

Support to Civil Society Dialogue - "People to People Actions"

# Regional Synthesis Report

## Advancing Participation and Representation of Ethnic Minority Groups in Education

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## Introduction

Researchers all over the world argued that parent involvement in school life and largely, family and community involvements, are important factors with a positive impact on children's development and that a child's educational development is enhanced when these three environments work collaboratively toward shared goals. Grounded on recent international legislation, international research findings, but also on examples of good practice in many countries, a widespread support for parents' involvement started to be reflected in current educational policies and practices. Extensive worldwide research<sup>1</sup> and evidence of practice has demonstrated that inclusive school level governance where the parents are given the opportunity to participate in shaping school policies has a positive impact on school climate and student learning. This is why the equitable provision of education is intrinsically linked to the quality of school-level governance in more and more educational systems and a true partnership between school and parents is considered among the most effective solutions to improve the chances for students to have access to a quality education, which all children in democracy are entitled to.

However, what parental involvement means is either not always clear, or has various understandings in different countries and cultural contexts. Generally speaking, parents' involvement includes a wide range of behaviors but generally refers to parents' and family members' use and investment of resources in their children's schooling. Is this general conclusion true in the Western Balkans countries? A 2009 Open Society Institute research<sup>2</sup> organized in ten South East European countries offered generally positive answers related to the opportunities created by school leadership for parents to participate in school life and to assess the extent to which equal opportunity for parental participation in school life is promoted. But are these findings relevant for the ethnic minorities living in these countries as well? Are the opportunities doubled by a real parents' involvement in school life?

This synthesis report tries to answer this question by examining what parents' belonging to ethnic minorities' participation in education means for teachers, students and school principals in five countries from the West Balkan region (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, and Serbia), and to what extent the ethnic minority parents' involvement is perceived as a factor bringing equity, and quality in a region still confronted with disparities in educational opportunities. The synthesis report is developed under APREME project, as described in the Section 2 of this paper.

The synthesis report is based on the findings provided by a set of country surveys<sup>3</sup> aiming to provide evidence on the school level sources of existing educational inequity

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<sup>1</sup> OECD, *Thematic review of education policy in SEE countries*, 2003

<sup>2</sup> Open Society Institute, *Parental involvement in South East European Schools Principals view*, 2007-2009

<sup>3</sup> All five country surveys are attached to this report.

in the above mentioned countries, but also to shed light on various factors that influence the levels and forms of existing disparities in school context.

Last but not least, the synthesis aims to identify and propose a set of actions that would offer possible remedies to the identified problems. The survey design reflects the effort to build systematic understanding and compare the experiences of the participating countries in terms of capacities, attitudes and actions related to promoting equal educational opportunity with focus on ethnic minority groups.

The synthesis is organised in seven sections, each of them having a clear focus. The first one aims to clarify the conceptual framework of the paper, referring to the main results of international research in the field of parents' involvement in education. Several different forms of parents participation in education and with the schools are discussed. The second section describes APREME project and its need in international and regional context, linking it with other international similar initiatives. The third section describes the research methodology used under APREME project, focusing on the instruments that facilitated the preparation of the country studies, while the fourth one intends to introduce the reader in the complex world of ethnic composition of West Balkan countries. The fifth section identifies the specificity of parents belonging to ethnic minorities involvement in school life and children education, with an emphasis on different types of barriers. The section six is a summary of practices and strategies either developed at a central level or assumed by school principals at the school level for involving parents in education. The last section has a crucial importance for those policy makers, community leaders and practitioners who wish to take on the challenge of improving inclusion and participation. The authors tried to offer a set of focal points that would enable people in a particular setting to identify a suitable starting point for development, improvement or innovation.

## Section 1: Conceptualisation framework

Research and common sense both indicate that increased involvement of different stakeholders in school life has a positive impact on students' development and achievement. A wide range of research papers supports such an observation, clearly indicating that parents' involvement in education a very important factor in accelerating and motivating factor in their children's education. As a consequence of the improved support received, students achieve higher grades or they feel more motivated for learning etc. In the same time, students improved participation in education – both in academic and non-academic activities help them to develop a good sense of belonging useful for their development.

For proving such observations, a concise literature review will be further developed, focused on exploring questions like:

- What does it mean involvement of parents and students in school life?
- Which are efficient forms of parental involvement in education?
- Does parent involvement have positive effects on student achievement?
- What is known about the uses of parent involvement in predominantly minority communities?

According to the literature developed on this topic, the term parent involvement includes several different forms of participation in education and with the schools, generally referring to parents' and family members' use and investment of resources in their children's schooling. These investments can take place in or outside of school, with the intention of improving children's learning.

***Looking more closely at the research on the effects of parental involvement, a consistent, positive relationship between parents' engagement in their children's education and student outcomes can be noticed. Studies have also shown that parental involvement is associated with student outcomes such as lower dropout and truancy rates.***

Researchers have begun to focus on how parental involvement affects students, why parents do and do not get involved in their children's education, and what role schools and teachers can play in creating parental involvement. Three frameworks for exploring the precursors to and effects of parental involvement have been the foundation of a majority of the research on parental involvement. Each approach highlights a different aspect of the dynamics that exist in school-home-community relationships (see "Parental Involvement in Education - Research on Parental Involvement, Effects on Parental Involvement, Obstacles to Parental Involvement, Controversies, Current Issues"): Wendy S. Grolnick studies from 1994 and 1997, on the three dimensions of parental involvement based on how parent-child interactions affect students' schooling and motivation. Behavioral involvement refers to parents' public actions representing their interest in their child's education, such as attending an open house or volunteering at the school. Personal involvement includes parent-child interactions that communicate positive attitudes about school and the importance of education to the child. Cognitive/intellectual

involvement refers to behaviors that promote children's skill development and knowledge, such as reading books and going to museums. Parental involvement, according to this theory, affects student achievement because these interactions affect students' motivation, their sense of competence, and the belief that they have control over their success in school.

- Kathleen V. Hoover-Dempsey and Howard M. Sandler, in articles published in 1995 and 1997, defined parental involvement broadly to include home-based activities (e.g., helping with homework, discussing school events or courses) and school-based activities (e.g., volunteering at school, coming to school events).
- Joyce L. Epstein, in a 1995 article and a 2001 book titled *School, Family, and Community Partnerships*, argued that school, family, and community are important "spheres of influence" on children's development and that a child's educational development is enhanced when these three environments work collaboratively toward shared goals. The widely used classification developed by Epstein and colleagues (e.g., Epstein, 1995) has distinguished six types of parental involvement reflecting different types of cooperative relations between schools and parents:
  1. Parenting - schools must help parents with the creation of positive home conditions to promote the development of children. Parents must prepare their children for school, guide them and raise them.
  2. Communicating - schools must inform parents about the school programme and the progress of children's school careers. Schools must also present such information in a manner which is comprehensible to all parents, and parents must be open to such communication.
  3. Volunteering - the contribution and help of parents during school activities (e.g. reading mothers, organisation of celebrations).
  4. Learning at home - activities aimed at the support, help and monitoring of the learning and development activities of one's school-going children at home (e.g. help with homework).
  5. Decision making - the involvement of parents in the policy and management of the school and the establishment of formal parental representation (e.g. school board or parent council memberships).
  6. Collaborating with the community. The identification and integration of community resources and services with existing school programmes, family child-rearing practices and pupil learning

Continuing such classifications, it is important to underline that an important implication of these conceptualisation models (as those developed by Epstein for instance) is that increasing parent involvement requires changing the behaviour of both parents and school personnel. Parenting, volunteering, and supporting home learning result primarily from the efforts of parents; but communicating, participating in decision making, and collaborating with the community also require commitment and effort from schools (Mattingly, Prislín, McKenzie, Rodriguez, Kayzar, 2002).

Other - more recent - studies have significantly contributed to the development of the concept of involvement in education. Several studies have shown statistically significant relationships between involvement in education and student success, considering parents' involvement as a predictor of children's academic achievement (Fantuzzo,

Davis, & Ginsburg, 1995). Studies also show that parent involvement positively affects student attendance (e.g., Stevenson & Baker, 1987), retention (National Center for Education Statistics, 1992), and student attitudes and behaviours (Clark, 1993). Research also reveals a number of persistent parent involvement patterns (Mattingly, Prislín, McKenzie, Rodriguez, Kayzar, 2002). Thus, it was noticed that the vast majority of involved parents are mothers (Henry, 1996), and parent involvement decreases as children become older (Eccles & Harold, 1996). Parents with lower incomes and less education are less involved than are wealthier and more educated parents (Eccles & Harold, 1996). A number of barriers to parent involvement have been identified as well, including school and community characteristics, parent and teacher attitudes and beliefs, parent emotional and adjustment problems, and parent and teacher practices (Eccles & Harold, 1996). Interesting to be underlined is the fact that such findings were confirmed also by the research developed in the framework of APREME project as well.

*Additionally, interesting information was developed concerning the level of involvement of minority parents and students in educational process. Even the literatures is not extensively approaching the issue, useful data are available for strengthening the conceptualisation framework specific to APREME project. Thus, single parenthood and membership in a minority group, two variables strongly correlated with income, are also associated with lower levels of parental involvement (Epstein, 1990). In other words, several studies indicate that minority parents are often underrepresented among the ranks of parents involved with the schools. There are numerous reasons for this: lack of time or energy (due to long hours of heavy physical labor, for example), embarrassment or shyness about one's own educational level or linguistic abilities, lack of understanding or information about the structure of the school and accepted communication channels, perceived lack of welcome by teachers and administrators, and teachers and administrators' assumptions of parents' disinterest or inability to help with children's schooling (Cotton, Wikeland).*

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## Section 2: Background

APREME is the acronym of **Advancing Participation and Representation of Ethnic Minority Groups in Education**, a project developed by Kosova Education Center (KEC), and implemented in five countries - Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Serbia<sup>4</sup>.

### ***International context***

APREME project is not an isolated initiative, but part of a focused international effort aiming to strengthen the inclusive education all over the world. The principle of inclusive education was adopted at the 1994 World Conference on “Special Needs Education: Access and Quality” in Salamanca, Spain, where participation and equality for all has been proclaimed. Essentially, the Salamanca Statement calls upon member states to guarantee the implementation of inclusive education in order to bring back excluded children into the mainstream educational system. (IBE-UNESCO, 2007, p. 7).

The problem has a high degree of relevance in West Balkans, a multiethnic region still confronted, despite of recent years positive evolutions, with violations of the basic right of children belonging to ethnic minority groups to be educated in the mainstream schools, with negative attitudes, prejudices and stereotypes affecting children’s universal rights. Under these circumstances, along the last decade strong educational programmes have been implemented by international donors as the European Commission through European Training Foundation, the World Bank and the Open Society Institute (Roma Education Fund<sup>5</sup>), UNICEF (Education of Minority Children in Kosovo, 2004) etc. The international effort has been amplified by significant national initiatives in most of the West Balkans countries aiming to restore security, the rule of law and the full exercise of human rights for each and every person everywhere where ethnic discrimination and segregation is still a reality.

### ***Regional concerns and initiatives***

Expanding the access to quality education for all children in West Balkans was an important objective for the Open Society Institute and for OSI-related representatives of ten South East Europe countries<sup>6</sup> who launched in 2007 the project *Advancing Education Quality and Inclusion in South East Europe*. The project started from a set of identified common priorities, such as (i) inequity in education - more precisely the gap

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<sup>4</sup> The involved partner organizations are: Open Society Foundation for Albania (OSFA) – Albania, ProMENTE Social Research – Bosnia and Herzegovina, Network of Education Policy Centers (NEPC) – Croatia, Group MOST – Serbia and Center Education 2000+ - Romania.

<sup>5</sup> REF receives financing from its founding donors, i.e. the World Bank and the Open Society Institute, and approximately from 24 further donors, including government agencies, private foundations, businesses and individuals.

<sup>6</sup> Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia.

between existing policies and their implementation, and the neglect of various forms of discrimination (e.g., in relation to minorities, special needs etc.) and (ii) insufficient participation by stakeholders - particularly students and parents - in education systems, and poor quality of education. Assuming that parental involvement in school life is crucial to the success or failure of sustained policy efforts to generate qualitative education services, the project aimed to identify the school principals' perceptions of the extent to which parental engagement in school life enhances the educational outcomes of pupils.

Despite the national variances, the analysis of the collected data led to the following main conclusions (Pop, Powell, Miljevic, Crighton, 2009, p. 119-121):

- School principals across all participating countries perceived parental participation in school life as positively associated to all four performance variables studied<sup>7</sup>;
- There is an important gap between the perceived importance of parental participation in school life and the actual efforts made by schools to actively involve parents;
- Home-school communication initiated by schools is limited in scope providing mostly information on pupils' educational performance;
- There is a consistent gap between the shares of school principals who perceive parenting services by schools as useful and the actual rate with which such services are organized in their respective schools;
- School Principals' overall assessment of parents' influence on school decision-making reflects the double standards that are assigned to teaching, pedagogy and overall management on the one hand – where parents' involvement is rather weak, and school social activity planning and engagement in classroom decision-making on the other – where the parents' involvement is everywhere welcomed.

Open Society Institute project findings challenged Kosova Education Centre to launch in 2009 *Advancing Participation and Representation of Ethnic Minority Groups in Education* project (APREME). KEC decided to assess if the above mentioned findings are valid for the parents belonging to ethnic minorities in West Balkans. The need for a new project was also supported by other evidences related to the status of ethnic minorities in the region, as follows<sup>8</sup>:

- (i) Although the legislations and education policies of the West Balkans countries recognize and integrate the principles of the United Nation Declarations and European Conventions and guarantee, in their legal texts, equal education to the all children (regardless of their gender, ethnicity, disability), strong disparities in education opportunities and outcomes between majority and minority population in this Region remain significant and continue rising. Credible reports point out that comprehensive education reforms

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<sup>7</sup> The four performance variables studied were: opportunities for parents to support school activities, home-school communication, school support for parents to help their children in education and parent involvement in school governance.

<sup>8</sup> Kosova Education Centre, *Advancing Participation and Representation of Ethnic Minority Groups in Education*, Grant Application Form, 2007

undertaken during the last decade, have not yet managed to assure the same education opportunities and a level of quality education for all citizens of the respective countries, hence the full enjoyment of the right to education for the minorities and other vulnerable groups.

- (ii) There is a noted gap between the existing education and anti-discrimination policies and their implementation. Furthermore, policies fail to deal with many subtle and hidden forms of the discrimination between minority and majority groups. Although ethnic minorities have access to education, yet the quality, relevance and the effectiveness of the education provided are disputable. Those problems, in varying extent and manifestations, are present in all participating countries and in all levels of education. Examples are the segregated schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, insufficient or no instructions in the minority/majority language; lack of teaching/learning material in the minority language all of which limit the educational and professional choices.
- (iii) There is an insufficient and/or inadequate participation of education stakeholders, particularly students and parents belonging to minority groups. Under the project, participation has been defined as the involvement of all or any relevant stakeholder groups (students, family, teachers, other local community members) in any kind of school management or decision making. Although the forms and instruments for students and parents' participation in the education exist (e.g. school boards, students' councils, etc.), the actual participation of these stakeholders in the life of school is rather nominal and their influence on the school issues negligible.

### ***Specific needs to be addressed***

Thus, the project aimed to address the following needs:

1. Increase of disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes despite the considerable improvement of national anti-discrimination legislation raises concerns about the extent of equity that may be achieved in schools in the newly developed education systems in the West Balkans region. While system level measures and policies are likely to provide the necessary framework for the reduction of large scale and systematic discrimination, they are far from being sufficient to ensure at the school level the enrooting of attitudes and behaviours that would ensure educational equity. Considering these, there is a need to identify the main factors that inhibit the enrooting of values, attitudes and practices leading to educational inclusion and quality at the school level.
2. Little exposure to good practices from other school communities, both within the country and the region, although there are such practices.
3. Insufficient and/or inadequate school based initiatives to bridge the gap in participation and representation in education and quality of provision between majority and minority groups. As underlined above, limited action at school level is likely to lead to shortcomings in the implementation of the educational equity related provisions.

### ***Project objectives***

The overall objective of this intervention is to contribute to building all-inclusive education systems in West Balkans Countries that promote equal access to quality education for all and model respect for ethnic diversity.

The specific objective of the Project is to advance participation and representation of minority ethnic groups in education systems in the West Balkans Countries by promoting good practices and supporting local initiatives.

The emphasis of the project will be on empowering students, teachers and parents to build initiatives that advance participation and representation of ethnic minorities in elementary (compulsory) education.

### ***Target group***

Policy makers, civil society organizations active in the field of protection of minority rights, three hundred parents, students, teachers from schools benefiting from the project.

### ***Main project activities***

In order to achieve the project objectives, the main following activities have been organised and implemented:

- a. A qualitative research has been designed and implemented (i.e. focus groups discussions – see the Section 3, Research methodology) to solicit the opinions of parents and other community members on the current practices of school-parent-community involvement strategies of schools in regards of creating an inclusive participatory environment, i.e. the efforts to engage parents belonging to ethnic minorities into school level governance. Country based survey of the relevant literature and documents was undertaken to corroborate the qualitative research findings and provide additional input for identifying advocacy priorities.
- b. In parallel, a collection of good education stakeholders' practices to reduce inequity and raise the quality of education took place. It included the review of different types of interventions initiated and/or implemented through stakeholder participation (school students and parents in particular) with the aim to advance educational inclusion and quality at school and local community level and provide mechanism(s) for horizontal learning and best practice exchange thus supporting sustainable initiatives on institutional and local level.
- c. Following this, local communities were engaged in actions planning to translate their views on inclusion and quality into practical programmes at the local level.
- d. These local initiatives to promote inclusion and quality culminated in a regional conferences organised to showcase and discuss the outcomes of the project.
- e. A project web-page was developed serve as means for continuous dissemination of project results across network and to the wider public.

### ***Project expected results***

The project activities have end up with the following expected results:

1. A functioning regional network for advancing educational inclusion built
2. A National surveys and the Regional summary published in English and the languages of the Region, including relevant information on participation and representation of minority ethnic groups at school-level.
3. A book including examples of good practices in parents and students participation and representation in school life and decision making at school level.
4. Local initiatives for improving participation and representation encouraged.
5. A web-page developed as a means for continuous dissemination of project results across network and to the wider public functional.

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## Section 3: Research method

The aim of the research developed within Component 2 of “Advancing participation and representation of ethnic minority groups in education” (APREME) project was to compare the experiences of selected countries in terms of capacities, attitudes and actions related to participation in education, with a special focus on minorities groups. More specifically, the survey goal was to explore how minority parents and students are involved in school activities (e.g. forms of involvement, frequency of involvement, barriers to involvement), with special attention given to examples of good practice.

For this purpose, a small-scale qualitative study (interviews and focus groups) was carried out between October 2009 and February 2010 in five secondary schools from the following countries Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Serbia. In terms of the research, each location was considered a “case study”, defined as a community where there is educational provision at the secondary level for more than one ethnic group with at least one of these constituting a minority. The case included at least one secondary / high school, situated in an urban neighbourhood or a small town in a rural setting. The data sources for each “case study” were school and community actors who could be categorised as ‘reliable informants; the survey did not target to reach a representative sample.

Prior to the field research, each country team elaborated a desk research, in order to collect information on the following issues:

- Extent of minority students and parents participation in schools
- Mapping existing initiatives seeking to improve minority students and parents participation in schools
- Legal, regulatory, policy, financial obstacles/incentives to improving minority students and parents participation in your country
- Key issues or factors which may affect level of minority students and parents participation in your country, e.g. school type.

Complementary, the qualitative field research covered similar topics, investigated with the help of the following instruments:

- *interviews with principals* (lasting around 45 minutes); the following topics were approached during the discussion:
  - *Participation of parents in school activities* (describing formal programs/initiatives aimed at enhancing parents'/ students participation in your school, describing projects initiated by the parents etc)
  - *School's strategies for enabling parents/students to participate and become involved* (nominating parent and student representative bodies, strategies for involvement etc)
  - *Motivation of parents and students to actively participate in education*
  - *Participation and involvement of parents and students – possibilities and barriers*
  - *Special schooling conditions for students belonging to minority groups* (discussing on how schools reach out to students from minority backgrounds or with limited competence in speaking mainstream language, identifying

solutions and suggestions to improve the parents/ students' involvement in school life etc)

- *focus groups with students* (lasting around 60 minutes); the content discussed in focus groups was divided into four thematic units:
  - *Participation in education and the decision making process* (describing term “student involvement” and roles do students have in making relevant decision for the school etc)
  - *School strategies enabling active student participation* (describing different type of involvement of students - attending school meetings, contributing to curricular decisions, being involved in school governance or administrative issues etc)
  - *Student participation and involvement in education - possibilities and barriers* (describing effective strategies used to involve students in education, identifying the main barriers etc)
  - *Special conditions for minority group students* (discussing on special support for minority students etc)
  
- *focus groups with teachers* (no less than 4 and no more than 8 persons, lasting around 60 minutes); the following topics were discussed:
  - *Parents' participation in education from the viewpoint of teachers* (defining “parent involvement”, nominating most important areas from the school life where parents can successfully get involved, describing advantages and disadvantages of parents' participation etc)
  - *Communication between the home and school* (describing efficient form of communication, identifying advantages and disadvantages)
  - *Communication with students and parents who belong to minority groups* (describing most significant challenges faced in terms of involving parents of minority students in their children's education, describing how are these challenges being addressed and how schools reach out to parents from minority backgrounds or with limited competence in speaking mainstream language, identifying possible communication problems etc)
  - *Necessary support and suggestions* for improving the participation of parents in education (describing most effective strategies the schools have used to involve parents in their child's education)
  
- *focus groups with parents* (lasting around 60 minutes); the contents that were discussed with parents could be organized in following thematic units:
  - *Parents' participation in education: current practice characteristics* (defining “involvement in education”, describing parents role in making relevant decision for the school and the most important areas from the school life where parents can successfully get involved etc)
  - *Possibilities for participation of parents in education* (describing the opportunities for engagement, the opportunities school provided to help parents to understand their child's learning needs etc)

- *Participation of parents of students who are minority group members* (discussing on special support from school to minorities - materials translated into parents native language, interpreters etc)
- *Communication between the home and the school* (describing efficient form of communication, identifying advantages and disadvantages)
- *Parent inclusion strategies and barriers* (describing most effective strategies the schools have used to involve parents in their child's education, identifying the main barriers to parents' more active involvement in their children's education etc).

Based on the results of the document analysis, interviews, focus groups, the country teams wrote a comprehensive report, mapping the barriers to inclusive approach in education and identifying existing solutions in the region, plus giving detailed recommendations on levels and ways of intervention, stakeholder involvement and advocacy in order to achieve greater inclusiveness in education.



## Section 4: Ethnicity across the region

West Balkans is a space of ethnical diversity and of spectacular historical events. Frequent wars, state demarcations (boundary determination), voluntary and forced population movements, relations of big powers toward small nations as well as many other factors moulded the ethnic map of this area. Natural-geographic, economic, traffic and ethnic entities (units, totalities) were criss-crossed with boundaries while the parts of nations have become minorities in the established territory/ state communities. These complex historical, geographical, social and economical circumstances determined nowadays significant differences in the political position of various ethnic groups within some Western Balkan countries. One dividing line is the extent to which an ethnic group has the status of ethnic 'minority', or 'state-forming nation' (in this respect Bosnia and Herzegovina is a specific case) or 'people' in a country.

The ethnic composition in West Balkans countries is much diversified and has several features, as follows:

- a. *Large percentage of the total population* The population censuses in early 2000 in Montenegro, Serbia and Croatia showed that the population belonging to a minority ethnic group accounted for 57%, 16% and 7.5% respectively (Anastasia Fetsi, 2006). In Kosovo, the United Nations Development Programme estimates that ethnic minorities account for about 11% of the total population. In Bosnia and Herzegovina although none of the Bosniac, Croat or Serb ethnic groups make up the absolute majority of the population, in the Dayton Constitution of 1995 they are described as 'constituent peoples' enjoying institutional equality. Other 17 ethnic groups in the country are estimated to account for about 2% of the entire population and have received the status of ethnic minorities.
- b. *Big numbers of ethnic groups* The number of ethnic groups encountered in each country is often high. In Serbia and Croatia there are more than 20 ethnic groups. In Montenegro there are six. This percentage, however, is not fully agreed; a World Bank study arrived at 7.5% of the total population (Anastasia Fetsi, 2006). The ethnic minority mostly exposed to uncertain numbers are the Roma because of their nomadic lifestyle as well as the fact that births are often not registered.
- c. *Large areas of homogeneous population* Despite the large number of ethnic groups the West Balkans includes significant areas of homogeneous population. In Albania, the six ethnic minorities account only about 2% of the entire population according to the 1998 census. In Kosovo, the Albanians majority covers 90% of the total population, while Serbia is dominated by a majority of approximately 83%.
- d. *Not all minority ethnic groups are officially recognised* In Albania, for instance, only three ethnic minorities are recognised (Greek, Macedonian and Montenegrin), while Vlachs/ Aromanians and Roma are defined as "ethno-linguistic" minorities.

The political, cultural and educational rights of ethnic minority groups are protected by law as in Croatia (A guide to minorities ..., 2009, p. 47) and Serbia (OSCE, 2008) where the legal framework facilitates the representation of the national minorities in the Parliament. In other cases, there are still tensions between the majority and the minorities as in Bosnia where according to the Constitution<sup>9</sup> only the three main constituent ethnic groups - Bosniaks, Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Croats have access to the presidency or parliament. The Constitution also discriminates against Bosnian Serbs in the Federation entity and Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats in Republika Srpska (Alic, 2010).

### **Albania**

Albania is one of the most homogeneous countries in the Balkans as far as ethnic communities are concerned. There are three recognised minorities (Greek, Macedonian and Montenegrin), while Vlachs/ Aromanians and Roma have the status of ethno-linguistic (sometimes called cultural) minorities. According to data made available in 2003 by the Statistics Institute of Albania, the number of people belonging to the Greek, Macedonian, Montenegrin and Vlach/ Aromanians ethnic groups was established as 42,892 (1.4% of the population), but other sources estimate the minorities in Albania to comprise 2-4% of the total population.

Experts estimate the number of Roma to be between 90,000 and 100,000, out of a total Albanian population of 3.3 million. Other authors enumerate Egyptians and Serbs among the existing ethnic minorities in Albania (Nikolovska, 2008, p. 14-15), but they are not officially recognised as either a national or a linguistic minority, although they would like their status to be acknowledged as such.

Roma and Egyptians are identified as the most vulnerable groups in Albania. In the absence of registration, the size of the Roma and Egyptian population is unknown. Estimates range from 80,000 to 150,000 people (up to 3 per cent of the total population). While admitting that Roma 'have ethnic characteristics and their own language', the government does not recognize the Egyptian identity: 'they have been integrated completely in the Albanian population and their only difference from [Albanians] is the colour of their skin'. There are no state programmes targeting the Egyptians, who often face similar problems to the Roma.

In the absence of recent census data, the last being from 1989 all the data related to the ethnic minority groups are not reliable (A guide to minorities ..., 2009, p. 44). This issue has been raised by both the Council of Europe and the European Commission on Racism and Intolerance (ECRI).

### **Kosovo**

Since a census hasn't been taken in Kosovo since 1981, neither the size of the population nor its ethnic make-up is known exactly but it is largely recognised that after 1999 approximately 90% of the population is Albanian, while the remainder is made up

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<sup>9</sup> The Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is embodied in the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement signed by BiH, Serbia and Croatia, was considered the best compromise reachable at the time.

of minorities: Ashkali, Bosnian, Egyptian, Roma, Serb, Turk, Gorani. The greatest minority, not only numerically but also politically, is the Serbian minority.

The undefined Kosovo status has an impact on divided education between the overwhelming Albanians as the majority and the Serbian minority integrated in a parallel education system inspired by the official one in Serbia. The educational authorities in Kosovo paid a special attention to inclusion in the system of the so called groups in danger. Thus, catch up classes have been organized with 3,580 students of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities, of whom 865 went on to join regular schooling (Council of experts of pre-university education ..., 2007).

### **Serbia**

According to the 2002 census, the population of Serbia numbers 7,498,001 persons, 6,212,838 of whom are ethnic Serbs (82,85%). The minority population includes Albanians, Ashkali, Bulgarians, Bunjevaks, Bosnians, Croats, Egyptians, Germans, Greeks, Hungarians, Jews, Macedonians, Romanians, Slovacs, Ruthenians, Ukrainians, Vlachs and Roma (OECD, 2008). The precise size of the Roma population in Serbia is not known. Official census figures for 2002 for Serbia (excluding Kosovo) cite 108,193, but unofficial estimates put it at as high as 700,000. The chronic levels of unregistered people impact on the data. A 2005 Amnesty International report states that: 'large numbers of Roma have never registered marriages or births, and effectively have lived almost completely outside of the state system'. In addition, many are reportedly reluctant to identify themselves as Roma, through fear of the possible negative consequences.

All national minorities in Serbia are officially recognized. They are under the protection of the Council of Europe regulations that secure minority rights ratified by Serbia<sup>10</sup>.

### **Croatia**

The 2001 Census data registers 22 national minorities in Croatia which might suggest that Croatia is one of the more multicultural transitional democracies in the region. However, the same Census shows that these minorities make up a mere 7.5% of the total population (Mesić and Baranović, 2005). The most represented national minority in Croatia are Serbs - 4.5%, followed by Bosniaks - 0.47%, Italians - 0.44%, Hungarians - 0.37%, Albanians - 0.34%, Slovenians - 0.30%, Czechs - 0.24% and Roma - 0.24%.

Other national minorities are represented with less than 0.1%. National minorities in Croatia tend to be "native" minorities, i.e. members of minority groups which have resided in Croatia for centuries (e.g. Italians, Hungarians and Serbs). It is important to point out that the minorities which are recognised as "migrant" minorities (e.g. Czechs and Bosniaks) (Tatalović, 2001) have also resided on Croatian territory for a relatively long period of time. "New" minorities in Croatia are not a widespread phenomenon.

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<sup>10</sup> The Framework Convention for the Protection of the Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities (in 2001) and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (2006). Furthermore, Serbia has signed bilateral agreements on minority protection with four neighboring countries: Romania (2002), Hungary (2003), Croatia (2004) and Macedonia (2004).

Comparing the 1991 census with the data of the recent censuses, the size of the minority population – with the exception of the Roma and Slovaks – has decreased. The most drastic decrease is among the largest minorities: Czechs, Hungarians, Italians and Serbs (MRG, 2003, p. 12).

### **Bosnia and Herzegovina**

The legal framework developed in Bosnia and Herzegovina after the Dayton Peace Agreement of 1995 defines three constituent nationalities - Bosnians, Serbs and Croats. These are a majority in some areas and a minority in others. Apart of this very specific kind of “majority”, BiH has about 15 other ethnic minorities: Albanians, Montenegrins, Czechs, Italians, Hungarians, Macedonians, Germans, Poles, Romanians, Russians, Rusyns, Slovaks, Slovenes, Turks and Ukrainians. The "others" category also lists people who prefer not to identify with any specific group and call themselves "Bosnians" (Ramadanovic, 2010). Each of the three dominant ethnic groups claims and protects its collective rights as though it were a minority within the larger state. Under these circumstances, minority groups are exposed to marginalization, segregation and social exclusion.

Other sources (Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1999) identifies before the war, about 25 minority groups, very small in number, excepting Roma, existed in Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, after the war, there remained only Roma and Jews out of minority groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The Roma belong to the largest minority group. It is estimated that about 6,000 Roma are presently living in Bosnia and Herzegovina, however, there were several times more Roma before the war. Apart from Roma population in Bosnia and Herzegovina there is also a Jew minority, numbering to several hundred of members. It should be mentioned here that they are very well organised within the Jewish Community based in Sarajevo. Their number was considerably higher but greater part of them had left Bosnia and Herzegovina in the war period 1992-1995.

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## Section 5: Practice and strategies for involving parents

The overall picture seems to be that there are strong legal frameworks for supporting the involvement of parents which give rise to structures that afford parents opportunities to have some influence. There is also strong evidence of commitment on the part of school Principals to the involvement parents from whatever ethnic background (with some notable exceptions). However, what is less evident is an appreciation of the problem or deliberate and innovative strategies to solve it even though the data shows that some parents do feel marginalized.

In order to build knowledge about how to improve the involvement of parents in the life of the school, there is a need to identify good practice where it can be found and to illuminate the strategies used to address the issue. It is assumed here that we are concerned with professional practice in particular. Clearly there are actions that can be taken by policy makers, community leaders and parents themselves but we are concerned with what the professionals – school Principals and teachers – can do to ameliorate the problem and develop positive strategies for encouraging, facilitating and ensuring that all parents' entitlements to participation in the life of the school are fulfilled.

It is overwhelmingly evident that practice is not well developed however. The 'country reports' contain some evidence of opportunities for ethnic minority families to become more involved in the life of the school and of innovative or breakthrough practices that can be shared and built on. These are now presented under the following headings:

- formal representation in governance
- representation in the teaching staff
- use of languages
- language classes
- cultural events
- extra curricular activities
- parent teacher meetings
- written communications
- direct contact between teachers and parents
- improving facilities
- supply of resources
- respecting traditions/political loyalties
- security measures

### **Formal representation in school governance**

In most cases the law requires that school governance rests on the existence of a School Council which has parent representatives. In some cases a parent is elected on to a 'Parents Council' (in Serbia and Croatia for example) – one parent for each class in the school. In Bosnia and Herzegovina the process is a little more complicated but the outcome is similar. There are also 'Governing Boards'. On the surface it appears that these bodies present opportunities for parents to make their views known and to participate in decisions that determine how the school operates.

There are problems however related to the make up of these bodies. In some cases there is a perception that only 'intellectuals' are qualified to serve on such councils and so minorities who may not be perceived to be intellectuals may be excluded. There also seems often to be a degree of apathy and tokenism. For example, parents report that the business is routine and dull for example reading out lists of test results. There is some evidence that, in some cases minority parents are members of School Boards although they are not always clear about the question of how to represent the views of the other minority parents.

There are also representative bodies for students variously called 'Student Council' or, in the case of Serbia, 'Student Parliament' which provide opportunities for influence and to voice the particular perspectives and needs of minority students.

However, it is reported that there are similar problems of apathy and tokenism. It is consistently reported that students have little faith in the Student Council as a forum for discussing the important matters such as the nature of teaching or the curriculum.

This situation clearly demands a proactive stance on the part of the school in order to dispel that view that for particular social groups' participation would not be welcome or legitimate. There is also a need to teach both parents and students how to fully realise the potential for representation that currently lies dormant in these representative, formal structures of governance.

The overarching message from these case studies is that such arrangements for inclusive governance do not necessarily lead to inclusive participation. What make a difference to the situation is action on the part of the school to clarify the rights of all families including minorities and to help parents to understand the purpose of these bodies and how they could work to represent the views of minority communities.

### **Representation in the teaching staff**

The body of teachers in the schools in the region are rarely mono-cultural. This is not necessarily the result of a deliberate strategy but where schools have a significant group of students from minority communities, this is likely to be the case. In Kosovo for example where a school has a group of Turkish pupils, there are a few Turkish teachers. Here the families express a desire for a Turkish school leader in order that the particular needs of that community might be better attended to. This does not appear to be a common occurrence across the region but it does highlight the possibility that the ethnic identity of the teachers could perhaps be used in a positive way not necessarily to provide alternative ethno-centric educational provision but perhaps to reflect the composition of the student body.

### **Use of minority languages**

In some cases there is provision of lessons in the minority language using materials written in that language. This can be sited firmly within the 'affirmative' model referred to in the report from Croatia. Such special provision can mean small class sizes and can be a real benefit to minority pupils but it is not without its downside. There are questions about the cost of such provision and the availability of materials in the

minority language that correspond with the national curriculum required by the government. There is also a desire on the part of some parents and some pupils to assimilate or at least to be able to participate fully in the mainstream experience.

### **Language classes**

School principals often report that most parents, regardless of ethnic background, can understand the usual medium of communication quite well without any adjustments needing to be made. In some cases however, the school offers language classes to the children of ethnic minority families. In one school in Kosovo for example there are optional classes in Albanian for Bosnian children. In Albania inclusion is a challenge when many Roma children hear only the Roma language spoken at home.

Language classes can also be combined with elements of national culture taken as an optional subject. It is interesting to note that this may be offered to those students whose families are identified with the particular culture, but it may also be helpful to offer such classes to the whole school population as a way of encouraging intercultural tolerance and understanding.

### **Cultural events**

There are many opportunities for students to see their cultural heritage reflected in the life of the school. For example it is reported that, in a Serbian elementary school where there were Romanian students, the school had “an ethno day” where Romanian traditions were presented. Another example would be a cooking festival held at the school where the parents present the cuisine of different minorities.

Such activities make a significant contribution to inclusivity in that they can raise the esteem of the minority community and can promote tolerance and respect.

### **Extra curricular activities**

Parents are sometimes invited to help with school trips. In one school in Croatia for example, a trip was planned by a committee which consisted of 2 parents, two pupils and two teachers although it is not clear if the parents reflected different ethnic identities.

Often the Parents Council plays a significant role in the organisation of such activities.

### **Drawing on parents’ expertise / experience**

Parents are sometimes drawn into school life by inviting them to contribute some input related to their occupation or their cultural heritage. This may be part of the scheduled curriculum or linked to a cultural event or an extra curricular activity such as a school trip. An example would be Founders Day in a school in Kosovo where parents help with the arrangements and minority parents present something from their culture.

There are some examples of parents being involved in school life by being invited to make contributions to lessons perhaps where their occupation or experience is relevant but this is suggested enthusiastically more than it is evident in practice.



### **Parent teacher meetings**

Although the law requires the existence of formal governance structures which have parents and teacher representatives, alternative arrangements such as Parent Teacher meetings and Parent teacher conferences can be more effective in drawing parents into the life of the school. In some cases, these are built into the annual calendar of events. For example, schools in Kosovo have at least 4 formal Parents Evenings a year. The country reports also identify a range of more ad hoc meetings which might focus on a particular issue.

Parents are generally in favour of such meetings where they convey important information about the progress of their children at school but there are problems. The key problem is that not all parents are able to attend such meetings because of their work commitments. In addition there is the question of effectiveness. In spite of the more positive comment about these arrangements, there are significant questions to be raised about the way such meetings are organised and the extent to which they are dialogic. In many cases the traditional perception of the school and teachers as figures of authority stands in the way of real partnership. Parents can feel alienated or at least rendered passive.

### **Written communications**

The traditional means of communication – the letter sent home with pupils is not relied upon in many schools. In some cases this is supplemented by such things as the parent-teacher notebook which the pupil carries back and forth. This does allow for a degree of dialogue between parents and teachers and can foster a sense of partnership.

Comments made by some students, particularly in Serbia, point to the potential for internet-based distribution of information. This raises serious issues concerned with access to computers of course and the expense of translating material into minority languages but it is worth consideration particularly where there minority communities have associations that can act as intermediaries.

### **Direct contact**

Increasingly teachers are using the telephone, particularly mobile telephones to communicate directly with some parents. This often comes into play when there is a particular problem with a student and the parents have been unable to attend a parent-teacher meeting. However, there is also some evidence of the idea of making such contact for positive reasons. Homeroom teachers (form tutors) can play a significant role in reaching out to minority families in this way.

### **Asking parents to help to improving facilities / resources**

Parents are often the source of financial support and material benefits of one kind or another. For example in Albania a primary school reported that parents had contributed approximately 750 Euros in a single year but had also helped practically by hiring a painter to paint walls in the school or refurbishing a meeting room. However, this tends to be something that can be done more easily by the majority families and could have the effect of increasing the marginalisation of the minorities even further.

In Serbia parents contribute to school funds via the 'voluntary obligation' or the 'parent dinar'. This is seen to be problematic to many in that it does not engage parents positively and can exclude those who cannot afford to contribute. It can generate a perception that participation entails financial contribution and is not therefore inclusive.

The mobilisation of practical help from parents either directly or indirectly through voluntary fund raising has greater potential to engage parents and enable them to develop a sense of participation in the life of the school.

### **Provision of material support for poor students**

It is sometimes the case that minority families suffer from poverty such that the children are unable to provide their own notebooks and other routine equipment. It is reported to be the case with some Roma children in Albania for example. Here other families and teachers raised funds to provide the children with the essentials.

### **Respecting traditions/political loyalties**

This could be expressed in the negative which is to say that schools can take care to avoid the use of overtly nationalistic material in their teaching and, where it does occur, intervene to address a concern and make adjustments to curriculum materials or teaching. This happened in once case where a parent had complained to the Parents Council.

More positively, this may simply be a matter of allowing children to take the day off for on the occasion of a religious or otherwise ethnic holiday. This is a common occurrence across the region. However, this is not always welcome on the part of some of the children who may wish to assimilate or at least not be identified as different. The matter is therefore one that needs to be handled with sensitivity.

There are many other ways to demonstrate respect for minority cultures which relate to the other categories outlined here.

### **Security measures**

For some children of ethnic minority families in the region there may be security issues and for this reason schools have made adjustments. For example, one school in Kosovo decided to schedule the Bosnian children for the morning shift and arrange special transportation from their villages. It is interesting that in this case, the Bosnian families expressed a preference for their children to travel with the majority Albanians. Clearly where security is an issue, minority families may be vulnerable and this has to be attended to as a basic requirement without which the other provisions have little chance of success.

### **The right to choose**

An overarching practice is concerned with the degree of choice that ethnic minority families are offered and the extent to which their rights within the legal framework of the particular country are made explicit or not. If families remain ignorant of their rights, they are effectively deprived of capacity to make a choice. In some of the schools

in Croatia for example, the school principal had outlined parents' rights at a parent teacher meeting and this was followed up by the class teacher.

The question of choice is complex and relates to the wider question of participation.

### **Conclusions**

There seems to be a widespread lack of deliberate strategies with many principals and teachers expressing the view that all is well and those minority families do not experience inhibitions to participation. It is clear that there is considerable scope for raising awareness of the issue and for examining what can be done to develop a more participative approach.

A crucial issue concerns the extent to which minority families are aware of their rights in the legal framework. Some students and parents report that "the cyber generation is coming" (Serbian report) which raises the question of how the internet could be used to enable minority families to be informed about their rights and about schools' provisions and practices. Access to computers is clearly an issue.

Event though there are structures for school governance in place, there is strong evidence of tokenism. The existence of such structures does not mean necessarily that students are actually represented. This may be a matter of clarification of the aims and scope of the body concerned but there is also a need to persuade and encourage people to become involved. Participation is not something that can be just taken up, especially by those who are on the margins. People need to be taught how to participate. Arguably this should be an aim of the education system – to enable all members of society to learn how to participate.

There is a clear link between the restrictions of centralised control, particularly of the curriculum which may exclude because it appears to put limits on the materials that can be used. For example, in Kosovo materials in the Turkish language had been offered by Turkish soldiers but could not be used even though there are Turkish pupils in need of such material. There are clear implications for the possibility of developing democratic decision making but it is not just a matter of governance and choice; it is also about the nature of curriculum and its responsiveness to students whoever they are. A strong point came through in the report from Serbia about the importance of relevant and meaningful curriculum content.

The point about responsive curriculum can be linked to the process of teaching and learning. Some approaches to classroom practice are more participative than others. There are calls, particularly from students to involve them more in the classroom activities. This is something that is not just of relevance to minority students but to all students. If processes of teaching and learning are responsive and participative, students will find themselves able to see their identities, both personal and cultural, reflected in the classroom discourse.

Inclusivity is not just a matter of allowing minorities to retain their cultural identity by teaching the standard curriculum in their language or by allowing the students the time

off school to participate in religious holidays or events. Neither can participation be boiled down to having representatives take part in consultation and decision making processes. Rather it has to be given life through active participation in the cultural life of the school. This might be interpreted narrowly as enabling parents to display their cultural heritage as in the example of the cooking festivals or it could be interpreted more fundamentally as a matter of pedagogy. That is to say that participation stems from a participative pedagogic culture in which the identity of all learners is seen as a resource in the classroom. This requires a commitment to nurturing a sense of partnership not only with minority families but also with students in classroom settings.

It is clear from the evidence presented in the national case study reports that, in general, neither parents nor students truly understand how they can be partners in the learning process. Such understanding may encompass the rights of minority families with regard to special educational provision and the processes of school governance but it needs to be extended to encompass the process of learning itself. Such understanding will not just happen like ripe fruit plucked from an overhanging branch. Rather, it has to be deliberately cultivated by school principals and teachers.

## Section 6: Obstacles to participation and representation

Beside various intentions and initiatives meant to stimulate participation in education, research identified multiple barriers affecting communication between teaching staff, students and parents within investigated communities. The obstacles are generated both by schools and community, each of these factors having an important contribution in promoting a successful partnership for students' development. Thus, on one hand, schools seem not to offer parents enough meaningful opportunities to engage in their child's education; therefore, involvement practices often reach a limited part of parents or they are restricted to a few types of initiatives. Also, beside this under utilization of parental involvement practices in schools, parents themselves seem to lack sometimes the desire and confidence to become involved; some of them, without the benefit of clear guidelines and support for educationalists, may not understand their role or in some cases they can express uncooperative attitudes towards schools.

In the same time, more systematic and meaningful parent participation is hindered by many other obstacles: lack of time both of teachers or parents, home-school scheduling conflicts, linguistic or cultural barriers. Some of these obstacles identified by investigated parents or school representatives are further described.

### 5.1. Parents participation in education: level of involvement and obstacles

Principals, teachers and the majority of parents who took part in this study agreed that parents were not sufficiently and adequately involved in school life. As one Croatian principal commented: *'We shouldn't just talk about minority groups but also the majority, parents are almost not at all involved. They are practically disinterested'* (school principal, Croatia). A similar opinion, pointing unilaterally parents' lack of involvement is shared by a Serbian teacher: *"maybe the parents themselves are not interested in getting involved, look at how few of them come to parent-teacher conferences"* or by a principal from B&H: *"Sometimes I have a feeling that parents behave as they sent their child to a factory for processing, and for them it is enough that they sent them"; "If they are not motivated by their own child and the child's progress, I don't know what their motivation should be"* (principal B&H school).

Parents themselves describe their limited participation in school life: *"We don't participate. Well, we aren't exactly fighting to make decisions or participating."* (parent, Serbia).

When analysing the reasons which determine such inconsistent parental involvement in education, principals and teachers are referring to:

- **Parents' disinterestedness, their lack of motivation**

*"Some parents only bring children at school in September and that is it. They do not get involved"* says one teacher from one Albanian school. *"There are parents who think that they finished their job when they sent their child to school, they don't know when the school begins or ends, they don't know what is happening in the school"; "parents are*

*simply not interested, maybe there is a reason we simply cannot see, we can assume why, but the fact is that the parents very rarely or never come to school”* declare one teacher from B&H. Such idea are overspread and frequently mentioned as a cause of low level of different stakeholders’ participation in education. According to such opinions, schools blame parents for not being enough responsible and adequately motivated for supporting the educational development of their children; as the principal of a school in Zagreb says: *‘Getting in touch with parents is a problem. We have a situation where the first parent-teacher meeting is attended by 90% of parents, the second by 40% and the third by less than 10%. Parents really avoid their responsibilities’* (principal, school in Croatia).

Parents themselves admit that participation implies motivation and dedication: *‘I think people avoid getting involved because you need to give a part of yourself. You need to make an effort’* (parent, Croatian school). In the same time, parents find an explanation for their reluctant attitude saying that: *“we can influence absolutely nothing, neither the reduction nor increase of teaching materials, nor the personality of teachers; but we lack the power or opportunity”, “we are all indifferent because we cannot do anything”* (parent, Serbian school).

- **Role confusions between school and parents; lack of shared responsibility**

*“While the school staff says that “it’s parents who should help the school”, they say “it’s the school that should help us”* (Albanian Country Report, 2010). In other words, neither schools nor parents clarified explicitly their roles or shared responsibilities in educating children; on one hand, schools blame the lack of parents’ involvement and their attitude of “abandoning” children, while parents accuse teachers and principals for not assuring enough opportunities for their contribution to students’ development. For instance as school representatives says:

- *“it’s a habit that this isn’t their job, it’s the school’s job. Someone else needs to take care of the child”*(school principal, Croatia);
- *“the parents’ attitude is why are you calling me? I gave you my child for you to bring it up and educate it”* (principal, Croatian school)
- *“some parents think that the school is solely responsible to teach, whereas parents are only interested in the final product, pupil’s grades’* (principal Croatian school).

On the other hand, some parents seem to confirm teachers’ opinions:

- *“I believe that I should take care of my children, and I expect the school to just educate them”* (parent, Serbian school).
- *“even if I was retired I wouldn’t have the need to go to school every other day’* (parent Croatian school).
- *“my contribution as a parent is in the house with the disciplining, with the school materials I provide and the money I give to the child. I cannot help with anything else. I don’t know how to help in the education process because now the subjects are far more difficult than they used to be in my time”* (parent, Albanian school).

- **Formal understanding of participation in school**

The above mentioned opinions prove that both schools and parents have a limited understanding of the concept of active participation in education, simplified and reduced to informal forms of communication in relation to current school issues. *“In most schools the parent-school collaboration is artificial”* (principal, school in Albania) or *“in Tirana schools, the process of selecting parents in the Parents Council is just in papers. It’s not an accurate process”* (principal, school in Albania).

- **Parents economic status**

The low economic status of parents as a factor potentially influencing their involvement in school life was mentioned by several research participants: *“Many parents are concerned about how to survive and everything else is less important”* (teacher, B&H school); *“some are single parents and they work all day ... economic status matters more”* or *“parents spend their days working and earning money and they expect schools to take over the education and upbringing and to replace them in a way”* (principal, Croatian school). *“There have been cases where I could not send the child to excursions because I had no money. School mates of my child came to my house and said that they would provide part of the money if I would give my share”* (parent, Albanian school).

While it is expected that poor economic background to have a significant impact on parents participation, the Croatian study draws attention on the correlation existing between parents high income and their consequent lack of involvement: *“some of the parents who are economically settled prefer to pay for private tuition because they think that this solves all their responsibilities towards the children’s education”* (principal, Croatian school).

- **Parents’ lack of time**

*“I don’t have time to go to the school meetings because I work all day. But my wife goes... I don’t know what they say in those meetings”* (parent, Albanian school), *“maybe the lack of time, we are working increasingly longer hours, and we do not all live in Sombor* (parent, Serbian school) – this is one of the most common explanations for low parent engagement in school. Also, a Croatian teacher says: *‘I think that part of the problem is that some parents are very busy and they help their children study if there are problems with their behaviour, then they participate, but if the pupil doesn’t have any problems, if s/he’s a good pupil, then they get involved less* (teacher, Croatian school). This impression is also shared by one of the interviewed principals: *‘Maybe the time will come when these parents will have more time for themselves and their families. That’s where the problem lies’* (principal, Croatian school). The parents themselves mentioned lack of time as a problem.

- **Distance between students’ home and schools**

Apart from a lack of free time, distance from schools was mentioned as a problem in certain schools. In one school the principal mentions how: *‘We have a lot of parents who live far away. We have kids from all over Croatia...we talk to the parents over the phone, but they are not as present because of the distance’* (principal, Croatian school).

- **Parents - children relations**

Without being a barrier, the age of students included in the survey should be taken into consideration in analysing the level of parental involvement. This particular age – adolescence - represents a time of renegotiating roles and attitudes between parents and their children; in this context, parents present as an explanation for the low level of parental involvement the fact that do trust their children: *“they allow their children to be independent, to think for themselves, decide whether they want to study, whether they attend classes, to take on some responsibility”* (teacher, Croatian school).

Lower involvement of parents can also be a decision taken together with the student in order not to aggravate complicated and sensitive situations: *“My daughter, for example, thinks that I shouldn’t get involved any more than I already have, because she is afraid that she will be even more of a target”* (Albanian parent) as in case of minority students. Or, in case of low achievers, parents stay away from school being embarrassed and discouraged by the teacher reporting a negative aspect of the child: *“I don’t come to the school because I am very embarrassed by my son’s achievements. He is not a good student and does not attend regularly...”* (Albanian parent).

The mentioned reasons for the low level of parental engagement refer specially to the responsibility of parents. However, some parents who expressed a greater interest to become more involved in school life mentioned the school’s responsibility for low parental involvement. Together with teachers and principals themselves, parents underlined a wide range of vulnerabilities which affect participation in education both of students and parents:

- Limited space for parents/students involvement, due to centralised decision making process
- Lack of projects targeting participation initiated by Miniserries, schools or local authorities;
- Lack of constant communication school-family – *„We receive information at the end of trimester, semester and the end of the year* (parent, Serbian school).
- Lack of funding for stronger support to student/parent participation (e.g. funds for space used for joint meetings and free time, for equipment, for additional lessons for music club, sports club, photo club etc...); Lack of adequate facilities for supporting participation; as some parents from Kosovo say school should open an official email address and have an employee available to reply to the email which parents send to the school address about any concerns they have; it should *“have its own pastoral officer, psychologist and doctor. Equally, the school should have a tutor session once a week, as it had before, when they can talk to the pupils about all their problems. The parent meetings should be once a month because four times a year is not enough. The head of the class should also take part in parents meetings. Similarly, there should be an office where parents can come every day and address their concerns, worries, comments, suggestions, and advice...”* (parent, Kosovo school).

## **5.2. Obstacles for students’ participation in school life**

An important obstacle affecting students’ involvement in school life is their limited understanding on their own role in the education process, their rights and obligations,



as well as the procedures which form the background of those rights and obligations. For them, participation in education is seen mostly as an opportunity to present their views to subject teachers in a more or less formal circumstances; *“it means to state our opinions as much as possible, on lesson content and so on”, “we do something like that only in civic education; there are workshops and we learn about communication; the teachers just give us a topic, and students state their opinions”* (students, Serbian schools).

This limited role assumed by students is sometimes shared by teaching staff as well, contributing in this way to the development of a formal, superficial, tokenistic type of involvement. As Serbian report noticed, summarizing findings from the 5 case studies, the issue of student participation in the school life and decision making processes has been reduced to sporadic cases when the students’ vote is needed for administrative reasons. Such instances are, for example, decisions on field trips or if an incident occurs: *“it’s all just empty words for me”, “we have more rights, at least on paper. And in reality?”, “I have to be honest with you. Sometimes, we, as a school parliament, are only a mask. A couple of years ago, it happened that a student was supposed to get expelled. We had a right to represent that student, but we didn’t have a voting right. We didn’t really have the option of changing anything”, “we are expected to dance to somebody else’s tune”* (students, Serbian schools).

Other reasons considered to limit student real participation are:

- The exhausting curriculum, the fact that students are overburdened with school lessons and obligations
- Lack of face to face communication, the excessive time spend in front of computers (*“They are constantly text messaging 4, 5, 6 others. And I keep wondering why they do not simply talk in school when they see each other there”*, parent, Serbian school).
- The lack of authority of parents and teachers in front of nowadays teenagers: *“The children today are given too much freedom. Everybody’s talking about child freedom and their rights. I think that the obligations of children have been shamefully neglected in the sense that they do not have any obligations any more”* (parent, Serbian school).

### **5.3. Participation of minority students and parents in school life**

In describing the level of involvement of minority groups in educational process, a very frequent declaration found in study cases analysed – shared by majority and minority as well - is that there is no relationship between ethnicity and parental involvement. In accordance with these declarations, minority representatives seem not to experience more obstacles affecting their participation in school life than those – described above - experienced by their colleagues belonging to the majority groups; also, they do not receive a special treatment derived from their status of ethnical diverse school members.

In Croatia, for instance, none of the participants in this study cited any barriers to parental involvement that could be related to ethnicity; to illustrate this, one parent

says the following: *'I don't think there is a difference. Every parent who takes care of their child wants to be engaged irrespective of whether he is Muslim, Orthodox or Catholic'* (parent, Croatia). A similar attitude is expressed by a teacher who answers the question of whether she thinks there is a relationship between parents' ethnicity and their involvement in school life as follows: *'I don't think so, I don't think they are related, it's about the responsibility of parents. What a person carries in him'* (teacher, Croatia).

In the same direction, a school principal from B&H claims: *"For us in the school, there are no ethnic minorities or ethnic majorities; the approach is the same for all."* The opinion is shared by teachers from one school in Pristina (Kosovo) who declare that there is no group of parents excluded from the life of the school, and certainly not minority ones; they also admit that the school has not helped minority parents to have greater involvement because the lack of adequate parental involvement is caused by difficult economic circumstances and nothing else.

Similarly, in Serbia, parents agree with the students that the communication between themselves and the school holds no specific traits in the case of minority group students/parents, nor should it. Some parents even believe that insistence on differences does not always mean equal respect, but can actually cause and increase the distance. *"I don't really have a distinct feeling of being a minority, the gap between us is still not that large. There are many links, and I don't really see it that way, I wouldn't even want to feel all those boundaries"* (parent, Serbian school).

But, beside such declarations, research identified also educational contexts where minority parents and students do face difficulties which reduce their participation in school life; these difficulties are expressed mainly by minority parents and students and are related to following issues:

**a) Linguistic barriers**

*"The students come with insufficient knowledge of Bosnian language, therefore, one can feel gaps in understanding of what they are being told"* declares a teacher from B&H referring to children belonging to Roma minority.

A similar linguistic barrier is found in some of investigated schools from Kosovo, where students and parents talk explicitly about these obstacles. Turkish minority students enrolled in one school from Pristina claim that teachers treat equally all pupils without any distinction, but it is natural that communication between Albanian pupils and the school management is more frequent and closer because of the common language. Half the Bosnian students in the mentioned school speak Albanian, but nevertheless, pupils who need to communicate with the Albanian teachers or the school management go accompanied by Bosnian teachers. Similarly in another school from Pristina, minority students feel equal with their peers, but they admit that their Albanian colleagues have more frequent and better communication with the school authorities because of not having a language barrier. In the same school, students would like the notices given out by school management to be not only in Albanian but also in Turkish because there are pupils who do not understand all the content of the notices.

- **Lack of information on minority rights from school; inadequate curricular support for minority students**

Almost all school included in survey report that even they treat minorities in a supportive way, they do not include in their offer special forms of informing minorities on their rights. As Serbian report underlined referring to one investigated school *“No specific materials for this group have been produced, so neither have the manners of their delivery. There are no specific activities focused on minority students. Teaching materials and schoolbooks, if produced in minority languages, can be used privately”*.

Similarly in one Albanian school, teachers mention that they do differentiated work with the minority children, but parents do not confirm this. Teachers affirm that they stay closer to these children, especially because as they say *“they need the warmth that do not find at home”* (teacher, school in Albania), but according to parents though, teachers do not treat these children with more care or attention.

For minority students learning in schools from Kosovo one important problem affecting generally their learning process and as the consequence their involvement in school is the lack of support materials in their mother tongue. The need for a more flexible school offer, adapted to their specific needs is also mentioned: *“The main problem is a lack of textbooks, which urgently need to be translated since the use of textbooks from Turkey or Bosnia/ Herzegovina is not allowed. Another problem is that the minority teachers have to teach in two or more school in order to fulfil their quota of hours. Another problem is the inappropriate nature of the curriculum”* (parent, school in Kosovo).

- **Minority improved representation at managerial level**

Minority parents consider that it is very important to be part of the school structures, because *“you can express the voice of the community”* (parent, Albanian school); therefore, they think that in schools where minority children comprise a considerable percentage, more parents from the minorities should be part in these structures. But, unfortunately, in Albania for instance only in few schools minority parents are members of the School Board or minority students are members of the Student’s Government.

In Kosovo schools, even though minority parents and students underline their good communication with school board, they also express the need of being represented at managerial level: *“our communication with the school authorities would be easier if the Deputy Headteacher or Headteacher was from a minority”* (parent, school in Kosovo). In the same time, the need for a more supportive attitude from the local authorities is mentioned: *“Maybe it needs to be a representative of the Turkish community in the Municipal Education Directorate so that they can deal with the problems of the Turkish community in our municipality* (parent, school in Kosovo).

- **Biased attitudes towards minority groups**

All investigated schools are immersed in rich multicultural environments; therefore, generally speaking, students and their teachers as well as parents are aware of the implicit messages emitted by the environment and perceive life in a multicultural environment as an advantage as well as an opportunity to learn tolerance and mutual

respect skills. *"I'm really glad I was born in this kind of environment, because tomorrow it won't be a problem for me to accept a co-worker of a different race, or different anything. While for some people any difference could be frightening. My best friends belong to a different religion"* (student, school in Serbia).

Nevertheless, students and parents declarations identify biased attitudes towards minority students and parents; these attitudes are going from teachers more favourable behaviour towards majority (*"Teachers who belong to one religion will act more favourable with students of the same religion"* - student, Serbian school) to prejudices or discrimination. Such biased attitudes are more visible in schools with Roma minority population, as in case of Albanian survey. In such cases, as one principal declared: *"You make the comparison: there are parents who come out of a house, and there are parents who get out of shacks and tents..."* (principal, Albanian school). And although teachers declare that *"we have involved them, they are equal"* (teacher, Albanian school), parents do not always confirm such realities: *"There is a lot of discrimination. Not to mention that you cannot expect for a child of our community to become someone. There have been cases that the child studied but he was not assessed properly"* (parent, Albanian school). According to minority parents, Roma and Egyptian children are treated poorly, they are forced to stay separately because *"they bring trouble if there are a lot of them in the same place"* (parent, Albanian school). More examples of discriminative attitudes towards minority are quite explicit: *"Once my daughter was punished by the teacher with a failing grade because the teacher did not trust her. She had done her homework, but someone else copied it from her. The teacher did not trust my daughter, and trusted the other child who was white"* (parent, Albanian school). *"One of my class mates called me names 'gabel'. I was very embarrassed and slapped him. What does he have that I don't? He is human, I am human... There is a lot of discrimination in this country"* (student, Albanian school).

## Section 7: Starting points for development

This section includes a set of focal points that would enable people in a particular setting to identify a suitable starting point for development, improvement or innovation. It is of crucial importance for those policy makers, community leaders and practitioners who wish to take on the challenge of improving inclusion and participation. The policy recommendations below are based on a good understanding of the local social, cultural and education environment in West Balkan countries, on the results of international research in the field of parents active involvement in education, but mainly on the conclusions of the Sections five and six above. These sections stressed that in spite of the progress made at the policy level in stimulating the involvement of parents in education, the real school life is still affected by formal implication, lack of motivation, poor level of knowledge and poor understanding of roles, lack of shared responsibility, biases etc.

### Identified issues

- Lack of deliberate strategies at school level to stimulate minority families involvement in education.
- Neither parents nor students truly understand how they can be partners in the learning process and they are not really motivated to actively participate.
- Even though there are structures for school governance in place, there is strong evidence of tokenism.
- The existence of school governance bodies does not mean necessarily that students are actually represented.
- Minority families are not fully aware of their rights in the legal framework.
- There is a clear link between the restrictions of centralised control, particularly of the curriculum which may exclude because it appears to put limits on the materials that can be used.
- Democratic decision making is not just a matter of governance and choice, but it is also about the nature of curriculum and its responsiveness to students whoever they are.
- Building a democratic learning environment includes a larger students involvement in classroom activities, while the current teaching strategies ignore in too many cases the students interests and identity.
- Inclusivity is too many times understood just as a matter of allowing minorities to retain their cultural identity by teaching the standard curriculum in their language or by allowing the students the time off school to participate in religious holidays or events.

### Recommendation for the central Government/ Ministries of Education

**Recommendation 1** Strengthen the decentralisation of the education system by empowering the School Boards as decision bodies in school based curriculum, teaching activity, professional development, and financial management areas.

**Recommendation 2** Include intercultural education as a compulsory topic in all universities/ pre service teacher training institutions.

**Recommendation 3** Restructuring the composition of the School Boards by including representatives of the Parents Councils (and of parents belonging to ethnic minorities where the case might be) and of Students Councils (and of students belonging to ethnic minorities where the case might be) on compulsory bases and in a proportion that makes their position significant.

**Recommendation 4** Restructuring the composition of the School Boards by including representatives of the parents and students belonging to ethnic minorities in all schools including ethnic minorities in a proportion reflecting the ethnic composition of the school.

**Recommendation 5** Initiate/ support national programmes/ projects aiming to strengthen the parents and students participation in education (curricular and extracurricular activities).

**Recommendation 6** Initiate/ support national programmes/ projects aiming to involve students belonging to different ethnic minorities to know, understand and accept each other cultural identity.

**Recommendation 7** Initiate/ support national programmes/ projects aiming to encourage constant regular communication between school and students families, not only on students' learning results, but also on class activity generally.

**Recommendation 8** Promote a curriculum framework that encourages the students participation in defining the learning goals, in classroom activities and give and reflects to a larger extend the students needs and cultural identity.

**Recommendation 9** Review the curricula of all subjects dealing with interethnic relations to facilitate interethnic trust and democratic attitudes.

### **Recommendation for the School Boards**

**Recommendation 10** Include the involvement of parents belonging to ethnic minorities as a target in the School Development Plans in those institutions where ethnic minorities exist.

**Recommendation 11** Deliberately involve parents and mostly parents belonging to ethnic minority groups in the preparation of the School Development Plans.

**Recommendation 12** Democracy have to be learned and people need to be taught how to participate. Develop learning programmes and projects for parents to enable them to learn how to participate.

**Recommendation 13** Support/ initiate projects stimulating the parents direct involvement in class teaching activities.

**Recommendation 14** Encourage those teaching and learning strategies that are responsive and participative, giving the students the chance to see their identities, both personal and cultural, reflected in the classroom discourse.

**Recommendation 15** Encourage those school development strategies and plans that promote students and parents active participation in the cultural life of the school, not just the right to learn in their own languages.

**Recommendation 16** Promote those school development strategies where principals and teachers deliberately cultivated the students and parents understanding on what participation in education means and identifies concrete activities turning theory into reality.

**Recommendation 17** Encourage the participative pedagogic culture in which the identity of all learners is seen as a resource in the classroom. This requires a commitment to nurturing a sense of partnership not only with minority families but also with students in classroom settings.

## Appendices