

# **Advancing Inclusion and Quality in South East Europe**

## **National survey of school directors in Serbia**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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#### **Introduction**

This report refers to the results of a survey of views of primary schools headmasters in Serbia with regard to the possibilities and practice of participation of parents in schools. The said survey is a part of the project “Advancing Educational Inclusion and Quality in South East Europe” unfolding in seven countries: Romania, Moldavia, Albania, Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia. In each of these countries, the same survey was conducted.

#### **Problem and survey objectives**

Despite legal obligation and established importance of parental participation, in practice this often comes down to either ‘decorative function’ of parents or their participation in decision-making on secondary issues in school life. During focus-group discussions with headmasters of sixteen Belgrade primary schools held over the course of March 2008, they said that the parental participation (with the exception of School Board and Parents’ Council) came down to activities like school refurbishment, organisation of some extracurricular activities or financial support for schools. Headmasters are of the opinion that there is no true participation of parents in schools and they see the cause of this problem in parents themselves (uninterested; they see themselves as controllers, not as partners in school life; they want participation in school life, but without

any responsibilities), but also in the way the schools are organised as well as unwillingness of their colleagues and teachers to involve parents in different aspects of school life.

The basic goal of this survey is *gaining insight into headmasters' views of parental participation in school life as well as actions taken at school to encourage this cooperation*. The survey endeavours to give answers to the following questions:

**I** In which way are the parents involved in different aspects of school life and in which way the school offers possibilities to implement the parental participation in practice?

**II** What are the views of school management – headmaster with respect to parental participation in school life?

**III** Which factors render the implementation of principles of parental participation in school more difficult?

**IV** What is the participatory practice in school: what is the influence of parents on decision-making process in school?

### **Survey method**

1. Sample: In this survey, the sample comprised headmasters from 200 primary schools in Serbia (a total of 200 headmasters). The sample was stratified by region (Belgrade – 14.5%, Eastern Serbia – 29.5%, Western Serbia – 26% and Vojvodina – 30%) and by the type of settlement where the school is situated (urban – 49.5% and rural – 50.5%). Whilst most headmasters have long-standing experience in the field of education (between 10 and 30 years of service), only 3% of headmasters have been in this office for a period longer than ten years. The majority of headmasters (63%) have been in this position for less than five years. As regards the time spent teaching in addition to performing their duties as headmasters, most headmasters are not teaching (85.5%), while a tiny percentage teach less than 25% (5.5%) and a negligible percentage of them spend more than a half of their working hours (2%) in the teaching process. As regards the size of schools in the sample and the number of pupils, there were 23% (up to 200 pupils) of *extremely small schools*, 47% of *small schools* (between 200 and 600 pupils), 12.5% of *medium-*

*sized schools* (between 600 and 800 pupils), 14% of *big schools* (between 800 and 1,200 pupils), and 2% of so-called '*gigantic*' schools (over 1,200 pupils).

2. Procedure: The survey was conducted over the course of May and June 2008. Headmasters of sampled schools were contacted in person and interviewed. GfK Agency was tasked with conducting the survey.

3. Instruments: In the survey, a *questionnaire* was used which the survey team compiled on the basis of focus-group interviews with headmasters in the given region as well as relevant literature on parental participation in school life. The questionnaire did not contain additional questions concerning the specific features of the context in Serbia.

## **Basic findings**

### I Communication between school and parents: different levels of participation

Very few schools have defined strategies for communication with parents which entails as its basic principle active participation of parents: *regular informing of parents, inclusion of all parents in the problem-solving process, principle of cooperation and mutual respect*. However, while schools list participation as the basic principle on which communication with parents is based, in reality parents have no many opportunities for participation: opportunities for informing and consulting parents are rare at schools (no more than once a semester; only a small number of headmasters say this happens more often). When it comes to parents' inclusion in the process of education of their children, the situation is rather similar, i.e. such opportunities do not occur often in our schools. In headmasters' view, the best thing is to involve parents in activities which are not directly related to formal school curriculum, teaching and learning processes, or essential aspects of school organisation, hence these would be: extracurricular activities, rearranging school space and financial issues (humanitarian actions and raising funds for some school activities). This may point to 'ornamental' or (at best) auxiliary role of parents in school life. The encouraging piece of information is that headmasters, to a degree, also mention parents' inclusion in projects and different educational events (educational workshops), which points to a practice of informing and education of parents on issues which are relevant to them and which may stimulate their inclusion in school life.

## II Headmasters' views on parental participation in school life

Headmasters' views are divided regarding the assessment of influence that parents have on different aspects of school life: almost a half of them believe that parents do have an influence on school life, while slightly smaller but still significant number of headmasters believe that parents have very little influence. The majority of headmasters agree that parental participation is not necessary in areas like teaching process and organisation of school and school life. While almost all headmasters agree that parental participation contributes to a more positive atmosphere at school, change of parents' attitude towards school in terms of better support and partnership, as well as improvement of pupils' performance, most headmasters reduce parental participation to their role as organisers of auxiliary activities at school. Verbal support for parental participation is also reflected headmasters' views on the importance of parents' inclusion in the process of education of their children: they believe that the role of school in ensuring such a support is very important, and yet parents have very few possibilities to rely on this support and get involved in their children's education process.

## III Factors which interfere with parental participation

In headmasters' view, the biggest obstacle in communication with parents are parents themselves, i.e. their lack of interest for communication with schools and lack of communication skills. Parents with whom communication is the most difficult are *uneducated parents*, *uninterested/irresponsible parents* and *biased parents*, as well as parents of lower socio-economic status, those employed and excessively ambitious parents. Parents were also described as the main obstacle concerning the possibility of school to provide to them adequate support (uninterested or too busy). A smaller number of headmasters have mentioned school as an obstacle, i.e. lack of school resources required for organisation and implementation of support programmes and teachers themselves, that is their (lack of) skills or lack of time needed for work on support programmes. When asked if school has in place some defined procedures intended to encourage and bring about participation, in most cases headmasters cite actions aimed at bringing about the change in parental population: *individual approach to parents* (frequent calls, interviews, advisory work), involvement of *expert professional agencies* and their contact with parents, *official invitation* (by post or telephone) to an interview; and to a lesser extent – actions which are conducive to changes in the school system which would render it open for parents' inclusion (*inclusion of parents in different seminars, educational events and projects*).

#### IV Participatory practice

In our schools, parental participation in the decision-making process takes place through Parents' Council and School Board. While the Parents' Council, according to headmasters, has significant and extensive powers, the question is if these are actually translated into practice or simply remain a dead letter given that the examples cited above suggest that the participation of parents is considerably limited, whereas their influence is assessed as being small and restricted to secondary areas of school life. This is partly corroborated by headmasters' standpoints vis-à-vis the Parents' Council's possibility to exert influence on various aspects of school life: the Council is not exerting any significant influence on the curriculum, the method of work and school infrastructure, and it neither influences other parents in terms of their greater participation. The most successful actions carried out by parents' councils, according to headmasters, are *school refurbishment, i.e. rearranging school and school yard*, as well as actions related to *safety* and *organisation of extracurricular activities*. This finding confirms the role which the parents have been given within the school structure: auxiliary activities and extracurricular activities, but certainly not those concerning the fundamental organisation of schools.

#### **Conclusion – recommendations**

Headmasters believe that parental participation is an important part of school life as well as that participation contributes to a positive atmosphere at school, motivation of other parents to participate, and pupils' performance. However, participation in our schools mostly boils down to auxiliary activities which are not directly related to the core education process or school organisation. Participation is most successful and yields best results in the field of numerous extracurricular activities (outings, excursions, school celebrations, etc.), school refurbishment, i.e. rearranging of schools and school space, and various humanitarian activities. As the biggest obstacles to effective participation, the headmasters see parents, their lack of interest, willingness and competence for participation. This effectively creates "a vicious circle of non-participation" given that this headmasters' perception of parents also has an impact on expectations from parents, which in turn define and determine parents' behaviour (the so-called self-fulfilling prophecy effect). All this is taking place within the school system which fails to encourage or stimulate to a sufficient extent participation, or limits and restricts it to passive participation and

‘ornamental’ activities so that parents are often not capable of recognising either the purpose of participation or the effects that it may have, which in turn renders their passive attitude towards their participation at school, and this is ultimately interpreted as a lack of interest. Participation as a possibility has not become an integral part of the school practice and procedures which renders its implementation at school more difficult. Given the importance which the parental participation has as regards the quality of the education process and all aspects of cooperation between schools and local communities, it is essential that participation be promoted and encouraged by way of carefully designed long-term projects as part of which parents are offered the most diverse scope of activities where they can get involved depending on their preferences, time available and capabilities/skills . The school must have a crucial role in designing such programmes, particularly the teachers who are most often in touch with parents. This is why education of teachers on possibilities which parental participation has in school context is important as well as the ways in which collaboration with parents may facilitate their work and stimulate children’s development. It is important to encourage and prompt the teachers to think about the ways in which they can involve parents and stimulate them to participate in the education process. However, in order to bring about the change, the processes of *restructuration* and *reculturation* must unfold simultaneously: in conjunction with the change of teachers’ attitude and values, the school system must change (in terms of values, norms and procedures) to support and make sustainable these changes. Education of teachers is not enough in itself if the school remains closed to new approaches and ideas. Participation of parents should become a part of school practice, not an isolated example which persists thanks to good will of individual stakeholders.