

Advancing Educational Inclusion and Quality in South-East Europe
**A survey on primary school children parents' attitudes to and views on
parental participation in schools**

Serbia

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Jelena Vranješević, June 2010

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

- **SP** – school principals
- **SB** – school board
- **PC** – parents' council
- **PTM** – parent-teacher meetings
- **OSI** – Open Society Institute

Preface

This subject of this report are results of a survey of attitudes held by parents, their representatives (in parents' councils and school boards) and primary school principals in Serbia concerning possibilities of parents' participation in school life and the current participatory practice. The survey is part of a regional project carried out by the Open Society Institute (OSI) and the Education Support Program (ESP) entitled *Advancing Educational Inclusion and Quality in South-East Europe*. Within this project, several surveys have so far been conducted in Serbia involving: a) primary school principals in Serbia¹ i.e. a survey of their attitudes about possibilities and forms of parental participation in various aspects of school life; 2) action research entitled *Fostering Co-operation between Parents and Teachers and the Inclusion of Parents in Classroom Life*, which aimed at surveying various possibilities and forms of co-operation between parents and schools and fostering that co-operation; and c) a survey of parents' attitudes concerning possibilities of co-operation with schools and how they perceive their role in that co-operation. The last survey mentioned is the subject of this report. It was preceded by conducting focus groups which involved parents who are members of parents' councils (PC) and school boards (SB), parents who are not included in school management structures and parents of children from marginalised groups (children with special needs and Roma children) with the aim of obtaining a clearer picture of how parents perceive their role in co-operation with the school.

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¹ A report about national surveys in Serbia and all surveys in countries participating in the project can be found at www.see-educoop.net/aeiq/.

1. Introduction

The main provisions of the *Law on Foundations of the System of Education* (introduced in 2009), and in particular the section *Basic Principles of the System of Education* (Article 3) envisage that “*the system of education with its organisation and contents shall also ensure: 1) effective co-operation with the family by including parents i.e. guardians, for the purposes of successfully accomplishing the set goals of education; and 2) various forms of co-operation with the local community and broader social environment in order to achieve full harmonisation between individual and social interests in education.*”

However, even though the law envisages and precisely defines parents’ participation in the decision-making process in school and explicitly emphasises the importance of parents’ participation in the process of educating their children for raising the quality of the education process (*The Strategy of Development of Vocational Education in the Republic of Serbia*), there is still a discrepancy between the idea of participation as it is codified and its practical implementation. The results of previous surveys conducted within this regional project show there is a lack of a *clearly defined strategy* of communication with parents among the schools: opportunities to provide information to the parents or consult their opinion in schools are rare; when they are actually given a chance to become included in school life, it is mostly as organisers of auxiliary school activities, namely extracurricular activities, to organise sports events, or design school premises and humanitarian campaigns. Parents have very few chances of becoming included in their children’s education process by participating in areas such as the formal curriculum and organisation of school life, although they said (during the focus group discussions) that they would like to be more included in the formal school curriculum, which would also be in line with the Law on Education.

According to the school principals (in the first survey carried out in the project involving 200 school principals in Serbia), the greatest obstacle to communicating with the parents are the parents themselves, that is, their lack of interest in communicating with the school and their lack of communication skills. Action research conducted in 2009 with parents and teachers shows that parents, by contrast, maintain that the reason for the non-

inclusion of parents in school life is a lack of information, namely, parents often do not know in which ways they can participate in school life and they expect the school to make the ways and possibilities of co-operation clear. The parents are not fully satisfied with communication with their representatives who sit on the parents' council (PC); some do not believe that the PC truly represents their attitudes and needs; others feel there is no two-way communication and they are not sufficiently informed about the decision-making process within the council. Some parents are afraid that their attempt to participate will be interpreted as unnecessary interference in the professional role of teachers. Most parents (both parents' council representatives and other parents) want to be more included in the educational process so they can gain a clearer picture of the continuity of the education process and school curricula.

2. Survey aims

The main aim of the survey was *to provide an insight into attitudes held by parents and school principals concerning parents' participation in school life and the current participatory practice in our schools*. The survey attempts to find answers to the following questions:

I In what way are parents included in various aspects of school life? Which dimensions of parent participation, in the opinions of principals and parents themselves, are most common in our schools (provision of information, consultation with parents or their inclusion in the decision-making process), and in which areas?

II What is the current participatory practice like: how much influence do parents exert on the decision-making process? To what extent are parents included and active in school boards? In which areas of school life do parents' councils exert an influence and what kinds of initiatives do they pursue (including volunteering)?

III Which factors aggravate/facilitate implementation of the principle of parents' participation in schools? What kinds of parents get involved and why?

IV How do parents and principals perceive their roles in the education process?

3. Survey methodology

3.1. The sample

The sample encompassed 32 primary school principals in Serbia who had also participated in the previous parent participation survey. The parent sample encompassed 1,153 parents whose children attend schools managed by the interviewed principals. The parent sample was divided into four subgroups: mainstream – regular parents sample, encompassing those parents who are not representatives in PCs or SBs and do not belong to minority groups (926 parents); a subgroup of the parent sample consisting of those who belong to minority groups (parents with Roma nationality – 67 parents); a subgroup of parent representatives (sitting on a SB or PC – 150 parents); and a subgroup of the parent sample that included parents with Roma nationality who are parents' representatives (10 parents).

3.2. The procedure

The survey was conducted in November and December 2009. The school principals and the parents of children who attend schools managed by them were personally contacted and interviewed. The Ipsos Strategic Marketing Agency was tasked with conducting the survey.

3.3. The instruments

The survey used the instrument of *a structured interview* which came in one of two forms: one for parents and the other for principals. The structured interviews were designed by the survey's headquarter team on the basis of focus group interviews of parents in the region, and on the basis of relevant literature about parents' participation in school life.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Dimensions of parents' participation

In the opinion of both parents and principals, parent-teacher meetings are the most common way parents obtain important information (more than 95% of all four groups of parents said that they are invited at least 2-3 times per year to those meetings). They are mostly attended by a teacher, a head teacher or an individual school subject teacher or, in rare cases, by the principal or administrative service. Individual meetings occur very rarely in our schools (62% of Roma parents, 67% of mainstream parents, 70% of parent representatives and Roma parent representatives said they are never invited to those meetings) and mostly involve behavioural or study problems encountered by pupils and are often attended by professional assistance staff such as psychologists or education specialists. However, the issues about which parents are informed mostly concern pupils' marks and their behaviour. It is far less common to inform parents about other aspects of school life such as teaching (school developmental plans), developmental issues of interest to parents or to provide them with concrete information about how to give learning assistance to their children (Table 1).

	Mainstream parents	Roma parents	Parent representatives	Roma parent representatives
Written feedback on the child's progress	13	39	17	40
Information on how to help the child learn/school/ rules/content of lessons...	86	97	82	100
School or class newsletter	84	100	70	90
Written information on other issues (health/drugs/violence...)	75	82	58	70

Table 1 – Percentage of parents who never receive information about different aspects of school life

Assistance with homework is one of the areas about which parents are informed and have a chance to become included. Although the parents were divided in terms of whether the school should ask them to help with homework (half the parents think it should and half disagree), most of them (more than 90%, including the Roma parents) agree that they are competent to provide assistance with homework and that it is their duty to do so (70%) because it is in the best interest of the child (84%)

As far as other areas in which parents can be included on a voluntary basis are concerned, the practice in our schools is mostly not to include them: they do not have a say when it comes to designing and refurbishing school premises, various school services, and the process of teaching (such as teaching assistance). The Roma parents (including the Roma representatives) are never invited (100%) to help with lessons or assist a teacher in any way and to help with the school services. They are almost never invited to help with sport, and social and cultural activities: plays, concerts, field trips etc. (only one parent from the Roma parent representatives sample said that he/she was invited to help with that). Other parents said they are generally not invited (more than 80% are not invited to help with sport and social and cultural activities, and more than 90% of them said they are not invited to help with lessons/assist teacher or to help with school services).

The parents and school principals agree that the school should not include parents in school services and the designing and refurbishing of school premises, but all four groups of parents maintain that the school should include them in the education process (50%) and in extracurricular activities (57%) to a far greater extent than now.

When it comes to consulting the parents, the parents feel they are not being consulted about any significant area (except homework) of school life: most parents say they do not have a say when it comes to school management and finances, issues concerning the education process and teaching, disciplinary measures, or issues of children's health and safety. Even when it comes to extracurricular activities and the organisation of celebrations and school events, only half of all parents say they have been consulted about such issues (Table 2).

	Mainstream parents	Roma parents	Parent representatives	Roma parent representatives
School financial management	90	100	61	50
Extracurricular activities (extra sports, foreign languages, arts)	76	66	52	40
Organisation of school events (celebrations, excursions etc.)	50	84	13	0
Health and safety issues	62	72	30	30

Overall school management	93	99	83	40
Educational matters – content of lessons/textbooks, teacher assessment, pupil workload, homework	86	84	78	100
Pupil violence, expulsions and other pupil discipline issues	85	90	57	80

Table 2 – Percentage of parents who are never consulted about different aspects of school life

More than 90% of all parents state that their opinion is acknowledged only in the rare cases when they are asked for their opinion. They confirm that they always give an opinion when asked (more than 90%).

4.2. Participation in the decision-making process in school

The fact that there are few situations in which parents are consulted also leaves a mark on their proactive stance, that is, their engagement to help accomplish individual and group goals concerning the well-being of their children. Even though most parents (including Roma parents) maintain they are competent to take part in the decision-making process in different areas of school life (such as the organisation of social and cultural activities, school events, teaching assistance, health and safety issues etc) and that their participation in decision-making is in the best interest of the children, very few of them (from all parent sample subgroups) say they have actually tried to take an initiative either individually or as part of a group in order to influence decision-making in the school. This corroborates the perception of the principals that the parents are not sufficiently proactive in their efforts to become included in school life. The initiatives around which parents are united (or try individually to solve a problem) mostly concern school marks, problems they have with certain teachers, peer violence, the organisation of school life (shifts) and the refurbishing and equipping of school premises. The Roma parents are

additionally engaged in issues of discrimination against Roma by other children or even teachers and other parents.

The general picture of the parents' (non)-involvement in the decision-making process in schools is confirmed by representatives sitting on the parents' council. Most of them are motivated to become engaged as parent representatives in the council or the board either because they think this gives them an opportunity to contribute to the solving of problems common to most parents or because they feel honoured to have been appointed by other parents to represent them in those bodies. However, they also feel that their influence in areas such as school management and finances, issues of education and teaching (curriculum contents, textbooks, intensity of requirements, homework etc) and even extracurricular activities and issues such as school discipline and violence in schools is negligible (Table 3).

	not at all	a little	moderately	a lot
1 Financial management of the school – How money is spent in the school	59	16	21	5
2 Extracurricular activities (extra sports, foreign languages, arts etc.)	45	23	23	8
3 Organisation of school events (celebrations, excursions, etc.) –influence on decisions	14	24	41	21
4 Health and safety issues (watchmen, road crossings, cameras, drugs, relationship with police etc.)	27	17	37	19
5 Educational matters – content of lessons, textbooks, pupil workload, homework etc.	60	15	17	9
6 Overall school management – shifts, opening times, merging or closing classes or schools etc	70	13	12	4
7 Pupil violence, expulsions and other pupil discipline issues and procedures etc.	42	31	21	6

Table 3 –Perceptions of parent representatives concerning their contributions as a member of the parents' council in different areas of school

They consider that the impact of parents in those areas is in any case minimal. To a somewhat greater extent they maintain that they have contributed to the organisation of various events and celebrations at school, to the health and safety of their children, and that in those areas the possibilities to exert an influence are somewhat greater than when it comes to the previous set of issues.

The perception of their relationship with school management and administration is another indicator of the marginalised role of parents, of the misuse of parents' councils for the purposes of decoration and manipulation: more than half the parents maintain that school management is not very interested in their contribution, that they only want parents to support their ideas (a presentational role of parents), and that their opinion is not even taken into account when it is formally required (manipulation). It is interesting that the principals perceive the role of the council differently, maintaining that the council is empowered to make decisions in various areas and they are satisfied with the co-operation they have with the parents sitting on the council.

Another problem seems to be the (in) frequency of communication between the parent representatives and other parents because almost half of both the mainstream and Roma parents (47%) say that the parent representatives do not contact them frequently enough, while the parent representatives maintain there is sufficiently frequent communication with the other parents.

4.3. Obstacles to/opportunities for parents' participation

The principals think that the main obstacle to the successful participation of parents are the parents themselves: they are not interested in participating, they are too busy, they do not have the time to become informed about various school activities and do not know how to constructively communicate with the teachers. The parents also think (but to a smaller extent than the principals) that the lack of interest of most parents and lack of information are the greatest obstacles to participation but, unlike the principals, they do not agree with the statement that parents do not know how to communicate with the school. When asked about other possible reasons for parents' non-participation, the parents said that it is because of the *lack of information* provided by the school, as well as the fact that parents *cannot influence* many things in the school that they do not become included. Like the principals, they also do not think that teachers are the problem (their capacities and interest in communication or a lack of time for communication) or that the problem is that the school lack capacities to enable the participation of all parents.

As a way to *foster the participation of parents*, the principals mostly mention co-operation and better communication between the family and the school (establishing a partnership with parents), secondly, *more frequent meetings* and some *common actions* and the better *provision of information* to the parents, while the parents say that the way to improve participation is through the better *provision of information*, *more frequent meetings* with school representatives, *consultation* with parents and taking their opinion into consideration, as well as *more commitment* on the part of the teachers and acknowledging the needs of children.

4.4. Perceptions of the parents and principals of their roles in the education process

Both the parents and principals perceive their relationship as a partnership when it comes to children and their best interests, although the principals are more than parents willing to take joint responsibility for knowing what is in the best interests of the children (almost 50% of the parents and 80% of the principals think this should be a joint responsibility). Only 17% of the principals think that it is only the parents' duty, compared to 46% of parents who think that should primarily be the parents' job). For both principals and parents the areas which concern children, their success at school, their satisfaction with the school, study motivation as well as solving problems which arise should be areas of joint concern of both the family and the school. The quality of teaching and extracurricular programmes, as well as the issue of children safety in school, according to both the parents and principals, lies within the purview of the school rather than the family.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

Even though general provisions of the *Law on the Fundamentals of the System of Education* emphasise the need for and importance of efficient co-operation with the family and inclusion of parents in the education process, actual implementation of the principle of co-operation is a very complex and long-running process. In order to achieve successful implementation, i.e. to improve co-operation between the family and the

school and foster parents' participation in various aspects of school life, it is necessary to introduce simultaneous changes at several levels:

I Working with parents

Including parents in various ways in the life of the school helps them understand the way the school functions, its structure and organisation, school curriculum and boosts their competence for co-operating with the school (Cotton 2000). Therefore, it is important to offer parents diverse types of activities within a well-planned and long-term programme in which they can be included in accordance with their preferences, obligations and capabilities/skills. In order to avoid the merely decorative role of parents in such co-operation, and given that a substantial number of parents said they would like to participate in various aspects of the education process, even in teaching itself, parents should be encouraged to become included in the education process in various ways (all of them being mentioned in the Law): a) as teaching assistance, especially when children are at a younger age; b) as child educators in areas in which they are professionals/experts; c) as educators of other parents about problems relevant to the parent population and as to which some parents are experts; d) participation in various educational projects going on in the school or in which the school is included; e) as evaluators of the educational work and quality of the institution; and f) the parents of children from vulnerable or marginalised groups should take part in individualised educational plans.

II The relationship between parents and their representatives in the parents' council

Since the PC has an important role and jurisdiction in regulating the life of the school, it is important to establish a mechanism through which two-way communication is enabled: from parents to their representatives in the council and from council representatives to the parents who appointed them. It is important to continually assess the needs and expectations of parents (through meetings, questionnaires and polls) in order to reach decisions in the best interests of the children. This implies consulting parents in order to pool ideas about various actions and initiatives in school as well as about ways to overcome certain problems rather than merely offering ready solutions with which parents only need agree (or disagree).

III Teacher training: the principle of co-operation with the family as an important part of continual professional advancement

Since parents mostly need to co-operate with teachers and have the most frequent contacts with them, teachers have an important task to create an atmosphere in which parents are encouraged to become included in various ways and to contribute to the life of the classroom/school without a fear of being seen as interfering in various roles i.e. interfering in the professional role of teachers. The good communication skills teachers have (according to parents in the survey) are not sufficient: teachers have to know how to empower parents in order to foster their participation in various aspects of school life. Therefore, teacher training and professional advancement are tremendously important: it is important for teachers to be stimulated to think about the possibilities parent participation affords in the school context, as well as the various ways in which co-operation with the parents facilitates their work and boosts child development. The principle of participation, i.e. co-operation with the family, should be established as an important part of: a) the competence of teachers and one of the criteria for their work; b) teachers' professional advancement programmes; and c) a training programme of their mentors.

IV Changes in the school structure and organisation: co-operation with the family as one of the basic principles on which the school's functioning is based

This is a very important step in implementation of the principle of co-operation since *reculturalisation* by itself, i.e. a change in the attitudes of teachers, parents and members of management structures, is not sufficient to bring about change; what is also required is *restructuralisation*, i.e. a change in the school system in terms of values, norms and procedures so as to make the changes sustainable (Fullan 1991). In that sense, the principle of co-operation with the family, i.e. the participation of parents in the life of the school, should become an important benchmark in assessing the quality of work of a school. An assessment by a team of monitoring professional education specialists should contain a standard pertaining to participation. The principle of parents' participation should hold an important place in the creation of school development plans. The school

should develop procedures to encourage and foster participation and make it sustainable. In that way, participation will become part of school practice rather than an isolated example which depends on the motivation of certain schools and the individuals in those schools to improve co-operation with the family.

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