

Advancing Educational Inclusion and Quality in South East Europe
Survey on elementary school children parents' attitudes towards and views on
parental participation in schools.

Montenegro

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Acknowledgments

This survey could not be realised without the contribution of 1156 parents who willingly participated and expressed their opinions and attitudes. At the same time, we thank Ministry of Education and Science, Bureau of Educational Services, National Parents' Association and OSI Montenegro for provided support throughout the survey.

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Background and purpose

This presents a summary of the national report on parents' participation carried out in Montenegro with 1156 parents, while, at the same time, being a continuation of the survey conducted with schools' principals. This research was conducted within the framework of the regional research project *Advancing Educational Inclusion and Quality in South East Europe*, launched by the Education Support Programme.

The project aims to address the problem of rising disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes continue in South East European (SEE) countries. To address these issues a series of international meetings, with the participation Open Society Institute related representatives of 10 SEE countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia) were held. OSI-related representatives of 10 SEE countries identified the following common priorities that should be addressed by OSI in the region:

- a. Inequity in education, more precisely the gap between existing policies and their implementation, and the neglect caused by various forms of discrimination (e.g., in relation to minorities, special needs etc.);
- b. Insufficient participation by stakeholders -- particularly students and parents -- in education systems.

Survey methodology

In this survey, the sample comprised 1156 parents. This is a stratified sample which covers all three Montenegrin regions, both urban and rural settlements. The survey was conducted during second half of 2009. The parents were contacted in person and interviewed. An agency was engaged to conduct the survey.

In regards to instruments, a *questionnaire* was used. The questionnaire was compiled by the central research team on basis of the focus group interviews with the parents, as well as relevant literature on parental participation in school life.

The most important research findings

The total number of surveyed parents is 1156. This is a stratified sample which covers all three Montenegrin regions, both urban and rural settlements. The sample consists of: 936 parents (A), 146 parent representatives (E), 64 parents from schools in which the level of exclusion of particular groups is higher (B) and 10 parent representatives from B schools.

The introductory part of the questionnaire, besides general information and indicators (educational level of mothers, welfare index, the number of the employed in a family, the number of books in a household, an estimation of a child's success in school, the level of aspiration etc), referred primarily to **identifying parents' opinion on some of the basic segments of possible cooperation between parents and school**. As a type of cooperation, we analyzed:

- Parents' meetings,
- Written information from school,
- Helping children with studying,
- Volunteering,
- Participation in decision-making.

For each of the stated types of participation, we established its frequency, response from parents and their estimation of their own competence to participate in work. The basic communication was considered, while taking into account three main elements:

- Frequency of inviting parents by school;
- Frequency of positive feedback from parents to school and
- Estimation by parents of their own competence and ability to participate, of their feeling of obligation towards identified activities, and all the offered types of communication were valued in relation to their possible help to child.

- We established that **the most frequent type of communication** which school practices with parents are **group parents' meetings** (66,4%), followed by **written information** (certificates and student record books) about a child's progress (52%). In a situation when school contacts parents by inviting them to a parents' meeting (group or individual) or sends them particular written information, a high proportion of parents (each time over 80% of them) **respond to an invitation or read information they received**. The respondents emphasize the opinion that parents' meetings and written information on child's achievement **are something that each school should practice**, but also that **other types of communication should be a school's obligation** (individual meetings with parents, sending information about the process and contents of learning, about drugs, violence and health. When it comes to estimation of their own ability to actively participate in a school life, **more than 70 % of parents feel competent** or thinks that some of their family members is capable to use the possibilities of communication with schools in the right way. They are aware also of the fact that it is their duty, but also a way to help their children additionally when it comes to school.

- One of the forms of most intensive participation of parents in their child's schooling is **helping children with doing their homeworks**, as we were told a number of times during focus groups¹. More than half of the parents from our research sample (52%) are of the opinion that school has the right to expect from parents to help their children with their homework. The respondents are very self-confident when it comes to their (own or some of their family members) competence to help children with doing their homework. **As many as 90% of them point out feeling capable to help their children with education, around three quarters of parents state that the family is obliged to help children with homeworks, and even 90% parents stress that helping with homeworks is something that can significantly help their children achieve.**
- During last school year, **most of the parents (over 63% when it comes to helping with organizations of cultural-entertaining and sports activities, maintaining or improvement of school infrastructure (87%), assistance in teaching (83%) have not received an invitation from school to participate in any kind of volunteering activities.** Those parents who were invited to help responded in a high percent (maintaining or improvement of school infrastructure (70,3%), organizations of cultural-entertaining and sports activities (64.4%), assistance in teaching (59%).
- **When it comes to parents' attitudes towards volunteering in relation to school– in the sense of whether the school should have the right to ask from them that sort of help, a practically U-distribution was noticed, meaning that we have quite extreme attitudes.** The dominant attitude of 41, 6% of parents is that their job is definitely not to help maintain or improve school infrastructure; by frequency this is followed by negation of the need to help with school service (31, 7%), or help with teaching (28, 8%). Still, we can not disregard the answers affirming all the mentioned elements of volunteer relation towards school.
- The answers to questions directed at **estimation of the degree of parents' involvement in school management show that a very small number of respondents has ever been consulted when it comes to finances (over 80% has never been consulted) and educational issues such as: content of the lessons, books, choosing and evaluation of teachers' performance, homework** (which obviously represents a *safe area* of teaching staff), and even the other elements (deciding on extra-curricular activities, issues of safety and discipline, organizing sports and cultural events etc) have been marked by parents as something school has never consulted them about. 87% of parents have never been consulted.
- **When it comes to situations in which parents' opinions on some issues related to school management, all replies** (except when it is about overall school management, in the sense of shifts of work, opening and closing schools and classrooms, changes of location, type of school etc) **tend to be positive** – the opinion given by parents is usually respected (higher percentage of answers 52–62%) and completely respected (26–34%).
- **Around 65% of parents emphasize that the opinion they have given in relation to the overall organization of a school regime** (shifts, closing and opening of schools, classrooms, etc) **has mostly not been accepted.**

¹ „Improving inclusiveness and quality of education in Southeast Europe“; method – focus groups, 2009; Forum MNE and CEPS

- **Significant dispersion of parents' answers to the series of set questions (management of school's finances; organization of extra curricular activities; organization of school based events; decisions in relation to issues of health and safety of pupils and to educational topics; overall management of school – shifts, opening time of school, merging or closing down of either schools or classes, changing of location) in relation to school management is also evident** – in the sense of whether that is something about which school should consult them—almost completely, on all the statements we received U-distribution of answers.
- **Over 55% of surveyed parents think that dealing with financial issues of school is not and can not be a parents' job.** Accordingly, they should not even be invited when such issues are on the agenda. Attitudes can be interpreted differently – respect of internal organization of school by parents, showing trust to school management, lack of parents' interest in this kind of issues, lack of trust in their own competence, lack of time etc. Still, we can not disregard the opinion of 30% of parents who stress that school should ask for their opinion when it comes to financial management.
- **Almost 75% of parents think that school management should consult them more when it comes to extracurricular activities, and health and safety of students should surely be on the list of priorities in school management about which 85% of parents would like to give their opinion** and relevant contribution in improving those areas. **Deciding on educational topics should be something to talk more often about with parents, according to the opinion of 57% of respondents. The number is even larger (three quarters of the sample) of those who emphasize the issue of discipline, as an area about which parents should definitely be consulted.**
- **The opinions of parents when it comes to their role in the overall school management are almost divided** – the number of those who consider that this segment of cooperation should be more intensive is almost the same as the number of those who oppose them.
- **A significant percentage of parents (83, 2%) have never independently, or even in cooperation with other parents, tried to present their opinion in relation to school issues.**
- **179 examples of self-initiative participation of parents have been noted. Parents have, in largest number, expressed their opinion when it comes to school marks (61 answers), followed by: disturbing by other child (20), discipline (15), conflicts among peers and teachers' attitude towards a child with 14 identified answers each.**
- When it comes to assessing their own competence to participate in decision-making, and also assessment of the degree to which that is a family's duty and whether that is something that can be of help to a child, significant percentage of respondents (every time over 70%) state positive judgments. **Parents, namely, say that participation in decision-making is their duty; that they can help their child with that, and also they do feel competent to engage with that.**
- A number of parents emphasize that during last school year school offered them help, mostly in the form of textbooks (**59 answers**).

- **Over 80% of the respondents during last three years were not on the list of classroom representatives**, but considering how this issue is legally regulated – 1 classroom 1 representative – the answers are not discouraging. Still, almost 20% of parents stated that during last three years they were chosen for parent representatives in parents' councils.
- **Almost three quarters of the respondents in the mentioned period of last three years were not active members of any other bodies**, such as school boards, associations of parents and teachers etc;
- **Parents very positively estimate their competences when it comes to their possible participation in the work of different bodies or associations at a school level** (70% of them thinks that they or some of their family members are capable to undertake these duties). They also think (over 50%), that this is their responsibility, through fulfilling of which they can provide additional support to children.
- Parents have also estimated the degree of presence of various barriers in communication between them and school. **Seen as a whole, the results are really encouraging – parents think that most of the mentioned possible barriers do not represent a true obstacle.** Their answers are concentrated at the levels *I do not agree* and *I mostly do not agree*.
- **More than three fifths of parents are categorical in their attitude that school and parents are not in any kind of conflict.** If we add to that thirty percent of answers given at the level *I mostly do not agree*, we have every right to conclude that, at least when it comes to parents' assessment, situation is more than suitable for intensifying cooperation.
- Also, **relations between parents and teachers are not assessed as a communication barrier in around 80% of questionnaires.**
- The answers of our respondents indicate that parents have enough time² (76%) **and interest (74%) in more intensive communication with school.**
- Besides mentioned predictors, parents have independently added a number of those which, according to their opinion, represent **the problem in cooperation. These are: usually negative practice (20), parents being too busy (too long working hours – 15), school does not invite and inform parents (11), parents are usually invited when the problem becomes serious (3), parents can not influence anything (2)...**
- Parents were also asked about their opinion on the possibilities of communication with different persons from school (class masters, teachers, psychologist, pedagogue, principal), but also about relations with other parents. Generally speaking, attitudes are very positive. **Parents estimate that communication is possible, that teachers (especially class masters) treat them with respect, which is a positive foundation for any type of cooperation.**

² The statement does not correspond to the attitudes received through focus groups where it was actually pointed out that the lack of time and interest are greatest barriers for more intensive involvement of parents.

- The research confirmed the usual practice that within school, **the least present communication is the one between parents and pedagogues and/or psychologists.** We are of the opinion that this is the practice long-present in traditional school system in which visiting this service meant a child had difficulties in learning or behavior.
- **Surveyed Roma estimated their own and their child's competences when it comes to using the language of instruction (Montenegrin/Serbian/Croatian/Bosnian). More than 80% of parents are satisfied with their language competences, and 87, 5% of parents state the opinion that their children speak local language.**
- **More than half of Roma thinks that school is equally difficult to their children as to other non-Roma children.** Nevertheless, **there are a large percentage of those who estimate that obligations related to instruction process, as well as those which continue at home with homeworks, are more difficult for Roma. As reasons, parents mention: weak financial situation and lack of conditions for work, and even elementary living conditions (19); inadequate reactions, and even insulting by other children (11 answers, which, taken the size of this part of the sample – 64 parents – is almost one sixth); a child does not have good command of the language of instruction (5); missing textbooks (3); children find it difficult to follow the lessons (2)...**
- **If school offered help to Roma, which was the case with 46, 9% of surveyed parents, it is about provision of free textbook.** According to the opinion of respondents, schools could help a lot more. Besides a serious and warning statement that *every help is welcome*, the respondents also mention other possible types of help, such as: **provision of free clothes, textbooks and other school stationery; better protection of Roma from other children in schools; introducing additional teaching for these children.** We are of the opinion that these are indeed humble requests. It may be high time to look around and see how our neighbors live-it is evident from their suggestions that this population is denied fulfilling their basic biological and social needs.
- **Over 90% of parents state that schools attended by their children do not have Roma assistants.** How then to include these children in a regular teaching process? Are we honest enough when we make statements about the need to build intercultural democratic society in which each child will have equal rights, among others the right to education?
- Like beliefs of parents that we came across during focus groups when it comes to their awareness of issues concerning existing and ways of functioning of various associations of parents at a school level (functioning of parents' councils are crucially different from school to school. On one side we have very active councils who are doing their best to help remove barriers in the work of school (this especially relates to material-technical help), but we also noted comments of members who have never attended councils' meetings, and some of their personal initiatives were even refused without justification.)³, the opinions of those who were surveyed also differ a lot. **We identified large dispersion of answers to every offered statement, which strongly leads us to conclude that the situation is crucially different from school to school – on one side we have answers of persons who are completely aware of council issues, and on the**

³ „Improving inclusiveness and quality of education in Southeast Europe“; method – focus groups, 2009; Forum MNE and CEPS

other side are those who witness that in their schools things do not function by the same principles.

- However, the differences are dominantly largest in the attitudes of parents towards whether the councils in schools attended by their children function by the principle of activities. Around **20% of parents emphasize that councils are active, and around 28% of respondents agree with them to a significant degree.**
- **Somewhat more than 50% of parents are of the opinion that representatives advocate on behalf of parents fairly well.** Still, the number of those who do not share their opinion is not small.
- The sample covered 156 parent representatives, and almost 70% of them have been in the role of a representative for more than a year. **They came to this function in various ways: by decision of other parents (62, 8%), by responding to the request of a class master (21, 8%) or a principal (10, 3%).**
- With our questions we also wanted to get an insight into motivation of parents to be included in councils, school boards and other bodies at a school level. According to their answers, **the main reasons which made them accept the role of parent representatives are the following (we list them in the order of frequency): representing all the parents and initializing resolving issues of importance to everybody (important - 31.4%, very important - 61.5%), the wish to change particular thing concerning all the children (important - 34,6%, very important - 48,1%), and the wish of other parents for a particular person to be their representative (important - 32,1%, very important 49,4%).** As reasons which did not at all motivate them to accept the role of a representative they especially state the following: persuasions by some person (**important 13,5%, very important 2,6%**) and benefit for their own child only (**important 18,6%, very important 14,1%**).
- **Parents' representatives emphasize that their contribution is mostly present during organizations of sports and cultural events in schools, and extracurricular activities, and they participated in the issues of finances the least.**
- According to the opinion of representatives, **parents should be included in all the fields of school management.** Still, **some domains are pointed out as areas of potential stronger involvement (celebrations and excursions, issues related to health and safety, violent behavior in school etc, extracurricular activities and educational topics), and finances are, by half of the respondents, estimated as an area where parents should not be included too much.**
- **Representatives are of the opinion that other parents see them in a very positive light.** The smallest number of them agreed with the statements: *'They think that I am doing this only to show off and I am doing this only for my child'*, and most of them agreed with the statement: *'They believe that I can represent them efficiently and they support me in expressing joint concerns'*.
- **Parent representatives think that their relation with school administration is very good,** and this opinion is best illustrated by over 50% parents who *positively and very positively* assess the statement that *they are trying to understand my attitude and usually*

take it into consideration. Representatives are of the opinion that relations between parents and school can be improved by following factors, listed in the order of frequency of answers (the largest frequency is 19, and the smallest 1): **constant communication between school and parents; agreement on many issues; larger number of meetings; more frequent visits to school; respecting council decisions; better communication in general; more active participation of parents; better communication among parents themselves; parents to be more interested; school to be more interested; the choice of adequate representatives; responsibility; objectivity in approach; stronger involvement in the issues of school discipline; good organization; more efficient work and parents' awareness about the existence of problem.** There were also 48 *I don't know* answers.

- **When it comes to the estimation of their own competences and other conditions which make their task easy or difficult, parent representative positively evaluate the statements related to: their own attitude** (*as a parent representative I efficiently advocate for our interests*), **communication competences** (*I can easily talk to parents about anything which concerns them in relation to their child or classroom*) **and activity** (*I am active as a parent representative*). The most problematic aspect refers to how much they know other parents and frequency of contacts with them. It is evident and clear that the fact of not knowing other parents and rare contacts do affect quality of communication which directly has got an impact on the process of resolving of many problems related to various aspects of parents' engagement.
- When it comes to the part of survey with which we wanted to question **the level of presence of traditional and partnership relations between school and parents, it has been noted that**, according to parents' opinion, **cooperation or equal participation in some segments have to be achieved to a higher degree. The joint work**, in which both school and parents should equally invest **consists of the following elements: doing everything so that a child is successful in school, doing everything so that a child is happy in school, motivating a child to study, intervening if something is wrong in school, followed to a lesser degree by: raising a child to become a good person, knowing what is best for a child, doing everything so that a child does the homework.** It is interesting that neither factor has been in a significant percentage qualified as an exclusive responsibility of parents, whereas three, with over 45% of answers, were listed as **exclusive responsibility of school.** These are: teaching (doing everything so that the teaching is good), setting good extracurricular program and doing everything so that a child is safe in school.
- The last survey questions were directed towards establishing concluding statements of parents referring to the final assessment of their satisfaction with school and a child's position in it. We analyzed child-related aspects: their satisfaction, achievement, possibility to enjoy other activities apart from obligatory school contents, safety of children, quality of teaching etc. Also, concluding statements referred to communication between school and parents, then the influence which parents, in general, have on school life. On the basis of results it is **completely realistic to state that parents are significantly or completely satisfied with considered elements.**
- As **key factors which could influence the improvement of partnership between school and parents, the following were listed: more teacher and parent meetings (91), parents to be more interested in participating (46), better communication (20),**

better exchange of information and generally parents to be more informed (19), greater dedication of teachers (16), improving conditions in school (16), respecting opinion and attitudes of parents (12), respecting the needs of children (10), including parents in extracurricular activities (9), less studying material (contents), larger number of different activities (8). However, a great number of parents (875) did not have any suggestions.