



Qendra për Arsim e Kosovës  
Kosova Education Center

**KEC**

## **Advancing Educational Inclusion and Quality in SEE**

### **Focus Group Report**

## **KOSOVO**

**Introduction.-** Two focus group discussions with primary school principals were organized in order to learn more about their perception of parents' and pupils' participation in school. The first group was composed of eight principals from the Prishtina Region, half of them from urban and the other half from rural schools. The second group with similar urban/rural structure was composed of principals from the Mitrovica Region. One confirmed participant of the Prishtina Group did not show up in the discussion. Nine out of fifteen principals participating in the Focus Group interview came from schools having been exposed to organized interventions aiming the increase of parents' and community participation in decision making, whereas the other six came from schools with no such experience.

The discussions took place in the premises of the Kosova Education Center (KEC) in Prishtina, in a setting familiar to most of the participants. The focus group discussion with the Prishtina Group took place on February 7, whereas the discussion with the Mitrovica Group took place the next day. Both discussions took approximately 1 hour and 45 minutes, and were carried out based on a common protocol. Discussions were carried out in Albanian and were moderated by Dukagjin Pupovci. Nora Tafarshiku was responsible for preparing full transcripts based on voice recording.

**Common problems of Kosovo schools.-** Poor infrastructure is perceived to be one of the major problems in the Kosovo schools, both urban and rural. Although there was some refurbishment of school premises in urban areas, as a rule, schools continue to operate in multiple shifts, often three or four with class periods shortened to 30-35 minutes. On the other hand, rural schools do not face the problem of being overcrowded, but the premises in those locations are usually damaged and do not offer proper working conditions for their students.

Another pressing problem in the Kosovo schools is a lack of any financial autonomy that deprives the schools from any possibility to manage even small procurements. The school principals complain that they need to initiate complicated procurement procedures with the Municipal Directorate of Education in order to fulfill every need including minor repairs and covering of small expenditures. Also, the consumables they receive on pre-capita basis are insufficient for normal operation of schools.

It is prescribed by the Law that a school principal manages the school budget, but, simply, it is not true. We, the school principals, often have to pay from our own pocket for minor repairs, just to get the things done.  
(A Focus Group Participant)

The school principals pointed out that, due to poor school infrastructure and outdated teaching, pupils lose the interest for school as they grow. Many children come from families living below the poverty line and their motivation for learning is extremely low, just as the support of their parents for better achievements.

**Reforms of education.-** School principals recognize that systemic changes in the education system have increased the capacity of schools to offer better education, and it particularly applies to teachers who have been exposed to various training programs. They acknowledge that trained teachers are able to offer more to the pupils and to make the curriculum more relevant to them. However, they point out that the lack of support structures for improvement of teaching, in addition to low teacher salaries, seriously affects the capacity of teachers to develop and use modern teaching methodologies in their work. The focus group participants felt it was unrealistic to expect they would be able to monitor and provide expert advice to 50-90 teachers in addition to their administrative tasks

I have a colleague who used to be an excellent teacher. Facing economic difficulties he found an additional job as a night watch. He works every night, and, of course, he is too tired to teach the next morning. Right after the classes he goes straight home to get some sleep ...  
(A Focus Group Participant)

Curricula are still considered to be knowledge based and overloaded with redundant and obsolete information. Different opinions have been expressed about the alternative textbooks – some focus group participants considered the schools are not yet prepared to choose independently the most appropriate textbooks, whereas the others thought teachers should assume responsibilities for the choice of the textbooks.

**Participation of teachers and students.-** It was agreed that active participation of stakeholders in decision making at school level brings a new quality into the operation of a school. Teachers are consulted for all major decisions at the school level, not only through Teachers' Council, but also through direct dialogue. Although academic

Teachers in my school are autonomous. They are free to do whatever deemed necessary for the benefit of pupils. They can organize extra classes, homework assistance, picnics... I never prevent them from doing right things.  
(A Focus Group Participant)

autonomy of teachers is widely recognized, several principals shared their concern on ways certain teaching methodologies are being applied in their schools. The latter refers to teachers transferring the responsibility for learning to pupils without providing proper assistance and guidance to the learning process.

The main form of pupils' participation in decision making is through pupils' councils which operate in all the schools in Kosovo. Focus group participants pointed out nice examples of pupils' councils assuming responsibility for extracurricular activities, competitions, etc. One of the school principal mentioned an example of parents having organized the repair of the damaged floor in some classrooms. Although other parents were hesitant to do the same in the classrooms where their children attended, they surrendered to the "pressure" of pupils who wanted to have good working conditions just as their neighbors. Another school principal shared an example of pupils' council selecting the cleanest classroom on monthly basis and rewarding it with something.

**Participation of parents.-** The school principals reported that their schools have a common format of organization of parents – the Parents' Councils. In addition to that, parents' representatives participate in school boards and the chair of a board is a parent. Participants of focus group discussions agree that it is up to a school to facilitate participation of parents in decision-making. They recognize that parents' participation is a key to the high performance of a school, and expressed no reservations towards inclusion of parents in school matters.

Types of participation vary from school to school. In most cases parents tend to assist schools in provision of goods and services that cannot be financed by the school budget, although school principals admit that they were more willing to offer this type of assistance in nineties when the education funding system was not functional. Also, they recognize that this type of contribution is more present in rural areas where the communities have a stronger sense of ownership towards schools than it is a case in urban areas. Financial assistance is more common for urban areas, whereas voluntary work is a type of in-kind contribution of parents in rural areas. Also, there are cases of school that involve parents in teaching.

In my school Soros Foundation furnished two classrooms according to the Step-By-Step Program standards. Parents of the children learning in three other classrooms decided to fund the furnishing themselves. They made a pre-calculation themselves and placed the order for furniture.  
(A Focus Group Participant)

School principals consider that the fact the schools do not have bank accounts and are not allowed to accept cash from parents limits their ability to mobilize the community in helping the school. However, the school boards are allowed to collect cash contributions provided they are overseen by parent members, so most of the schools have some funding for urgent needs.

Interviewees agreed that participation of parents in school decision making depends on their social status, and it is visible in both, urban and rural areas. It was reported that parents originating from lower income groups are quite generous in providing financial and in-kind contributions, but they usually refrain from taking initiatives for improvement. The principals of schools with significant participation of minority students reported that their parents are quite actively involved in school business.

The Chair of my School Board is a military officer, and he always helps me in undertaking any activity necessary to ensure normal operation of the school. He helps us establish links with the community and use their capacity for the benefit of the school.  
(A Focus Group Participant)

**Conclusions.**– The focus group discussions confirmed presence of traditional participation of stakeholders in Kosovo schools. Those schools functioned for almost three decades within a decentralized system which encouraged participation of teachers, students, parents and the community in decision-making:

- 1970-1990: The self-governance system promoted in former Yugoslavia defined a school as a property of its employees, just as any other socially owned enterprise within the country.
- 1990-1999: Vast majority of schools in Kosovo were functioning within a system which was not recognized by the state authorities of Serbia and Yugoslavia, so they had to rely very much on participation of stakeholders in decision making in order to create minimal conditions for normal operation.

Traditionally, people in the community such as the parents of children attending the school often make contributions to meet the costs of repairs, rebuilding and equipment for schools, or for extra activities such as school excursions or sports activities. These contributions are voluntary. However, it is evident that in the post-conflict period the contribution of the community to the school has significantly declined, probably due to high degree of centralization of the education system and lack of any financial autonomy at school level.

Some good examples of participation of parents and children in school matters were brought up by school principals, to mention but a few categories:

- extra-curricular activities organized by pupils,
- participation of parents in fundraising with the community and local businesses,
- participation of parents in provision of school curriculum,
- in-kind contribution and voluntary work of parents for the benefit of the school.

The overall impression from those discussions is that school principals in Kosovo are quite open to participation of teachers, pupils, parents and the community in decision-making at school level, but the legal environment and the attitude of public authorities do not always contribute to creating good conditions for increased participation..

Minor differences in attitude towards participation have been observed between principals who were exposed to programs providing incentives for increased stakeholder participation in school decision making and those who were not involved in such programs, so the recommendation is to explore the effect of such programs in participation.

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