



Qendra për Arsim e Kosovës
Kosova Education Center

KEC

National Survey of Parents in South East European Countries

Focus Group Report

KOSOVO

1. Introduction

Six focus-group discussions with parents of elementary school children were organized in Kosovo in order to gain a sound understanding of the different ways parents are involved and influential in school education and to contribute to testing and possibly refining relevant findings obtained from the school principal survey carried out in the first phase of the Project “Advancing Education Inclusion and Quality in SEE countries”.

The discussions took place May 10-30, 2009 in two main Regions of Kosovo:

Prizren Region

- Parents from one mainstream urban school from the town of Prizren
- Parents of Roma children from schools in the town
- Members of the Municipal Parents' Councils in Prizren

Prishtina Region

- Parents from one rural school in the Municipality of Podujevo
- Parents from one school with significant presence of Roma and Ashkali children in Obiliq
- Members of Parents' Councils from four schools in Prishtina Regional – 3 urban and 1 rural

Interviews were moderated and transcripts prepared by Vetton Sylhasi (Prishtina Region) and Arben Shala (Prizren Region), based on previously agreed protocols.

2. General Mood

Overall economic situation was indicated as one of the main problems that affect quality of education. Parents consider that underpaid teachers are not motivated to work with children, whereas parental participation is hampered by the fact that they have to take several jobs at a time to provide income to their families. On the other hand, high unemployment makes it difficult for parents to support education of their children.

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.
(Parent Council Member - rural school)

We, parents of the children with special needs, were told by teachers to apply for social welfare. Expenses for those children are high, and we are not able to meet them. It is very difficult for a parent not to be able to support her child.
(Ashkali Parent - rural school)

Poor infrastructure is perceived to be one of the major problems in the Kosovo schools, both urban and rural. Although the Government invested significant resources in new construction and refurbishment of existing buildings, urban schools continue to operate in multiple shifts, whereas rural schools do not offer optimal conditions for good teaching.

The area of the classroom is only 25 m² and 31 grade 2 students learn there. The blackboard is placed in vertical position, and when teacher fills half of it all students have to stand up to be able to follow her.
(Parent Council Member - rural school)

My daughter attends grade 1, and there are 42 students in the classroom. It is not possible for a teacher to work with 42 students.
(Parent Council Member - urban school)

In Kosovo schools, aggressive behavior, including fighting, is widely perceived as a minor disciplinary problem. Bullying is frequently associated with discrimination against students from poor families or ethnically marginalized groups, or those with particular personal characteristics (e.g. appearance, or a physical or mental disability), but may also be a type of attitude towards female students. Bullying is most commonly verbal, but physical violence also occurs. Schools are also affected by events in the wider community, for example, increased incidence of gang culture

When I was going to school, 3-4 boys would get together and beat me up. I would tell the teacher and nothing would happen. I grew up, but my nephew is being harassed just like me. He goes to school now and frequently gets beat up by bullies.
(Roma Parent - urban school)

Roma parents report that prejudice and stereotypes among members of majority communities towards them are visible in the education system, taking the shape of discrimination against Roma children and parents. This attitude towards Roma may be different among members of other minority communities.

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).
(Roma Parent - urban school)

My children attend the school in Turkish. My children sit in the first row. They do not mind who is Turk and who is Roma.
(Roma Parent - urban school)

3. Education Reforms

Parents recognize that education reforms have brought some changes in the classroom, particularly related to teaching methodologies, but also point out poor quality of learning outcomes. They consider curricula to be overburdened and irrelevant for children’s future, whereas textbooks of poor quality and not very helpful for supporting the learning.

It was different when we were students. I completed four classes of primary education. I learnt Albanian and Serbian, and I can read and write in both languages. My four year s of basic education were more worthy than 8 or 20 years of today’s education
(Ashkali Parent - rural school)

Children are taught by one class teacher in grades 1-5. When they enroll in grade 6 they start learning English, Biology, Geography,... Many of them have serious problems with reading and writing in their mother tongue.
(Albanian Parent - urban school)

Parents discussed discrepancy between the planned interventions and creating basic conditions for their implementation. They pointed out that existing school infrastructure and the lack of teaching aids make difficult and even impossible implementation of new curricula and use of modern teaching methodologies. Apparently, Roma and Ashkali parents were less concerned with such issues and, in general, demonstrated less interest for the ongoing changes in the education system.

Reforming education is more than necessary, but the supporting infrastructure is zero.
(Parent - urban school)

4. Participation, General

Parents shared their concern on highly centralized management of the education system, and limited responsibilities of school principals. They mainly 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. It is their perception that the most important decisions on the school are taken by the Ministry of Education and the local education authorities, including curriculum development, textbooks, hiring and firing of teachers, and even disciplinary measures against students.

Even when we are not happy with developments we cannot exercise pressure on the school principal, since we know that he has very little influence on employment of teachers, quality of teaching, etc.
(Parent - rural school)

On the other hand, the interviewed parents who are not parent councils were quite critical in relation to the readiness of schools to establish full cooperation with parents and involve them more actively in school life. They consider that school principals are interested to maintain the control over school operations without involving parents, except for cases when they need their financial support. However, several interviewees expressed opinions that prove hesitation on the part of parents to get involved in matters other than financial contribution and infrastructural projects.

We are invited to school only when they need money. I have never heard that a parent has been invited to express his/her opinion on an important decision.
(Parent - urban school)

I do not want to get involved in matters related to teaching. Curriculum development, teaching methodologies, textbooks – those are responsibilities of the school principal.
(Parent Council Member - urban school)

Roma parents, also not involved in parent councils, think that school principals are biased, and therefore do not encourage their participation in school life. They feel that they need to be more represented in school bodies to protect the interests of the people from their community. Also, they feel that their education represents and obstacle for more active participation.

We need to have at least one member of our community in the Council, and he may represent the whole community by sharing our common concerns with the school and other parents.
(Roma Parent - urban school)

Education is an obstacle to participation. You are not active in debates. Seventy percent of Roma parents do not have full basic education.
(Roma Parent - urban school)

Roma parents see a role for the civil society organizations in helping them achieve better representation in the schools. They acknowledge that Roma civil society organizations have helped a lot to facilitate the enrolment of children in pre-primary and primary education, and also in secondary and tertiary level.

I am telling you. If the Ministry was not informed by a civil society organization about the case, my son would be out on the street. School principal told me that he could not continue schooling here, that he didn't speak the language, didn't learn history, and didn't learn physics in Germany where we used to live until we were deported. This is where the Roma community lags behind – they erect a barrier and make you drop out.
(Roma Parent - urban school)

In general, all parents expressed positive attitude towards participation in school activities, and also reflected self-critically on their own commitment to assume a more active role. Nevertheless, those not being involved in parent councils consider that councils are not really operational and, in addition to the causes related to attitudes of school principals, consider that councils cannot operate efficiently without any authority to decide about the budget and school expenditures.

In theory, parent councils operate, but not in practice. If you go to the school principal and ask something about school business /she may think you are investigating something. I think Councils should have a financial base – they cannot operate if there is no money.
(Parent - urban school)

We, the parents, also avoid our responsibility. But, we are also busy. We have to work a lot, and when we go to school we do not know the rights of our children.
(Parent - urban school)

5. Members of Parents' Councils

Although parents' councils exist in all schools in Kosovo their functioning and role varies from school to schools. The interviewed parents expressed different opinions on influence of parents' councils in school life. In rural areas, parents' councils are more likely to take initiatives supporting infrastructure projects and mobilize community to provide financial resources for needs of schools. In urban areas, even members of parents' councils feel that their role is less important, although they are able to provide numerous examples of benefits of parental participation. It also applies to the Municipal Parents' Council, which should help school-based parents' councils.

We meet only once a year, just to show up and prove that the Council exists. We are only names, and do not even know each other.
(Member of the Municipal Parent Council)

When we had that crisis, together with the school principal we went to the Municipal Director of Education, who came to school and told the Contractor that if he didn't finish the renovation in one week he would hire another Company. And, lessons re-started in one week.
(Parent - rural school)

6. Conclusions

- 1) Although parents, formally, participate in school councils and school governing bodies the quality and extent of participation need significant improvement.

The school principal survey carried out in 41% of the Kosovo schools shows that communication is mainly developed in the direction “school-parent”, where a parent is more likely to listen than to express his/her opinion. This conclusion is substantiated by the focus group discussions with parents from different schools and with various responsibilities levels of responsibility within the parental community.

Whereas parents’ councils function in almost all schools in Kosovo, their visibility varies from one school to another. As a rule, members of the parents’ council are rarely accountable to their “electorate”. On the other hand, their involvement in school-based activities is much higher than it is the case with other parents. Parents’ councils tend to be more active in rural than in urban areas.

Major cause for low participation of parents is the lack of time caused by the need to support their families by making for living, but also by taking several jobs at a time.

- 2) School principals have a key role in improving participation of parents.

Although Kosovo schools have a tradition of parental involvement which was particularly strong in nineties, school principals are expected to initiate participation and facilitate the process. Schools in Kosovo have very little autonomy, which appears to be one of the limitations of school principals, in addition to reported attitudes for non-inclusion. Nevertheless, school principals are the ones who should find ways to involve parents in non-infrastructure type of activities, simply, because there is no capacity among parental community to take a lead on that.

- 3) Roma parents do not feel welcome in schools and their participation is much lower

The focus-group discussions proved that the prejudices against Roma are still present, not only among students, but also among teachers and school administrators. Whereas Roma children are bullied by their peers from the majority community and mistreated by teachers, Roma parents do not have support of the school to improve their situation. It is interesting that Roma are better treated in classes with minority language teaching (Turkish and Bosnian) than in classes belonging to the majority language stream (Albanian). This may be due to the fact that Turkish and Bosnian language stream classes often struggle for students, and therefore, Roma children are not a real minority among children.

Roma parents feel that their education is a main cause for low participation in school-based decision making, and see a role for civil society organizations to advance participation, and help them defend interests of their children.

4) The major concerns of parents are poor infrastructure of schools, overburdened curricula and bullying.

Parents tend to identify poor infrastructure as one of the major causes of low quality education, a conclusion that may also be due to limited involvement in school related matters, and lack of information on other inputs contributing to the quality. Most of them consider that infrastructure prevents implementation of education reform plans.

Curricula are considered to be overburdened and inadequate for the children, but, in general, parents do not see a role form themselves to contribute to the improvement of learning outcomes from that perspective.

Bullying is considered to be one of the major issue in Kosovo schools. This confirms findings of a UNICEF sponsored study on peer violence which shows that 73% of urban teachers and 58% of rural teachers surveyed were concerned about bullying. Also, 46.8% of older children and 42.4% of younger children admitted they were afraid to go to school because of bullying.

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