

**“Advancing Educational Inclusion and Quality in
SEE”**

**Summary of Focus Group
Discussion Reports**

May 2008

TABLE of CONTENTS

Focus Group Sessions..... 3

 Project objectives..... 3

 Focus group objectives 3

 Groups..... 3

 Sessions..... 3

 Topics..... 3

 Country reports..... 4

Key findings..... 4

 Issues discussed 4

 Parents’ and Community Participation in School-level Dedcision-Making..... 5

Additional issues 7

Focus Group Sessions were held in all 8 countries participating in the Project:

Albania
Bosnia & Herzegovina
Kosovo
Macedonia
Moldova
Montenegro
Romania
Serbia

Project objectives

This focus group research is part of the Project "Advancing Educational Inclusion and Quality in South East Europe". The Project has several phases; the main objectives of the first phase are to --

- (1) better understand how stakeholders (e.g., parents) engaged in school- level governance, by carrying out national surveys of school principals;
- (2) support sustainable initiatives that enhance stakeholders' participation in school governance.

Focus group objectives

Focus groups are a useful way to ascertain the capability, values, positions and activities of school principals with respect to participation at the school level. The results as reported in the 8 country reports will be used to improve our understanding of the conditions under which schools operate, and principals' positions with regard to parental participation in school-level decision-making. They will also help us to prepare more relevant questionnaires for other components of the Phase 1 research.

Groups: In each country, two groups of school principals were invited to take part. Most groups included elementary school principals only, although some secondary school principals took part as well (Romania). In total, 16 focus group sessions were conducted, in which more than 100¹ principals or other school leaders (e.g., deputy principals) took part. In some cases, care had been taken to include a mix of urban/rural schools, and in one case (Montenegro) the principal of a special school was invited; in another (Albania) a school with a largely Roma student population was represented. Each focus group had about 8 participants.

Sessions lasted between 90 and 120 minutes, and - judging by the reports - the discussions were animated and considered useful by those present.

Topics were suggested by a set of guidelines provided by the Regional Research Team for the Project, and translated for each respective country. Each discussion group was recorded, and then transcribed and summarized in 8 country reports. These are available on the Project web site (in English).

¹ Two reports do not mention the number of participants (BiH and Albania); but together, the other 6 had 99 participants over the two focus sessions. However, it can be assumed that BiH's and Albania's groups were of approximately the same size (± 8 people), bringing the total to an (assumed) $16 \times 8 = 128$ people.

Country reports range from 5 pages (Kosovo) to 36 pages (Montenegro), with an average about of 15-17 pages. Some are straightforward summary *reports* of what was said during the discussions (Kosovo, Moldova, Macedonia, Serbia) while others offer *analyses/interpretations* (Albania, Romania, Montenegro) as well as *recommendations* (Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina).

Key findings

Issues discussed.

Despite the common guidelines, there are considerable differences in the topics of discussion among the groups. Understandably, principals were more interested in solving their immediate problems than in talking about stakeholders' participation in school decision-making.

For example, in **Albania**, one of the top concerns was over-crowded classes; another was the undue importance given to examination results, and the adverse (or not?) effects of new private universities with easier admission criteria. Principals in **Bosnia & Herzegovina** said that education reforms were imposed without adequate funding or clear guidelines, and that therefore they were implemented by schools themselves to the best of their ability, given that essential materials and equipment are often unavailable. In **Kosovo**, principals spoke about poor infrastructure, too many shifts, not enough class time, and a lack of financial autonomy which means that even minor expenditures require complicated centralized procurement procedures.

In **Macedonia**, concerns were related to teacher quality, to the availability of equipment, to the impact of [financial and administrative] decentralization, and to the introduction of the new 9-year basic education programme. In the latter case, principals commented that the new requirements (e.g., the provision of a computer for every child) took no account of the real conditions of many schools. Reforms were too rushed, too top-down, with too little consultation, and no strategies for sustainability. Worries were expressed also about aggressive behaviour of some children – fights, vandalism, bullying. In **Moldova**, there was concern about the large amounts of home-work given to students; teachers' low salaries, and resulting lack of motivation. Moreover, the fact that a growing number of parents work abroad means that children often do not get the kind of family stability and support they need in order to learn and develop. Their motivation suffers; they are also often sick and not properly nourished. **Montenegrin** principals spoke of their schools' financial and material problems, as well as their lack of professional and personal satisfaction because they feel they cannot provide the kind of high-quality education that students are entitled to. Some also mentioned political bickering between parties and personal animosities that sometimes stand in the way of getting things done. Relations with local authorities, however, are reported to be good. The principals acknowledge that the socio-economic "surroundings" of the school (community) highly influence the quality of schooling, and that they are sometimes more concerned with ensuring safety and security than with teaching and learning,

In **Romania**, all focus group participants had recently been involved in public consultation debates about a block of new education laws proposed at the end of 2007 (Law on Pre-University Education, Higher Education, and Teacher Education). Therefore they were very well informed. Not surprisingly, some of the discussion was about changes in the way principals will be appointed (under the new laws, this will be the responsibility of local Councils on the recommendation of the school's Board of Trustees) and similar issues raised during the public consultation. In addition, all

principals said that the quality of learning in Romanian schools is “getting worse” and that learning outcomes are unsatisfactory; but that negative media reporting – and a lack of communication between political and administrative decision-makers and the school – are adding to the schools’ negative image. **Serbian** principals agree: they say that one of the most common problems for principals is the lack of communication, co-operation and support from the Ministry and other institutions (e.g., Social Welfare and Health). Also, while material conditions in schools have improved, student behaviour and attitudes have not. “Some students are aggressive, and not interested in learning” – and in some cases parents do not support the school when there are problems with violence or other behaviour issues. On the positive side, in-service training of teachers is much better, and they have more opportunities for professional development.

Parents’ and Community Participation² in School-level Decision-Making

The main objective of the focus group discussions was to find out how principals perceive the level and value of parental and community participation in school affairs. Therefore, all focus group spoke about this topic in some detail, mostly in a positive way but with some reservations.

Recurring themes were:

- Active interest and involvement from parents are good for school life, and for ensuring that students are regularly in school and progressing well.
- Frequent contact between the school (principal as well as teachers) and the parents is helpful, and often prevents problems or makes it easier to resolve them when they arise.
- Not all parents, however, are interested in taking an active part. In fact, principals say that most are *not* interested, beyond the results (grades) of their own child³. A minority of parents (between 10 and 20%) are taking an active interest in school matters.
- As a result, the most prevalent form of participation is through formal channels, such as a Parents’ Council or a Board of Trustees (with parent representative(s)), and communication goes through the same channels. Decisions taken are “notified” to teachers and parents. Communication is limited to dissemination of information, rather than participation.
- In practice, for most parents contact with the school is limited to their child’s teachers, or other professionals such as pedagogues or psychologists.
- Most principals are satisfied with this, and many expressed concerns about too much direct involvement by parents. They felt that this could lead to undue interference in matters that are not within the competence of non-professionals, and that in the end the principal is [legally] accountable for the way the school is run: “The School Council has power but is not accountable, whereas the principal is accountable for decisions made by the School Council” (**BiH**). In **Serbia**, the comment was made that “Some parents on the Board are

² Since none of the focus groups spoke about *employers* – key “stakeholders” in education quality! – “participation” in the reports usually refers only to parents/guardians, and [occasionally, e.g. in **Romania**] to persons who are community members but not parents of students in the school.

³ Some principals saw the lack of involvement by parents as symptomatic of a *general* lack of involvement in the lives of their children, either because of lack of time or lack of interest. “Children have no one to talk to at home” (**Romania**).

aggressive...they do not trust the principal and use their power to constantly criticize, complain and control everything”.

- Indeed, some focus group participants were strongly against the very idea of Parents’ Councils or School Boards (e.g., in **Albania**), again because these bodies confuse (or dilute) issues of authority and accountability:”Either you give the competence to the school head, or you give it to a Board. I don’t want to deliver my requests to a Board and be controlled by a Board”.
- However, there is a general consensus that parent involvement is useful in specific types of activity. Examples given are (1) raising money for materials or equipment [most frequently mentioned]; (2) supervising extra-curricular activities such as clubs or school outings; (3) organizing special events, and contributing to refreshments for parties; (4) helping with building maintenance or painting classrooms. Note that none of these involves decision-making in matters of school policy, or priority-setting in allocating resources. Thus, the conclusion must be that *informal* parental involvement is welcome, as long as it is limited to “support”, and does not impinge upon the decision-making powers of the principal.
- Nevertheless, a significant number of principals mentioned positive experiences with parental involvement, although they say that it takes a great deal of effort to engage parents in a meaningful and sustained way. Training of Board or Parents’ Council members would be useful, because few are familiar with the legal and financial implications of running a school. In addition, many principals expressed dissatisfaction with the way in which Council or Board members are chosen, and with the overall constitution of the Board or Council membership.
- It is striking that there was no discussion (except briefly in one case, in **Albania**) about *students’* participation, either formally (e.g. through student representation on a Board or Council) or informally, for example through organization of clubs or competitions. Principals spoke fairly critically about their students (low motivation, poor results, behaviour problems) or seemed to regard them almost as “victims” of education reforms such as curriculum change, assessment/examination procedures, or as being overloaded with too many subjects, homework etc. Principals do not appear to consider them “stakeholders” in the way the school functions. (This may be because most principals came from primary schools; but even where secondary school heads were present, the subject did not arise.)

In conclusion, principals say they do want parents and the community to be more actively involved with the school, as long as there are clear boundaries between the principal’s authority and (constructive) input from stakeholders. The way most principals see it, practical support -- such as fund raising or helping with maintenance -- is most useful.

In addition, there may be some legal restrictions on what non-professionals can and cannot do. In **Serbia**, for example, rules laid down by supervisors and inspectors limit parents’ involvement to some extra-curricular activities, but they cannot take part in any aspect of teaching or learning. In one school, the principal was sanctioned because during a gym class some skills were demonstrated by a parent who was not a qualified teacher. Some projects like *Developmental Planning* and *School without Violence* can include parents as partners, as long as no classroom work is involved.

In **Montenegro**, by contrast, principals were enthusiastic about involving parents directly in teaching. One of the arguments put forward was that this might “lead to an increase in parents’ motivation for participation in other aspects of school life, including the Council’s work.” They also say that there is a legislative framework for this, since every teaching plan and programme leaves space for the autonomous creation [at school level] of parts of the curriculum relating to the local environment, and parents could be involved in both the planning and the delivery of lessons related to the local economy, the town’s history, etc.

Additional issues

Because the Project is formally titled: “Advancing Educational Inclusion and Quality in SEE”, several focus groups seemed to be unclear as to what the *main topic of these particular discussions* (**parental involvement**) was meant to be. A great deal of discussion time was therefore spent on wider issues, such as education reform, teacher qualifications, materials and equipment, and student behaviour. While this certainly helped to break the ice and get the discussion going, there was also a risk that the groups would focus on their schools’ most pressing problems (such as over-crowding, poor condition of premises, lack of class time to deliver the curriculum, lack of money, and concerns about [too much or too little] external assessment and testing).

Of course, these problems do affect both the **quality** of education and the capacity of schools to be more “**inclusive**” in terms of ethnic minorities and children with special needs, and in that sense these wider discussions were useful.

Several focus groups did spend time talking about **inclusion**, mostly in positive terms although they did not underestimate the complexities of the task. Efforts to include **Roma and other ethnic minority children** were mentioned in several cases (**Romania, Montenegro**), as well as a greater awareness of the problems that some poor or otherwise disadvantaged children (for example, those without parental care) face in terms of learning achievement. There also seems to be a difference in learning achievement between urban, suburban and rural children, and in the ability of [some] rural schools to provide the same quality of education as urban schools

Only in one country (**Montenegro**) was time devoted explicitly to principals’ attitudes to **inclusive education**. It is well worth paying some special attention to this discussion:

- Principals in both focus groups stated that one of the basic forms of educational deprivation is that of **rural children vis-à-vis their urban counterparts**. Rural children are less likely to have had pre-school experience, and often come to school less well prepared.
- The education system – and the school – is adapted to the needs of the national majority more than to **ethnic or linguistic minorities**. The language barrier was mentioned in particular, as well as the lack of appropriate role models for minorities as reflected in textbooks, materials, and curriculum.
- In the case of **Roma**, the language barrier is considered the greatest problem. Often they do not speak Montenegrin, and there are no conditions for teaching in Roma language. Many also speak Albanian, and although there are some Albanian schools not all Albanian-speaking Roma have access to them.

- Regarding children with **special educational needs**⁴, principals say that some teachers (especially older ones) are opposed to SEN inclusion, and do not make any effort to include them in teaching and other activities. “They don’t look at it as something normal.” Also, some students are prejudiced against SEN children, and have negative attitudes because of what their parents and other family members say about special needs.
- Some principals also raised practical problems – “there are no legislative standards set by the State”, for example about the incline of wheelchair ramps, how long and wide they should be, etc. Also they say there are no standardized specifications for toilets for disabled children.⁵
- A key issue is the lack of staff trained to work with SEN children, especially in overcrowded classrooms. Some teachers have had NGO in-service training but it is not enough.
- Specialists are also lacking – mentioned were speech therapists, psychologists, pedagogues. These may be available in bigger schools but not in smaller or rural ones.
- The principals mentioned as “the biggest problem” the so-called “categorisation” (assessment and diagnosis of a child’s special educational needs). [NOTE: In Montenegro, the notion of “*categorisation*” is no longer used. The former Commissions for diagnosis and placement are now called “Commissions for Direction”; there are at present 19 of them at local level. They include parents as well as school psychologists and defectologists, and the approach is no longer “medical”]
- However, in practice the evaluations are not always carried out, and this leads to frustration not only for the school and the teachers but also for the parents and the child. There is also a danger of under- or mis-diagnosing special needs that are not immediately obvious, for example children with some degree of autism, dyslexia, or behaviour disorders.

Conclusion

The focus groups appear to have been well attended, lively, and useful in terms of the development of the PHASE 1 research questionnaire. In particular, the report from **Bosnia & Herzegovina** includes some helpful suggestions for amending the survey questionnaire. Because only a few of the focus group reports came to any “recommendations”, and because these tended to be country-specific, it is best for the national teams to follow up on them.

⁴ In April 2008, the *National Strategy on Inclusive Education* (developed by the MoES in partnership with UNICEF, the Finnish Government Development Programme, FOSI-ROM and Save the Children-UK) was formally approved.

⁵ Others felt that (in the case of ramps) ordinary common sense should be enough, and that no legislative standards were needed. In the case of toilets and other facilities, architects or building contractors should have enough experience to advise the schools.

