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1. GENERAL PARENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS SCHOOL

The last few decades could be characterized as a period of turbulent technical and technology development, time of many different and significant influences on the whole human lifestyle, as well as on the processes of communication among people. Media and mobile telephone expansion, huge computer technology possibilities, accelerated way of living, employees overloaded with work, many tasks and obligations – these are some of the everyday components of modern life. People are adapting to the new era.

Family is certainly determined by global social movements. European working time (9–17h) is a particular difficulty to some parents. **Employed parents have got a little time for their children**, and those few hours spent together are often of poor quality, stress disturbed, loaded with many obligations:

My wife and I have a hard time. We have this European working time, both of us. Our children are at school in the afternoon. They stay alone, they wake up, prepare for school and study. You can imagine what three children can do staying alone at home. My job, my home and the school are nearby. I work in a private company where the employer has no understanding at all. He doesn't let me go even when it's raining or when it's bad weather. I escape when I need it, and if he knows that, he reduces my salary, if not, he doesn't. (Parent).

At the beginning of the 21st century, many countries' educational systems are being modified. More efficient ways of teaching and learning, more adequate methods and working procedures are required, revised selection of content is done, based on the objectives which are derived from the hypothetical image from which we anticipate knowledge, skills and habits our students need in their life and work in the new millennium. These tasks are not simple, especially if we talk about them in the socio-economic context of the transitional societies such as Montenegrin society nowadays.

Some parents lost their confidence in school, especially regarding its **educational function (related to upbringing)**. Even **the achievement of the educational tasks** in primary schools is exposed to critics too. Parents regard school in the context of the global social movements and changes, but they do not perceive it as quality partner:

If a parent has no time to give his mind completely to his child, he will lose his child in a sense of education and upbringing. If a parent has no time – in school a child gets only basic instructions, which certainly is not enough. I mean, I understand teachers – they get large classes (20 – 30) of students, 45 minutes is a short period for a teacher to do all that should be done. (Parent)

And the next statement testimonies that parents expect the educational (related to upbringing) role to be accomplished by school:

Out of the educational function that school has, there is upbringing, cultural role too.

Definitely, parents (employed ones) are in that position that they don't have any kind of support in the sphere of child's upbringing. That child is abandoned to live on his own. Only a few years ago my older son finished that very school (he is the first year at university now). I had a great support from school then. The school staff at that time was focused on either educational or upbringing function and on the main life rules that children should accept. I am in the situation that for my child, who is in the seventh grade, there is no authority in school. You see in what situation I am. That child is in school from 7.30am to 1pm. Parents work, so that they spend with child 2 – 3 hours a day. School programme is simplified a lot, but the school staff doesn't apply that programme. So we have no such an obligation to work with the children as we did before, those children literally –I speak honestly – the main rule is that rule doesn't exist. (Parent)

Students have not got quality communication skills and there are more and more those among them who **do not want to solve their problems through dialogue and rather turn to various kinds of violence instead**. If a school age child „learns“ to solve difficulties in relationships in that way, there is a great possibility that this kind of behaviour becomes habit and permanent personal characteristic:

I have got two children. They are excellent students, completely independent. It doesn't mean that we shouldn't raise the level of education. As a man and as a parent I am more concerned about things I see on TV, around me, the things we close our eyes before – computers, television, we are witnesses of violence every day, we get familiar with it every day. We try not to see, but we see –be it a soft or a harsh sort of violence. I don't know how exactly to express myself, but practically – we get familiarized with violence every day. It's less important to me if my son's marks are very good or excellent, but it is more important that he becomes a man, a good colleague. (Parent)

Misunderstandings are, often, present among children, lack of comprehension and intolerance appear there. Even the smallest difference in terms of child's physical appearance may become reason for sharp mockery in class or in another group of children. Jealousy is an often cause of inadequate behaviour. Even a better student is sometimes exposed to sneer and identified as a “geek” or “nerd”. It is not necessary to emphasize how much **children from vulnerable groups are struck by this peer behaviour**. Parents point out that they sometimes neglect what their children tell them about these problems:

Regarding violence among children – I think it exists, but honestly speaking, I think as parents, we are responsible too. However, one part of upbringing comes from home. Parent has to talk to his children. Child can say – „He pushed me, he hit me.” Maybe, as a parent, I neglect that, as well. (Parent)

Considerable number of parents is very concerned about the **safety of their children, both in school and on the way** from home to school. There is, certainly, fear of heavy traffic (some schools in city centres are practically overcrowded). But **parents' fear of drug addiction** is more emphasized:

The problem is children's safety. I think it's a problem of all schools in Montenegro – both primary and secondary. We had a problem that, at the school gate, one parent noticed a person truly known as a one of the drug dealers. We reacted quickly. We wrote a letter; let's call it petition – to the Ministry of education, the Ministry of Interior, to director of Police Administration and to the Mayor. Out of four of these addresses only two...The director of

Police Administration responded and assigned one more policeman in the area. It was reduced after that, we got two night patrols which don't pass through the schoolyard only by car, but they go out and look around. Only one syringe has been found since January. But the safety on the way is a problem. (Parent)

School cannot avoid common social problems. Financial status of parents, **low incomes, and the obligation of supplying a child with a considerable amount of school equipment** – all that does not give impression that primary education is completely free of charge. Indeed, technical education, art, buying of different magazines and publications, all those are expenses that strike modest family budget:

Today, so called, free education is expensive for parents up north – how to get books, how to prepare child – and when child comes to a school without proper equipment. (Parent)

It is even difficult to list all the problems in relation to this that Roma people come across. **It is evident that there are not basic life conditions in Roma settlements.** In that sense, their indifference to school is clear. If we remember Maslow's need hierarchy, insufficient interest of this population in school and learning will be completely clear in this context; – however, basic biological needs satisfaction precedes all contemplation of self-development and self-actualization:

Toilets are out of order. It's hot and an epidemic can break out. There is no electricity and that's the problem. Children cannot do their homework – there is no way to do what they are asked to do. Everything is in one room (they have a bath, they eat, and they do their homework...) The teacher doesn't treat the children well, because of their bad hygiene ... Unfortunately, city rubbish heap is near by, the children must be like that, better hygiene conditions should be provided. (Parent)

An additional **difficulty is the fact that their parents are illiterate**, so they cannot help them in completing their school obligations. Language barrier that Roma people cope with is also evident – poor official language command (Montenegrin/Serbian/Croatian/Bosnian), it practically disables them to function in the society:

I worked for three years as a Roma assistant. All Roma people are poor, hungry, and thirsty. We are all human... We are trying to speak the same language with you. Children cannot go to school after the fourth grade, because their parents are illiterate, they cannot sign their name. I would like we do a workshop for parents and an additional workshop for children. Children need additional teaching¹ in order to learn the language.(Parent)

Parents of children with disabilities sometimes come across huge problems, especially when enrolling children in school. What is definitely worth of admiration is their belief that no one is guilty for their problems, as well as their attempt to save the confidence in other people:

My daughter didn't go to any regular school for sixteen years, we didn't even try to. The problem is that the commission didn't let us enrol her in that school. The child had not been in school until three or four month ago. They claim now that they are enthusiastic about her progress. We have worked at home with her. My wife usually worked with her. We visited a

¹ It would be better *supplementary*.

psychologist and speech pathologist too. When she started, she knew a lot – she could write, she could multiply and count. I don't judge anyone for that; it was an evaluation of the teacher then. I don't know. Time's changing. I don't think that someone did it deliberately, for God's sake, no. (Parent)

The fact is that it is not always problem in schools' resistance of accepting children with disabilities. Sometimes, simply, there are not proper conditions, even if principal and teachers give their best, and that is what parents talked about.

Parents of children with disabilities were in especially difficult situations during the period of inclusive programme's very beginning. Practically, eight years ago, enrollment of a child in school often depended exclusively on goodwill of principal and pedagogue. Of course, we should not put aside precaution measures that school staff took, regarding many questions about inclusion, such as: **architectural barrier, lack of school equipment and working tools, school furniture unadapted, poor teachers' knowledge about children with special needs and their incompetence to quality work with children through individualization...** However, beside the justified concern, there is certainly a lack of understanding for these parents and children needs:

In my town, I talk about the first generation, the beginning of inclusion. The school got the project to lead in inclusion because four of them are in that school. I took her at one of the schools to be tested for the first grade. She passed the test over average, but she couldn't enrol in school, because she has a physical disability – she can't walk. What could I do then? I took the responsibility to wait for her in school and be there all the time. "It can't be so. You know how cruel children can be" - they told me. My girl even read Latin letters in her class. They suggested me to send her to the Institute for children with disabilities. I quitted that year. Her IQ is 128. She was tested in Belgrade. I went to Igalo and they raised my hope and propose me not to give up and I went to another school. There was a teacher who worked with her privately. She visited me and said that she talked to the principal of another elementary school in order to enrol the girl in that school. The principle enrolled three or four extra children, but the pedagogue was indignant. Any of those children didn't get school report at the end of the term. The teacher accepted the child. She called parent meeting immediately and explained to all what it is about. All reactions of the parents were great. The children accepted her too, were happy to help her. She received uncertified school report card, for the reason of the pedagogue protesting. We sent an appeal to the Ministry of Education and Science and the Ministry asked the child to be registered in the form- register. There aren't any proper conditions in the High School. Staircases and staircases only. (Parent)

Still, there is one **actual dilemma** in Montenegro – **whether to enrol a child in a specialized or a regular school?**

The child's enrolment in a specialized school brings a lot of difficulties to their parent. The next statement shows that clearly:

There is my son's, and my own, experience of the specialized school (my son started speaking later and his cognitive development is slowed down.). Firstly, the big problem was to decide whether to send the child to a specialized school or not. Family support, my mother as a teacher didn't want to intervene, my father kept his distance. My husband left it over to me. And that's the most difficult part of my life, when I had to make a decision. If I did wrong, I

would be the only one to regret and no one else. My start in the specialized school was difficult. (Parent)

Students with special educational needs (of course, everything is individual) **often have not got books**, so it is more difficult for them. Parents sometimes **are not satisfied with the way school staff inform them** about certain important issues. Law regulations exist (for example, it is specified that a child has got a right to other people's help, particular means to help, etc.) but parents are not informed about that.

2. SCHOOL NOW AND THEN – TRADITIONAL AND REFORMED SCHOOL COMPARISON

Among all other things, reform means both material and technical school preparation, new furniture, providing and usage of different didactic media, more intensive involvement of parents in school life and work. **Some schools managed to adapt their work better than others, taking into consideration material, spatial and technical sense**, so that the parents are very satisfied with whole school environment and ambient:

A school in my town has new classrooms, completely new equipment, desks and chairs, computers. There were even some proposals for parents' education in the afternoon. So, the relationship between the school staff and the parents is very good. All we agreed, they did it. You really have a feeling it is a good school. The new classrooms are built because of the increasing number of students. It is a nice feeling when you come in. One should be persistent or even intrusive in order to reach solution. (Parent)

Parents expected (those from the northern region of Montenegro emphasized it the most) that reform would bring a certain **progress in the school infrastructure** in their region, that old school building would be renovated and equipped according to modern standards. Some of them also emphasized that, in the period before the reform, they had been promised **fewer obligations in their work with children**, that all students' obligations would be done in school, that, in general, school programme and school work would be relieved from unnecessary facts, etc. What concerns parents from this region is the fact that **children start with school one year earlier** than in traditional school system. It is a great difficulty in the northern region in relation to climate characteristics:

My oldest daughter is finishing her eighth grade. I have a daughter in the fourth grade of traditional and the other one in the fourth grade of reformed class. The reformed school is a big relief for children until their third and fourth grade, but after, it is a great difficulty for them. It would be great that we have conditions in school as they presented to us here in the north region. They said the classrooms would be put in order, with playing room. Nothing of it. Then we protested and required explanation, they put an oval carpet, children could hurt themselves there. They run and they can get hurt. Then they said there would be whole equipment for children in reformed school, nothing again. I don't want to say that individuals didn't, but in all that reform, parents had to participate in everything. And we were said that whole needed would be provided. It wasn't the case in our school. It hurt me when I needed to wake up my child at 8.30. She should have been in school at 9 o'clock and she was only six. When it's snowing here, we have 1,5m of snow, chatastrophy, -20°C. Our school is near by, 5 minutes, and those children from suburbs, that's really sad. (Parent)

Parents think that a few key things are significant for the successful school reform: **larger space capacity in school, continuous education of teacher and inclusion of local community in the whole school system functioning** (anticipated by the Law of primary school education):

*School should be provided spatially, starting with the children's induction up to provision of the whole sojourn. We wanted our children to bring books home (children in the first grade) and we were right. Teachers should be in a constant educational process. The children safety from and to school should be improved. **Local government has to be more involved in solving school problems.** Local governments left it over to the Ministry of Education. There is a paradox there – the schoolyard belongs to the Municipality and buildings to the Ministry of Education and Science. Whatever you want to do, Ministry says – it can't be done without the Municipality, and the Municipality says – it can't be done without Ministry. We had an initiative (Parent Council) to raise the level of the schoolyard fence for 40cm and realized that the Ministry cannot do anything without the Municipality and the Municipality without the Ministry too. If the local government was involved, it wouldn't allow a bookmakers shop 200 or 300 meters from school. We have two or three bookmakers shops just round the corner. (Parent)*

At the same time, parents perceive a lot of **advantages that the reform brings**. Almost all of them agreed upon the fact that it is still something on paper and that it requires a plenty of additional working efforts of all included in educational and upbringing process. **The advantage of individualization principles' appreciation** is emphasized in the teaching process:

The school gives it to us for the first time – the possibility to work as much as we want – everybody will get diploma and we will be only responsible for our knowledge. It's better, because we all have an opportunity. (Parent)

The parents of nowadays' students were educated in the traditional system (teachers too). Large number of parents explicitly emphasizes their **dissatisfaction with reform**. The difficulty is probably parents' ignorance regarding particular elements – so, **we can talk about their lack of being well informed**. Having in mind that the reformed school system is considerably different from the traditional one, **there is a need for a public presentation of the new concepts definitely** – so that parents could become familiar with the characteristics of new methods, ways of working, etc:

They went far. My son goes to school. He's in the first grade of a reformed school. He learned to draw letters, his notebook is all drawn. My child says that he draws letters. When we had the first parents' meeting, I said: 'I am not satisfied. My child can't draw a butterfly'. Maybe, teachers are not educated for the reformed system. In the reform, teacher and small children educator are in the first grade in order to cover everything. (Parent)

But there are different opinions, as well. Some pointed out that the school **system finally gave a chance to everyone, to be developed in keeping with one's own needs and possibilities**. Parents emphasized, too, that **children were finally owners of the truth concerning their rights**:

School should be based on the child's needs. The steps are: comprehension of child's needs and timely and methodical responds to the needs. Everything is individual, but we should go

for it (all of us and local community too). Children develop critical thinking in the reform; they are invited to give comments. The example is the class of nature – it is not a bare presenting, but children are more informed about their rights. Before, only well informed children used to know about rights. Regarding criteria, I like the fact that reform relieves us from unnecessary facts. It necessarily doesn't have to mean reduction in quality. (Parent)

One of the reform segments is **inclusive education** – that is to say, including children with special educational needs in the regular educational system. On one side, system and the legal regulation allow that, but the inclusion of those children is not always followed by agreement of typical children's parents (without special needs):

There's a hyperactive child who bullies other children and his mother says on the parents' meeting – 'What can I do, my child is hyperactive.' But those children are not there to be bullied. (Parent).

On the other hand, some parents believe that the reform brought them additional obligations. They think that **school classes are not enough for a child in order to make oneself master of a subject-matter**. The classes are large, school lessons short; children's behaviour is such, that teacher has to be more occupied with discipline than with creating quality school units where they can learn with comprehension:

I think that the reformed school brought more obligations to parents. Teacher is there, he says - we do this – he just recounts them something. Regarding school, if a parent doesn't work with a child, it's difficult. The child often comes from school confused about something. Teacher is there more to keep discipline and there's less and less of it. I am afraid that the reform will be like an oriented education used to be and everyone insisted on it and then said it's not good at all. (Parent)

Some parents think that **majority of children study at home**. Of course, it produces extra dissatisfaction on the parents' side. They also think that students working habits are neglected (almost general opinion).

According to some parents' opinions, no matter how well adapted programmes and school books are, they think that **teacher is the one who mostly influence the quality of teaching realization**, which is absolutely true, whether we accept it or not.

What most of parents pointed out as a positive reform achievement is **more direct communication between students and teachers**. The relationships in traditional school were mostly based on the attitude of the strict teaching authority. Awe was a basis of the student's attitude towards teacher and absolute authority – teacher's attitude towards student. It was clearly the basis of a great distance and immense fear before writing or oral test.

Many of them are still wondering if **two-way open communication in teaching could influence teacher's authority badly** (we think about legitimate authority necessary for quality functioning in and out of classroom) or could it be a double-edged knife:

My knowledge was better before and nowadays communication with teachers is better. The teacher's attitude towards student should be friendly...If you respect child's personality, everything is O.K. I think that the reform anticipates group work and it influences discipline badly. Teacher is like a coordinator and in those situations things go out of control a bit.

(Parent)

Teachers can be a particular **barrier to the children with special educational needs and their parents**. In spite of the fact that individualization is a teaching principle and inclusion regulated in law, some teachers do not want to accept those children and they do everything to prevent their parents from enrolling them in regular classes. However, we should emphasize that we talk about individual cases:

We tried to enroll our child; actually, we enrolled him in a regular school. I explained all his problems to his teacher. My son went to that school for three days where his teacher exposed him to mockery due to his ignorance of the concepts yesterday – tomorrow. Even after my conversation with the school pedagogue who showed a great comprehension – firstly, for me as a mother and then for him as a child – she told me literally – ‘Your child will be mentally destroyed or he will become unsociable.’ After those three days, I went with my son in the specialized school without any categorization. My son passed all categorizations anticipated for other children. So, he enrolled in the school. After those three days I went with him in a hospital for categorization. I asked for a lot of information. I didn’t get a response neither from the psychologist nor from speech pathologist...the teacher said: ‘I will get a flat from the Ministry of Education and Science and I’ll retire. That’s my goal’. The woman who could be my mother and not mother of my son. (Parent)

Evaluation criteria of student’s work are different in the reformed school. **The aim is to give marks according to the teacher’s observation of the complete students’ progress** – comparing it with that very student and not with the group or the class. It is also insisted on the more complex evaluation of student, including knowledge, his working habits, his attitude towards the subject, motivation and interest, etc. Some **parents emphasize that they notice a certain decrease in criteria for students’ marking** (lower learning requests for children):

Schools used to have more quality education, more knowledge was required. It is illusory to compare. Things need to be changed but not regarding criteria. I don’t agree that criteria in primary school need to be changed – I wrote to the Ministry of Education and Science. Some things can be omitted after, in secondary schools. (Parent)

The aim of teaching differentiation happens in parallel with induction of the system related to difference between class, subject and classroom. Mass education of children, besides great advantages, brought a certain uniformity of the educational and upbringing process and ‘imposed’ an adaptation of all teaching elements to, so called, ‘average student’. **Additional, supplementary, elective, optional and other types of teaching support the process of individualization principles’ accomplishment:**

There is an additional teaching in maths, physics, English in our school. I don’t know if the school pay them for that but, I can see that the teachers do it well. (Parent)

Language barrier and insufficient engagement of teachers to help them to learn the language is a great difficulty to Roma population:

There are children who lost two or three years in order to learn Montenegrin language. If a child is three hours in school, it is not enough to learn the language. I would add additional²

² Word supplementary is better.

classes for these children. There are not physical education classes. Supplementary teaching – to have classes in the afternoon, to make our children become bolder, to teach them reading and writing. In the second, third and fourth grade – Roma children are only two hours in school. It is not enough. They don't speak the language. (Parent)

Parents work additionally with their children at home or they pay for private classes:

It is necessary to work with children. If you don't work, there aren't any results. They come from school at six and we work until 12 o'clock in the evening – from school to school. That's it. I say that on a parents' meeting. The teacher says – if someone doesn't make progress in school, he simply doesn't make progress. I said that I didn't agree with paying for extra classes. They said on a parents meeting – you have to work with children. I said – let's evaluate teacher's work – and if they have all bad marks, children are simple-minded or they don't know how to teach them. I used to go to school too, but my parents didn't take my book to see what I learned. I don't like the thing that parents don't talk during our meetings – not to offend – and when the meeting is over you can hear murmur... (Parent)

3. PARTICIPATION IN GENERAL

Having in mind that the previous school system in Montenegro was rather confined, parents were not involved in the school work. The fact was that the laws never brought inhibitions regarding this, but it was known that parents' meeting and, at some times, consultation with form-master or another teacher were the only opportunities where a parent could express their opinion about certain segment of school life and work. *Step by step* programme is the first project in Montenegrin schools where the parents were motivated more to participate actively. It is of utmost importance to involve parents in school life – to provide them with **complete information**. Parents, included in our sample in survey, mainly appointed the Ministry of Education and Science and school management as those who made the most important decisions for their children's education.

Some parents were well informed about the way institutions created legal acts. Despite the fact that they knew the procedures well, they did not find it necessary to react and give comments or suggestions during the public discussion on establishing the Law on primary education and upbringing:

The Law is established (the Ministry of Education and Science, the Government of Montenegro). Did parents give comments when the Law was put in the public discussion? I didn't. The reform has some advantages, but disadvantages too. Children cannot do what they want in primary school in UN. There is a limit or standard. There is no standard here, because children don't fail. Child can't read or write in the fourth grade. (Parent)

Parent Council is not an absolutely new thing. However, its role and importance in school has been innovated. It often stays in the domain of good intentions and a particular legal base. But **how much and to what extent will parents use the possibility** that is finally given to them - to **participate in a quality aspect in primary school education** – it mainly depends on them – on their level of information, level of awareness that they can really provide support, aspiration for improved working conditions in school, etc. The whole support that Parent Council has got is sometimes insufficient, if parents are not willing to be involved more actively:

The Parent Council should make itself more active. The state and local government should give material support, but sponsoring can be useful too. Parents are not aware of the importance of Councils. We have to create climate in school in order to make parents become aware of their role. (Parent)

Majority of parents is familiar with the existence of the Councils in their schools. However, **some are not informed about Council's role**, about its competence, possibilities, the ways memberships can be gained, etc.

Parents' Council consists of one representative from each class in school. **The election of the representatives happens, in most of the cases, during the parents' meetings.** Sometimes a parent proposes a representative and sometimes teacher does it.

I am elected on the parents' meeting; it was a proposition of a parent. I think that the teachers weren't satisfied with parents' choice. But, somehow, it was approved. The president of a class - and on a school meeting where there were 29 parents from all classes - parents elected me as a president, and in that way I am elected for the School Board by the Law of Education. (Parent)

The criteria for parents' election in Parent Council are not defined. It is upon school, teachers and parents to decide what they want and according to that they elect and propose members. In some areas, where the schools function in more difficult material (financial) context, parents elect those representatives who **can support school financially**. We do not exclude possibility that these kinds of elections are supported by principles too:

In many schools, many parents are elected on the basis of material criterion - to pay excursion and so on. This is important too. I personally think that it is connected with 'buying marks' to a child. If someone is active in the Council, let him be a member more than two years. (Parent)

There are opinions that a financial power is not a sufficient argument for membership in a Council. In other words, active people willing to do something and give support without being in the position to give material support, are sometimes more helpful than a resounding names some councils are 'decorated' with. Parents also emphasize the importance of being prepared for membership in Council and that the elected person **has to be very responsible and aware of the role and expectations as being representative of other parents**, and, of course, to give their contribution. This should be concern of those who propose members, as well as of those who are elected:

We choose people for the Council - someone says it would be great to elect this one - he is financially powerful, and if an excursion takes place, he will support it. It's not important if he is financially powerful, but if he wants to do something. Give all to the powerful ones; they will have one more title. I have never contacted the council. We elected a man for the Council and he wasn't present on the parents' meeting. President should possess will and free time to do what is planned. I think it's not correct to take on responsibility and not to have time for it. (Parent)

The Parent Council is the body which definitely represents a resource able to improve school functioning in many ways, especially if there is partnership between Council and school management - Councils are not inspecting bodies, in charge of criticizing teachers and

principles, but primarily **bodies that can help a lot in achieving educational and upbringing roles of a school**, as well as in school arrangement and equipping, which is, according to parents, significant too:

Lately...the school was in bad conditions, the school management was impolite to parents, the principle was deposed and from that moment the Parent Council started functioning. Parents were engaged and so on. We participate maybe more than others in the complete school functioning. (Parent)

The real power of the Council reaches even to changes in the school management. The deciding body is the School Board and the Parent Council has its representative in that body. If parents really have convincing arguments that principal does not do his work properly, representatives can talk about it on the School Board:

The Council used to exist on paper but it didn't function. When the Council was changed, the principle was changed too as well as the conditions in which the school functioned. One School Board meeting, 6 of them, and me, alone. When the open competition was on, during the voting on a meeting of the School Board, I managed to come out with my option. He sued me, the inspector visited us. At the end, we got a principal who wanted to work. (Parent)

Functioning of parents Councils is completely different from school to school. By means of the sample, we literally covered the members of councils, starting from those who were only elected but never attended any meetings, over those who had three meetings a year (they emphasized that they were not active enough even if no one prevented them) to those who participated very actively in the real Council's functioning:

We have all minutes from meetings in the original forms. Just in case, because we had a lot of disputes. The council made a book of rules (40 and more items). We function as an organization which hasn't got a real legal subjectivity, but has everything in its hands and manage it. (Parent)

Inner functioning of certain councils is very strict. Aware of the fact that they are members of an important body, these councils resist to inertia of some members **insisting on the book of rules agreed among the members**:

All reports exist, with date and number of members who attended it. If a parent misses out one meeting, they have to elect another class representative. We created the Rule Book with 40 items – how to create agenda, who can be present and how, when...The principle is allowed to be present when the Council invites him. Decisions made by the Council have to be proceeded to the School Board, with report – what was done and how. Practically, we are like an organization without legal subjectivity, but very effective. (Parent)

Except for elective subjects, we previously mentioned, **we did not record** in this survey **Council's activities concerning substantial side of school life**, in spite of the fact that many parents pointed out their objections on particular segments of school functioning. Council is mainly occupied with financial and technical issues, which is also important for the school functioning in terms of quality:

We initiated in our school: school parget, parquet replacement, afforestation of the big neglected schoolyard, the school has changed a lot and it is much, much better now. If parents agree about something in school, no one will oppose it. It used to be catastrophic, to put it mildly. Toilets were out of order and so on. I couldn't understand it – parents went to school and saw all that. When I reacted, they asked me: what are you making for your children? I am making them something better. You will see how better it is. I don't say it is not true. If you have an objection to professors' work, you name that professor openly on the meeting of the Council - we do it like that. Maybe, sometimes, that professor has got personal dissatisfaction and gives bad mark to a child. But we cannot give comments there. Each professor has a right to mark his subject. (Parent)

However, even those members, whose Councils function relatively, emphasize that it is not enough and that there could and should be done more. In order to have better functioning councils and to strengthen their forces additionally, one parent proposes:

Parent Councils should be united on the local level in order to influence the Ministry and Municipality in an easier way. A regional association is a good idea too. (Parent)

It is certain that, besides good will and parents' wish to actively participate in the council's work, for the successful functioning of these bodies, **attitude of school management** has great importance. It is different from school to school. We had a situation where the council was aware of its rights and obligations and very actively involved in almost all school issues:

We are familiar with the school financial plan. We provide comments and suggestions on the teachers' work to the School Board and the School Board to the principal. Each problem concerning teaching plan is in the principle's personnel policy. We may point out some problems. We participated in some renovating projects – we engaged some craftsmen and they helped us. (Parent)

There are many other experiences and opinions and we have to admit that these are not so rare:

Not in my school, a few times I – once I did a project work – regarding educational reform – I offered to inform parents about reform, I offered a presentation – teachers have a kind of aversion towards parents and parents towards them too – there is poor communication between parents and teachers. There are prejudices from previous experiences or experiences of other people, so we are somehow blocked to have an open communication. School should be responsible for itself and of course, local community and parents – the Ministry is not the only center any more – parents are a great resource. There was a sign on school: “the entrance of parents in all spaces of the school is forbidden without permission of the school management”. School should be widely open for parents – it belongs to teachers, parents and local community. (Parent)

Majority of parents emphasizes that **problems of insufficient participation lie in themselves**, in their indifference, overload, fear..., but also, in school efforts to keep its integrity, protect employees (who do not fulfil standards of a particular criterion – some teachers drink, work insufficiently, and work without needed education and diploma, what parents discussed openly):

I think that parents are indifferent a bit. I think that teachers don't like when community intervene. Everyone in school knows weaknesses of others and they protect each other in that way. (Parent)

4. PARENTS' PARTICIPATION

Almost all parents, who participated in the work of focus groups, showed great interest in all aspects of their children education. The partial exception is a group of interviewed Roma parents whose **priorities are bad life conditions**:

I only know that my child goes to school, nothing else. (Parent)

They are satisfying basic and existential needs and are not interested enough in children's education. Large number of Roma children enrolls in primary school, but, unfortunately, only a few of them finish it. They usually leave school after the fourth grade.

Language barriers are particular problem to this group of parents. So, for each problem, they turn to a woman who was working as a Roma assistant in school and speaks the official, Montenegrin, language very well. Besides that, she is fully aware of significance of education and possibilities it provides, so she puts great efforts to show her people how important school is for each child:

I don't want to regret and I'll work as a volunteer. When I started working in school, there were 103 children and now there are 500, I put the same efforts in it as I put in work with my children. Sometimes mother doesn't know that her child is in school. I brought him and wash him to be prepared for school. (Parent)

However, most of the parents' activities regarding their children's education are directed to **supporting child in achieving his obligations, doing his homework, learning lessons, comprehending subject matter**. Almost all interviewed parents agreed with it. So, according to our survey sample – **the main domain of parents' participation in children's school life is support in learning**.

We cover a teaching unit with teacher in school, which I don't see as a parent's role. All the things that children do at school, they do at home, as well. It seems that it is necessary in order to learn subject-matter. I am the class representative in the Council for two years, but we haven't got meetings. We have only one parents' meeting a year. The parents are not satisfied, but there isn't willingness of their expressing that. (Parent)

A specific problem for parents is, as they say, the fact that **society poorly values school as an institution**. The change of the whole social functioning, moving from traditional to modern standards of life, in short – transition influences the change of the existing system of values. It is certain that in this period, traditional school value changes and new positioning of school achievement in the social system of values has not been completely clear to the adult members of society yet, so how it would be for children who are to **find their place in this society**.

What children can see today is that educated people are not particularly valued in society. In most of the cases, they work for low incomes, they are sometimes even on the edge of existence. After all, their teachers are obliged to do other jobs in order to provide decent life to their families. On the other side, there is a part of society (and those are individuals who dictate *values* according to their financial capacities), a large group of people who did not get financial power due to work and knowledge, but on the contrary – they gained it through different machinations. Considering two sides of one reality, choosing between two ways – immature child without his own attitude towards what is and what is not good in life – naturally choose an easier way. Having in mind this context, it is very difficult for parents when they have to explain to their children the value that lies in studying and learning:

I participate in a way that I have been explaining to him why school is so important. My child resists – mom, why do you always talk like that? And mother of a friend of mine is this kind of person, that mother is that kind of person, etc. (Parent)

Parents strongly agreed concerning this issue too. It is important that their children educate themselves in terms of quality, to learn with comprehension and independently. Above all, they wish their children to understand that the school will be valued sooner or later; they wish, as well, that their little ones grow up and become honest people, responsible in any needed situation:

I support my child to understand the whole situation. This, what they study now, is less than I used to learn. I am not of the opinion – poor children, they have so much to learn, and they simply cannot manage it. That's the problem. They are enormously intelligent. They use internet and computer. The main problem is indifference. I help him to simplify subject-matter. I don't draw or write. I am willing to explain, but do the rest by you. It is important to simplify what is often abstract in book, connect it with life. I am ready to do anything for my child, but in a reasonable way. There is no chance that I will do anything if my child needs to take responsibility for it. (Parent)

Working with children after school became practice. Some rich parents **pay private teachers**, who work with children, but there are a lot of those in default of finances, but willing to help their children – they **work with their children by themselves**. One parent said that his wife and he had to work with their three children until midnight. Also, noticing that **passing from the first to the second grade is a great difficulty to children**; parents put additional efforts in order to help children in overcoming that obstacle in an easiest way as possible:

The problem is a lot of playing in the first grade and then a lot of working in the second. They literally bury those children. I have to play roles at home – to be parent and teacher. I don't manage to follow all that and the child loses interest in school. At the very beginning, they lose interest and will to learn what is required. We cannot remember if grandad had glasses or not³, and not talk about the other things. (Parent)

Due to the inert state in school system, in which parents often fit ideally because their own being out-of-date and lack of informing, fear or simply a kind of feeling – why to react when someone could suffer from consequences – not rare situations are when whole generations of children are damaged because a teacher does not teach them even according to minimal standards. The example is illustrative:

³ Allusion on the poem by Dragan Radulović *My grandad's glasses*

I am not included directly, except on the parents' meetings. We had problems with the teacher of maths last year. He is a very good man and he was a good teacher. My child is in the sixth reformed grade. He had had a great teacher before (during the first grades), who taught him very well. But the maths teacher has problems with alcohol, a big problem even when I was in that school, and you can imagine what it is after twenty year and more. We failed as parents too, because we let it be, well, it was maths, we worked, he had excellent mark, that's great – we failed as parents, and this year came a professor of maths who is really great, very strict, but he taught them – he did more in three months than we had done on private lessons, because we didn't work with him last year. They had one class last year and then they hadn't three and so on. You know, it's a small town and one is not willing to cause somebody to lose their job. I said it to the class-teacher on the parents' meeting, and other parents murmured only – what can we do – they have excellent marks. Believe me, for them, excellent marks are only important. My son was under the stress. He didn't dare to do task because he realized that he didn't know anything. And he had A. (Parent)

Problems that parents of children with special educational needs cope with are such that they are obliged to be fully involved in the school functioning. This is the case in specialized institutions, while they **rarely come even to the parents' meetings in regular schools**. Mothers emphasized that **female population is majority in specialized schools**:

Only a few fathers are met with this problem in a proper way. Mother is often alone when child is born with this kind of anomaly. (Parent)

Mothers of children with special educational needs, as we said before, are the most active group of parents. They are familiar with (mainly due to their own activity and information exchange with other parents whose child has the same or similar difficulty) legal regulations, institutions sphere of activity, but they have opinion that **the whole society should more honestly deal with their problem and with their children's needs**:

Everybody should honestly be part of this - not only on paper and formally, especially when someone from abroad forces it, in order to fulfil some international and European standards. And after, it is still only on paper. Something has to be done regarding these architectonic barriers. Good will must exist. People should be more educated in order to work with those children, more stimulated and motivated. Someone who has 400 EUR cannot be motivated. More resources have to be allocated – for example, for nursing of these children you have to pay costs of 60 EUR per a month. (Parent)

Most of the parents from our sample of survey **are not included in school life and work in a satisfactory way**, and that is their own evaluation. Some of them – actually majority – as a reason mention work overload and other personal obligations, skepticism that they cannot do anything better etc. They emphasize that **it is their own responsibility to be more involved**:

I live in a small town and I still think that the atmosphere in school is positive. Regarding these towns, it is still pretty well, it functions well. The cooperation between parents and teachers exists. But it is individual among parents, we should think how often we go to school, on the parents' meetings, to ask about our children – it happens, believe me, some parents never go. Their children finish primary school and they never go.(Parent)

The attitude of parents towards participation (as a concept) is absolutely positive. However, they are aware of many obstacles. Among other things, they strongly emphasize indifference to issues that are not directly concerned with either them or their children's lives. It means that they will not react until their child finds himself in a negative school context. This is something that majority agree with.

The initiative of Roma parents (if we can call it like that regarding the fact that it should have not ever happen) is disturbing. They had to respond to **reduced school teaching their children had** during the last year:

We have this lady, who was Roma assistant in school before, and she helps mothers to make contact with school, they talk to her first. We complained last year, we asked teachers to spend more time in school, to respect schedule. We have the schedule, but teachers don't respect it, so my husband and I went to solve that problem. They respected what we had agreed for a longer period of time but they stopped doing it again. They used to stay in school from 9 to 12.30, and now from 9.30 to 11.30, it's shorter. They have no complete school teaching. They had it in 2006. (Parent)

A few parents emphasize that in the process of teaching in modern context, teachers definitely have difficulties too:

Teachers have difficulties too. Some work, some don't. They all have the same salary. And those who work are ridiculed by others. And the teachers – there should be a difference among them. (Parent)

Parents hope they could have a chance to say or ask something during the parents' meetings. If teacher insists to finish with parents as soon as possible, his unwillingness to communicate with parent is obvious:

Parents' meeting lasts about 5 or 10 minutes. A parent starts talking, a teacher interrupts him. There's a parent in the class with speak disability. He starts talking and she says – Oh, please, you need half an hour to pronounce it. She doesn't understand. The principal is interested in convincing somebody to be politically apt, not in the teaching. (Parent)

It is evident that **parents' participation is not on a satisfactory level in many schools.** The main part of parents' participation is evidently directed to supporting children to finish their homework or learn with comprehension. Are parents indifferent or someone prevents their participation in school life?

The opinions are almost the same – parents generally do not show their willingness to be actively involved:

I think it's parents' indifference. We know, according to the parents' meeting, who comes and who doesn't. How much time a parent spends with his child in a day? None. (Parent)

In some communities (Roma people, for example) parents' behaviour practically reaches level of disturbing neglect, almost irresponsibility:

There are parents who are not interested to know where their child is. Mother maybe doesn't know where her child is or she sleeps when the child has to go to school. It happens that parent knows that their child is not in school only when principle calls. Child goes to school but he doesn't arrive there. (Parent)

Inactivity of parents who are present on parent's meetings is particularly noticed (almost all parents agree upon it). Teachers rarely somment on anything – practically, parents come, teacher speaks, parents listen to, and they start talking after the meeting:

No one talks on the parents' meeting and when it finishes all of them stand around the teacher and talk. (Parent)

One mother, openly and clearly, described behaviour of a teacher in school, especially on the parents' meetings:

Our people possess a lot of poltroonery. When we are all together, everybody nods and smiles. That's O.K., that's nice, that's perfect. Then two mothers, whose children have excellent marks, stand up and say: My ...is excellent in history, he's a great teacher. And the teacher doesn't come to school. They have excellent mark in maths and the teacher doesn't do anything. If someone stands up to criticize, everybody hushes him up and that person feels like a black sheep, so, people cannot stand up. It's not question of being a good teacher if a child is successful and independent in learning. The teacher doesn't go on sick-leave, but he simply doesn't come up. (Parent)

All parents absolutely agree that **only parents of good pupils come to the parents' meetings** and the others do not. They are probably afraid of class-teacher and other parents' judging:

Only parents of more successful pupils are on the parents' meetings. Other parents don't come, because somebody will say 'you are awful, your child is destroyed.' When they tell you something like that, you won't come ever again. (Parent)

We will illustrate this with one more example. Parents, who are afraid of being invited to explain why their child behaves in one way or another, simply react by avoiding parents' meetings:

Parents of problematic children and pupils with bad marks don't come. Parents of children with special educational needs don't come either. They never show up. Teacher and class-teacher call them thousand times but they don't come. (Parent)

Parent Council, in schools where they are active, can solve these critical situations. An example given by a parent is illustrative:

As a Parent Council, we managed to bring a parent whose child constantly made problems during the class and recess – he didn't leave them alone – we have a group in the Council that deals with these kind of problems (respectable people, with resounding names) – they talked to the family and parents came to the parents meeting and that child didn't make problems any more. The child was chosen for the class president, grew better and improved his learning. (Parent)

All parents are aware that everybody would have advantages of their more active participation in school life and work, and especially children. They are realistic in their belief that **the role they could have in school is mainly advisory and the attitude cooperative**. All agree with the next statement:

It would be better for all. We would have: better upbringing, successful school, school would have assistants (finances and other problems would be solved to some extent), school could solve all current problems faster and more efficiently and have better children's education. The parents' problem is that they are more turned to marks, not to knowledge. When we understand that, it will be certainly better. (Parent)

Parents are aware of benefits that would happen in that case. But the question still stays open: Why they do not try to participate? We did not hear from their answers that it was strictly forbidden to them. Also, fear, some of them mentioned, that child would be punished in some way, should not be an obstacle. In a moment when parent shows to school that he is not there only to intervene for his child's mark and when teacher really believes in his sincerity and perceive that they could be partners – then communication will be more open, which will, it is obvious, create favourable conditions for better parents' participation, as an incredible supporting resource.