

Advancing Educational Inclusion and Quality in SEE

Focus Group Report

MACEDONIA

FOCUS GROUP 1

30.01.2008

I. Introduction

This focus group consisted of 12 school principals mainly from the Skopje area but also some from Veles (50 km south of Skopje). Most of them hold the principal post only the last 3-5 years due to the political party interference. You “have to be” at least close to some political party in order to be appointed for the post. Nevertheless, most of them are employed in the same schools for more than 10 years and some of them are in the education system for more than 20 years. The debate was lively and most of them in the first part were trying to stress that a lot of positive things are happening in the schools these days. **The group discovered the major topic of the focus group only in the second part because they did not know the exact subject of the focus group from the beginning.**

II. General Mood

*How do you feel about the way things are going in the schools these days?
What has changed for the better or for worse in your school in the last few years?
What are the main problems in your school today and who is going to solve them?*

These were the basic questions for the first part of the focus group.

Generally principals think that things in the schools are getting better. They feel that is getting better. The teachers are changing and also the other participants in the education process. Things are getting better especially with the specialization and upgrading of the teachers. But not for all of them.

“There are many projects related with the education and we are learning new things and that is good.”

“I think that the most important thing is the education of the teachers and the education equipment. Until now most of the initiatives in the education sector came from the NGOs. Some activities were initiated through the Bureau for Development of Education.”

“The big problem is the degrees of the older teachers. The older teachers refuse to upgrade their diplomas even if they are 6-7 years before retirement.”

The big news for the system of education is the decentralization process. The people and facilities were transferred from the central to the local level. But not everything went smoothly. Some of the principals complain for the political pressure in many ways. Some are satisfied with the cooperation between the school and local government. Different schools with different experiences.

“The process of decentralization went well in the older and better equipped with the staff municipalities. The newer municipalities were completely lost.”

“There are complications with the new employees between the municipalities and the Ministry of education. There are also problems with the legal procedures with the transfer of the employees due to a process of decentralization.”

“I do not like the fact that the politics have entered the schools with the process of the decentralization. The politics should be separated from the education. There are many irregularities with the election of the members of the School Boards.”

“We have gained more with the decentralization, and from the municipalities we got more financial resources. We have close cooperation with the municipality authorities.”

Many of the principals think that the most urgent problem in the schools today is the upbringing problem. Cooperation with the parents is one of the most important parts of it. But parents often do not even know what is happening to their children. And they are the weakest link in the triangle.

“Not knowing what is happening at all they do resist the new changes. They do not accept the new educational methods. They ask for the old traditional methods like the once that they were taught with.”

“We are presenting to the parents the educational methods through the Council of parents. We show them the integrated education and new skills.”

Most of the principal is faced with two kinds of problems: the ones that can be won and the ones that they cannot do anything about. They can provide training for their teaching staff, they can seek support from the NGOs, they can ask parents to bring some materials to the classes or to assist with some work, and sometimes they can collect money for some purposes connected with the education process.

“I think that the main driver for all of this is the motivation. With good motivation you can resolve all the problems if the ultimate goal is effective instruction, effective school and education of quality. If we want the teachers to upgrade their skills and to use the new methods the main task is the motivation.”

“There are different ways how to motivate the employees within the schools and not just with financial rewards: good facilities, positive surrounding, seminars, appreciation certificates, etc...”

“When older schools accepted the new 9 year education program we were faced with the infrastructural problems. The facilities are in bad conditions especially for the 5 and 6 years old children. Nobody came to check the things before the Law was imposed. So, when we are faced with bigger problems we as principals cannot do much.”

III. Reforms of education

How about reforms of education in our country?

What is your role in implementing reforms and how do you feel about?

What are the main obstacles, problems for the reforms?

The second set of the questions were about the reform processes and their results.

There are many huge changes that are happening in the education process and in the schools. Some are positive but still many are too complex and need time for implementation. In this rush many gaps showed up. There are some priorities that are obvious and nobody bothers about them and in the same time there are also some smaller objectives which instigate much public attention.

“There were moves and attempts that were rushed. For example: the 9 year school program, the compulsory high school education announced by the Government, computer for every student. They were done without proper analysis previously.”

“The schools are falling apart, the roofs are rotten, the installations are old, but we will provide computer for every child.”

“We still lack textbooks for the new first year of the new 9 school program. Objectively, we were not ready for some changes.”

“The school hour again was back as 45 minutes (from 40 minutes), the school hours for 5th and 6th year grade are expanded from 5 to 7 classes. There is little time for other activities for talented children.”

The reforms instead of positive transformations are giving just temporary results. The implementation of the changes and their durability sometimes it is problem of its own. Most of the reforms are positioned through top-down strategies. There are many problems with these reforms.

“There are lot of reforms but we lack control, monitoring and strategies for sustainability. We lack external and internal control, control that should evaluate the implementation of the programs. There are no effects. We are going nowhere.”

“The changes are not becoming institutionalised. There are good laws but we have bad implementation. If the training ends when the trainer is gone nothing has been done.”

“1. Changes were made in the physical education but without control for the existing facilities. 2. The new subject for the informatics meant one missed generation when it was moved from 7th and 8th grade to 5th and 6th grade. 3. About the additional activities, we lack space and time for that.”

“I was asked among the first for the opinion for the new changes but nobody accepted my remarks. It was too late. The teachers were not ready for the new programs and education.”

Many of the principals think that the Ministry of education do not properly consult them before they make some changes of great importance. There is not enough experience consulted before the implementation of the bigger steps in any of the aspects of the educational system. Changes are usually initiated by the political parties' ideologies or more concretely what they have promised at the last elections.

“The higher positioned persons are changeable cadres but we stay and we have problems with the reforms. If we want effective school they have to consult us, in opposite, the parents and the teachers will not accept the changes.”

“We will not progress in this way. What I should tell the parents? That I was told to do that and that from the above! The parents ask questions and they want answers.”

“We now do not have the pedagogical records for the first 2-3 years of the primary schools. That is very bad move.”

“Macedonia have 10 years National program for the development of the education accepted by the Parliament – from 2005-2015. We have to adopt with that program. But the way the changes were implemented is wrong.”

Occasionally, there are some good moves with some reform projects. Still, these changes should be accepted not only from the teachers and the students' side but also from the parents' side. That is why they have to be solid and well thought of. There are more and more projects that are connected with different aspects of the primary school system. Recently in Macedonia have started the Primary Education Project under the auspices of USAID. They will renovate the infrastructure of the more than 30 schools. It is about the energizing the schools.

“We have problem with the mental matrix of the people that should accept the changes. You have to explain them well if you want them to accept the changes. Without that the people show resistance towards new things.”

“When the project for the modernization of the education allowed the schools to choose which training programs they should apply for, that was excellent because the people know what they need.”

“It is not good when the Ministry centrally decided what training the teachers need. We are different and we have different demands.”

“In my school there were no obstacles for the reforms, even the parents accepted them. So, there are some good winds also, not just bad things. We have older teachers and they accepted the changes too.”

“Sometimes maybe there is not enough coordination between the schools and the Bureau for education development and the Ministry of education.”

IV. Participation, general

Who besides you is involved in making relevant decisions for the school?

What are parents role in making relevant decisions for the school? Examples?

Do parents/pupils like to participate in making relevant decisions?

What is your role in parents’/pupils’ participation? How do you feel about?

Were there any formal programs enhancing parents/pupils participation in school?

These set of questions entered the parents “participation” issues.

The general feeling is that responsible for the schools problems are the principals. For many things they are the only decision-makers. For some issues they are relying on the School Boards. The School Boards is deciding on many issues too. For some decisions the principal have to consult wider circle including the colleagues. The members of the School Boards are not delegated by their expertise but for their political affiliation. They often do not know what their task is.

“My opinion is that the School boards are in charge for many issues but the members of the School boards are not trained enough for this task. I face that problem continuously.”

“The members of the School boards have not even read the Law on primary education. How they will make some important decision if they did not read the Law. They are not familiar with their tasks.”

“These days it was announced that the training will be conducted for the School teams, School Boards and other school related administration, inspectors and legal staff. This will be done by USAID and the Ministry of education through the PEP project.”

There are different cases and different experiences about the way the decisions are reached for some particular problem. Most of decisions should be done after the consultation with the Council of Parents. The principal as manager should take care of the parents participation in the decision making process. He/she should know on what matters the parents should be consulted or involved. It is the same with the School Boards. The right way is when the beginning of the decision process go through the Councils of the classes and the Council of the teachers.

“Once we had to make the decision for the working clothes for the students. We asked the students first whether they would like to wear working clothes. Then they draw them. Then it was discussed in each class with the parents. Then it came to the

Council of Parents. The students were initiator of the idea. They saw it on the TV on one children show. At the end the decision was reached on the School Board that the clothes will be worn by the students.”

“We had a part of the schoolyard that nobody took care for years and demanded a lot of finance to be settled as a problem. Nobody bothered, the Ministry, the municipality. The parents organised themselves and decided on the Council of Parents to handle this part of the yard. The parents participate with the working force. This year we will be done with this project.”

In some schools the parents are very active while in others it is very difficult to only bring them to the school. There are different projects that the parents can come with themselves, or they can do things that most of the schools do: open days, public events, selling exhibitions. A lot of schools are doing the same. This is self-financing activity. It is up to the parents who organise such activities. It should not be done too often, and when done it should be useful for the school. Also the schools differ in the intensity and the way they are doing some of the common activities.

“We are organising with the parent support a selling exhibition with the child made products and that is how we collect some small finances for our needs. That was a decision made by the Council of Parents.”

“Most of the schools hire its own security company. The decision is made in consultation with the Council of Parents. In some cases the parents are paying for this. Now some municipality have reached decision to cover this expense.”

“I do organise every year presentations with the parents. They are coming and speak about their profession to students. Psychologists, medical doctors, philosophers, they speak for love, sexual education, other issues...”

Most of the principals appreciate what the parents are doing for the schools and the children. But there are limits on parents' involvement. Some ideas sometimes are stepping the line. The principals think that parents cannot be involved in the instruction classes for various reasons. Generally the cooperation with the parents is sufficient, thinks most of the principals. They are already included in many aspects. Nevertheless, some of the principals think that the parents are very much needed in the upbringing element of the education where they have to support the whole process of teachers' instruction and education as total sum.

“I think that the family should take care of the upbringing the moment the student exiting the school door. Some project should be instigated with this side of the upbringing – with the parents.”

“We are trying to make parents part of the school in all of the aspects of the education. Even the school parties cannot be organised without parent involvement. If this is only 60% achievement overall I am satisfied. The problem is that the parents most needed in the school, the parents of some problematic children, are the most difficult to reach: because of social factors, incompact families, antisocial behaviour... and I would put accent on such cases.

“Our Council of parents made decision that some parents should work with parents of these problematic children. We reached some positive effects.”

So far the Ministry has not initiated any formal project or initiative for the inclusion of the parents in the process of education. What is legally proscribed it is compulsory, but nothing extra or supplementary. The Ministry was only included if some projects were initiated and they had to approve them.

V. Parents’ participation

What is the experience of parent participation in your school?

Please give examples of the projects initiated by the parents and somebody else?

Please give examples of what are the main obstacles and main benefits for parents?

What are the examples that will be most conducive for parents’ participation?

What are obstacles to more participation of parents of disabled/minority children?

What do you need in order to boost parents’ participation?

And the last battery of questions directly connected with the examples.

The Principals stressed that the parents are most interested for participation if they are well informed and if they see benefits from their participation. They will participate if they believe in the project or the program. If they see feedback with some previous activities and they see consistency from school side they will participate. The motivation of the parents does not have to be congruent with their real incentives which can be well hidden. The parents are especially interested to help in the first four grades. Later on it gets more complicated and the students are left on their own.

“There are two categories of parents: from 1-4 grade when parents are maximally involved in the projects with their children and fully participate: to see them, to help them, to support them. But, they participate if WE invite them. They do not have an initiative. When we tried to implement some idea from the previously 38 interested parents only 22 of them showed up on the spot. The second group is from 5-8 grade and they are coming only when we have open days and when we have parents meeting and tell their marks.”

“The parents are most interested only for the marks of their children in 90% of the cases. The parents do not have time for school activities in later grades. If the marks are good they are satisfied independently of the learnt skills and knowledge.”

“Maybe the communication is more complex and difficult because from 5-8 grade the students have more teachers and different curricula. For the parents it is easier from 1-4 grades when they have one teacher. Then the parents are coming and are interested in every aspect.”

There are different experiences in communication with the parents of different students groups. Much in the communication depends on the teachers’ skill for communication with the parents of regular, problematic and students with special needs, minority too. There are obstacles but there are benefits for parents.

“It is important HOW the teachers are communicating with the parents, WHAT they say to them, HOW they tell them about their children successes, failures. Do not tell them just: it has to learn more... How much more, 10%, 20%?”

“Where the schools have experienced and adequate teachers we enrol the students with special needs. We cooperate well with their parents. They can finish even 8th grade in our schools.”

“If there are problematic children first the class teacher is trying to make contact with his/her parents. Then we officially invite the parents with the letter. We are trying hard with every child. It takes time. The parents of the problematic children are the most difficult to get them to the schools.”

“We have Roma children and we are trying hard to get their parents to cooperate with the school. There are many projects about Roma children. Also some NGOs are working with their parents.”

The principal emphasized again that they need parents for the second part – the building of healthy persons, not for education, but for the upbringing. The education is for the teachers. It is their job. Parents stress that they expect that the school should do everything and that they are paid for that. In the family the upbringing component is neglected. Everything is left to the schools and their ability to do something for the children. There are parents that praise their children and never find their children once to blame. For them the teacher bears all the guilt. The parents are with low self-criticism. Sometimes their only information came from their children. Sometimes the parents try to find any excuses for not participation.

“Maybe we need seminars, trainings or instruction together with teachers and parents. They should become partners. We definitely need parents for the upbringing part, not for the teaching part.”

“If something to be achieved, one can organise workshops with the parents of children who have difficulties with behaviour or learning. The workshops should be done 2-3 times a week. Maybe in a period of one month. Within the school. The teachers should be engaged also.

“We have concluded that the communication with the parents should be strengthened as well as the upbringing element from the parent side. Parents have to have more control of their children education.”

“The new working hours of parents are disastrous for our cooperation with them. The working day, from 8 until 5-6 in the afternoon, do not leave room for the parents to dedicate some of their time to their children education and upbringing.”

Some good practices experience.

“You can do something just if you can come closer to one family. Personal relationship is the most effective. With the parents you can cooperate only when they are motivated. They can do a lot of things if they want to do it.”

“The Veles municipality opened a portal (web site) where all the primaries have options for better communications with the parents. In the same time maybe the parents will be less present within the schools but they will have on time information for their children.”

“The municipalities can do a lot for the schools if they want to cooperate and support us. The municipality should be our pillar. The decentralization process should go faster and things will be much better.”

“Many times our analysis is about the children discipline. Why they are not behave properly. All of these were discussed on Council of Parents. Then, we created 7 criteria through which the teachers are rewarding the students. The students even took care of who is wearing the working clothes and who does not. We made competition. One free day of school is the reward.”

“The principals and the teachers are very important. If you want results you should create authority, stimulate human behaviour. Then, the personal example is important. We as teachers started with the working clothes first, then it was easier with the children. The principals make the atmosphere in the schools, the teachers in the classes.”

Focus group 2 – Skopje, Macedonia

31.01.2008

I. Introduction

This focus group consisted of 8 school principals. Most of them are employed in the same schools for more than 10 years. One of them is principal of the primary school for children with special needs. The debate was more calmly than the previous day and most of them in the first part were trying to be realistic and to explain the moment in which the schools are today. They stressed that a lot of positive things are happening in the schools these days but also that there are many obstacles concerning the educational process overall. **The group was familiar with the topic from the start of the discussion unlike the first focus group. The moderator told them the main theme from the beginning.** This resulted with slightly different answers for the subject of the research - the parents' participation in the school environment.

III. General Mood

*How do you feel about the way things are going in the schools these days?
What has changed for the better or for worse in your school in the last few years?
What are the main problems in your school today and who is going to solve them?*

Generally, these group of principal also think that things in the schools are getting on the road. That there are changes happening in the educational process, but they are more critical towards the changes. They are more pessimistic concerning the outcomes of the changes unlike the other focus group. Some think that the schools are on the cross road and the things can go both ways: for good and for bad. That is why we have to be very cautious.

“Either we go further and forward or we will just formally accept some projects which impact do not last longer than the projects. The new things are lasting until the projects are on and once the project is finished whatever was the subject all is gone.”

“I remember when we had pilot project for the conditions for children with special needs. When the project is connected to some person individually that is dedicated to some program is OK, when not the project is fading out. The projects should live after the formal timing and financing, and their impact should be sustainable.”

“With younger generations and teachers is easier to work with. We have problems with the middle aged and they do resist changes of their consciousness, stereotypes.”

“Most difficult thing is to change the consciousness, the prejudice. It is very hard to change the consciousness. We are kind of people that think that we know everything and we do not need projects, new skills.”

Due to a decentralization process the politics entered the schools. Now, the principal complains, there are more negative things than positive since the local government took over the schools. Political parties on the local level see local schools as a playground for their influence and the place where they can seek jobs for their people.

“We have pressures from the political parties for the new jobs. This varies from the fact as who have the power on the local level. The political parties would like to have their “people” in every place on every post.”

“The politics interferes in our business. We are just formally de-politicised. Almost all of the school principals are political party cadres or at least affiliates.”

“Political parties are very much involved with the schools. These changed the relations between the colleagues, it affect them negatively. The teachers some times do not cooperate between themselves.”

“How I can build the team to manage the school if someone tells me through the phone which one I should employ. OK, I will employ someone only if she/he fulfils the criteria and has some skills for the post. If we want to go further we need educated people with specific skills, languages, computers, the necessary things that we desperately need.”

Because the principal were pretty much aware of the main subject of the focus group they started immediately to comment the conditions on this theme. They were speaking about the parents attitudes towards the changes.

“Most of the parents accept changes as something better. They like to cooperate and they support me. But you can always find different types of people. Some like the old method ex-cathedra, old style of teaching.”

“Until now a little has been done to include the parents in any aspect of the schools activities.”

“The Council of parents constituted very difficult in our school. Before in our school the Council of parents worked only formally. But the parents are aware that if they want their children to do better they have to participate in many activities.”

“The parents should be involved and we have to have good cooperation with them and to include them in the schools. We should cooperate without lies, without deceptions.”

VI. Reforms of education

How about reforms of education in our country?

What is your role in implementing reforms and how do you feel about?

What are the main obstacles, problems for the reforms?

In this part the principals were speaking more concretely about some reforms and their effects. There are positive but also negative comments. Some projects were good some never finished. They all agree that many things are happening at once. Some of them think that the reforms are constantly happening since 90th. Many projects were implemented with the positive results for students, teachers and parents.

“It is true that before nothing was happening. In the last couple of years a lot of projects were initiated. There is a government project “computer for every student”, from 5-8 grades.”

“There are lot of things that are going on in the last two mandates of the Government as never before in the education. They prepared a list of important projects and documents: the National program, the training of the principals, the modernization of the education, etc.”

“The reforms are something positive. A lot of people had opportunity to be part of the creation of the new strategies, programs, activities and implementation. I was one of the trainers in the training program of the principals. I was trained in Slovenia. I have taught them the communications in the educational organizations.”

“Unfortunately, there were also some not very good projects but in time they vanished. Still, we have many things to praise, projects that trained the teachers in new methods and skills. Those teachers are active and contributed with their knowledge in the schools.”

What are the reforms concerning the parents participation? Are there any significant reform moves that will increase the level of quality of education concerning parent participation? Some were complaining that the upbringing element is missing in the reforms and that the parents are important to be part of the reforms. Also, the principals in the schools are very important and the atmosphere they are creating, the positive climate they make.

“All of this is concentrated on the instruction, training of the teachers and training of the principals. That is the strong part of it. While nobody takes care of the upbringing component in the schools and cooperation with the parents. This is the weak part.”

“In my school I encouraged 11 teachers to pass the directors exam. I supported them. The good staff is one of the main factors in the education process. Without smart people, enthusiasts, there are no chances of doing good projects. You have to be creative.”

“We have cooperation with the parents. Also the parents structures are important, the Council of Parents. I think that there are a lot of projects but the parents are for sure forgotten. The parents would like but they do not know how to help. If we find the way to include them as much it is needed in the school activities they will surely come and be welcomed.”

Some obstacles for the proper implementation of the reforms are not easy to resolve. What changes and reforms are needed for better inclusion of the parents in the process of education? What to do to bring parents to the school?

“I think these are more important aspects if we can do something to include the parents. Which model to be used? This part should be supported as building cooperation with the parents. All of us are trying to do something. We have regular meetings, The Council of parents, the open days once a month; more or less most of the schools are doing something. We do that. Still, the problems we have are similar. Many parents you cannot bring to the school at all.”

What are the problems that the principal most often face when in the process of changing things? Are there any specific problem and how it can be regulated or resolved? Any specific comment or remark concerning implementation of some reform activities? Any positive example?

“For me the most difficult problem is not defined working hours of the teachers. This should be regulated by the Law. The teachers cannot leave the school after three hours instruction. The timetable is made by the teacher needs, not the students’ wishes. The teachers are complaining for the small salaries and they work only for three hours.”

“Sometimes it is difficult to persuade the teachers to be part of some projects if that means more working hours. Many teachers think that their only obligation is the instruction classes and nothing else.”

“I agree that if we want something to be implemented you need supervision constantly. You cannot leave this to someone’s good will. You need regular supervision.”

The principals are most positive when they speak about the reforms in the upgrading skills of the teachers. They as schools in the project of modernization of the Ministry of education have chosen different themes. At least they were consulted about their needs. The better skills of the teachers the better results for the schools.

“We liked our teachers to upgrade their communications skills in order to better communicate with the parents.”

VII. Participation, general

Who besides you is involved in making relevant decisions for the school?

What are parents role in making relevant decisions for the school? Examples?

Do parents/pupils like to participate in making relevant decisions?

What is your role in parents’/pupils’ participation? How do you feel about?

Were there any formal programs enhancing parents/pupils participation in school?

They all agree that the decisions are responsibility of the principal in general. The parents are present at different structures (Council, Board) and other meetings and their “main task” is to tell objections, comments or complaints, or at the most, giving some ideas or some solutions that schools are expected to comply with. Principal “complains” that when they were asked the parents to participate with some project or to work together on some proposal they are absent. They do not participate when they are directly invited to do so. When they asked some parents to have some lectures as doctors or to give lectures on any educative topic they also withdraw.

“Maybe they are busy, they have no time. But they should save some time once a month.”

“I have a group of parents that have organised very well and in the last three months they have brought 6000 Euros to the school as a donation. We invested in the infrastructure. We did together the idea and the implementation.”

“I would like to make a good team in the school but I cannot create such a team. When I say a team I mean the team that can manage some project, in those teams the parents can also participate equally.”

“There are some small initiatives with major impact. We are the school with special needs. But still is possible to cooperate. Selling exhibition it was very successful. In this cooperation we cooperated with the parents and the Association of the parents with autistic children.”

How this cooperation takes shapes? Is the Council of Parents good example of participation of the parents? There are different opinions. But they equally agree that the parents should be present at the schools. There are different examples of participation and some positive results. It is important for the parents to be included in as much activities as possible, from minor to bigger projects.

“The parents are organising themselves through purchasing the necessary things for the students, sometimes some small infrastructure refurbishing. They help a lot. It is easier for us. Everything is going through the Council of Parents.”

“The Council of Parents should meet more often just to be in line with the events. We do not want parents to think that we want only money. We also do not want parents to think that we are just asking for something. The most important is that they should come with the ideas otherwise they will not participate.”

“We together with the parents created Codex of behaviour for the parents, students and teachers. They created the rules. There are many examples of this.”

The principal agree that parents also need some time for good cooperation. Nothing happens overnight. Especially they need time for good ideas. The parents also think that they should meet more often. And there are problems where without the parents not much can be done. In order to make things better for the students and for the schools some of them were very creative. They were inspired by the problems they had.

“One of the most pressing problems is the aggressive behaviour of the children, conflicts with mix ethnic groups of students, fights, ruining the school inventory. How to improve things? We had a positive project where the parents participated. We have created Centre for non-violent cooperation and building the culture of peace. The parents also participated. Not with money, but with work, knowledge and ideas. We the teachers have our children in the school too. We live in very multicultural area. So we did many things together in Saturdays. After the work we used to sit down and discuss things. For example who is to blame for the children increased aggressive behaviour. We concluded that all of us are guilty, the adults, the parents... If students are not under kind of monitoring and if you do not pay attention to them for a longer time, the problems will show up again. My colleagues do not have problems to stay overtime even in the afternoon if it is needed. Our strategy is that we have to start changes from ourselves. The Centre is us. Not some building. Together with the parents. That is how we do cooperate. Money is slippery terrain. We do not do that.”

How to improve the parents’ participation in general? What to do to make real partnership between the schools and the parents? The Councils of Parents are appreciated by most of the principals. But the parents should be educated to do that, to be supported. Whether we take the Councils or the Boards the parents should be instructed to do the job. In the same time the activities of the parents should not be compensated for the rewards of their children in marks. The teachers should also train how to communicate with the parents. It is all about creating rules and respected them.

“Anyhow, the teachers should be educated how to make workshops on specific issues, to discuss with the parents some problems that their children are faced with.”

“If the cooperation is only when parents come to school to hear about the results it is not enough. Many parents are afraid and do not come to hear bad comments about their children. If this is the only thing the parents do, then they will not participate in anything.”

“The Codex for evaluation is important thing. Everybody should comply with. Parents, children should comply, teachers also. These workshops are very useful. Through these meetings of parents the teachers are also learning how to cope with the situation and how to handle parents.”

“You cannot have different Codex. There should be one Codex of the school for all. Coming on time is compulsory for all, from principal to all employees, the working clothes is obligatory for all. But the rules should be done together with the parents.”

V. Parents’ participation

What is the experience of parent participation in your school?

Please give examples of the projects initiated by the parents and somebody else?

Please give examples of what are the main obstacles and main benefits for parents?

What are the projects that will be most conducive for parents’ participation?

What are obstacles to more participation of parents of disabled/minority children?

What do you need in order to boost parents’ participation?

The principals were eager to speak about the challenges in the area of participation of the parents and were thinking of the right ways to do that. They have different experience. They say that the financial support is the easiest way of cooperation and the parents do that without problems. But in some areas the parents are not in position to help us financially. The principals' argument about the upbringing element is more than convincing. This cooperation and participation is very complex and it takes time to find the "best" solutions and practices.

"More difficult is to bring the parents to the schools for other more important problems. The regularity of their children to the classes, the instruction in general, not supporting some behaviour of the students, the conflicts with the teachers..."

"In my school the parents have good communication and transfer the discussions from the Council of parents to the School board and vice versa. Especially for the important discussions for the school and the students. It is functioning."

"The message is that the parents are definitely needed in the schools. The more they participate better for the schools and the students."

What kinds of activities are convenient and beneficial for all the actors? Formal or informal? More creative or just simple communication techniques? Most of the schools act in the similar way and with the same methods. But is there any improvement in any areas so far.

"In my school the informal activities have more effects. Otherwise the formal meetings will consist of which teacher gave which mark to which student, why this teacher gave that test, psychologist did this..."

"The parents like less formal events, more with fun elements. The Clubs of the parents is a good idea. The Forums for discussions is a very good idea. Debates on specific subject..."

"It is important for the school that the parents will be enlisted in all of the committees. According to the needs, for instance the excursions, free activities."

"We have in Ohrid association of parents called Vidici (Horizons). They had issued a Brochure how the parents should act in the schools. We had trainings with parents. The parents should be informed about many things. It is also with pedagogical hints and issues."

"I have more and more problems with addicted parents. Alcohol, drugs, and I wonder how we should act. The parents are also problematic."

The principals argued that maybe the family is the basis of everything. How the school should emphasize the family part? We all know that the family is eroding. The ties are breaking. The parents do not have time for their children. The parents are also faced with existential problems and are difficult for cooperation. The teachers are not always of the same high quality.

“Some parents are absent during most of the school year. We have to act. We have to mediate. The school is the place where the aggressive parents are also showing of. The parents directly threaten to report teachers to the media, to the inspectors, to the Mayor, to the Ministry of education...”

“We have to work with the parents. They should respect some procedures. The children are replicating the parents. We have to have coordination and help from other state institutions as well – the Centers for social care.”

“We have to bring the parents to the schools. We are at least trying all the time. It is not easy. We have to write letters to them. Call them. Parents are coming in due time. A little improvement it is good improvement. Still, we do not have enough people in the schools to work with. We are sometimes one to 1000 students.”

“Also the level of quality of teachers decreased a lot. It is difficult to work with some teachers. There are no problems with good teachers and responsible persons. But with some...”

There are different factors in the society that are influencing our children. They are more powerful than us. That is why our task is becoming more and more difficult. It is more difficult to give them proper information when they have everything with the press on one simple button (Internet). Maybe the one part where we can make more efforts including the parents is the upbringing part.

“Internet is also influencing, also the media, the peers, mass communications, new technologies, mobile phones... Many principals have forbidden holding mobile phones. The students are educated more by media and peers than by adults.”

“I will stress that there is no improvement. We as a school we should pay much attention for the education part. But! Do we have to, to some parent in 50s to tell him/her how to dress their child? That they should not insult for any difference anyone, on national, religious basis, children with special needs and different social background. How to teach them how to communicate with the teachers, not just to say HELLO with the principal and the teachers. Why they are destroying the school inventory? We definitely missed the parents here.”

“I do also think that the upbringing element is missing. The parents do not have time to work with their children. All three sides should do their part or share. The teachers and the school, the students and the parents. Everywhere there are different kind of parents, one group will cooperate another will not. But we have to continue to work with them.”

Some good ideas?

“The culture of communication is very low. We should learn how to communicate. The teacher should be trained how to communicate. We have to find MODELS to communicate with the parents.”

“Where is the main problem? The feeling of belonging of the students I think. When the students will have the feeling of belonging, the parents and teachers will have

easier job. That is the area where we need support and assistance. Belonging, consciousness, attitudes, here is the catch. Belonging as in a family.”

“We have chosen our color, our logo, students and teachers worked together on these. We did print some T-shirts. We are trying to do the school song. All of these are important steps.”

“You can share the space of the school when it is not used, the gym, do some other activities... It is important to do things together.”