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Parent and pupil involvement in school activities: the perspective of national minorities in Croatia

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Outline

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Introduction

This report has resulted from research carried out in five secondary schools in Croatia (October 2009-February 2010) as part of the regional project *Advancing the Participation and Representation of Ethnic Minority Groups in Education*, funded by the European Union. The research aim was to explore how minority parents and pupils were involved in school activities (e.g. forms of involvement, frequency of involvement, barriers to involvement), with special attention given to examples of good practice. The background to the research includes studies which have shown that the involvement of parents in school life can have a positive effect on their child(ren)'s behaviour, his/her emotional development, as well as educational outcomes both at primary and secondary school level (e.g. Hango 2007, Koutrouba et al. 2009). The project leader in Croatia has been the Network of Education Policy Centers and the project has been carried out in partnership with five other countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Romania and Serbia).

The report begins with an outline of the broader context of ethnic minorities in Croatia and an overview of how the educational system structurally responds to ethnic diversity. This section is followed by an outline of the study's research process and moves on to sections which individually discuss the main topics identified in the research: the attitude of schools towards ethnic minorities, the rights and responsibilities of parents and pupils, forms of involving parents in school life, the frequency of parental involvement and its educational, economic, gender and ethnic aspects, barriers to parental involvement, parent-school communication and pupil involvement in school life. Although parental involvement in their children's education also includes home-based activities (e.g. help with homework, talking about school), the focus of this research has been on the direct involvement of parents in school activities. Each section begins with an overview of its main points and ends with recommendations which have resulted from the conducted research.

The wider context – minorities in Croatia and the Croatian educational system

√ 2001. 7.5% of the population belongs to a national minority
√ 2001. 22 national minorities registered
√ Serbian minority most represented
√ There are special educational models for national minorities

According to the Constitutional law on the rights of national minorities (2002), a national minority is a group of Croatian citizens whose members have traditionally lived on the territory of the Republic of Croatia, who have ethnic, linguistic, cultural and/or religious characteristics which are different from other citizens, and who would like to preserve these characteristics. 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.

The Constitutional law on the rights of national minorities (2002) and the Act on the education of ethnic minorities in their mother tongue and script (2000) form the legal framework regulating the education of minorities in Croatia. According to the Constitutional law (Article 11), national minority groups have the right to be educated in their mother tongue and script. In accordance with this, schools can be founded with classes in minority languages and script and the educational process can be organised for a smaller number of pupils than the minimum required for classes taught in the Croatian language and script. Apart from general content, the plan and programme for the education of minority pupils includes content specific to the national minority in question (mother tongue, literature, history, geography and culture). In this sense, minorities in

Croatia can choose to be schooled according to the majority plan and programme, as well as specific educational models. There are three such models:

(1) Model A: All teaching is conducted in the language and script of the national minority. There are also compulsory Croatian lessons amounting to the same number of lessons as those provided for the mother tongue. In addition, pupils can learn extra content identified as important for the minority community. This educational model is carried out in a special school, but can also be carried out in separate classes in institutions which have the majority programme.
(2) Model B: The teaching is bi-lingual. The natural sciences are taught in Croatian and the social sciences and humanities in the minority language. This educational model is carried out in special classes in institutions which have the majority programme.
(3) Model C: The teaching is dominantly in Croatian. There are 2-5 school lessons which are devoted to learning (fostering) the language and culture of the minority in question. This includes lessons on minority literature, geography, history, music and art.

There are also so-called "special" modes of teaching (seminars, summer and winter schools, distance learning) which are organised for those pupils for whom it is not possible to organize either of the listed educational models.

The Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Sports covers the expenses related to organising the listed educational models. According to the Coalition for the promotion and protection of human rights (2008) the Ministry has never received a written complaint reporting that any of the educational models were being denied to the minority community. The Office for National Minorities (2008) reports that in the 2006/2007 school year, 1.766 pupils in 15 secondary schools and 139 classes were taking classes in their minority language. This number includes 50 pupils belonging to the Czech minority (Model B), 74 Hungarian minority pupils (Models A and C), 923 Serbian pupils (Model A) and 717 Italian pupils (Model A). It is important to notice that there is no registered provision of any of these models for the Roma community in Croatia.

Although provision of such special minority education exists in Croatia, only a small proportion of minority pupils attend one of these programmes. In fact, the majority of minority pupils attend classes according to the regular "majority" programme (Mesić and Baranović, 2005). This finding corresponds to the fact that minorities in Croatia are mainly "native" minorities who have undergone cultural and social assimilation.

Research overview

√ October 2009-February 2010
√ Interviews and focus groups
√ Principals and teachers
√ Minority pupils and parents (Albanian, Bosniak, Czech, Macedonian, Roma and Serbian)

A small-scale qualitative study (interviews and focus groups) was carried out between October 2009 and February 2010 in five secondary schools in Croatia with the aim to explore whether and how minority parents and pupils were involved in school life. The research consisted of the following steps: (1) applying for and receiving permission from the Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Sports to conduct the research, (2) selecting potential schools for the research and sending required documentation to the schools (e.g. aims of the research, research methods, permission from the Ministry), (3) final selection of five schools according to location criteria (different parts of Croatia represented), as well as the representation of minorities in the schools (one school in which the Czech minority was significantly present and where Model B was carried out and four schools which have the majority programme, but they are also attended by pupils who belong to different minority groups), (4) data collection at school visits (interviews with principals lasting around 45 minutes, focus groups with 4-7 pupils lasting around 60 minutes, focus groups with 5-7 teachers lasting around 60 minutes, and focus groups with parents in three out of the five schools lasting around 60 minutes (in schools where it was not possible to organize a focus group with parents (two schools) and teachers (one school), parents and teachers were asked to respond in writing to central questions relating to parental involvement in school life), (5) transcribing the interviews and focus groups and (6) analysing the data collected.

Interview and focus groups protocols which examined different aspects of minority parent and pupil involvement were adapted for the study. The protocols were structured according to the following topics: forms of parent and pupil involvement in school life, frequency of involvement, bridges and barriers to involvement, forms and quality of parent-school communication, school climate with regard to minorities and recommendations to improve the involvement of parents and pupils in school life. The research included the principals of all five schools, 28 teachers, 26

minority pupils (second and third grade of secondary school), and 17 minority parents. The pupils and parents belonged to the following minority groups: Albanian, Bosniak, Czech, Macedonian, Roma and Serbian. Table 1 shows the sample of participants for this study.

Table 1. Research participants (excluding five principals).

Schools	Pupils	Parents	Teachers
A (City of Zagreb)	4	3	4
B (Karlovac county)	5	5	5
C (Osječko-baranjska county)	4	2	7
D (Primorsko-goranska county)	6	4	7
E (Bjelovarsko-bilogorska county)	7	3	5
Total	26	17	28

The attitude of schools towards national minorities

√ Dominantly neutral attitude of schools towards minority groups (with the exception of Model B school)
√ The majority of pupils find a neutral attitude acceptable
√ Many parents in schools where there is no special provision for minority groups would like the school to foster minority cultures, but are reluctant to initiate this

In order to understand the presence or absence of school activities which encourage the involvement of minority parents and pupils in school life, it is important to consider the general attitude schools have towards minority groups. This approach can be affirmative (minority cultures are positively recognised), neutral (minority cultures are not especially highlighted) or discriminatory (minority cultures are negatively recognised). When considering the attitude of individual schools towards minority issues, it is important to make a distinction between schools which organise special educational provision for minority pupils (Models A, B and C), and which are by definition inclusive of minority groups, from schools which implement the majority programme but can have different responses to minority groups (affirmative, neutral or discriminatory).

In the conducted research, the school that organises Model B for the Czech minority best illustrates the affirmative approach towards minority pupils. In this school, the Czech minority is taught according to the bilingual programme and there are also opportunities in the school for these pupils to present their culture through poetry, music and dancing. It is important to note that this is a school located in an area where the Czech community is significantly represented which means that the educational recognition of the minority is also part of the wider local context of this minority's recognition.

Aspects of such an affirmative attitude towards minority groups can also be found in two schools which have the majority programme, but offer Orthodox and Islamic religious education. In the case of Orthodox religious education, it is a school located in an area where there is a significant Serbian minority, whereas the school that offers Islamic religious education is located in an urban area dominated by the Croatian majority. This latter case is particularly significant because it shows the need and opportunity to exercise minority rights in areas where a particular minority may not be significantly represented. This is especially true for urban areas.

In general, the schools in this study meet their legal responsibilities towards minority pupils (e.g. school offering Model B, Orthodox and Islamic religious education), but apart from the responsibilities laid out by the legal framework, minority cultures are not especially recognised in the majority schools and there is a neutral attitude towards them. This neutrality manifests itself discursively and organisationally.

The dominantly neutral discourse towards minority groups in the four majority schools is best illustrated with a statement made by one of the school principals at a majority school: 'What matters to me and what I manage to do is to integrate them into school life. There is no separation, no special lessons, you can be equal if that suits you. I cannot just put people into drawers. What I try to achieve is that we are all here together and we have common concerns like overcrowded buildings, poor equipment, poor teaching conditions'. The cited principal emphasises the fact that he does not differentiate pupils according to their ethnicity or nationality and highlights the value of equality irrespective of these social markers. He supports this attitude by citing problems which equally affect both majority and minority pupils. In doing so, the principal prioritises the pupil's learner identity (a pupil schooled in an overcrowded building in poor conditions) over his/her ethno-national identity (a pupil who belongs to the ethnic minority or majority). Although information on pupils' nationality is collected at enrolment, this

information is not directly accessible to teachers. Some teachers pointed out that they do not know which parents and pupils belong to a minority group. For example 'As class heads we do not even know which nationality they are, at least I don't know. We're not interested in nationality' or 'I don't think we know who belongs to which minority'. One would expect such a finding to differ if there were widespread cases of pupils who belong to ethnic minorities which are not traditionally settled in Croatia (e.g. Asian minority pupils); however, such cases were not identified in this study. In practice, the neutral attitude of schools towards minority groups results with the reinforcement of the majority culture in schools and the wider society. Organisationally, the attitude is translated into the carrying out of legal responsibilities (e.g. religious education), but not the encouragement of extra activities which aim to affirm minority identities (e.g. intercultural events were not organised in any of the schools in this study).

Based on the conducted interviews and focus groups, a neutral approach towards minority groups dominates in four out of the five schools, whereas the school which organises Model B is the closest to the affirmative approach. One would expect schools which organise Model A to be even closer to the affirmative approach; however, these schools were not included in the study. A discriminatory approach was not identified in any of the schools, although there was an incident in one of the schools between a Croatian language teacher and a minority pupil; the teacher was said to have insulted the pupil along ethnic lines. The parents who took part in the focus group at that school said that this was an isolated incident. The Act on education in primary and secondary schooling (Article 4, 2008) states that one of the schools' educational aims is to enable pupils to live in a multicultural world and to respect differences; however, a dominantly neutral attitude of schools towards minority pupils does not seem to contribute to this aim.

A key question related to the neutral attitude of most of the schools in this study towards minority pupils is whether such an attitude corresponds to the attitudes and wishes of minority pupils and their parents. As far as pupils are concerned, in the conducted focus groups only one pupil said that fostering her minority culture in school mattered: 'maintaining Czech culture and tradition is important to me. I am sad it's being lost, there are so many nice customs'. Although the cited pupil expresses her wish to preserve the minority cultural heritage, she associates the culture primarily with folklore elements ('nice customs') and does not express a need for a wider social affirmation of her minority identity. Unlike this pupil, other pupils did not express a wish for their minority culture to be nurtured in schools. Several of these pupils said how they had not even thought about this. In other words, one gets the impression that the schools' neutral

attitude corresponds to the expectations and wishes of the pupils themselves. The pupils find this approach agreeable either for pragmatic reasons (e.g. taking part in organising an intercultural even takes up too much of their time) or because they do not want to be singled out as a minority. For example, one pupil says 'there are kids who feel threatened, they are made fun of so they don't want to for that reason. But I don't think that's the case here'.

Unlike the pupils, several parents expressed their wish for the school to have a more active policy towards nurturing minority cultures (e.g. intercultural events), although they also brought up the question of potentially negative reactions from their social surroundings. A father who belongs to the Serbian minority suggested that 'higher instances' should make the decisions relating to an affirmative school approach to minority groups 'so that it doesn't seem as if we are imposing this'. A Serbian minority mother says how organising an intercultural event would not be a good idea because 'someone would say that you are pushing your own, there is no need, things should stay as they are'. Such reservations expressed by members of the Serbian minority are probably related to recent memories of the homeland war. They point to the importance of not only an inclusive school climate, but also sensitising the wider community to the value of minority cultures. According to Patrizia Pitacco (2010), the senior consultant for the Italian national minority at the Education and Teacher Training Agency, this process of sensitising depends on the one hand on the majority community, its curiosity and positive approach to differences, and on the other, on minorities and their developmental vision.

Taken together, in this study neither pupils nor parents were particularly keen on a more proactive affirmation of minority cultures in school activities. Pupils seem to prefer the schools' assimilation approach which corresponds to the egalitarian discourse promoted in schools and parents primarily highlight the pragmatic reasons of avoiding negative reactions from their social surroundings (this is particularly pertinent for the Serbian minority). Patrizzia Pitacco (2010) commented such attitudes in the following manner: 'We mustn't forget that adolescence is the most important age for an individual's identity development. In this context the school and family can and should play and important and key role. In the case of national minorities, especially in the context of the B and C educational models, parents should play a more active role in nurturing the minority language, culture and tradition. Parents should actively observe and respect their children's attitudes, but they also shouldn't support their final and definitive assimilation. Rather they should persevere in the nurturing of the minority language and culture, traditions and customs, i.e. persist in maintaining the cultural identity of the national minority. I

think parents should have a clearer and more decisive attitude towards their own involvement in school activities and not go by the trend of 'avoiding negative reactions from their social surroundings'.

Recommendations:
School initiated consultations with pupils and parents with regard to how they would like their minority cultures to be nurtured in school.
Democratising school culture so that the exercise of educational rights is not seen as an imposition.

The rights and responsibilities of parents and pupils

√ Informing all parents about their rights and responsibilities without special attention to minority groups
√ Pupils have the right to attend non-Catholic religious education or ethics
√ In most schools there is no systemic school policy encouraging the exercise of minority rights

According to the Act on education in primary and secondary schooling (2008), parents have the right and responsibility to take part in their child's education and they should be regularly informed about their child's progress (Article 135). In addition, parents need to take care that their child meets his or her school responsibilities (Article 136).

The extent to which parents were informed about their rights and responsibilities differed according to the schools in this study. At the two grammar schools parents were read their rights and responsibilities at the beginning of the school year, a practice which was not identified in the three vocational schools in this study. In the two grammar schools, parents' rights and responsibilities were read by the principal and/or class head. A mother explained that the class head informed parents about the school's statute, regulations on grading and school rules at the first parents' meeting, whereas a father says how the principal read the rights and responsibilities at a joint meeting of all parents. This father mentioned that he was dissatisfied with such a way of informing parents because it was crowded and there was no opportunity to discuss the issues. It is important to note that where parents were informed about their rights and responsibilities, this information was generic for all parents without any special attention to the rights of minority

parents. Such practices reinforce the impression that in general schools take a neutral approach to ethnic diversity. The practice of sending written materials to parents about their rights and responsibilities was not registered in any of the schools. This was identified as a problem in cases where parents were unable to come to school (an example of a school in this study where a significant number of pupils come from different parts of Croatia and they live in student accommodation during their schooling).

Whereas there was a difference in the extent to which parents were informed about their rights and responsibilities across the schools in the study, the majority of the pupils in the schools said that they felt well-informed about their rights and responsibilities. According to the Act on education in primary and secondary schooling (2008), their rights include the right to be informed about all questions that relate to them, the right to advice and help in solving problems, the right to have their opinion accepted, the right to file a complaint to teachers, the principal and the school committee, the right to take part in the Pupil council, as well as develop and implement school rules, and the right to give recommendations on how the educational process can be improved. From the listed rights, one pupil mentioned the right to have his opinion accepted and the right to complain: 'Well our right is to be free in school and to express our dissatisfaction'. The pupils also mentioned the role of the school pedagogue/psychologist in the context of help in problem solving, as well as the Pupil council. Based on the focus groups with pupils, it seems that the right the pupils are least likely to be able to exercise concerns their participation in developing school rules and improving the educational process.

In the context of rights, pupils most often cited grading issues, the number of tests permitted in a week or day and the right to know each of the grades they are given and explanations for them. It seems that pupils and teachers most often refer to these rights. With regard to specific rights pertaining to their minority background, pupils mentioned their right to be away from school for religious holidays and to listen to ethics or religious education other than the dominant Catholic religious education. While pupils' opinions on whether grading rights were being observed in schools differed (e.g. in one school a pupil mentions that 'this type of right is usually sidestepped' and another says 'they can't uphold these, there is too many of us, they have to grade the work so we write tests because you can't do it in any other way'), pupils did not mention examples which showed that their minority rights were being breached in school, i.e. they were allowed to be away from school during religious holidays and the right to choose the form of their religious education in schools.

However, even though pupils did not mention that their minority rights were being breached, it seems that there is no systematic school policy which would encourage them to exercise these rights either. Out of the five schools, one has Orthodox religious education and another Islamic religious education. Principals in the other three schools express good will to organize both these forms of religious education, but they expect parents and pupils to initiate this. Principals mention ethics as the alternative to Catholic religious education for non-Catholic minority groups; however, in one school ethics lessons take place on Saturday's. In this school a parent mentions how his only complaint about the school concerns the timetabling of ethics: 'My children go to ethics every other Saturday (compulsory) and we have to pay for the travel. It would suffice if their travel expenses were covered or if ethics was part of the school week'. As far as learning the language and literature of a minority group, apart from the one school which has the Model B where the educational programme is bilingual, the other schools do not have the option of minority language classes.

Although a situation in which there is no systematic school policy which encourages the exercise of minority rights could be questionable, the lack of initiative to introduce minority religious education or minority language and literature classes seems to confirm the impression that there is a lack of expressed will for the affirmation of minority identities in schools among minority pupils and their parents. From this perspective, the fact that pupils do not report any breach of their minority rights in school could be a result of their lack of interest to exercise these rights. Legally, it is not compulsory for schools to organize the learning of a minority language unless there are a sufficient number of pupils belonging to the minority group who wish to exercise this right. According to one of the interviewed principals, organising such classes is possible for a smaller number of pupils, but such an initiative should come from the parents. For example, a principal mentions how he has not had one parent initiative with respect to learning a minority language or Orthodox/Islamic religious education and concludes the following: 'parents from minority groups have realized that such separation would do them more harm than good. We had cases where they said well I won't learn Cyrillic, Serbian language, I live in Croatia. You have such cases with the Orthodox for example. It is his right to learn about it if he wants to. It's different in Vukovar where the majority are Serbs, there you can do this, but here where there are a few we can't'. A pupil in the same school says: 'I wouldn't go to Orthodox religious education. It's not that I am afraid, but I have a feeling that would separate me from my group, this way I blend in with my surroundings'.

It is important to mention here the ambivalent attitude of parents towards this issue. On the one hand, parents express their wish for schools to nurture their minority language and culture, but they are also aware that in the given social context this could also have negative repercussions. In this sense, where there is no systematic recognition of minority groups by the school (e.g. Model A, B or C), it is important to consult minority group members about how they would like their minority culture, language and religion to be fostered.

Recommendations:
Parents and pupils should be informed about their rights and responsibilities both in person and in written form, with special emphasis on the rights of minority groups.
Minority parents and pupils should be consulted about which specific rights they would like to exercise. This shows the school's interest to meet the wishes of minority groups as opposed to leaving the initiative solely to the minority groups themselves. This is especially important in communities where minorities are not significantly represented.

Forms of parental involvement in school activities

√ Parent-teacher meetings and individual information sessions are the most frequent forms of parental involvement
√ Less frequent forms of parental involvement: parent workshops, parents as guest lecturers, parents involved in organising school activities
√ Parent councils as a formality

The dominantly neutral approach towards minority groups identified in four schools in this study is also reflected in the fact that the ways of involving parents in school activities do not include any particularities for minority parents. This also pertains to the school which implements the educational Model B, where minority parents are significantly represented in the school in comparison to the other schools in the research. In other words, minority parents can get involved in school life in the same ways as other parents. These forms of parental involvement can be divided into two groups. The first group includes forms of parental involvement available in all schools: parent-teacher meetings, parent-teacher individual information sessions and Parent councils. The second group includes parental involvement activities which do not take place in all schools: learning workshops, parents as guest lecturers and open school days.

With regard to the most common ways of involving parents in school life, it is necessary to differentiate between, on the one hand, parent-teacher meetings (compulsory) and individual parent-teacher information sessions (optional) which involve all parents, and on the other, the Parent council which involves only one parent representative from each class. Parent-teacher meetings and individual parent-teacher information sessions are the most frequent forms of parental involvement, recognised by parents in the conducted focus groups as passive forms of participation through which they receive information about the grades and behaviour of their children. A more active role is notionally provided by the Parent council which should enable parents to participate in the decision-making process about school life. According to the Act on education in primary and secondary schooling (2008), the Parent council should give its opinion on the proposed school curriculum and the school's annual work plan and programme, it should discuss reports given by the principal about the realisation of the school curriculum and the annual work plan and programme, discuss complaints parents may have about the educational process, recommend measures to improve the educational process and propose its representative for the school committee. However, based on the feedback from parents who participated in this study, which suggests that they are not informed about how Parent councils work although they are aware that they exist, one can conclude that the Parent councils in this study are a formality. This appraisal is reinforced by the interviewed principals according to whom Parent councils 'do not meet regularly'. Such findings are consistent with other research conducted on parental involvement in Croatian primary schools which also identified a lack of clarity with regard to the role of Parent councils (Miljević Riđički 2009).

The only example of the active involvement of a Parent council in this study was identified in a school where the council requested that the school takes an official stance on a reported incident which involved a teacher offending a pupil along ethnic lines, which was the only such discriminatory case involving school staff reported in the study. This example suggests that Parent councils have more of an intervention role, which can be further illustrated with a quote from a parent who said that he did not know whether or what the Parent council did, but that he expected it could be useful when there is a problem.

Parents and principals have different attitudes towards who is responsible for the lack of engagement on the part of Parent councils. Parents tended to associate Parent councils with the school's formal obligation to have such a body and claimed that it did not have a real role in school life. Unlike parents who hold the school responsible for the passive role of Parent

councils, principals primarily talked about the lack of initiative and disinterestedness of parents. One of the principals mentioned that it was his obligation to organize a meeting of the Parent council once a year, whereas other meetings depended on the council itself. Similarly, another principal says that 'parents do not feel this responsibility, they think it's our responsibility not theirs'. Two principals described Parent councils as a 'Western' idea which has not taken ground in their schools because parents lack initiative. In other words, a pattern can be discerned according to which principals and parents blame unsuccessful Parent councils on each other.

Parent-teacher meetings and individual parent-teacher information sessions, as the most common forms of parental involvement, together with Parent councils and a parent representative in the school committee, are instances of parental involvement identifiable in all five schools. However, in some schools there are also other ways of involving parents. For example, one school organised workshops for parents on how to learn. According to the principal of this school: 'We have such workshops and we invite parents at around this time, 5-6pm, when they are free to come and find out about learning methods because often when you ask parents why their children's grades are low they say that they don't know, that their kids are constantly studying…and that's it…they sit, but are they learning and how are they learning, that's the problem'. Although this is the only example in this study where a school provided parents with educational support, in another school a teacher also organised a workshop with parents on the topic 'stop to violence in schools'. It is important to note here how the focus groups with teachers and parents suggested that thematic workshops were welcome, i.e. both parents and teachers have a positive attitude towards this form of parental involvement in school life.

Inviting parents to attend an official ceremony organised at the end of the school year is an example of indirect parental involvement identified in several of the schools in the study. The principal of one of these schools said that this was the only activity attended by almost all parents; however, it is important to emphasise that parents have a visiting rather than organisational role at the ceremony. In the same school, so-called parent-teacher 'receptions' are held twice a year. On these days all the teachers at the school are available from 5-7pm and any parent can come and talk to them. This form of parental involvement was only registered in one school in the study.

Other ways of involving parents identified in some of the schools include 'open door days' or presentations of parents' occupations either at school or their workplace. As an example of the

latter, one teacher took her pupils to the land registry office (so that they could see land registry maps) and they were met there by a pupil's parent. The same teacher plans to make a postcard of the city with her class and sees this activity as an opportunity to involve parents who work in different tourism-related institutions.

In the above mentioned 'alternative' forms of parental involvement (thematic workshops, school ceremonies or open door days) parents are, just like with parent-teacher meetings and individual parent-teacher information sessions, mostly in the role of passive information recipients. Parents have a more active role when they present their occupation (as information providers), as well as in Parent councils which should enable the parents to be decision makers. In some schools parents have a more active role by taking part in the organisation of school trips. For example, a principal of a school says: 'there is a committee which decides [about the school trip] which consists of two parents, two pupils, two teachers and the school secretary who takes the notes for the meeting. They decide where the pupils will go and with which agency'. However, despite the mentioned varied forms of parental involvement, parents tend to be information receivers rather than decision makers in schools.

As was mentioned in the introduction, no special activities were registered in this study for the involvement of minority parents. Importantly, several minority parents mentioned that they would be willing to present their culture in school. To illustrate this, a parent says: 'My participation would contribute to people getting acquainted with a national minority which is a weakness in schools, and which I am willing to present, because children know too little about minorities and what's presented to them is done wrongly, with an aversion'.

Recommendations:
More frequent meetings of Parent councils and schools consulting the councils on issues which are of importance for school life.
Organising thematic workshops for parents. Organising presentations of pupils' work for parents (e.g. exhibitions, concerts, performances). Creating opportunities for parents to participate in school life as guest lecturers.
Taking into consideration the minority perspective when deciding on issues related to school life by consulting minority parents who are not represented in Parent councils.
Schools encourage minority parents and pupils to present their cultures if they would like to.

Level of parental involvement – educational, economic, gender and ethnic dimensions

√ Low level of parental involvement in secondary school in comparison to primary school
√ Impression that level of parental involvement is not related to ethnicity
√ More educated parents more involved
√ Mothers more involved than fathers
√ Pupils do not want more parental involvement

The principals and the majority of parents who took part in this study agreed that parents were not sufficiently involved in school life. When describing the level of participation, several principals and teachers emphasised the distinction between the primary and secondary educational levels, estimating that parents were more actively involved in school life at primary school level. The following quote from a principal illustrates this: 'I have a feeling…that after primary school parents don't show as much interest as they did up to the 8th grade…in secondary school parents only cooperate in the form of parent-teacher meetings and individual parent-teacher information sessions'. In this principal's school, workshops for parents on how to learn, as well as parent-teacher receptions are organised; however, according to the principal only a small number of parents attend such activities. The principal of another school shares the impression that parents are not very involved in school life: 'We shouldn't just talk about minority groups but also the majority, parents are almost not at all involved. They get involved only when we or their child makes them. They are practically disinterested. 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'. Similarly, 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'. A teacher asks the following question: 'How do you involve parents who are not interested in their child's situation (grades, behaviour, class attendance), who never come to parent-teacher meetings or individual parent-teacher information sessions and who have no idea where their child has been for the past two weeks for example (and s/he hasn't been in school)'.

This impression of parents' disinterestedness and their inadequate involvement, especially at secondary school level, is also shared by teachers. For example, one teacher says how she works in both a primary and secondary school and how 'I think it's the same everywhere. Parents

cooperate more and communicate more when their children go to primary school, so they are more involved and there's better cooperation with regard to workshops'. According to another teacher, 'In earlier years the cooperation is better and more frequent, then later it becomes weaker'. Apart from the mentioned distinction with regard to parental involvement at primary and secondary school levels, several of the research participants also mentioned a difference between different secondary schools or, more specifically, vocational and grammar schools. In this context, it seems that the parents of grammar school pupils are more involved in school life than parents whose children attend vocational schooling.

This study also explored the relationship between the level of parental involvement and their educational level, economic status, gender and ethnicity. It is interesting that apart from ethnicity, all the other mentioned factors were identified in the interviews and focus groups as important for understanding the level of parental involvement in school life. With regard to parents' ethnicity, the majority of the research participants said that there was no relationship between ethnicity and parental involvement. 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'. 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'. These selected quotes illustrate the dominant attitude expressed by this study's research participants according to which ethnicity does not influence level of parental involvement. It is important to emphasize that this is an impression shared by members of both the majority and minority groups.

Unlike ethnicity, the educational level of parents is mentioned as a potential influence on the level of parental involvement. The following examples illustrate the impression shared by certain principals and teachers that more educated parents are also more involved: 'I can really see here that when a parent is more educated they take care of their child more', 'maybe the demands of more educated parents towards the school are bigger than those of less educated parents because they are more informed', 'when I sat on the school committee I noticed that parent representatives were people who were better educated'. On the other hand, opposite views were also expressed: 'The more educated people can go to the other side – you can do it on your own' or 'I speak from experience – we have unsuccessful children from well educated parents, bad communication, and children whose parents are less educated and who develop normally because

they are normal'. The conclusion which imposes itself from talking to the teachers and principals in this study is that more educated parents tend to be more involved in school life in comparison to their less educated counterparts. However, as the selected quotes show, not all participants agreed on this.

The economic status of parents as a factor potentially influencing their involvement in school life was mentioned by several research participants: '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'. The principal of a school where many parents live far away from school mentions travel costs and how it is impossible for some parents to meet these costs, whereas the principal of another school says how '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'. Whereas the first three excerpts suggest that a lack of financial resources can have a negative effect on parental involvement, the last excerpt indicates how having a lot of money can also have a negative effect on parental involvement.

Unlike the reported different opinions on the potential influence of educational and economic factors on parental involvement, almost all the participants agreed on the gender aspect of involvement, i.e. they agreed that mothers were more involved than fathers: 'mothers are more involved', 'maybe mothers a bit more' or 'mothers come more frequently'. Some of the study participants commented on the greater involvement of mothers in the following way: 'Mothers come to school more often although I support fathers coming to school too because the effect of the father is felt longer. They'll be calm for the next three weeks and then the breaks will loosen up again. These are mostly patriarchal families, that's why the effect is stronger' or 'I think this is a total mistake on the fathers' side. It's not just their mistake but the mistake of the family in general, fathers don't want to, so the mothers take on this burden. The guilt is equal, because sometimes mothers do not want to hand this over to fathers'. The conversations with principals, teachers and parents suggest that when discussing parental involvement it is important to be sensitive to the differences in involvement between mothers and fathers. In other words, increasing parental involvement in school life may involve not only increasing the general involvement of one parent (most likely the mother), but also the greater involvement of fathers. In the study only one teacher mentioned the example of a pupil whose mother and father attended parent-teacher meetings together.

Finally, it is important to emphasise that all pupils who answered the question whether they would want their parents to be more involved in school life said that they would not want this: 'no, I feel more independent like this', 'I don't think they should be, we go to this school and we should fight more' or 'I think pupils should be given more opportunities to make decisions because they attend this school'. Although these answers could reflect typical teenage rebellion in the sense of resistance to the adult world, it is justified to assume that measures (to increase parental involvement) which do not take into consideration these attitudes could, in the long run, have a negative effect.

Recommendations:
Develop specific strategies to encourage the involvement of parents belonging to different social profiles.
Encourage the involvement of mothers and fathers.
Consult pupils and parents about how parents could be involved in school life.

Barriers to parental involvement

√ Lack of time
√ Lack of motivation
√ Distance from school
√ Lack of activities to involve parents in school life

Different explanations for why parents are not more involved in school life were provided during the conducted interviews and focus groups. Although parents, teachers and principals cite similar reasons for low parental involvement (e.g. lack of time, distance from school and lack of motivation), a smaller number of parents felt that the school was equally responsible for low rates of parental involvement, whereas the school's responsibility was not mentioned by the principals and teachers in this study.

One of the most common explanations for low parent engagement in school was parents' lack of time. For example, a 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'. 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'. The parents themselves mentioned lack of time as a problem.

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 have two dorms for them, well it's one dorm in two buildings and we have pupils from all parts of Croatia, so that distance is a problem…we talk to the parents over the phone, but they are not as present because of the distance'. Similarly, another principal says that some of the parents in his school do not have the financial means to come to school.

Parents' motivation to be involved in school life was also mentioned as a potential explanation for low involvement, both by parents and school staff. The following examples illustrate this: 'The parents' attitude is why are you calling me? I gave you my child for you to bring it up and educate it' (principal 1), 'Some parents think that the school is solely responsible to teach, whereas parents are only interested in the final product, pupil's grades' (principal 2), 'I think people avoid getting involved because you need to give a part of yourself. You need to make an effort' (parent 1), 'Even if I was retired I wouldn't have the need to go to school every other day' (parent 2). In other words, according to the cited principals and parents, some parents do not recognize the importance of getting involved in school life or do not want to get involved for other reasons. Connected to this, a principal says: 'I would want parents to understand what I said at the beginning, that education is not only up to the school, but also up to the parents'.

Other explanations for the low level of parental involvement included parents trusting their children (e.g. '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') and parents' previous school experiences (e.g. 'Parents may have negative experiences from primary school. Unpleasant conversations parents might find upsetting').

The mentioned reasons for the low level of parental engagement refer 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. For example, a mother says: 'There is nothing at the school' and another supports her in this claim: 'There is nothing going on at the level of the school'. Apart from mentioning the lack of activities which would encourage parental involvement as a barrier to higher levels of involvement, a parent in another school says how a practical barrier is that teachers and not only pupils have to travel: 'He

comes in the morning, wakes up at 5am, works and then can't wait for the fast train to go home. I can understand that'.

The cited opinions of parents, teachers and principals suggest that the responsibility for low levels of parental involvement is shared between parents and schools. It is important to mention that none of the participants in this study cited any barriers to parental involvement that could be related to ethnicity (e.g. language barrier), although this does not necessarily mean that such barriers do not exist. In answer to the question whether minority parents might require any special support from the school, a teacher says: 'Maybe they do, but they don't express the need'.

Recommendations:
Organising school activities intended for parents at a time that suits them.
Involving parents who live far away from school in different ways, e.g. telephone, internet, as opposed to the traditional physical presence in schools.
Explain to parents the benefits of their involvement in school life.
Provides spaces for parental involvement in schools.
Inquire whether minority parents require special support from the school (e.g. language support).

Parent-school communication

√ Most common channel of communication: parent-class teacher
√ Parents largely satisfied with the availability of school staff
√ Parent-teacher meetings and parent-teacher individual information sessions most frequent means of contact
√ Schools tend to initiate contact with parents when there is a problem with the pupil
√ Communication tends to be oral

In school, parents most frequently communicate with their child's class teacher. If the teacher is not available or the parent wishes to talk to another member of staff, they most often contact the school pedagogue/psychologist, and then the principal as a final instance. In several of the schools, study participants complained that the school had only a pedagogue or psychologist and pointed out that it would be good if the school had both.

In all the schools in this study parents expressed their satisfaction with the availability of school staff when parents wished to contact them: 'We can always contact someone, if the class teacher

is not available then there is the school pedagogue', 'They are always available, I have never had any problems', 'I am mostly in touch with the class teacher and I am exceptionally satisfied with this cooperation'. The principals and teachers said that parents tend to contact them for information on their child's educational success and behaviour and this seems to be the type of information that the schools emphasize too. For example, in this study's schools, parents did not receive information about the curriculum, school policies or school activities. The satisfaction parents expressed with regard to their communication with the school has also been reported in a study which examined parental involvement in selected Croatian primary schools (Miljević Riđički 2009). Unlike the largely positive appraisal parents gave with regard to the school's response to their contact requests, some of the parents were dissatisfied with the extent to which schools initiated contact. For example, in one school two parents said: 'I contact the school often, the school never contacts me' and 'Only when the kids have problems. Otherwise we don't know much'.

On the basis of the conducted interviews and focus groups, it seems that the main reason why schools initiate contact relates to there being a problem with the pupil. In all other cases, parents receive information about their child's progress at parent-teacher meetings or individual parent-teacher information sessions, where the latter form of communication is optional. Asking parents to attend parent-teacher meetings is an opportunity for school-parent communication; however, parents are invited to these meetings through their children. Referring to this practice, a teacher says how she does not feel the need to contact parents directly because she believes that the chidlren will pass on the message.

The communication between the school and parents tends to be oral (parent-teacher meetings and individual parent-teacher information sessions). The exceptions to this are cases where parents live far away from the school and when parents do not attend parent-teacher meetings. For example, in one school a teacher communicates with parents via telephone and mobile phone messages because the parents cannot come to school. In cases where parents do not attend parent-teacher meetings there is a practice of sending written invitations to their home address: 'There are regular parent-teacher meetings, but there are parents who do not attend either these meetings or individual parent-teacher sessions. If they do not respond then we inform them via registered mail'.

Communicating with parents via email was not a practice registered in any of the schools. However, in four out of the five schools in this study there was a 'parent corner' on the schools' internet pages. In two of these four schools there was no information on this page, in one school the page included a list of class teachers and a timetable with parent-teacher information sessions, and in one school the page contained information on the safety of children on the internet.

No special ways of communicating with minority parents were registered at the schools.

Recommendations:
Availability of a school pedagogue and psychologist.
More initiative from schools with regard to contacting parents (contacting for positive rather than only negative reasons).
Use of different means of communicating with parents.
More productive use of the schools' internet pages to communicate with parents.

Forms of pupil involvement in school activities

√ Pupils are mostly in the role of information receivers at their schools
√ The success of the Pupil council varies by school
√ Forms of involving pupils in school life do not include any particularities for minority pupils

Similarly to their parents, pupils are mostly in the role of information receivers at their schools. Apart from the regular educational process, pupils can also be involved in school life through membership in different school groups, e.g. the art group, drama group or different sports clubs, but the opportunities to engage in schools in such a manner differs between schools: in some schools these opportunities are greater than in others. Apart from these activities, pupils are also sometimes involved in school performances and manifestations (e.g. Bread days).

According to the Act on education in primary and secondary schooling (2008), a school can establish pupil associations, clubs and societies as ways in which to involve pupils. Article 39 of the Act states that schools can also market products which were made by their pupils and that the profit from this can only be used to support student associations and promote the school's

educational activities. Article 40 defines the organisation of student clubs and societies, but none of the pupils in this study mentioned any of these forms of involvement. A pupil said: 'No, we're missing those'.

While pupil associations and clubs were not mentioned in any of the schools in the study, all schools had a Pupil council. Article 71 (Act on education in primary and secondary schooling 2008) states that this council comprises of a representative from each class and that it has its representative in the school committee who participates in the committee's work when decisions are being made on the rights and responsibilities of pupils. It is interesting that the article states how in these school bodies the pupil representative is 'without the right to decide'.

The Pupil council, just like the Parent council, was described as a formality by the pupils in three out of the five schools in this study. The following examples illustrate this: 'I don't know, it's not like we benefit much from it', 'I never know when this council takes place, no one tells us, the president of out class goes there, we ask what happened and he says he doesn't know. So, even if I wanted to know I couldn't', 'they just tell us that the meeting is taking place, someone asks him what happened, he says he doesn't know and we have no idea. Rarely anyone asks him'. One pupil has the impression that the Pupil council has 'little power, although I believe that the psychologist who moderates the council doesn't think so'. However, in two schools the Pupil council was described as successful. For example, in one of these schools the council's activities are described as follows: 'The class talks to the president and then the council decides whether they accept the proposal or not. For instance, we have a problem and then they announce that the Pupil council will meet. We tell the president what our problem is and then he presents it and it's accepted or not. Usually he tells us what happened the day after and the conclusions are also read out in each class'. Another pupil at that school says how important the Pupil council is because it 'raises our morale if we are involved in it'. In this school the Pupil council organised a charity event which raised money for students who come from poorer backgrounds. According to another pupil at that school, the success of the Pupil council depends on the pupils themselves: 'it is more about the pupils and then the teachers accept it…it's not that they encourage us, these are just our ideas that we want to realize'. In another school the Pupil council has not yet initiated any activities, but according to the pupils it meets regularly and their class representatives inform them about the meetings. In this school pupils rated the Pupil council as useful: 'The president of each class represents that class, goes to meetings, agrees on excursions and similar things and then tells the class all about it'.

Based on the focus groups with pupils, it seems that pupils have different attitudes with regard to the extent to which they wish to be involved in school activities. On the one hand there are pupils who would want to be more actively involved if there were opportunities to do so in school; then there are pupils who would like to be more actively involved but cite barriers to their involvement (e.g. time 'there is too much to learn, everyone is more oriented to oneself, a lot is expected, so people work individually and the collective looses out', and travel to school); and then there are pupils who see any extra involvement in school life as 'just extra work'.

The dominantly neutral approach towards minority groups at four schools in this study is also reflected in the fact that pupil involvement activities do not comprise any particularities for minority pupils. Examples of fostering minority cultures were registered in the school which has Model B where the Czech minority has a special section for its activities in the school paper and Czech recipes are used at Bread days celebrated annually in schools. However, even in that school a pupil says that 'it mostly depends on us, how well we are organised'. Although good practice examples to integrate minority pupils into school life or to expose the majority pupils to minority cultures were not identified in this study, two potentially good recommendations were registered. One of the principals mentioned he would like to take pupils for a visit to the mosque, orthodox church and the Jewish community so that they could see 'other realities', and a Roma pupil said how 'it would be good if everyone presented their religions, their customs, how their religions work', although she mentions that she does not know 'how others would feel about this'.

Recommendations:
Organisation of diverse extra-curricular activities for pupils.
Encouraging activities of the Pupil council. Encouraging pupils to initiate school activities themselves.

Conclusion

Only a small proportion of minority pupils in Croatia are educated according to special educational models developed for minority pupils; the majority of these pupils attend the regular school programme. In this study only one school carried out Model B for the Czech minority and this school was identified as closest to the affirmative educational approach to minority groups, although apart from fostering Czech culture no other examples of fostering other minority

cultures were registered in that school. It is important to note that this school is located in a town where the Czech community is significantly represented, so the school's organisation reflects this broader context.

Apart from the opportunity to attend non-Catholic religious education and to be away from school during religious holidays, schools in this study which implement the majority programme have a dominantly neutral approach towards minority groups: the organisation of intercultural events was not registered in any of the schools, minority parents and pupils are not specially informed about their minority rights in education by the schools, either in person or in writing, and there is no practice of communicating with minority groups about whether, and if so how, they would like their culture fostered in school. The issue of special communication efforts between schools and members of minority groups is extremely important since it provides minorities with information about their educational rights, the opportunity to voice their wishes and worries with regard to the exercise of these rights, and such communication sends the message to minority groups that schools respect their ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural specificities. The openness of schools towards minority groups (when these were identified) dominated in the interviews with principals, as well as the focus groups with teachers. The next step would be to implement this openness organisationally, and an inclusive local community culture has been identified as key in reinforcing this openness.

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