the Ministry of Education. However, the school principal and

teachers are responsible for carrying out these decisions, and there is a lot of space for them to modify and adapt them.

Bills are brought by the Ministry, but a lot depends on the Principal.

There is always a space where things can be modified and adapted, and for that the Principal and staff are important. We all know the government is responsible for legislation, but the staff is most important for us parents, that they can make some things more concrete.

I think that school principals are responsible for a lot of things, but teachers are most important (...). About general things and suggestions, I think they are decided on the level of the Ministry.

- At the school level, parents think that the decisions should be made about individual student's education – what are his/her potentials and how much stimulation does a student need to achieve them. All teachers should be included in making these decisions for each student. However, parents think that they are not properly informed about the decisions made in school; they hear about them mostly from their children. They suggest that they should be informed via Internet.

My view is that teachers can talk about each student, 14 teachers about one student. I expect that for both of my children every teacher in the staff room knows exactly what is his personality, his abilities, how much does he want to work and how much stimulation does he need to achieve that.

5. MEMBERS OF PARENTS' COUNCIL

- Some participants think that parents can be involved in school life and decision-making, by joining Parents' Council. Parents' Council consists of one parent from each class. One of the initiatives of Parents' Council that they know of is an initiative to expel a student from school. This initiative was successful. Participants in one of the schools feel that parents who join the Council are "pushy" mothers who want to be leaders, and they would not like to be members of the Council because parents like that irritate them and they don't have time for active involvement in school life. However, they admit that "pushy" mothers can sometimes be useful, because they can fight for pupils' interests. In other school some parents, members of the Parent's Council propose smaller groups of participants in the Council, in order to enable discussion about the problems. Roma parents complain about lack of possibility for participation.

I know two mothers of children in different classes and both of them totally irritate me. While we are on the bench waiting, they act as if they are leaders of the horde. And then they are the first ones to run to the class teacher, they

always have the biggest problem, they are always active. So, because of that, it strongly repels me.

One mother like that irritated everybody, but it turned out great in the end, because this woman fought for everything. She always... or complained, or demanded something and then they figured out that was very useful.

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. I told them I think that younger parents should be more involved and that's how I got out.

Council of Parents? What are they for? I have never got any feedback.

Lower and upper classes do not have the same problems. Why do not they divide Council of Parents in two groups?

I would like to be a member of Parents Council because we (Roma) want to improve education of our children and enable all children, male and female, not only to finish elementary school, but also to go further, even to higher education. But they do not choose us.

- When participants need some information about something relevant for the school-life of their child, they consult teachers, the principal, or sometimes they call other parents on the telephone.

I rarely call other parents. The class teacher gave me his cell phone number, because my son was an excellent student up to fourth grade and then he almost flunked fifth grade. So the class teacher said: "There is my cell number, do not say that you are not informed about your son, you can call me any time".

6. PARENTS' PARTICIPATION

- Participants feel that today's parents are more involved in the school life than their parents were. They often go to parents' meetings and seek information from teachers about their childrens' grades.

The percentage of parents involved is larger than it used to be when we were children.

There were initiatives for collecting plastic bottles, Christmas manifestations and so on, but that was really initiated by teachers, it would be good if parents could involve in such activities.

My proposal is: a room for parents in school. So we could meet informally if we

like. (Mother has a child with special needs.)

- Participants think that it is important for parents to be involved in the school life and that school would react positively and welcome parents' wish to involve. However, they do not feel that they should be more actively involved, for two reasons. First reason is that they do not have enough time and they feel that a lot of work is needed for some results to be seen. Second reason is that they feel that giving everyone the possibility to suggest an initiative would be counterproductive. Every parent would have different suggestions and they would not agree on anything. They think that the Principal or the teacher should make suggestions about an initiative, and the parents should then vote whether to accept it or not.

It seems to me that the parents' engagement should be very large for some results to be seen. Children would already be in high school before some results would be seen.

I am afraid of too much parents' involvement in school's work. If you need me, tell me, if I need you, I'll come, and that's enough from school and teachers.

At our parents' meetings, when teacher says "How would you do something?" everyone has a different opinion. I agree that it is better that the Principal or a teacher offers a suggestion, and then we decide whether we agree with it or not.

- Participants say that there were initiatives to involve parents in the school life. Teachers invited parents to show the class where they work or to come to school and talk to children about their job.

For example, I manage a literary club here in Zagreb and once the whole class spent a whole day there.

They went to the Television because one father works there, it was interesting for them (...). They also went to Ruđer Bošković Institute because one dad teaches physics there, he showed them experiments, it was very interesting to them.

- All parents think that the relationship between parents and teachers and the relationship between parents and school leaders are good. They feel welcome and their children are not afraid of the Principal, school secretary and other school leaders. However, they feel that the school is not efficient in dealing with problems such as bullying.

When my older son was bullied by other three kids, my husband of course contacted the teacher and nothing, he was helpless. Then he went to the psychologist, she talked to them, but nothing. We went to the principal, again nothing. (...). And then all of that made me sick, their approachability, when they are not efficient.

- According to participants, the most important obstacles for parents' being involved in school life are the lack of parent's interest in involvement and their belief that it is not possible to make some change in school. They also do not have time for more active involvement.

Participants believe that the school should initiate cooperation with parents, not the other way around. Things that encourage them to participate are initiatives and constructive ideas that are coming from school. If there were an initiative that would be good for their children, they would help. They also think that a field trip or a picnic with other parents and students would be a good idea for future cooperation.

From my perspective, it is like this... When they said that I could organize something and when we agreed about it, I did it. But I wouldn't think: "What should be changed, what do I think should be improved...?". When they ask me, I will really participate.

Or if there is a good, constructive idea for our children's benefit, of course we will help – financially, by devoting our time to it, or by any other method. I am for school activities for gifted children.

Our class teacher wanted that parents and children go to a field trip, a picnic or something like that. It would be nice. But then it rained and all sorts of stuff happened and we didn't go. We are all sorry because of that, we would be more close to each other after that, relaxed and so on.

- Parents do not feel that there is any particular group of parents that is excluded from the school life.

There are only parents who don't come to school by their own decision, their children behave badly and they are not interested in that.

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

In my child's class there is also a Roma child, but his parents come to school, it is all on an individual bases.

- Parents believe that parental involvement is important for the school-life. They think that if there were more parental involvement, children would be better and there would be less violence. Parents would also be more connected and willing to help each other. Parents' involvement can improve the overall quality of education.

One example for that is when children went to see where some of the parents' work or when parents came to school to talk to children about their jobs. Participants' suggestion was for some of the parents to go to nature with class and help teachers take care of the children, so they can see what real nature looks like and not just learn about it in school.

Going to see where some of the parents work helped children to make connections between real world and what they learn in school. It is hardest to learn when you have to learn something only to get the grade. It is good for them when they can relate what they learn to something, they will remember it permanently; it is better than staying in school and copying from the blackboard..

They learn how a petal looks, how something looks, and they do not go to nature, to touch it. They should at least go to Sljeme. I do not say it is the teacher's fault; it is very hard for her. It is hard for her in the class because they are all wild, they all make noise, talk, shout and it is very hard to take them somewhere. But at least it would be good that five of us "bodyguards" go with them to take care of them and feed them. So they can see frogs, so they can see tree crust.

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National Survey of Parents in SEE Countries Parents' participation

Focus group report – Roma settlement

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Context and comments

Kutina is a small town with 15.000 inhabitants. It is about 70 kilometers distance from Zagreb, the capital of Croatia. Most of the Roma national minority live in a settlement located about 4-5 kilometers from the center of the town. About 200 families live there and most of them live from social welfare and collecting raw materials.

They speak Bajaski (one of the Roma languages spoken by Roma in Croatia). Some children do not speak Croatian before entering school. All the adults in the settlement completed at most eight grades of primary school, or dropped out earlier, with the exception of a single young girl who recently finished secondary school and is working at the post office.

The meeting was organized by one of the teachers working in the Primary school 'Vladimir Vidrić' in Kutina. This is one of the five primary schools in Kutina, and the only one attended by Roma.

The meeting was held in the courtyard of the house owned by the president of the Roma NGO, around a big table. Twelve parents participated during the whole meeting (8 fathers and 4 mothers), while four more joined for a while standing by the fence, and listened and commented.

The meeting lasted 2 hours. At the end the conversation turned to some other topics and we were told that the settlement doesn't have sewage, and only part of it has running water and electricity. The part of the settlement where the meeting was held is by the main road and well maintained, with brick houses and small courtyards.

We changed a bit the sequence of questions and wording in order to keep the fluency of the conversation, but we made sure that all relevant questions were asked. We decided to skip the questions about the reform of education because it was not relevant for the group.

General mood

The meeting was dominated by the president of the Roma NGO, an engaged and articulated young man. At the beginning he was the only one answering the questions, but little by little the others joined with their comments and opinions.

Parents felt that being a parent brings great responsibility, mainly because of financial problems and discrimination towards Roma.

The town is covering meals for all Roma children in school. Families live on social welfare (welfare is received per child) which is not enough to cover living expenses and expenses of schooling. 'Children need sneakers, notebooks, we don't have money for excursions, they would probably need a computer, too'

All Roma children in Kutina attend the same school. Organized transportation of Roma children is the reason/excuse for that. The school is attended by 275 non-Roma children and 200 Roma children (according to the president). Non-Roma parents often transfer their children to other schools because they don't want their children to attend the school with Roma. 'They have the freedom to choose school for their children, and we don't.'; 'Soon, it will be only Roma children attending the school.'

Parents often talk among themselves about problems and they think 'education is very important for better life'. When they talk to teachers about the financial problems, the answer they get is that the welfare should be used for child's schooling.

Despite the problems, general opinion is 'All together everything is good.'

Reforms of education

In parents' opinion nothing has changed since they went to school (15 years ago). They say that about 50% of Roma parents don't attend school meetings. Those whose children cause problems (smoke in school and in the school bus, brake windows, beat other children, steal, etc.) never come to school. Then, all Roma children appear 'bad'. The Roma community is helpless; they don't know how to deal with parents who don't care. Parents take the blame on themselves. For example: 'School is excellent, teachers are good.'; 'Parents are guilty, they don't attend school meetings'; 'Children behave as they learn at home, parents are to blame for problematic behavior of their children'.

Answering the question 'Is school today good or bad?' the answer was: 'Yes, the school is good, but cooperation on our side is bad.'

The 'school' never came to the Roma parents at the settlement. Parents feel that the school gave up on 'problematic' children and that it even doesn't use all legal measures (social service, police). Parents agreed that the school representatives should come directly to the settlement to talk with parents who don't come to school. 'But who am I to teach the school principal how to do his job?'

Participation, general

Parents are aware that the mayor and the school principal are important persons who decide about education of their children. Only one parent, the president of the Roma NGO, knows about Parents' council, the others were not aware that it existed. In spite of the fact that more than 40% of pupils are Roma, no Roma is member of the Parents' council. Parents don't remember that they were ever informed about the work of the Parents' council. The president of the Roma NGO recently received the letter from the council representative of the class attended by his child, with the request to talk to Roma parents whose children make problems.

They would want to participate as members of the Parents' council 'because they want to improve education of their children and enable all children, male and female, not only to finish elementary school, but also to go further, even to higher education.' The

president of the Roma NGO said that he believed he would be a good member of the Parents' council because he could get in contact with all other Roma parents and could help in solving problems. He had offered his help to the school principal in his capacity as the president of the Roma NGO, but was refused with the explanation that the school needs to work with parents directly, not through NGO .

Parents fear of talking much 'against the school' because of consequences for their children (!). 'It is better to be quiet and content with what we have.' 'Children go to school, and this is the most important.' Still, they wish that Roma children would be able to attend all five elementary schools in Kutina. They are convinced that it would improve children's language skills and that they would learn better. 'When there are 10 Roma children in the class they all sit together and speak Roma language among themselves, they giggle and don't listen to the teacher'.

Parents' participation

Cooperation with teachers was described with 'When they invite us, we come.' 'Teachers invite us when children make problems.'

Generally, fathers go to school meetings more often than mothers, while mothers work more with children at home.

If there is a problem, parents turn to the teacher first, and that to the school principal if needed.