

**ADVANCING EDUCATIONAL INCLUSION AND QUALITY IN SOUTH EAST  
EUROPE**

**Report of Focus Group Discussions with Parents from Romania**

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## 1. Conclusions

All focus group discussions developed in this phase of the project were held in schools, with voluntary parents of children of primary and secondary school level.

There were six groups interviewed at different periods of time between 1<sup>st</sup> of May and 8<sup>th</sup> of June 2009.

The groups of parents were between 6 and 12 participants. There were a group of parents of urban mainstream Romanian parents from Bucharest, another group of urban mainstream Romanian parents from a town (Calarasi), one group of rural mainstream Romanian parents (Roseti), one group of Roma parents from a town (Razvani, Lehliu), one group of Roma parents from a village (Roseti), one group of parents, members of Parent's Council and School Boards (Calarasi).

The discussions revealed the following ideas:

- Parents, no matter the group, feel powerless in front of a system which doesn't have a sense of reality and it is alienated from the school and from its real activity.
- Parents are individualistic; they do not tend to talk to each other problems or decisions that must be made. They speak with the teacher or the professor, rather with each other.

*In fact, the focus groups discussions gave them the chance to sit for an hour and a half and talk about their problems, their fears, their complains, their hopes, and, most important, they realized their flaws, their lack of initiatives and the incapacity of acting as a group. At the end of each discussion, all the parents thanked us for giving them the chance to talk to each other and, for our surprise, invited US to do more something like this.*

- Parents are a reactive body; they act rapidly, and sometimes recklessly, just when something goes wrong. They do not have the idea of prevention or the "I just stop by to see what have been going on lately in my children's school".

- The good thing is that *they recognize very fast the need to build an active body of parents urge to be satisfied.*
- Parents are more conscious about the fact that reforms are necessary in a continuous changing society, and they totally agree that today's school is more adapted to children needs that it was when they were pupils.
- Decisions appear to be taken somewhere far from them and parents obligation is only to apply what it had been told to do.
- School level decisions appear to involve parents more in *rural areas*, than in towns or cities. Parents are asked often how school yard should look like, how the interior should look like, what new
- Roma parents are rather excluded in rural areas, than in towns or cities.
- There are almost no differences of problems between Roma parents that are living in urban areas and Romanian parents from the same areas, the impossibility of transportation to the high school, lack of professors interest, society values and undesired "freedoms", temptations with whom parents cannot fight, street violence, television violence, food and drinks everywhere, lack of models (very interesting observation, wise!), people who represent good examples, lack of authority, of the teachers, of the law representatives, of politicians, etc.

It is obvious by their declarations that they learned from their experience. Parents' wish for their children is a different life and their experience told them that education is the key to a better life, a quality life. One of the mothers participant to the groups said that she wants a career for her son, or at least, a profession, a qualification. To the question "how much school a person should have?", Roma parents from the town answered that as much as possible! College or faculty, but it depends of the children, how much they will want to learn, because to go to school only for the presence, it is not an acceptable thing for the parent. But if the child wants to go to school, then parents will support him/her in this project.

- Roma parents from rural areas say that children need to learn reading and writing, count and calculate. And this is all they have to know in life. Girls and boys alike aren't supposed to learn so much, because it's a waste of time. Their traditional jobs, making copper caldrons, jewelry, to carry things by hands or by carriages, to wattle or to wicker, need no school or education. All they have to know is learned in the family.
- There are big differences between Roma parents from a town and Roma parents from a village concerning general view about school, its purpose and value.
- Parents agree most of the time (no matter of the group) that there is not such a thing as excluded parent, but a *self-excluded* parent.
- For parents from the village, inclusion or participation begins in the family. The family values must contain school values and education as a precious asset of a person.
- For parents from towns or cities, participation is something that begins with an invitation from the school, Inspectorate or even from the Ministry.
- Parents from villages tend to trust school's representatives (teachers, director, dirigints, etc.), instead of local community authorities, and have little understanding of their relationship with higher structures of policy making.

## 2. General mood

On the beginning of the discussions, all the parents said that all it's fine, there are some problems, but no major problems. Things might be improved, if everything would be more clear set or said.

*Parent from Bucharest: If we knew what is going on here, it would be better.*

*Romanian parent from town: Everything is fine. We don't speak so much about what is wrong and what is right. We just struggle. (All laugh.)*

Apparently parents have no problems, or they think they can handle them. But somebody breaks the ice:

*Romanian parent from village: Come on, people! Whole Romania has problems, do you think somebody will buy us when we say that we don't have any.*

Roma parents had completely different views, comparing the two groups. Roma parents from the town said that they have the usual problems of a parent, and parents from the village said that they have problems with clothes, they are old, do not fit most of the times, they do not have enough money for food, people laugh of their children.

This shows that our initial hypothesis that presupposed the existence of a difference between Roma parents from the town/city and Roma parents from village begins to be confirmed. Roma from the town say that there are no more discrimination acts toward Roma, they do not have separate classrooms, teachers are not discriminatory, although there are some examples of teachers, older, that give lower grades to Roma just because they are Roma. And then one parent says something interesting:

*Roma parent from town: There were a lot of programs for Roma in the school and all benefit from them. Computers, furniture were brought in the school, but no one thinks of that. We want to be treated equal with Romanians.*

In addition to that, all the parents think that local authorities do nothing to help school and all the funds are coming from EU or from sponsors.

### 3. Education reforms

Parents are unanimous on this issue. Great things have happened since they were pupils. School looks better, is renovated, furniture is adapted to children's needs and physical characteristics, now they have alternative textbooks, they choose which is the proper one for their children, parents choose optional subject matters for their children, they are asked more often about school level issues like choosing a uniform model, choosing supplementary books or notebooks from an offer, about organizing some events like school's days or open door day, etc.

Concerning curriculum reform, parents declare that subject matters content is more adapted to children's level of understanding, textbooks are user-friendly, there are not so much to learn how it use to be in the old days, but still too much!

One parent had another complain:

*Romanian parent from village: What children learn at school doesn't prepare them for life. It's should be more applicative, more life related and more related to present life of the child.*

It seems that one parent resumed the whole philosophy of age adaptation, real life adaptation, interdisciplinary and skills development.

The same group of parents gave an example of successful curriculum adaptation when their children had a class named *Education for a healthy life*. Children, third graders, learned how to brush their teeth correctly, how often, how to wash their hands, how many times. Children had a supervisor, the teacher or the nurse that came at every child's home and show him/her how to clean the room, how to arrange the objects, how to keep and store their personal things needed for school's activity, how to refresh the room, how often. After that, children teach their parents concerning hygiene.

Roma parents from the village had again stereotype answers, but Roma parents from town were very active and had nuances in their answers.

*Roma parent from town: Information from children manuals is too difficult for us. We can help them up to fourth grade, but not above. If they understand from classroom, that's ok, because we cannot help them with homework.*

One Roma parent has said that she is not satisfied with the school, with the teachers from fifth to eighth grade and she will move her child to a better school from the center of the town.

If you note this, it is quite a completely new and beautiful approach of Roma parents of education issue. They are very present and keen observes of the system and school's current problems.

Problems appear as "side effects" of the reforms and parents mentioned:

*Restrained authority of teachers and director, lack of punishments established by the law, migration of the responsibility for school from the Ministry to local authorities who doesn't care and does nothing else except talking (these opinions were encountered to all groups, except Roma parents from village, which had little to say).*

General perception toward reforms is that they are imposed from the Ministry and parents, children and teachers must follow.

The main complaint was that parents aren't listened by those who make the laws, and national consultations with parents' representatives are probably faked or those parents who indeed participate were not as representative as it should.

*Parent from Bucharest: Some reforms seem to be made by a group of amateurs.*

#### **4. Implication, general**

Parents from the village are more confident when they say that school management consults them, compared with town/city parents which say that school management has serious communication problems.

*Parent from Bucharest: I think that teachers and director want to be left in pace. They propose something, we are informed in different ways, especially through children, we receive some written notes, and we respond. Yes or no; we agree or disagree. It's difficult to gather and to merge all the opinions and then to satisfy all. It's too much trouble. It doesn't matter if all the parents vote. The teacher or director or diriginte of the class marks that he asked parents, and that's it.*

Parents declare that the most important decisions are made by the Ministry, and then by the school director and administration council. Their role is to apply what it has been told.

There are some differences between groups.

Urban parents are more convinced about the fact that they do NOT take the most important decisions.

*Romanian parent from town: We apply what school tells us to do in order to increase the grades of our children and his/her chance on exams.*

Instead, parents from village, Romanian parents, say that they are consulted and the most important decisions are taken by them. But parents have a different approach of implication. They see it as beginning in the family:

*Romanian parent from village: After all, it is I who motivates the child to go to school, to learn, to see that the school has meaning and value.*

The school has to react to that, to the indifference or to the implication!

Parents think that they can influence school level decisions, but not in very essential domains, like finances, hiring or firing staff, evaluation.

Roma parents say that they cannot change mentalities. Even though Roma do nothing wrong and his/her performance is the same as a Romanian child, teachers give lower grades just because the child is Roma.

So their influence stops there, and law change as well. Changing mentalities and society as a whole it's too much for every citizen.

The village Roma tend not to answer direct to those questions, they say that do not know and sometimes that they are not interested of those things.

*Roma village parent: People from above, Miss! I don't know.*

## 5. Parents' Councils

When they refer to decisional groups formed by parents, they think primarily of parents' council of the classroom. Only three parents from all groups had a clear view of the fact that there are some parents that are a part of administration council (School's Board).

Urban areas parents say that they are just informed of administration council' decisions, they are not asked o consulted about anything.

So they cannot influence decisions taken at school level. They do not know them all.

Parents from the village are asked and consulted, but domains are rather small in importance: weeds cutting, cleaning the school, flowers plantation, etc. But parents feel that they are important for the school management and they are consulted for real, not just formally.

Members of parents' council are communicative persons, with time to spear, interested of school's actions and not very shy persons. This is the sketch made by the parents.

In parents' council are elected persons that are proposed or self-proposed. Parents are not forced to be a part of parents' council, but they are not happy either. They feel it as a duty to perform.

This is the situation in all the groups, except village Romas which say that they are not invited or proposed and they are not coming so often at the school to know everything and to make a decision.

*Roma parent from village: We are poor people and we don't have time to come to school and participate to meetings. And we don't speak beautiful, no one listen, so we come for nothing.*

Parents that are a part of the council, classroom council, say that they do not remember some great achievements of their organization, but were some achievements, for sure. Nothing memorable, though.

*Romanian parent from town: If those structures, parents' council, parents' association, etc., wouldn't be dictated and we had made them ourselves, I think it would've worked.*

So those structures must come from a real need of the parents to be active and to be constituted in a body, even legally represented. But, especially urban parents think that they are obligated to do so, to be in parents' classroom council or in administration council. Everything what is imposed, parents see it as a foreign body that needs to be extirpated. They are resistant to everything that's not from their will.

What we observed from these focus group discussions is that parents that are a part of parents' council do not have a different discourse from the other parents. They were more talkative, though.

## 6. Participation of the parents

Motivations of participation as member of parents' council are divers, from: "I need to know what is going on here with my child", up to: "a friend, parent of a child in the same class as my child, got me into this".

Instead, Roma parents from town said something interesting:

*Roma parent from town: They have to call us in the Council, if the child is smart and got awards, it is normal. It's the merit of the child and I see it as an award for myself if I'm proposed to be in the Council.*

Anyhow, parents are happy to be involved. But parents from the urban areas feel most of the time unsatisfied of this activity, they feel that school management are not as open as it should be to their proposals and to they do not have a feed-back of how parents proposals are received and applied.

Initiatives are self-blocked, in the first place. Parents not even try to propose something because they are sure of an unsuccessful action; they think that they will consume precious time and energy for nothing.

For the question "Did you try to do something to motivate the school or other parents to join your projects?" the answer was unanimous, "NO". Some parents, very few, said that they had shy actions and when they were rejected by the other parents, in whom they trusted, and then they abandoned the projects.

Parents agree unanimously that participation is very important and recognize that they do not have time to come to school as much as it should.

## 7. Parent-teacher relationship and mutual trust

As we have said before, parents trust and respect teachers, dirigints, directors and professors. But they do not trust local authorities, especially the mayor.

*Roma parent from town: The mayor came to us before the elections said that his door will be open for everybody if we vote for him. The door stayed open for about a month after the elections. Then he got tired of us and closed the door.*

*Romanian parent from town: The mayor came in the schoolyard to make a speech in his campaign. ... He promised everything, he gave nothing.*

Parents affirm that they feel welcomed in the school, mainly because of the professors, teachers and school's management behavior.

However, we can make a classification on this issue, parents from village, especially Romanian parents, are very sure when they say that school's staff makes them feel welcomed and important, then parents from town are medium sure when say that school's staff makes them feel important, and then are parents from Bucharest which are less sure when they say that school's staff makes them feel important.

## 8. Obstacles

Parents identify as main obstacle the society, as a whole. They, as these society members, are not use to participate, to be active members and to ask for answers whenever we consider we are in a black-spot of information.

Parents from town said that they miss the ideas, what to do, how to act, what is good, what is necessary, what harms. They feel that they are not informed proper by the school, by the ministry and by their local authorities.

Parents from urban areas are more likely to react to an invitation from the school and this triggers the participation. Parents from rural areas, instead, come to school to ask, to see or to speak to teachers or the dirigints. In rural areas, it is common the situation when one of

the parents (usually the mother) doesn't work. In this case, more time it is dedicated to the children, their supervision and nurture.

## 9. Exclusion patterns

To the question "Is there any particular group of parents that is excluded from the school life?" parents firmly affirmed that they do exclude nobody. Not even when the moderator insisted and reformulated the question later, parents didn't say anything about exclusion. Not even Roma parents, especially those from town, didn't say that they are excluded.

All parents had been agreed with the idea that there is not exclusion, but self-exclusion.

Just one parent, from town, said: *Of course they are excluded, gypsies, or Roma, however... Why we don't recognize this?*

But no examples were given and the other parents from the group didn't agree with that parent and we couldn't convince him to say anything else on this theme.

## 10. Benefits of participation

A parent from Bucharest said: *Apparently we have been given a lot of weapons, but with no instructions manual. It is true that we have now more power, but we miss information. I, myself, need more informative meetings about the reforms, the new laws, the new regulations, what is this, what is that, more informal meetings amongst us and not only formal meetings with teachers where we are presenting results, grades of children. I think that we are missing parents' school.*

That says it all!

We could comment, of course. One benefit of participation is information. Another is satisfaction of the need for determination, control of their own children' education. A third benefit would be a professional help in becoming a better parent, the most challenging job in the world.