

The background of the cover features black silhouettes of a family consisting of two adults and a child, standing and holding hands. The silhouettes are set against a light purple background. A vertical double-line border is positioned on the right side of the cover.

PARENTS' PARTICIPATION IN SERBIA

Jelena Vranjesevic
Milina Petrovic

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Group structure

The six groups were organized according to the following schedule:

Group No.	Group description	Number of participants	Location	Moderator
1	Council members	10	Nis	Jelena Vranjesevic
2	Council members	12	Belgrade	Jelena Vranjesevic
3	Mainstream parents from urban areas	8	Kragujevac	Milina Petrovic
4	Mainstream parents from rural areas	7	Marsici village, Central Serbia	Milina Petrovic
5	Roma parents	7	Belgrade suburbs	Jelena Vranjesevic
6	Parents of children from special schools (vision and hearing impairments)	11	The school is located in Belgrade, parents come from the wide region of the city of Belgrade	Milina Petrovic

Key findings and recommendations

Key findings

- ✓ There is a general lack of understanding of the educational reform, its course and main objectives, while even the whole school system is by some parents sometimes perceived as mysterious, operating by its own rules that are not general or known to general population
 - ✓ Participation is in general identified with decision-making, while involvement is primarily home-based; level of involvement decreases with age – the peers become more important and there is an implicit or explicit pressure of children that the parents should not go to school
 - ✓ Among the mainstream school parents, there are no clear patterns of meaningful participation exceeding the issues such as excursions or choosing the extracurricular activities that can be identified
 - ✓ Parents from parent councils perceive their participation mainly in the areas such as extracurricular activities, finances (money donations) and in solving some specific problems (security problems, violence, drop outs, etc).
 - ✓ Main obstacles for participation are:
 - Mainstream schools parents
 - Learned helplessness – school is the one with the power, whatever parents may try will not have a real effect (lack of sense of having a real impact, or being an agent of school and community change in general)
 - Perception that the school should have the key responsibility in education of children, not the parents; general expectation that the school and the teachers need to be more proactive
 - perception that the school does not recognize that parents could have significant contributions to school life
 - Perception of teachers as not being sensitive and inherently interested in both parents' and children's needs and fears, judgemental and not devoted to their work, while the school is not a friendly and welcoming environment
 - Goals of education not being shared with parents, so the parents are often not completely sure which way they can help
 - Parents from the Council
 - Poor communication with teachers (teachers and parents seen as opponents, teachers feeling that the parents try to interfere in their professional skills and knowledge)
 - Problems in communication with other parents (lack of trust in the Council, lack of time and interest in school, unwillingness for taking the responsibility for the education and educational outcomes, accusations that council members try to bribe the school officials and teachers)
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- Fears of being in the mercy of school
- General lack of knowledge and ideas how to participate
- Parents from excluded groups
 - Lack of time (parents of children with developmental challenges are heavily involved in helping their children master the skills and competences in the curriculum)
 - Poor communication with teachers in some cases
 - Poverty, general exclusion from the society, stereotypes about the members of the excluded groups (especially the case with Roma parents)
- ✓ The most important opportunities for participation and strengths on which successful patterns of participation can be built are the following:
 - Mainstream schools parents
 - Parents seem to trust the teachers more than the school as the institution; personalizing this contact would be helpful for both sides
 - Parents value the teachers contacting them not just when there are some problems, but when they provide a useful feedback on the child's school performance
 - Participation may be achieved more easily when the classes are smaller; larger the class, less participation there is
 - An approach based on respect shown by the teachers and their explicit and well intended calls for parents to get engaged in very precisely defined, meaningful activities seem to have a fair chance to succeed in boosting the participation
 - Urban schools are under greater risk for lack of parent participation – rural schools are small and there is by far more communication between the parents, and most probably the communication between teachers and parents is more open, and the parents seem are more willing to involve in trying to make the school a better place for their children
 - Parents tend to be involved in the education of their children in the first school years - teachers of younger children could work on promoting participation, making the school a friendly place in which the education happens
 - Parents from the Council
 - This group of parents is in general more open for participation, and seem to understand it better
 - Lack of knowledge that they point out and their openness gives a chance for creating successful participation patterns by showing them different ways how they can participate
 - Parents from excluded groups

- This group of parents more easily accepts the responsibility for education of their children, and are more willing to get involved in different ways
- Some of the parents spend a few hours a day in school, which opens a chance to involve them in the school life in a systematic way
- Informal chains of communication are present and very strong (the support from other parents with similar problem is often offered and used)
- Although some of the parents show similar type of dissatisfaction with the school and teachers as the mainstream parents, they also seem to be more open to accept the school initiative
- There is a clear relation between the school initiatives to involve parents, the quality of teacher-parent communication and the actual level of involvement of parents/potential interest for involvement

Further recommendations for questionnaire development

- ✓ Parents do not have many ideas about different types of involvement / possibilities for involvement – the questions investigating participation need to be given as a semi-closed inventory of possible types of participation.
- ✓ The questions should include all levels of participation (information, consultative process and decision making process – parents tend to focus just on the decision-making)
- ✓ Although parents perceive their involvement mainly through relations with teacher/subject teachers, it is important to explore other relations they might have (with other parents, parents' council, school board, school principal, school staff, etc) – again, giving an inventory of possible types of interaction
- ✓ Since one of the obstacles for participation is that parents do not see its value, e.g. participation does not have sense for some parents, questions should address this issue too.
- ✓ Questions should address parents' ideas for better cooperation with school, but they should be very specific in order to avoid general comments. They should be about some specific thing/action/project parents would like to be informed of /consulted / participate in decision making process.
- ✓ There should be questions about cooperation / communication between parents from parents' council and other parents
- ✓ Parents from marginalized groups (Roma parents) have different perspective on participation, since their main issue is how to survive and provide education for their children. Most of the questions from the focus groups interview do not make any sense to them.

Research report

Parents from mainstream schools

Understanding the educational reform

"I don't know, to be honest. Everyone's been talking about the reforms. Reforms are a change, that's the meaning of the word reform. From what I see, the backpack of my kid is getting heavier and heavier. I don't see the point."

"The books are different, they look better than when I was a kid. Still, I think what children learn is too much. It is too difficult and they have too many classes."

"What I've seen from this reform so far is that I need to work with my child every day. I wonder what the teachers are paid for if I'm going to teach my child"

Parents from mainstream schools, either urban or rural, have very poor understanding of the meaning and content of primary school educational reform.

The reform is most often identified with curricular changes, but, again, there's no comprehension of the main aims of the reform.

Among the curricular changes, parents name the change of books rather than the programme itself, than the chance to choose between two facultative subjects (religious education or citizenship education) and some of them point that the curriculum is less suited to the knowledge and developmental capabilities of children.

Together with this, parents claim there have been some changes in the school expectations from them as parents. More precisely, they say the school teachers are putting a heavier burden upon them insisting on involving them in teaching their children and helping them with the homework more than it was the case when they were children.

Parents are neither able to say if the reforms are heading in a good direction, nor if it can be expected for the reforms to succeed.

Understanding parent participation

When asked who makes the most relevant decision about the education of their children, it seems that the parents have the feeling they are the responsible ones. Still, naming these decisions they are making, they are able to identify mostly just the decision on which school the child is going to attend, and whether the child will go to the excursion or not.

This inconsistency between the reality and parent's perceptions was the first among numerous signs that the parents are not really engaged in the life of the school (if we leave

"I am the one who has a say when it comes to education of my child."

"Well, I've chosen the school in which my school is going, I decide if my kid is going to excursion or not. But I can't decide where the excursion is going to take place."

the home-based involvement aside) nor they have a broad and comprehensive picture of how educational system is organized and the decisions made.

As the decisions made at the school level parents recognize the organization of excursions (choosing the march routes and the agencies that will be engaged in the realization), decisions about spending the money gathered from parents at the beginning of each school year (school dinar; giving this sum of money is optional, but there's actually an implicit pressure on all parents to donate the money; the sum of money given is predefined, and varies from school to school, depending on the school officials estimate of the economic situation of the majority of parents), decisions on the extracurricular activities (sports and science sections) and decisions on the children's placement in particular classes.

None of the decisions perceived as being made on the school level is the area in which parents participate. They claim that in the best case members of the parent's council are

"It is a system that works in a mysterious way, but works somehow. I have the impression that no one is actually aware of the rules that the schools are to obey. For me, there is a secret mechanism that makes it work."

informed post festum, in the form of a report. However, parents not being the members of the school or parents council are not even informed about these things.

Regular parents are neither aware of the ways they could participate in the school life more, nor they feel they do have some rights regarding their children's education nor the circumstances in which that process takes place. There are no

initiatives coming from the parents' side that the participants of the groups were aware of, neither had they had any idea about which kinds of initiatives might come from them. There were no patterns of meaningful participation of parents in school life that were identified in this group of parents.

School is perceived as operating by some hidden rules which parents neither understand nor are familiar with how they are made.

Parents do not feel empowered to have any significant influence on the ways decisions are made. Moreover, they feel intimidated by the fact their children are in the hands (and at mercy) of teachers and school in general, so they tend to give up even when they are not satisfied since they are not willing to engage in "Quixotian" fight.

When initiatives are coming from the school, parents are willing to accept them if they do not take too much time. In most cases parents are not willing to engage in prolonged, time consuming activities: their financial situation does not allow them not to work and be just moms (who are the primary caretakers in the families), but being a working mom does not spare them from taking care about the whole family almost entirely alone.

"There was a parent in this school that was always complaining about something. I think in most of the cases she was right, but they made her kid's life very difficult. Finally they have transferred the kid to another school."

"I would do what I am asked if it doesn't take too much time. With three kids, a regular job and all the housework... I really can't."

"I don't have the time."

"I can't do anything myself. If the school organizes something I would help."

Perception of school councils

School councils are perceived as not too influential. In most of the cases council members

“School councils are just a paravane they are using to legitimize all they do.”

“No one wants to confront the school. You need people that are talkative and open in the council, the ones that will speak out. Still it always ends with school making the decisions they want.”

“I don’t believe the council has any power. I see no sense in becoming a member”

are named by the school, and these are mostly parents whose children stand out in school. Although council members are often communicative and assertive, parents feel that the council really has no power, and that even the most loud parents, once they become council members, stop being critical towards school since they do not want to risk their children’s well being in school.

Pretty often, parents are not aware who the members of the school council in their school are.

Most of the surveyed parents from mainstream schools would not be willing to become the members of the school council – it takes time and does not give the parents any kind of satisfaction or influence on the school life.

Threats and opportunities for boosting the participation

What appears to be one of the most significant findings is that the lack of participation is rooted in parents’ learned helplessness – it is what prevents parents from having the initiative – parents got used to the school which is not organized as being in the service of children and parents, but more like having parents and children being in the service of school, and also got used to the fact that the school would not really take their needs into consideration whatever they might try. This situation is also identified as a general sense of lack of power within the community.

Among the other obstacles, the following can be identified as most important:

- It is emphasized that the school should have the key responsibility in education of children, not the parents
- Some parents expect more proactive involvement of the school and teachers
- Significant contributions that may come from the parents’ side are not recognized
- Teachers are not seen as being sensitive and inherently interested in both parents’ and children’s needs and fears
- Parents do not see themselves as the important agents of general community change
- Teachers are seen as being judgemental and not devoted to their work

“We as parents can’t really do something important. It is the government who can make the changes”

“I don’t feel welcome at school.”

“I am not a teacher, I can’t teach math. If I could, I wouldn’t do what I do.”

“I can help with the homework, and I am OK with that. I don’t know what else I could be doing”

“My kids are in 7th and 8th grade. They don’t need help. I just go to parents’ meetings ‘because they need to know I am controlling their behaviour”

- School is not seen as a friendly environment – parents do not feel at ease there since feeling inferior
- Goals of education are not clearly shared with parents, so the parents are often not completely sure which way they can help
- Participation is identified mostly with home-based involvement (helping the children master the skills and competences required by the school programme)
- Level of involvement decreases with the age of children – due to participating being understood as helping with the homework, with the decline of this need parental involvement makes less sense in higher grades

Some strengths on which higher levels of participation can be built are also identified:

“We know each other, we live near, so when we go for a coffee or so, we discuss school issues.”

“I was talking to some people in the local government to try to help. Our children don’t have a normal heating during the winter. They use coal. Like in the previous century.”

“In the first grade my daughter had a wonderful teacher. Every time she saw me on the street she would approach to tell me how my daughter is doing in school. I really felt she was interested in my child. But this one is so not involved at all. Totally opposite. So many things depend upon a teacher.”

- Participation may be achieved more easily when the classes are smaller; larger the class, less participation there is
- Urban schools are under greater risk for lack of parent participation – rural schools are small and there is by far more communication between the parents, and most probably the communication between teachers and parents is more open; in rural schools parents understand the financial problems of schools better and are more willing (but less financially able) to involve in trying to make the school a better place for their children (providing financial resources)

- The fact that parents tend to be involved in the education of their children in the first school years call for teachers of younger children to work on promoting participation, making it a natural surrounding in which the education happens
- An approach based on respect shown by the teachers and their explicit and well intended calls for parents to get engaged in very precisely defined, meaningful activities seem to have a fair chance to succeed in boosting the participation, since the school is seen as an important institution
- Parents seem to trust the teachers more than the school as the institution; personalizing this contact would be helpful for both sides
- Parents value when teachers contact them not just when there are some problems, but when they provide a useful feedback on the child’s school performance, pointing out the areas in which the child needs help, and helping parents deal with these problems

Communication with the school staff

Communication with the school staff is often rated as satisfactory in the beginning, but when probed for

“Teachers are acting sometimes like they are so much more important than the parents are”

deeper evaluations, there are some sources of dissatisfaction that can be identified primarily regarding the general sense that the school and teachers in a society are presented as very important and powerful which they tend to underline implicitly in their contacts with parents remaining distant.

Communication is expected to be initialized by the school and teachers, since parents do not feel comfortable and lack confidence in their contact with the school. This lack of confidence is the main reason why parents seem to prefer formal ways of communication with teachers, since it gives them the opportunity to reduce their sense of lack of efficacy by blaming the teachers.

Informal chains of communication

Informal chains of communication do exist between parents of children in the first years of schooling. Other parents are contacted in order to get the information on the schoolwork or some school problems, and sometimes it is centred on the organization which of the parents are going to pick up or drive the kids to school or for some extracurricular activities. These links between parents get weaker in time, since when children grow up parents get less involved, and school and homework problems are discussed among peers, not their parents.

Informal parental chains of communication are more important within smaller, rural communities, while in urban areas parents communicate just when they are neighbours or when they are friends with children of same/similar age.

Members of the Parent's Council

Parents perception of the main problems in school

According to parents the main problems in the school are:

- discipline
- peer violence
- greater demands and expectation from the school/teachers
- discontinuity between 4th and 5th grade, concerning different expectations teachers have both from students and their parents, different relations with teachers/subject teachers, different communication style, etc.

"Sometimes we have problems with Roma parents and Roma students. Recently, one of the students wanted to hit his teacher and that was a big scandal."

"Children do not respect their teachers as we used to when we were students"

"Atmosphere in the school is completely different now than it used to be before: teachers are permissive, students can do whatever they want..."

"I don't remember that my parents studied with me, when I was a student, and now we all have to be fully involved in our children's education, they are usually overwhelmed with homework and additional classes, I know a lot of parents who are forced to pay private lessons for their children."

"We were talking with other parents and we all agreed that school violence is one of the biggest problems."

"I wish there is the way to make the transition from the 4th to the 5th grade less stressed both for children and for us.... Our teacher promoted completely different communication style, expectations and relations with students than their subject teachers. Now in the fifth grade their subject teachers do not appreciate that, and the children are totally confused. We are also confused..."

Reasons for participation in the parents' council (PC)

Most of the parents said that participation in the PC is a good way to be informed about what is going on in the school and to try to be involved in decision making process in order to ensure the best interest of the children (all children, not just their own children). Some parents said that they were glad to be elected as parents' representatives and they wanted to justify the trust others had in them. A few of them mentioned some specific problems that they wanted to solve, like school violence and students' safety or changes in some aspects of school organization

"I wanted children from the first and the second grade to go to the school only in the morning shift, because they are too little and in the afternoon they cannot concentrate. We succeeded in changing the school schedule."

Parents perception of their participation in PC

Parents are in general satisfied with the decision making structure in the school, cooperation with teachers and the level of their involvement. They have the impression that they are informed about everything that is going on in the school. They said they are informed about: the annual school plan, the money and the way the money is spent, about curriculum (optional subjects and elected textbooks), extracurricular activities like field trips, excursions, "outdoors school", study visits (local government, museum, theatre, etc), different projects school is involved with, humanitarian actions and different initiatives such as decoration of the school, school yard, classroom. They are also informed of school performances, competitions, extra classes for children and optional extracurricular courses.

There are significantly less areas in which they are consulted: they are consulted about different actions/initiatives for which they need to donate the money; extracurricular activities such as outdoors schools, excursion and field trips (where to go) and about some specific problems that need to be solved like problems with discipline, violence, children's safety, or problems with certain group of students.

Concerning decision making process, they can decide upon very few things: how much money parents are suppose to give to school ("parents' dinar"), the way the money they donate could be spent, how high fees for teachers who are taking students on a field trips and excursions should be. Parents in Belgrade were more certain that this should be the only thing they can decide upon since "they cannot interfere in areas for which they are not competent enough, like school management and education".

Parents in Nis were more willing, than their "colleagues" from Belgrade, to talk about the areas in the school life in which they would like to be involved more.

"I would like to have more information about the place where they are going, to have maybe the pictures of the hotel and other facilities there, we need information in order to make us parents more relaxed."

"Maybe I would engage as a teacher assistant, I've heard that some schools have that"

They said that they would like to be informed and consulted not only about possible site for excursions, but also to be informed about conditions there. They would be interested in assisting teachers on the field trips and excursions and to be consulted about where to organize field trips. They would also want to have more information about the content of civic education and religious education,

before they decide where to enrol their children. They would like to be informed about whole school curriculum and its changes through different grades to be able to understand the "whole picture" of the child education. It seems that the big difference between parents and teachers of a certain grade and subject is that parents have in mind the whole child and teachers have in mind the certain grade, or certain subject (they do not have the holistic picture). Parents in Nis also express their motivation to be consulted about school curricula and to be involved more in educational process.

Initiatives made by the parents council

Belgrade parents mentioned some initiatives they started and conducted, such as:

- after school programs for 3rd and 4th grade students
- morning shift for students in 1st and 2nd grade
- project "School without violence" started in their school as direct outcome of the

discussion they had about violence and children's safety

Parents in Nis mentioned:

- school policeman who takes care of their students
- finding donors to donate computers and internet to the whole school
- decorating school yard for the project "Outdoors classes"
- organizing football game with teachers as a way to show that they were not opponents but should be partners

Challenges for parents' participation

- Communication with other parents:
 - Other parents are not regular on parents- teacher meetings, because they are either too busy (working a lot to provide money for their family), or do not want to accept responsibility to solve problems. Special problems are parents whose children are in some way "problematic". Some parents deny their responsibility for their children and try to place all responsibility on teachers and school in general. Those are the parents that are very difficult to communicate with.
 - Parents from marginalized groups represent group that is very difficult to communicate with mostly because "they are not interested in the education of their children, they are not interested in cooperation both with other parents and with teachers".
 - According to parents from PCs, some parents do not want to be involved in any aspect of the school life because they do not see the meaning of their involvement, they cannot realize potential benefits from participation. They think they have only decorative function (which is true in most cases!) and don't want to participate.
 - Parents participation is mostly present as numbers of "isolated attempts", rather than massive initiatives
 - Some parents mentioned that if they cooperate more with teachers/school, there will be danger of labelling that as a "corruption"
 - Other parents are usually uninterested in what parents from PCs have to say about information they got, they are more interested in school success of their children
- Communication with teachers:
 - Some parents mentioned that if they start to participate more, teachers could

"They would like others to solve their problems, they are used to delegate problems to other parents. They are thinking like: ...Let them deal with that...why it has to be me"

"They do not want to come to the meetings because they are afraid to talk about the problem. They are usually not present at school, they come at the end of the semester and ask about grades only."

"People will say that I want to gain some benefits for my child and that I want to corrupt the teacher. This is small place, we all know each other, rumours can be spread very quickly."

"It is difficult to draw the line between cooperation and intimidation, between participation and interfering in other's job."

interpret this as “intimisation”, or interfering in their professional role. They are afraid that if they express their motivation for participation in the classroom, teachers will be threatened and they would react in hostile way.

- According to parents one of the main obstacles for parents to cooperate with the school are stereotypes/prejudices about traditional relations between parents and teachers. For most parents teachers are seen as opponents, not partners.

- Lack of knowledge/ideas
 - Talking about barriers for participation some parents mentioned the lack of knowhow, e.g. ideas for their meaningful involvement. They said that they do not lack motivation and energy, but they don’t know how to participate in the meaningful way. They expect help from school/teachers to suggest some ideas for participation.

- Pressure from children
 - Parents whose children are in high grades mentioned that they suffer strong pressure from their children not to go to school, not to visit teachers, not to participate.

- Sustainability
 - Special challenge, according to parents, is how to make different actions/initiatives sustainable. Parents show interest from time to time, but without continuous support, their motivation decrease slowly and disappear at the end.

Opportunities for participation

In spite of different obstacles, parents think that they can participate in a meaningful way. They stressed good relations with teachers as the most important precondition for participation. There are parents who show motivation for cooperation, they just need to be educated how to participate. Participation should be understood in much broader since than “getting information about school grades and behaviour of students”, donating money and decisions about the way the money should be spent.

It seems that participation should be supported “from the school”, parents cannot do things alone, they need systemic support that will make participation more sustainable and incorporated in the school ethos.

Excluded groups

Parents of children from special schools

Understanding the educational reform

Parents of children from special schools included in this study had children in the school for children with vision impairments (VI; their curriculum is the same as in the mainstream schools but the methods used are adapted for children; since brothers and sisters with and without vision impairments are often accepted in order to make it easier for the parents, this school actually works as an inclusive school) and hearing impairments (HI; often paired with some cognitive deficits; therefore, these schools work according to different programmes suited for special schools).

The main difference between parents from these two parent groups was apparent from the beginning of the discussion, so the results of this focus group discussion will often be interpreted starting from their different positions.

"Books that our children are using are from 1985 or 1986. There are still the stories about Tito and his birthday, about the pioneers and the holidays of ex-YU. Our children kinda live in the past century, in a non-existing country"

"I can't expect a teacher to be interested in my child more than I am. I am to try to make my child's life as good as possible."

"My primary responsibility is to help the development of my child. And that means helping him get the proper education also"

When it comes to the educational reforms, these two groups are very similar in their lack of being informed on the main aims of reform together with its content. While the parents of children with VI are at least aware of the changes seeing the books that have changed, children with HI are using the books from the mid eighties.

These parents are not especially concerned about having to work with their children at home – they see their children as different which helps them having a better understanding of them being responsible for their children's education and achievement. In this sense, compared to the mainstream groups, they really feel that they share these responsibilities with schools and teachers.

Understanding parent participation

Similar to the previous groups, parent participation is understood mostly as being exhausted with the parental involvement in homework assignments. Still, these parents do tend to get involved in school a bit deeper. The main reason for this lies in the fact that they are obliged to bring their children to school every day, and then pick them up after school. Since many of them are travelling from distant suburbs or surrounding villages (some travel 50-60 kilometres one way), the school provided them with the possibility to be in the school while waiting for the classes to end. Although the parents are not allowed to go to the classrooms and in any way be involved in the educational process within the school, the main benefit is that it connects the parents who have the chance to share their experiences, get closer and develop supporting

"My child needs to get up at about 5.30 every morning since we have more than 50 kilometres to the school. And when I use public transportation in the city, I often get kicked off the bus or tram because I don't buy the ticket. I can't afford buying the ticket every day."

strategies which are especially important for the new parents that are coming to the school with their children. This support from parents with similar problems is stated to be very important and sometimes much more than the mothers get from their partners who in most cases are totally excluded.

"Since my kid was going to a regular school before this one, this is a paradise. The first school was an absolute hell. Here everyone understand me, and are willing to help. Some parents were there for me from the beginning, financially and emotionally."

Still, when the line is drawn, it can be said that these parents do not participate or have a better understanding of participatory activities of parents more than the mainstream groups.

Perception of school councils

Parents from the school for children with HI show similar lack of understanding and trust towards the council as it is the case with mainstream parents – parents in the council are not chosen by the other parents but named by the school, there is no communication between the council members and other parents and no one is interested in taking part in the work of the council.

When it comes to parents of children with VI, the general attitude towards school that is more positive can be seen in their better overall communication with the school:

- They choose their own representatives for the council – they are picking the people that are outspoken and willing to get engaged
- Since the number of children per class is around 10, all of the parents from the same class know each other and council member inform the other parents on council activities in advance, also consulting their opinions on different issues
- They feel they are participating in the school life and making important decisions, although that number of decision is limited.

"I don't even know who's in the council!"

"No one ever contacted me regarding anything that the council has been involved in. At the parents meeting they just sometimes inform us that something has been done – for instance that they have painted some classrooms or something like that."

"We choose our representatives. We vote those that are willing to stand for our interests and interests of our children"

"The woman that is in the council calls me to check my opinion on the excursion march routes"

"There is not too much we can decide upon: the excursions, picnics... But they ask us always"

"Teachers are active, they contact us to inform us what we need to do with our children, on what to pay more attention"

Still, there are no specific initiatives coming from the parents' side that exceed what is typical in school.

Threats and opportunities for boosting the participation

Main hindrances for increasing the participation can be identified as the following points:

"We share the smoking area with the teachers. They have different chairs, and it says – for teachers' use solely. It makes me feel like I am less worth than they are."

"I don't know, this is different from how I learned in school. I don't understand that it is OK for a child to be in the 4th grade and not being able to read and write perfectly. I don't understand how they can't teach that simple thing."

- Parents' week economic status does not allow them to be just mothers taking care of their children, although they would prefer that
- Their home-based involvement, the necessity to bring the children to school every day tightens the space for parent's additional involvement
- Parents of HI children perceive teachers as distant, not interested in communication, not too cooperative and not involving the parents, insisting on the separation from the parents
- It is difficult for parents to understand specific educational goals for HI children, since they are different from what they have in their experience; they tend to expect more than the teachers do, so there is a conflict since the parents sometimes feel lower expectations of parents are not there due to the real abilities of children, but due to lack of teacher involvement

Main strengths on which one could rely trying to boost the participation are the following:

- Parents tend to feel there's a shared responsibility for their children's education; impairments are seen as challenges that they need to overcome in order to do everything in their power to help their children have a normal life
- Some of the parents spend a few hours a day in school, which opens a chance to involve them in the school life in a systematic way
- Informal chains of communication are present and very strong; the school just needs to start using them in order to promote participation
- Although parents of HI children show similar type of dissatisfaction with the school and teachers as the mainstream parents, they also seem to be more open to accept the school initiative – they just need someone to show them how they could get involved.

Roma Parents

Participants were six Roma parents from one very poor Roma settlement in Belgrade. They did not participate in any project (neither OSI, nor any other local NGO project), they have from three to seven children and all of them live under the edge of poverty. They have from one to three children at the school and they are struggling very hard to keep them in the school. The school in which they are is near Roma settlement and there are a lot of Roma children in the school.

Their main concern is how to survive and how to provide education for their children. They are not familiar with decision making structure in the school, parents' council or any parents' initiative. Their main focus is communication with the teachers of their children and the only modus of participation is through cooperation with teacher. They said that they were

satisfied with the teachers, and gave some examples of teachers' understanding and concern for their children

They do not communicate with other parents, although they said that they are not excluded. They rarely come to parents-teachers meetings because they have to work to earn some money, or they have to stay and take care of the children. Some of them live far away, but they decided to enrol children in this school because "in this school Roma children are treated well". They have problems to come to school very often. That is why their communication is usually through teachers and school psychologist who is always "willing to help". There were no initiative from other parents to help them in any way; the only help they get is through school donations from time to time.

"I would do everything for my children to finish the elementary school. I don't want them to have life that I have. I am illiterate and today you cannot achieve anything without school. I don't want them to collect garbage."

"My daughter couldn't go to school two weeks because my wife delivered the baby and she had to stay at home and help her because I work at the market whole day. I went to the teacher and explained the situation and she said that it would be OK."

"Last winter my daughter could not go to school because she did not have shoes. Teacher understood that and she did not make any problem."

"Our teacher promised us to provide some free textbooks because she knows we cannot buy them."

Problems they identified are connected with: poverty (no money for textbooks, books, notebooks, pencils, clothes, etc); their way of life; stereotypes/prejudices toward Roma

" My son did not go to preschool although he had to, because he was not used to be without us alone and he could not stand to be alone in the preschool. I talked with the school principal and she promised me that he would be fine in the first grade. We all go together, we are very connected."

people in other institutions ("When they see me in the welfare centre they did not want to talk with me"); some of them do not have documents (ID or citizenship), so they cannot use facilities of welfare centres or primary health care centres. State is very strict with their obligation to send their children to school, but on the other hand they are not receiving any support for the education of

their children. This is why for the most of them, the main problem is how to keep their children in the school. They are very interested in education and they value education, but if they do not get support, their children will soon be drop outs.