

Advancing Educational Inclusion and Participation in SEE

Focus Group Report
Parents Perspectives on Participation

MACEDONIA

Author:
Ana Tomovska

Important findings:

- Parental involvement in the school life is a multifaceted problem. The responsibility for parental involvement or rather lack of it is shared between the way the educational system is organised, the way schools function and the Principals' leadership style, as well as the parents and their motivation to get involved.
- There is a difference in parental involvement between parents whose children attend central schools and parents whose children attend satellite schools in rural settings.
- Parents feel that most of the decisions in the educational system are centralised which leaves very little space for parental involvement in important decisions. Some of them even feel that their possibilities for involvement are hindered by political influences
- First association that parents have regarding school participation is helping their children finish school tasks and trying to discipline them. As such when they hear parental involvement they start talking about their involvement in everyday school tasks and the curricular issues.
- Parents talk about Council of Parents as a body which has decision making power in the school with the exception of the members of those Council who know that their role is only advisory
- Main motivation for parental involvement is the wish to improve their children's education and the reasons for not getting involved are the lack of interest and time
- Generally parents feel that their communication with the teaching staff is good. However most of the communication is about school achievement and discipline. Their communication with the professional support staff (psychologist/pedagogue) is very limited and generally revolves around dealing with problems.
- Parents want to get more involved in the school life and be more proactive but they need to obtain skills in how to get proactive especially in rural settings.
- Involvement of Roma parents should be viewed in line with the broader exclusion of Roma from the educational system and the stereotypes about Roma.
- Involvement of parents with special needs should also be viewed having in mind the issues that the children face when they enrol mainstream schools
- The Macedonian parents from the urban areas declare that parents have shared responsibilities in raising the children, Macedonian parents from the rural area and the Albanian parents say that the mother are more involved in the children's everyday upbringing, but the fathers are involved in making important decisions. The Roma parents accentuate that the more literate parent is more involved in the child's education.

1. Background

The focus group of parents conducted in the Republic of Macedonia are part of the project "Advancing Educational Inclusion and Quality in South East Europe". The findings of the focus groups will be used in addition to survey findings in order to present parent's views and experiences of participation in the school life. This part of the research will supplement the findings of a similar type of research conducted previously with School Principals.

The findings have great significance for the Republic of Macedonia as there have not been many studies on the issue of parental participation and they can therefore serve as base-line findings for future project initiatives as well as other research endeavours.

2. Methodology

As part of the research six focus groups were conducted in May 2009. The focus group interviews lasted between one hour and two hours. The participants of the focus groups were parents of elementary school children.

Each interview was conducted with different group of parents. One interview was conducted with ethnic Macedonian parents living in urban areas. This group comprised 7 participants from two different cities, the capital of the country and a smaller town. In this group 6 participants were female and one was male. Another focus group was held with ethnic Macedonian parents living in rural area. This focus group was conducted with 10 females in a village located close to a town in the central part of the country. To portray the experiences of parents involved in the Council of Parents a focus group with 9 parents, members of those bodies in schools was held. The participants were all ethnic Macedonians and came from two different cities and four different schools. Six of them were females and three were males. One focus group was held with ethnic Albanian parents to portray the view of the second largest ethnic group in the country. The focus group was conducted on Albanian language with parents from a city and adjacent villages in a region that has majority Albanian population. Seven females participated in this focus group discussion.

To portray the needs and experiences of especially vulnerable groups of parents one interview with Roma parents and one interview with parents of children with special needs were held. The interview with Roma parents was conducted in a town with a sizeable Roma population where in parts of the town Roma live in ghettos. The participants were found with a help of an NGO organisation providing support with the educational needs of Roma children. However the participants of this focus group came from different parts of the town and had different professional background thus reflecting the broader Roma population in the town. The focus group with parents of children with special needs was conducted in Skopje and the parents were found through and Institution which provides support to such parents. There were seven parents in total in this group and their children had different special education needs.

The interviews were conducted by three interviewers in May 2009. The interviews with the Macedonian parents from rural and urban area, members of Councils of Parents and Roma parents were conducted by Ana Tomovska. The

interview with Albanian parents was conducted by Florina Shehu and the interview with parents whose children have special educational needs was conducted by Meri Boshkovska.

After the interviews were finished they were transcribed and coded. During the coding process the most striking and most typical answers were coded respecting whether the answers came from the rural/urban and vulnerable/non-vulnerable group of parents.

3. Findings

3.1. General issues that parents are faced with and the reforms in education.

The problems that the parents are faced with everyday are mostly connected to the ongoing reforms in the educational system. The parents are concerned about the ongoing reforms in the educational system which they feel are not properly organised which results in a lot of frustration. Parents feel that there have been too many changes happening at the same time, which is confusing for all stakeholders in education. Some of the changes they mentioned were the nine year elementary school, introduction of religious teaching, external testing to check the achievement of the students and performance of teachers. As a result most of the parents associate parental involvement with helping their children in everyday studying.

As a result of all the changes most of the parents feel that they are pressured to constantly work with their children on homework and other school tasks. This is illustrated in the following example:

Compared to when we were at school and with our parents then, now we have more duties. I can't really define why. Whether it's because the material is too big or we taught our children that way or the teachers ask too much from us. However, everyday we have something to do with them, whether that's browsing the internet with them to find information, or printing and making projects. We have additional work to do with them because the children can't do it on their own. (focus group with Macedonian parents.)

Some parents fault the school curriculum for this problem as the material that their children study is not age appropriate and sometimes too hard for the children of certain age groups.

Now with the nine year primary school concept it is harder on the children. They have a lot of material to cover and... It's a lot... for them it's a lot... excessive. (focus group with Macedonia parents from rural area)

In addition there have been so many changes in recent years that some of the parents feel the confusion in the educational system:

I am ashamed to admit this but I constantly tell my children to go to school with and be happy there, but there might not be light at the end of the tunnel, we might face dead end. I expected a lot from the reforms and I am disappointed. [...] I am a teacher myself and I have been involved in so many changes lately that sometimes I don't know what to implement. It is a total confusion, lack of organisation, anarchy. (focus group with Albanian parents)

The problems are multiplying given the fact that some of the educational reforms were introduced without proper preparation. Some parents are faced with problems regarding books supply (for some grades the books were printed as late as May) or lack of proper equipment in the schools (such as the promised computers). This means that the parents feel left alone to help their children get better educational opportunities or even just learn the basic requirements of the curriculum. Sometimes this brings additional pressure on the parents as they feel more finances are needed to give their children proper educational opportunities, as the schools are not properly equipped to provide all the necessary elements and opportunities for the children:

Person1: In the first year of school, previously preparatory year, most of the material is on CD and the computers in the school are not working and the children learn only from pictures. How can they learn only from pictures... And they just say... your children's attainment is low. How can they have better attainment when they only learn from pictures. They have never even seen the CD. I don't understand that. "

Person2: They brought computers to the school but they never started working. They never worked. (focus group with Macedonian parents from rural area)

Well some parents really can't afford to buy computers for their children. And that child, even if using Internet cafes can't really do the work properly as they need adult help. (focus group with Macedonian parents)

Person1: The school is in appalling state, they don't have normal classrooms or cabinets, they don't have a gym and they can't have proper education. [...] The teachers can't do anything to improve that. That is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education.

Person2: Maybe they think: "There are different sport and educational centres where people pay."

Person3: That mustn't happen because some parents can't afford to pay for those things. That is actually more of a free time activity. (focus group with Albanian parents.)

All parents talk to other parents to get a real feel of the what is happening and to appraise their reactions:

Person1: We always consult with other parents as well. We will talk to other parents to check what really happens in school. If we need to react together we will, if it's an individual problem we will react separately.

Person2: Yes we talk to other parents frequently. (focus group with Macedonian parents).

Sometimes parents talk to the teachers about problems that they feel are centralised, but feel that they can't really solve the problems as the decisions are not made by them or the schools.

Teachers claim that the curriculum demands that type of work. That they follow the curriculum. Sometimes they don't like it... rearranging the

classroom, they were promised to get computers... For example in our school they are still waiting for those computers, the tables are arranged that way and the teachers are not satisfied with that. (focus group with Macedonian parents.)

These problems and feelings are connected to the perceptions that the parents have about important decisions in the educational system.

3.2. General participation and decision making

Most of the parents feel that they can't influence the "big decisions" regarding their children's education as some of the decisions about the structure of the system, the curriculum and the reforms are centralised. The reasons for the parents feeling so hopeless when it comes to decision making is the fact that they have been pre-occupied with many changes in the educational system this school year. External testing and religious teaching have been introduced at the beginning of the school year. Both decisions caused huge public debates and friction between different groups of experts and parents with opposing opinions on the issues. In the past month those two initiatives proclaimed unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court and the Ministry was ordered to stop the initiatives. However this caused friction between the Ministry and the ruling coalition on one side and the Constitutional Court. The Ministry claimed that the decisions of the Court are politically motivated and that those initiatives are aimed to improve the standard of education whereas the Constitutional Court based the decisions on the country's Constitution. Therefore it is not surprising that the parents feel they can't influence any important decision.

The next excerpt from the interview with Macedonian parents living in urban setting is an example of such views.

Person 1: Ministry for Education.

Person 2: There is no way we can influence some of the decisions.

Person 3: I can only influence my child's work.

Person 4: We can't influence whether they can make any changes in the educational system. Nobody listens to us about that.

Person 1: For example, the external tests now. The children don't want to do that, but the Ministry made a decision and that's it.

As such parents wonder whether they can even influence any change in the educational system. They don't perceive that they have enough power compared to other stakeholders. The next excerpt of an interview with the parents whose children have special need illustrates this point:

Person1: I don't know how good it sounds to say that people don't try. People try and would do anything to instigate changes. But they can try as they might as an individual. However we... the period is like that... pessimistic...I sometimes wonder whether we could possibly... as individuals... whether we can change anything and do something... even if we are in the Council of Parents, or the school generally...It all depends on many other factors.

Person2: The Ministry and bureaucracy.

Person1: Yes. For example I was involved in a number of US funded projects and saw it from that side as well. Some things just can't be changed. No matter the amount of money, the methods promoted some things just can't be changed. It's very hard, everything depends on the central decision making bodies.

Moreover some parents feel that the politically motivated decisions are very much part of the Macedonian educational system which hinders successful parent's participation. This view has been repeated in few interviews and the next excerpt is the best illustration of this view:

I think that yes in our school they will meet with us, listen to us, but we don't know if anything will happen as a result... The bad thing is that they don't answer to us, they answer to someone else and that's why they can't always respect or implement our demands because they implement someone's politics and policies. The Principals are not accountable to the School Board, they are answering the Mayor, directly regardless of what the law says – that the School Board decides on the Principal, it doesn't happen in reality. They answer directly to the Mayor. The teachers don't answer to the Principal no matter how much we dislike that it's like that. The Principal can't fire anyone, they can only suggest that. So the hierarchy of who answer to whom stops, so even if someone is very rude nobody can do anything to them if they have their back covered from higher instances.[...] That is definitely a barrier to anything as the schools have Principals but they don't have implementing power, because they answer to someone else, not the School Board. [...] They answer to someone implementing a political agenda. [...] The Principal has more of a managerial role, they don't have the power to say I will punish you by a lowering your pay check or whatever. They can't punish anybody. In our municipality things are organised this way. (focus group with parents members of Councils of Parents)

Therefore some parents think that even the Council of Parents do not have any power within the schools and the decisions are made by higher instances.

Person1: And the Council of Parents is more of a parade. Let's not tell lies here, we are all adults. If the Principal wants something that will happen end of story. The Council of Parents is just a cover for that decision to be supported. It's a pity but that's how it is.

Person 2: It depends, it depends on the school.

Person 3: And the Principal.

Person 1: Well if the Principal is persuasive the decision will be made.

Person 2: Well for example in our school, The Council of Parents makes decision whether to renovate the school, parents give suggestions. Whether the decision will be made or not is not that important, parents give suggestions.

Person 1: I am not saying that we don't give suggestions, but who makes the decisions. The Principal.

Person 4: The Principal.

Person 5: And they change the Principals quite often.

Person 2: Well not that often.

Person 5: The Mayor makes those decisions. (focus group with Macedonian parents)

3.2.1. Differences in parental involvement

Although most of the parents felt that the decisions in the educational system are quite centralised and politics plays major part in decision making there are differences between their involvement in the school life, ways of participation and satisfaction with the involvement. Generally there are schools where parents feel that they are being at least consulted about important decisions and they feel welcomed in the school, schools where parents feel welcomed in the school and have access to the Principal but they don't feel that they are listened to and finally there are parents who feel that their relationship with the school is very poor and they are totally left out of the school life.

The parents from one school feel that they are welcomed in the school and that when they can voice their opinion it will be given a proper treatment. The school even has different possibilities for voicing opinions. This is visible in the following example coming from a member of the School Council:

In our school always. We have access in every moment. If needs be directly to the Principal's office, pedagogue, psychologist. They are all very open. All parents have the access. We also have a post box in the hall and every parent can leave their opinions in it, everything we think the school should know about, but the parent feel it should be anonymous they can put it there. Only the School Board has access to it and the students from the Students Board. Nobody else can open the box. [...] The idea probably came from parents as the parents can't always...there is a difference in convenience when you can put a piece of paper into the box in a hurry and finding time to get a meeting with someone from the school as we all have different engagements. (focus group with parents members of Councils of Parents)

In that school even other parents felt that they are properly engaged in the school life as they have access to the teachers and they also use parents meetings to talk about important issues and not only discipline and achievement. In this school parents felt that they are involved in decision making and they can realize some parental initiatives. The next example is of a parent from the same school, not involved in the Council of Parents:

In our school we don't discuss achievement on parents meetings, we discuss issues and decisions and the decision making process.

The Council of Parents functions according to certain predefined meeting times and previously agreed agenda for the meeting.

In our school we are invited in writing, but we agreed on the first meeting of the Council to meet every last Wednesday each month. [...] Sometimes it happens that we meet twice, but parents already expect that last Wednesday they have a meeting and they ask their children do they have any invitation and the invitations always have the schedule of the meeting. Every meeting

we also have small pieces of paper and we write topics to be discussed in future.

In the other group of school are schools which have positive relationship with the parents, parents are involved in few activities, but the parents do not really have impact in the school life.

In our school we have access to the Principal, but I personally don't think that the things we say, whether it's a praise or complaint, I don't think it has any effect. They will listen to you, tell you, you are right, we'll do our best, something like our politicians, they will pat your back but the everything will remain the same. Time will pass and you'll realise that nothing has changed. At least that's my experience. (focus group with Macedonian parents).

In these group of schools, the Councils of Parents functioned more or less successfully, but the parents were not as engaged with the Councils and felt that they did not function as well as they could.

I think that in our school the Council meets once in each term, so twice a year. On those meeting smaller bodies are formed and those bodies meet more often. I don't know three parents in some body responsible for sport. [...] They meet more often and the Council of Parents meets only once in a term. And that's usually at the beginning or at the end when they tell us where would the children go on excursion and how much it costs. [...] Those smaller bodies... we don't know but we assume they meet more often. We are just part of that big Council of Parents. [...] The Council doesn't choose the members of those bodies, I don't know... I think those parents make those decisions on their own. (focus group with parents members of School Councils)

I was a member of Council of Parents. And I was never asked to go to meetings. I want to get involved but I never received any message about a meeting of that body. We were three members from that age group and we were never invited. After some time they will say on the Council of Parents meeting it was decided...it was decided but in our age group we don't know anything about that. Sometimes it happens that the child forgets to inform you, it happens...but we were not invited. (focus group with Macedonian parents)

The last group comprises rural schools which are satellite schools. In these schools parents feel that they are not getting the treatment that they deserve. They have poor relationship with the teaching staff, they rarely see the professional support staff and the Principal and do not have access to the Council of Parents and other school bodies. These parents feel that the decisions regarding their children's school life are made by some other parents in the central school. This is visible in few of the statements from the parents in the rural school which has classes of children only up to 4th grade and after that the children travel to town to attend the classes in the central school. Even after the children go to the central school the parents feel left out:

Person1: We have only very official relationship. We only talk about the children. We have four or five teachers here. They are all from the "big good

morning club" and they only talk about the children, just about attainment and discipline.

Person2: We mustn't talk about anything else.

Person1: And they are always right

Person3: And they are always right and they speak with high pitched voice to us.

Person1: And if you want to say something it's in vain. They don't try.

Person4: All they say is your children are not properly raised. You need to study with them as if we are teachers. If we know that much we wouldn't send them to school. Why are they going to school. (focus group of Macedonian parents from rural area)

The professional support staff don't even come to the school. They only come when something happens, like a mishap. (focus group of Macedonian parents from rural area)

Person1: We are not involved in anything. The parents from the town are.

Person2: We don't know whether anyone from here goes is in the Council of Parents. (focus group of Macedonian parents from rural area)

Person1: Yes they make decisions but nobody from gets involved. We don't get involved.

Person2: At least that's what we know. They totally left us out.

Person1: Town people will get together and there is none to tell us about anything. (focus group of Macedonian parents from rural area)

The parents in these schools feel that as a result their children are not as academically successful as they can be. The parents whose children attend "satellite schools" frequently accentuated that during the conversations. The next excerpt is an illustration of that:

My son attends a satellite school connected to a central school. They don't have child interactive teaching, group work or anything else, they study in the "old" classic way and compared to other children from different schools they all lack behind. And we can't do anything. (focus group with Albanian parents)

3.3 Parents participation

In the schools where parents feel at least some degree of involvement there are examples of parental participation in the school life. The ways of parental involvement vary from school to school but parents participate in some activities:

Our school has open doors policy if we are interested. For example recently parents took part in organising a celebration in the school. We are also involved in many other things as well, it depends on what needs to be done. (focus group with Albanian parents)

One example, of such parental involvement is an initiative targeted at improving the quality of the food that the children get in the school, since all the decisions about the choice of supplier were made by the Mayor:

Person1: In our municipality it's dictatorship. Whatever the Mayor says will be implemented.

[...]

Person1: But the matter improved, as there are no complains anymore.

Person2: We contacted the producer that supplied the food, it was a body formed from parents, not the school, we had initiative. [...] In our municipality the choice of school food supplier was made by the municipality. The municipality had a tender for all the schools. [...] We organised a body which wrote down what the children are getting and what the rules are regarding school food. Then we presented the results to the supplier. The parents initiated that, it was discussed by the Council of Parents and we implemented the initiative. (focus group with members of Councils of Parents)

Another successfully implemented initiative commenced by parents was implemented in another school and aimed at improving the quality of free time that the children have after school:

For example, we had an initiative, since Primary School "Dame Gruev" has children from the surrounding area. They have free space in the first shift in the gym. We had an initiative and the Principal and the gym teachers agreed and most of the parents are interested for their children to practice some sport rather than run on the streets. So we agreed on that and they will start soon. (focus group with Macedonian parents)

There are a number of activities initiated by the schools where the parents are asked to participate in the implementation of certain activities and help the school with their engagement. These are usually fair type activities used for fundraising:

Person1: Our school "Pitu Guli" organises a 9th May celebration. We do that for few years now. We have different stands, each class has a stand and usually a number of parents are involved to help in organising that. Then we contact the teachers, the Principal. It's a Principal's initiative, the school's initiative, I don't know whether the Council of Parents has any initiative within that, but the Principal is the main author. The parents are involved in organising and they participate. [...] We also helped with flyers and promotional materials. "

Person2: Our school has something similar. We have New Year's and Easter markets we call them fairs. It's like a fundraiser, we collect funds to get something that the school needs. We make decorations, greeting cards and sell them and we use the fund that we collect to buy something like a copying machine or paint the school. It is initiated by the Principal. (focus group with Macedonian parents)

Sometimes parents are also asked to help the teachers in the teaching of certain subjects or in helping with some excursions and extra-curricular activities:

In "Pitu Guli" we had computer teaching in third grade. The parents got questionnaires to see who can help with the teaching of that subject. They have that twice a week so some of the parents agreed to help as the teacher can't control all 20-20 computers at the same time with those children at that age it's really hard. So whoever was free went and helped. (focus group with Macedonian parents)

We also arrange help to the teachers whenever they need to go somewhere. For example, tomorrow they are visiting the zoo and the parents that have free vehicles at the time volunteered to drive the children to the zoo. (focus group with Macedonian parents)

3.3.1. Motivation for involvement and reasons for lack of involvement

The parents in all groups were unanimous in saying that the main motivation for involvement is helping their children get better education and go through a pleasant educational process. The parents also feel that the motivation that drives them to get more involved is connected to the main benefits of their participation. They feel that they want to get engaged to help improve their children's educational experience and expect the benefits of their participation to be improvements in the educational process regardless of whether they happen within the school or on systemic level.

Therefore parents say that they will get involved if they have the opportunity to do so (in the schools where they don't feel properly involved) or are already involved because:

Person1: So we can help our children.

Person2: Make it better for our children.

Person3: To improve achievement and relationship and everything else. (focus group with Macedonian parents from rural area)

I would get involved to help my child and to help the other children. [...] We will be in that school for a long time. So I would help my child but I could help other children as well in their education. (focus group with parents of children with special needs)

At the same time parents feel that the reasons that motivate them to get more involved will bring the benefits of their involvement if they are given proper chance:

Person1: We can help improve the teaching process by helping with some activities.

Person2: We can also help in arranging the space to be more conducive to learning. (focus group with Macedonian parents)

The education of our children will improve. To begin with the space in the schools can be improved. We can contribute to the improvement. Not pay for improvements but find ways to fund the improvements. [...] If the system changes we might even provide input regarding the curriculum, involvement of parents with special professions etc. (focus group with members of Councils of Parents)

It would be better because the real everyday problems will be known to the system. It's always better to make decision based on real life situations rather than what some people in some office think about something. (focus group with members of Councils of Parents)

The parents felt that the main reason for not being involved is the lack of time that some parents have or at least they thought that was the excuse that parents use when they don't want to get involved. Another important thing accentuated by parents was the expectations that some parents have of the educational system. Namely they felt that some parents think their activity should be finished when they enrol their children to school and the rest is the job the school itself.

Person1: They don't have time.

Person2: The lousiest excuse.

Person3: Or maybe they think than even if they get involved nothing will change.

Person4: Or some parents think my duty is to enrol the child in school, the child will study and it's up to the children to succeed. Unfortunately those kind of parents still exist.

Person2: Some parents are just resistant to initiatives. (focus group with members of Councils of Parents)

Person1: Some parents are maybe too busy to get involved.

Person2: Maybe they just don't want to get involved. They just want to contact with the teacher, get information and that's it.

Person3: Sometimes the parents that already have one older child are not interested to get involved with the second one.

Person4: It's true as I was more involved with my oldest. With the younger one I am more relaxed about everything. (focus group with Macedonian parents)

A number of parents felt that it's usually parents with children who are considered problematic are the ones that are least involved which causes problems for the other parents as well:

Some parents are also just not interested to get involved. They don't even come to parents meetings even if their children have problems with absenteeism. (focus group Macedonian parents).

The more problematic the child is the less the parent is active. It looks as if they consciously avoid coming to the school. They don't even come to parents meetings. (focus group with members of Councils of Parents)

Sometimes the parents admit that they would like to get more involved but they fail to take initiative. The next statements are from the parents in the rural school that felt least involved:

Person1: We just talk with each other but nobody has started any action.

Person2: We are not united. If we go as a class, you'll see what happens.

Therefore it can be said that the responsibility for parental involvement is shared between the schools and the parents. The next excerpt summarizes the opinions present among the parents regarding the lack of parental involvement. The excerpt also accentuates the responsibility and the possibilities that the broader educational system provides for parental involvement:

Person1: I think parents are more responsible.

Person2: I think that the school's attitude is more responsible. I think the way the Principal, psychologist, pedagogue think about parent's involvement is very important.

Person3: I think the pure activity of the Council depends on the parents, how often they meet etc, but the actions that are implemented don't depend on that, they are connected to some other structures."

Person1: We are not limited how often and when we meet.

Person2: Yes but if the parents feel that the decision they make are implemented and their engagement is effective, they meet more often and if they feel that's a waste of time they'll say once a term is enough, my voice doesn't mean anything anyways.

Person4: Our voices don't mean anything. According to the law as Council of Parents we can only elect two three members of the School Board, we don't have any other right. The law is very clear that the Council of Parents only observes the teaching process and gives an opinion. According to the law we can't make any decisions. When I became a President of that body the first thing I did was ask the Principal for the Law and the School's Statute, copied those, gave them to all the members and now we are all aware how loud can we raise our voice. Sometimes you can ask for something in vain if you can't get it. (focus group with members of Council of Parents)

As the responsibility for successful parental involvement is shared between different stakeholders the actions need to be multifaceted. The systematic solutions need to take in consideration the needs of the parents and the schools. On the other hand the parents and the schools need help in establishing models of parental engagement that will satisfy both the needs of the parents and the needs of the schools.

3.3.2. Exclusion of Roma parents

There is a degree of exclusion of Roma parents from the school life. The exclusion of the Roma parents should be viewed in light of the broader exclusion of Roma children from the educational system and the problems that Roma people face in schools. One of the most pressing issues that Roma are faced with are the stereotypes and lack of involvement of other parents and the teachers with Roma parents and students. In some cases the situation goes as far as denying Roma children the opportunity to attend the nearest school (which is prescribed by law) and instead enrolling the children in schools further away. This is done to protect one school from becoming Roma majority school and also to help other schools with their student numbers.

Person1: An example of pure discrimination. The children from Sredorek study in primary schools "Koco Racin" and "Dimitar Miladinov". To get to

school they have to cross two or three traffic lights, it's a kilometre long walk and the primary school "8 September" is only 200 metres away from Romaville that has 3000 people. It's a case of classic discrimination.

Person2: It's the Principal.

Person1: There are at least 50 children in first grade each year. In few years or so...those children that study there, 200 in one shift, 400 in both shifts are Roma. So the community is afraid and the city is afraid, that it will become Roma school. Therefore they do a favour to the other two schools... not to leave any of teachers jobless and send Roma there. It is a pure example of passive discrimination.

We always give suggestions to the Principals and we have better cooperation with the people from the municipality. [...] For example I always suggest that the Roma children stay in "8 September" according to the law children attend the nearest primary school. But the Principal won't enrol Roma children because he is afraid the school will become Roma school.

It is not surprising that Roma parents from this city are not properly involved in the school life. They are only called when they need to fill forms and when the schools need to increase their student numbers.

We are just formally consulted when they need to make some changes and reforms, for example the religious teaching in schools. They won't stop calling us until we sign some forms. And when they need to inform us about anything new or tell us something on those parents meetings except talks about absenteeism and problems we don't talk about anything else. Especially psychologist and pedagogues should inform us: "Hey this month or next month we plan to do this and that." That's absurd.

Parents complain that their children are mistreated at school and that they are doing what they can to help them but the schools and the educational system hinder their efforts:

Our children have Roma as mother tongue. When they go to first grade they already have problems communicating with other children. That's one of the problems and the NGO's help with that. [...] My children study in a school located in the centre. Problems...one classic problem is... from 5th until 9th grade the teaching staff do not pay too much attention to Roma children, example in maths...they should have more solidarity...They need Roma children only to fill the free spaces in their school's classes...to have 25 children let's form a class. After the class is formed, the Roma child gets an x. That's what I think, because they say "Come on Cigance, now we'll make him something. No, no.". They do not pay any attention to the child's development. Every parent wants a child with good education. [...] But when a child comes home everyday and complains...they go to school clean and come home filthy...the place is dominated by Macedonian children and they kick our children and that child which has been neaten two or three times doesn't want to go there anymore. [...] I don't know if people from this town, people in general will ever become aware that we don't go to other schools, we study in the Macedonian schools, although with law we have a right to education in

Roma language but...the children should be treated equally regardless of their faith or ethnicity.

Parents also mentioned that in their town an initiative to promote learning Roma language was unsuccessful due to the treatment that Roma population receives from the schools. Part of the Roma population got active and initiated selecting Roma language in schools but after the initial success further progress was stopped:

We had initiatives for elective subjects and it was successful. [...] It was in all schools of the municipality to have one or two teachers covering Roma language as optional subject. This was 2007/2008. Then the law on elective subjects changed. After that we did another round of parental initiative in 2008/2009 but that was unsuccessful because the staff on all school were discriminating Roma. They influenced the children by telling them you will study Roma language during breaks, after regular school time. They managed with their demagogy...They called parents then...they were interested in obstructing the Roma language as elective subject in the schools. Then they had interest and they invited parents to schools, told them stories and the parents said why should my child stay more in school."

On the opposite side the parents of Macedonian children perceive Roma as uninterested to get involved as can be seen from the two statements:

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

In my child's class they have Roma child, but the parents are never present. They have been invited but they just don't come. The parent is in the Council of Parents but doesn't show up to any of the meeting and doesn't come to the parents meetings as well. The parent volunteered for the Council and never showed up. (focus group with members of Council of Parents)

The Roma parents also admit that they need to be more proactive in getting involved in the school bodies to convey their problems and find ways to solve them:

Roma parents are also quite passive. We need to be more active, to demand our rights. Nobody will come and say there you go, you need to be there. We can't understand...Roma need additional teaching in all primary schools...and they also need Roma teachers or just Roma assistants. [...] Roma especially the ones from ghettos need additional tuition in their mother tongue.

Therefore the main benefits of increased participation is viewed in the light of helping the whole Roma population by accentuating the problems that Roma children are faced with:

We could make the problems with Roma students more prominent. First of all we could pressure them into implementing special measures to help with Roma education. [...] For example the reasons for children's absenteeism, their low levels of attainment and many other reasons for Roma drop-out and how can the individual school help in eliminating those things.

3.3.3. Parents of children with special needs

The parents of children with special needs feel that their children are well accepted within the schools. However their experiences again are different depending on the school that the children attend. Some parents feel that they have good relationship with the teachers as well as the professional support staff. Others feel that in their child's school the school staff including the professional support staff are not well prepared to cater for the needs of the children. The following two statements illustrate both those experiences:

I have great relationship with everybody, the teacher, the psychologist, everybody. From the beginning we started like that and even now when the psychologist sees me we talk about issues, progress and usual things.

Person1: I think that in the school the psychologist and pedagogues exist only for the form and the core of their work.

Person2: That will start changing I think...

Person1: My son in first grade went for testing and passed the test and they enrolled him in old first grade (first grade of eight year primary school). When he started in the old first grade we say that he is young for that. Young not by age but by his development and we switched to the new first grade ^(only for one school year children were able to enrol to either first grade on the new nine year primary school with 6 years and to the first grade of the eight year elementary school with 7 years of age. After that only the nine year primary school exists). The pedagogue didn't see anything, didn't evaluate the things properly, made a wrong decision. They made the wrong decision. So we had to change classes and that could have been a big problem for my child. Luckily my child accepted the change well.

None of the parents from the group is involved in the Council of Parents. They say that the parents that have more free time and are prepared to volunteer get involved. These parents also do not communicate with other parents about their children's problems and some of them feel that even parent's organisation for children with specific problems sometimes do not function as they should in providing support:

Person1: Well I talked only with one parent one and she couldn't believe it or understand the problem.

[...]

Person2: I have a neighbour and she once told me that she feels a bit lost and lonely, her child is autistic. I asked her whether she knew of an organisation for support of autistic children, but she said that even that doesn't function in that way.

The parents also feel that more children than officially declared need help but that there are still prejudices among people and declaring that someone has a problem and need specialist help is still a taboo:

I see that in the class a lot of children need help, not a lot, but some of them do, like they have problems with reading, hyperactivity and such. However when you mention specialist help or defectologist they think that something major is wrong with the child, like a big problem in the central electric plant of the electrical system has gone wrong. It is still a big deal. Some parents deny the problems because of that. And they are the ones that need help. I admit the problems and I will help my child.

They feel that their issues can't be discussed within the Council of Parents as the other parents lack sensitivity for the problems that their children or any other children with problems face:

Person1: They are not even slightly interested in discussing issues and problems. They solve the problems by moving the children from one class to the other.

[...]

Person2: I personally haven't even thought that I could advocate for improving the situation regarding children with special needs through Council of Parents.

[...]

Person3: As an individual you are nothing and nobody.

Person4: If you are too loud or press too hard maybe they will tell you to take your child out of that school.

Person3: Well that's why we need an Organisation. If they tell you, take your child out of the school, you will ask for support from that Organisation and go with other parents to the meetings of Council of Parents and they will have nowhere to move. Our problem will be solved fastest and in the best manner if it gets public.

In addition they feel that they might be able to help but are reluctant to get more involved in the school life as they are too busy organising the support that their children need. They feel that maybe if they have defectologistc (special educators) in the schools their burden might be eased and they could get more involved:

Person1: I accept the condition that my child has and I do all that I can. But for example I don't know English and I say give me specialist help with that for example. I take her to private language school. I need to make him study... he finds it hard, he will get nervous ones or twice and say I won't do it. I don't have a choice. I have to go from one place to the other, take him to different specialist help. [...] I wonder whether it is even bad for my child as we have different appointments even up to 9 or 10 pm. But I don't have a choice. [...]

Moderator: Would you think you should be more involved in the school life?

Person1: No, I don't have any time nor intention.

Person2: We are not qualified for that. We need special educators so we can tell them our problems and they can appraise the situation themselves and help us and the other children and parents. Then maybe we can get more involved.

They feel that the educational system needs a complete overhaul so it can cater better for the need of their children but feel that they can't do the change on their own and they don't feel that the Councils of Parents can do that as well:

Person: The parents, the local government, Ministry of Education everybody needs to get involved.

Person2: That is still big policy. Everything needs to change. I personally know the president of the Commission for Education in our municipality... and many people in the educational system, I don't know how much they can contribute. It is still a matter of decision making in the Ministry of Education.