

Advancing Educational Inclusion and Quality in SEE

Focus Group Report

SERBIA

Place: Belgrade

Date: March 4th and March 7th, 2008.

Participants: School principals from 16 Belgrade elementary schools (8 participants in each group)

Duration of focus groups interviews: app 90 minutes each

Interviews conducted by Jelena Vranjesevic

Summary:

One of the most common problems that principals face, is lack of communication, cooperation and support from Ministry of Education and other institutions such as Social Welfare Centers and Primary Health Care Centers. Principals feel that they are loaded down with different expectations (they are expected to be both experts on education and managers, sometimes even a lawyers) and responsibility that they cannot share with others. Cooperation with parents is mostly seen through their involvement in School Board and Parents' Council. Parents, according to principals, perceive their role as controllers, not as partners. They want to take part in decision making process, but without taking full responsibility for decisions. Apart from School Board and Parents' Council, participation of parents are usually limited to extracurricular activities, financial support and help in decorating and repairing school. There is not much meaningful participation and the principals placed one part of responsibility for that on themselves and their colleagues.

Interviews were started with exploring significant changes in schools during last few years and problems that principals face during their work. They talked a lot about problems they are facing and general impression was that they usually do not have any chance to talk about that with people outside the school, that is why that part was so important for them.

Important changes that happened in schools during last few years, according to principals are the following:

- The image of the schools has been significantly changed, primarily due to different donations (in terms of money and equipment), schools are much better equipped now and provided with all necessary educational materials.
- There has been significant change in behavior and attitudes of students: some of them became very aggressive, not interested in anything concerning school and learning; aggressiveness became the way they are addressing every issue related to them. According to principals' opinion, the cause of the problem is the fact that majority of parents do not spend time with their children, they have to work to support family and the children are all by themselves most of the time. Principals think that some extracurricular activities designed for those children might help, but they would need financial help from the Ministry of Education (MOE). On the other

hand, some principals reported that there has been decrease in aggressive behavior and violence in school.

- According to some principals, there has been significant change in criteria for students' evaluation. Those criteria, as well as expectations from students in terms of their knowledge and discipline used to be high and now, due to decrease in value system, those criteria are set very low.
- Parents are strongly encouraged to express their opinion about everything that occurs at school, so there are a lot of articles in newspapers about what is happening in schools, anonymous reports to MOE, etc.
- Some of the very important positive changes are improved in-service trainings for teachers and possibilities for their professional development. There are more and more trainings and seminars for teachers, different projects in which they can be included and increased number of textbooks that are at their disposal.

Problems/Challenges principals are facing in their work:

- One of the most common problems, according to principals, is what to do with children who have behavior problems (discipline problems). Parents do not cooperate; those children can be given discipline punishment and eventually transferred to another school. They think that the problem should be addressed through different legislative framework (one principal suggests that there should be created a special school for those children !) and that there should be more “radical measures” in punishing those children that would serve as prevention of other problems that might arise.
- Lack of experts who can deal with different students' problems (pedagogues and psychologists) - in one school with 1500 students, there are only one psychologist and one pedagogue employed. Besides that, psychologists and pedagogues are not qualified enough to deal with some problems: for example, in cases of divorce and custody, parents expect school to be the “judge”.
- Issue of inclusion – teachers are not trained to work with children with special needs and to work in inclusive classrooms; definition of what is inclusive education and children with special needs is vague, it is not clear enough what it means; teachers would need support to work with children with special needs; Principals mentioned problems with Roma children as the largest marginalized group in

school: “most of them do not speak dominant language, they are not socialized, they do not accept dominant values, they have problems with other children who do not accept them, they are isolated, there is no cooperation with their parents, etc”. In some schools, principals reported great progress in Roma children education, they managed to establish cooperation with their parents, they introduced Roma teaching assistants in classrooms, Roma children get additional classes, they get free textbooks and other materials, etc.

- In general, principals think that they are loaded down by different duties and responsibilities. They are expected to be both experts in education and lawyers and managers at the same time. They need to take care of curricular, extracurricular activities, projects that are running in school, at the same time they need to apply for funds, so they need to have fund raising abilities, as well as management skills. For most of them, this is too much to expect from one person. Besides that, they are responsible for everything that goes in the school and they do not have support.
- There is no education and seminars for principals, even if they exist, it is too expensive. All principals think that they need more professional development.
- Principals are the only employees without permanent job position – the moment they become principals, they lose teacher’s position and if they are not reelected on principal position again, they do not have job as a teacher again. While they are in management position, they lose teacher’s license (?)
- Many issues concerning school life are not regulated by law, so schools are forced to bring a lot of amendments to regulate those issues. Law is not precise enough and they are forced to “swim on the margins of the law”.

Lack of communication and cooperation with other relevant institutions

Two main institutions needed for support and partnership are Ministry of Education (MOE) and Social Welfare Centre (SWC). General impression is that principals need those institution as support in decision making and also as institution that can “make their lives easier” by imposing some explicit and clear rules. They need those institutions to be more involved in dealing with different problems in school, such as discipline problems, family problems (child abuse and child neglect), problems with parents (how to force parents to cooperate with school and to share responsibility for what is happening with their children). According to principals, the main problems are the following:

- Lack of communication with MOE: when they have problems they do not know to who to address, who is responsible for what in MOE (they do not have access to such information), they also lack feedback from MOE, etc.
- Lack of cooperation with MOE: every time when they need to make some important decisions (which is not very “popular” and bears a lot of responsibility), MOE puts all responsibility for decision making process on school/principals, so that they have impression that they are alone every time when they need to make some important decision.
- Lack of cooperation with SWC – people in SWC do not respond to calls, they do not deal with problems that should be under their authority (problems in the family, problematic parents, children with behavior problems, etc.). Principals think that the role of SWC should be also to work with parents and to educate them.

Decision making process - involvement of parents

Cooperation with parents is mostly seen through School Board and Parents’ Council. Cooperation with the School Board, according to principals’ opinion is more or less satisfying, but there are certain problems:

- Parents in the Board accept their right to make decisions, but not the responsibility. Responsibility for decision making lays on principals, although he/she is not autonomous in making them, according to the Law
- Some parents from the Board are aggressive, in a way that they do not trust the principals and use their power to constantly criticize, complain and control everything, instead of be cooperative and supportive.
- According to principals School Board (as well as Parents’ Council), has too much power that left the principals with almost no power when some important decisions should be made. That power is not followed with responsibilities, so many principals think that SB and PC have power in decision making process but no responsibility, since principals need to sign everything and they are responsible for those decisions. One principal said that SB refused to allocate the money for night security, and when the school gate was stolen the school had to pay for that. Other examples that were used by many principals concern mostly the excursions for students: SB chooses the travel agency and travel destination, as well as fees

for teachers, but principal needs to sign this and he/she is responsible for that, if anything goes wrong, he/she should be responsible, not SB. One principal explained this as following: “Whenever something good is achieved everybody claims that this is because of their participation, but if anything goes wrong, the principal is left alone as the only person who is responsible for the failure. We do not have our Union to protect our rights, and we usually do not have support from MOE. When we have to introduce some “unpopular rules” we are usually left alone”.

- One of the problems that were mentioned by some principals is the educational structure of parents who are in the Board. If they are uneducated and incompetent, they cannot understand some issues like curriculum, in-service trainings, etc. Principals think that SB should be composed of “educated and good intentioned” parents and members of local community
- It was not defined precisely what are the mandates of SB, so parents think that they can decide upon everything (in one school they send petition to the MOE because their children go to afternoon shifts, and they want them to be in morning shifts). According to principals Parents are not aware of their limits in decision making process.

In spite of those difficulties, most principals said that they have positive experience with SB and that in times of difficulties SB usually support them.

Council of parents consists of parents who apply voluntarily, because parents do not eagerly accept appointment to this position. The reasons for non involvement of parents in School Council (and School Boards), according to most principals are: they do not have time and they do not want additional obligations; most of them work a lot to provide decent standard for their families, so they do not have time for an extra work and responsibilities; there is distrust between parents and school staff; some teachers don't put any effort to include parents and involve them in decision making process; parents see their role as more controllers than partners; some parents expect to gain something as result of their involvement and help, etc. Even when they are involved, parents are mostly concerned about finance, money for excursions, textbooks, than about curriculum and the way their child spends his/her time at school. Most common problems are:

- According to principals, the law gives too much power and mandates to parents in decision making process (three member of the School Board, principals is not a

member, on every complain coming from the parents, inspection is coming to the school). Parents misuse the article from the law that says that »parents have rights to give opinions for all happenings in the school« and try to be involved in everything. What has been shown in practice is that parents, instead to contribute to improvement to the school atmosphere, understand their role as monitors of the school work, especially financial aspects of it.

- There is mistrust between teachers and parents, as well as between parents and principals (they are acting more as one against the other, parents are trying to protect their children from the teachers, they do not recognize the common interest and they do not see teachers as partners who are working together on behalf of children. Some principals shared their experience of including parents in the process of decision making and taking responsibility for what happens with their children at school (for example, if the child do not go to school for a longer period, they make plans with the parents how he/she can pass the exams, what to study first, second, etc...That way they share responsibility for the school achievement of their children).
- Principals think that there should be some systems of punishing and control of parents established (for example, if parents do not come to parents' meetings, if their child does not come to school regularly...). They think that they should have cooperation and support from Center for social work, or some other institution, that would be responsible for taking care of that.
- Principals think that in rural areas parents show much more respect to school as an institution, as well as teachers and principals, while in their (urban) areas, parents act with less respect - if principal does not respond to their request imidiately, they file the complain.

General Cooperation with parents (apart from SB and PC)

General impression is that parents are not present much in the school life, they are usually involved in the process of school decoration, repair, sometimes as help during some visits and field trips. They finance some school manifestations; they are hosting children from different regions in Serbia who come to visit the school. If some of them are experts in some fields they are willing to take part in lectures and seminars and panel discussion for other parents in school. One principal said that she had example of Roma mothers that

organized celebration of Bajram and Djurdjevdan in order to inform other children about their culture. What was interesting was the fact that other mothers supported that initiative and they made nice celebration together.

Concerning involvement of parents in some school projects, general impression is that they are not involved in the projects, partly because the principals are limited by the rules of supervisors and inspection. According to those rules, parents are allowed to be included only in some extracurricular activities, not in any part of learning and teaching process (in one school the principal is sanctioned because during the gym class some skills were demonstrated by the parent who is not teacher by education). There is no law that allows parents to be included in teaching process that is why it is so difficult to involve parents in some educational projects. That is why principals need to find some shortcuts to include parents in some projects. Some projects like *Developmental planning* and *School without violence* included parents as partners.

How to involve parents more

Principals think that this is partly their responsibility and partly teachers' responsibility. They think that they should create atmosphere of trust at school, so that parents can see their role as partners and cooperators with teachers and principals. Teachers also have responsibility in establishing atmosphere of trust and cooperation and willingness to share decisions with parents.

Some principals mention that it would be helpful to establish some procedures in order to impose parents' participation. They think that there is a need for some systemic regulation of parents' cooperation and that should be provided by law (for example, if child has a bad mark because of the discipline, parents should be volunteers supervisors in school to see how their children are behaving)