

Parental Involvement in an Emerging Democracy: The Case of Croatia

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Abstract: *Parental involvement in schools in an emerging democracy has gained significant attention among school administrators, educators, parents, local governments, and the international development community; yet, empirical data on this subject remains sparse. This study aims to examine the patterns of parental involvement in schools in Croatian communities. Using mixed-methods, the sample size consists of 294 elementary school parents, two focus groups (parents and teachers), and nine interviews with national and international stakeholders. The study found that, apart from the educational outcomes for children, parental involvement also may be an important platform through which parents can practice democratic behaviors and engage in community-building initiatives. Through school-related activities, parents learn to interact with a government institution, voice their interests, participate in decision-making, leverage and use power, and cooperate with each other and the community. Findings from this study can have implications for social work practice and social development assistance by recognizing how engaging parents in school-based activities can become a platform for community participation and democratic behavior.*

Keywords: *Parental involvement, democracy, community participation, Croatia*

INTRODUCTION

The last two decades have been turbulent for Croatia, including both a war for independence and major democratic transformations in political and socio-economic systems. With the growing democratization as well as preparation to enter the European Union (EU), important social transformations inevitably followed. Social institutions, including schools, had to adjust their practices to meet new requirements and expectations for civic participation. In the schools, parents and community members alike were called, through the new educational reform from 2005, to engage and participate in decision-making processes in local governments and schools.

Parental involvement in schools in Croatia became a topic of discussion among social scientists, educators, policy makers, and international development agents. International development stakeholders targeted parents and teachers with peace

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programming, reconstruction, and reconciliation programs immediately afterwards, and the interest continues. Parental involvement in Croatia is gaining even more attention from the international community in those communities that continue to be affected by the Croat Independence war.

However, although implementers have paid significant attention to parental involvement in schools, very little empirical research has examined parental involvement as a social phenomenon in communities undergoing democracy and post-war community building. Thus, the purpose of this research is to explore the patterns of parental involvement in Croatian communities markedly affected by the war and its aftermath, to understand the why and how parents participate in school related activities, and to link that participation to emerging democratic behaviors. Using data from a self-administered parent survey, we first discuss the dimensions of parental involvement in the Vukovar region. Further, through focus groups with parents and teachers, and interviews with community stakeholders, we identify and discuss the benefits of parental involvement in post war communities along with the factors that may contribute to increasing parental involvement in the elementary schools. We locate our research in the context of social transitions in schools in which educational reform demands a shift in parental involvement, thus inviting these changes to influence community members' democratic behavior and participation in community building efforts.

Parental Involvement in the Emerging Croatian Democracy

From traditionally centralized social institutions, functioning as a *locus* for acquiring knowledge, schools increasingly are becoming public spheres for practicing democracy, in which parents and the community come together to negotiate new roles in their children's education and in their own communities (Bauch & Goldring, 1998; Chan and Chui, 1997; Lewis & Naidoo, 2006; Mintrom, 2009). Parents are no longer perceived as passive listeners in their children's education. Quite the opposite, they became central stakeholders and active participants in the educational system. In the past, the parent - teacher meeting was hardly more than a platform for practicing authority of the school (state) over parents (the citizens) thus causing most parents to avoid engagement (Males, 1995). The new paradigm of parental involvement promotes a strong parents' participation and parents-school-community relationships in which parents, teachers, and the community are no longer insular entities, but allies in educating children in a new socio-political context (Bauch & Goldring, 1998; Dewey, 1921).

Parental involvement in schools is receiving increasing consideration in Croatia because of educational reforms put in place as part of Croatia's preparation to enter the EU. In order to come closer to the contemporary European education practices and prepare for its accession to the EU, Croatia was required to undertake serious actions related to its educational traditions and views on the role of schools, especially toward parental involvement.

As such, several elements of the educational reform are worth mentioning. First is the creation of *the Croatian National Education Standard* for primary schools, in which special attention was paid to broadening the definition of education to include both

transfer of knowledge and socialization; these standards also include the introduction of modern teaching methods requirements for ongoing professional training for teachers and cooperation among teachers, schools, parents, and local communities. For these reasons the *Education and Teacher Training Agency* was created (<http://www.azoo.hr/>). One of its responsibilities is to provide preconditions for the external evaluation of education. This change allows different stakeholders, including parents, to have a voice in improving the educational system. The assumption is that establishing a role for parents would lead to greater parental involvement.

The second document on *Strategy of professional training for teachers 2009-2013* (http://www.azoo.hr/images/razno/Strategija_SU.pdf) suggests, among other propositions, higher involvement of local communities and parents in schools. In addition, the Croatian Education Sector Development Plan for 2005-2010 (<http://public.mzos.hr/fgs.axd?id=14194>) calls on teachers and school administrators to establish networks of contacts and partner relationships with parents and the local community.

Finally, the *Law on Upbringing and Education in Primary and Secondary Schools* (*National Gazette*, 87/2008) establishes specific school governance regulations, including mandating parents' participation on school boards—an institutional change that represents a step forward through increasing participation of parents in the educational system. However, without much teacher/parent training on parental involvement or guidance on how to implement this school reform, the challenge of working and promoting parental involvement within this new paradigm is shared by both - the parents and the schools.

Adding to this, the academic community in Croatia did not historically include parental involvement as a priority topic. Therefore, the literature on parental involvement in Croatia is sparse and only subsequent to 2009 has attention been paid to it. As democracy was unfolding in the newly independent Croatia, Males (1996) notes that schools must develop democratic practices and open their doors toward parents' engagement in educational processes. Her work calls for a shift in the parental role from passive to active—from engaging parents not only in school activities and their children's academic performance, but also in the school's decision-making process and in building partnerships between the school and the community. When the family, school, and the community work together, the rewards may go beyond improving students' academic success to improving schools' atmosphere, providing needed family services and support, and increasing parents' human capital through the connection of families with others in the school and in the community (Epstein, 1995). Echoing Males's work, a 2010 study on parental involvement (Pahic, Miljevic-Ridicki, & Vizek Vidovic, 2010) also finds school-parent communication in Croatia to be traditional, in which schools would determine the educational goals and subsequently, and sporadically, inform parents about those goals. Investigating the differences in the perception of school-parent cooperation between parents who are not included in school advisory bodies and parents-representatives in school bodies, the study discovered that parents showed interest in engaging in school because they believe such participation would benefit their children

With this shift, parental involvement in schools becomes especially challenging, particularly in those communities affected by war and divided along ethnic lines. One such area, the Vukovar region in eastern Croatia, continues to be heavily affected by the Croat Independence war. More than 15 years after the end of the war, the city of Vukovar remains ethnically segregated. The ethnic division is especially marked in the educational system (Freedman et al., 2004); Croatian and Serbian children attend different classrooms, on different floors, and often at different times. Both the academic and international development communities have focused on the school segregation, but much of the research done in schools examines residents' views on the war and prospects for reconciliation (Corkalo et al., 2004), with little focus on parental involvement *per se*.

In addition, research on parents', teachers', and students' attitudes toward the present and future of education (Corkalo Biruski & Ajdukovic, 2008)—specifically, the role that public education plays in the process of reconstruction (Corkalo Biruski & Ajdukovic, 2007; Freedman et al., 2004)—occupies the research agenda. These foci add great value to the body of literature on schools, but parental involvement continues to receive short shrift in the literature. This article serves to fill the gap and provide an understanding of parental involvement in the Vukovar region, typical of communities struggling toward democratization and post-war community building.

Parental Involvement and Community Participation

For decades of work and research, parental involvement in schools has been mainly focused on outcomes derived from involving parents in their children's education, and both literature and schools' experience have established a clear relationship between parental involvement and students' academic achievements and motivation to succeed in school (Clark, 1983; Comer & Haynes, 1991; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbush, & Darling, 1992). This focus of research also established that schools clearly are interconnected with the community in which they exist, to the people they serve, and to the values they uphold. Schools and parental participation may be used as a platform to become civically engaged in the community. When parents practice parental involvement, this behavior engenders participation in education and in the overall community concerns (Castells, Flecha, Freire, Giroux, Macedo, & Willis, 1999). More precisely, researchers have examined parent participation as a civic capacity (Stone, Doherty, Jones, & Ross, 1999) or as community leadership development (Shatkin & Gershberg, 2007). The underlining thesis is recognizing that investments in parents will encourage citizens to engage in a more vigorous civic life. By working with parents to hone their skills and increase their participation in decision-making groups at the school level, and most importantly, by participating and working with other parents in traditional events such as a spring carnival, parents begin to become acquainted with each other, learn to respect one another, and eventually begin to see themselves as participants in school/community programs as opposed to viewing the other as a competitor (Schraft & Comer, 1979). Their research supports the assertion that principles of participation, empowerment, civic engagement, and asset-based community development bolster the parent involvement initiatives and create greater community capacity.

Contrary to the parental involvement/ community building approach, there are scholars who examined the role of schools in post-war social reconstruction and identified that, while schools have the potential to be central social institutions for socialization and community reconstruction, they may also play a divisive role in a community. A case in point is the city of Vukovar in Croatia in which researchers (Corkalo Biruski & Ajdukovic, 2007) identified that parental attitude and behavior may be connected to children's discrimination toward those who are seen as different from themselves. The view is supported in Weinstein, Freedman and Hughson's (2007) work in Croatian schools, by recognizing that schools are considered positive social agents in communities, but they can also contribute to identity-based conflicts. Nonetheless, this study suggests that schools are not only education institutions; they are also institutions that can take on responsibility for community building efforts.

Although it is worth spending time on discussing this possible relationship between parental involvement and community building, until parental involvement is empirically studied in a war-torn community and clearly defined, it is premature to discuss the parental involvement-community building equation. Thus, the main purpose of the study aims to examine the patterns of parental involvement in elementary schools in the Vukovar region, to understand how and why parents participate in school related activities, and to link that participation to emerging democratic behaviors. Lastly, it aims to identify specific factors that contribute to increased *positive* parental involvement in elementary schools in the region of Vukovar, Croatia.

Research Context: The City of Vukovar and its Region

The City of Vukovar is located on the river Danube, on the border with Serbia, in a region of the country well known for its fertile land and wine production. Before the 1991-1995 war, the area was an example of a functional and integrated multiethnic community, in which more than 20 ethnic groups made their home and peacefully coexisted for decades. These communities had been characterized by dense social networks and ethnic integration, in which community members socialized with one another without regarding or even necessarily knowing the other's ethnic background (Corkalo Biruski et al., 2004; Corkalo Biruski & Ajdukovic, 2009).

Nevertheless, the pre-war instability and war overtook this community and erased the calmness and the spirit of togetherness. Pre-war instability was marked by the continuous economic, social and political crisis in Yugoslavia during 1980s and by the breakdown of both communist rule and of federal state itself by 1989, as well as of ideological and value system. Political instability created the atmosphere of fear and production of national animosity and hate that, coupled with and the first free democratic elections held in former Yugoslav republics suddenly brought upon the rise of national issues and closed ethnic groups within themselves. Silence and deterioration of inter-personal trust and inter-group relations soon became a common place in many heterogeneous communities, such as Vukovar. Trust was lost even before first shots in the war were fired, and thereafter the Vukovar community developed as separate, ethnic communities (Corkalo Biruski & Ajdukovic, 2009).

During the massive and overwhelming war that followed, Vukovar community was severely traumatized as thousands of lives were lost – many in one of the first mass-murders of the following wars, families have fallen apart, with intense massive destruction of housing, infrastructure, and symbolic eradication of symbolic objects. The war attempted to erase all culture and history belonging to other groups. Many Vukovar citizens of Croatian origin have disappeared, with tens of thousands expelled from their homes throughout the rest of Croatia. Extreme traumatizing experiences, suffering and losses have burdened this community, especially its Croatian majority, and contribute to poor prospects for community recovery and healing. Thus, reconciliation among citizens appears difficult (Corkalo Biruski & Ajdukovic, 2009).

The post war atmosphere does not appear to foster social interaction and it is possible that the divisions within schools have deepened disconnections among the community members. The Erdut Agreement signed in 1995 aimed to facilitate the integration of the minority groups in Vukovar, including Croat students and teachers (who were displaced in 1991), whereas the schools for Serbs in Vukovar had operated and served the existing Serbian community from 1991 to 1998. Several provisions of Erdut Agreement such as separate schooling for Croat and Serb children, remained in place for years after its expiration in 1998. According to Erdut Agreement, the Serbian community has chosen 'A model of schooling' ¹ with all teaching held in Serbian language and script, in practically separated schools, while it was also possible to choose more integrated 'B model' or 'C' model. All this said, division remains today ¹.

Today, the city of Vukovar remains divided, symbolizing the reality that a deeper sense of reconciliation has failed. The ethnic communities are separated by mistrust, divided institutions and disappointment. Lately, some people report positive improvements, as some participants have mentioned in our pilot study. However, Vukovar and its region still remains a stark contrast when compared to multi-ethnic and integrated city of Vukovar prior to war.

METHODOLOGY

Study Design and Procedures

This study applied a mixed research methodology using principles of participatory research (Israel, Schulz, Parker & Becker, 1998; Wallerstein & Duran, 2006) within a cross-sectional research design. For the quantitative aspect of the study, data were collected using a self-report questionnaire for parents during their parent-teacher meetings. Focus groups with parents and teachers, and interviews with community stakeholders were the main source of data for the qualitative segment of the study. Parental involvement is conceptually defined as any form of interaction between parents and schools, such as: *parenting*, which encompasses any form of interaction between parent-child school activities; *communicating*, reflecting on any type of parent-school communication and in turn monitoring the students' academic progress and development; *meeting/volunteering*, reflecting on the parents' participation in school governance and meetings in the school; and *collaborating*, through which parents identify and connect

resources from the community with the school to help students develop and achieve their academic full potential (Epstein, 1991, 1994, 1995).

Planning and setting up the field research was an important first step. The principal investigator (PI) was from the school of social work from a university based in the United States. Two other co-PIs included a faculty member from another U.S.-based university and a faculty member from a university in Croatia. The research team also included a community research partner based in Vukovar. Although the community research partners were well respected in their community, the school principals demonstrated a high level of mistrust toward any post-secondary education was experienced. It is assumed that the mistrust stemmed from many years of partnerships with research projects, national and international, that did nothing but collect data to satisfy academics' publication interest or project requirements, without much responsibility towards enhancing the well-being of the community. Thus, as part of the participatory process that the researchers intended to promote was to step back, and let the community members decide whether they would collaborate on this research initiative, laying down the clearly identified steps of the research and post-research plan. From the six elementary schools approached, two confirmed their interest in the study and two new elementary schools (outside the city of Vukovar) heard about the project and asked to be included in the sample. The levels of participation (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995) used in this study was consultative and collaborative among the schools, the community and the research partners.

Description of Sample

Due to perceived low levels of trust at the community level, we employed an availability sample, based on schools' interests in further studying parental involvement. The sample consisted of 294 elementary school parents from two urban and two rural schools in the region of Vukovar. Both urban schools participating in this study are considered segregated schools in which children from different ethnic backgrounds, majority Croats and Serbs, attend school at different times, or in different classrooms. One of the rural participant schools has five branches in small villages around the town of Vukovar—most of them being predominantly Serbian ethnicity. The sample characteristics of our study participants are presented in Table 1.

For the qualitative segment for the study, an availability sampling approach was used to recruit participants for the focus groups with parents and teachers and for the interviews with stakeholders. The parents and teachers were from the schools where the quantitative questionnaire was previously administered. The participants come from different ethnic backgrounds and were from both rural and urban areas. The teachers' focus group was made up exclusively of female participants while the parents' focus group consisted of both males and females. There were five participants for the teachers' focus groups and six participants for the parents' focus groups. Nine stakeholders participated in the interviews. They were parents, school principals, and local governance representatives involved in education and governance of elementary schools, along with representatives of non-governmental organizations and research institutes that work on education and social change in elementary schools in Vukovar.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Sample

	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Female	229	79.5 %
Male	59	20.5 %
Age		
22 to 29	29	11.4 %
30 to 35	105	41.2 %
36 to 40	74	29.0 %
41 to 49	44	17.3 %
50 and above	3	1.2 %
Ethnicity		
Croat	90	33.0 %
Serb	181	66.3 %
Others	2	.7 %
Education		
Elementary School	34	12.5 %
Three years of Secondary School	16	5.9 %
Secondary School	194	71.6 %
College or University	25	9.2 %
Graduate School	2	.7 %
Employment Status		
Employed Full-time	131	47.0 %
Employed Part-Time	7	2.5 %
Unemployed	132	47.3 %
Retired	8	2.9 %
War-veteran	1	.4 %
Marital Status		
Single/never married	3	1.1 %
Married	260	91.5%
Separated/Divorced	10	3.5 %
Widowed	4	1.4 %
Not married but living in a marriage-like relationship	7	2.5 %

Instrumentation and Measurements

For the quantitative aspect of the study, we used the Parent and School Survey (PASS) adopted from Ringenberg, Funk, Mullen, Wilford, and Kramer (2005). Prior to its application, an instrument testing for cultural sensitivity took place based on which several questions were removed or adjusted. Both the survey and the focus groups and semi-structured questions received IRB approval. The survey had 46 main questions and 85 contingency questions to gather more data on specific themes under examination. To measure the main research variable – parental involvement – a factor analysis was performed using principal component analysis with a Promax rotation. Out of 18

questions that measured parental involvement following Epstein's conceptualization (1995), only 16 loaded into three major factors: Parent-Child-School Activities, Parent-School Relations (communication and monitoring), and Parent-School-Community Collaboration. Moreover, to test the internal consistency reliability of each scales, Cronbach's alpha were calculated (See Table 2). While the alpha is low (.666) for the Parent-School-Communication scale, we believe it is due to this new paradigm of linking and understanding schools and parental involvement in a changing community and political climate.

Table 2: The Reliability of Parental Involvement Scales: Parent-Child-School Activities, Parent-School Communication, and Parent-School-Community Collaboration

Parental Involvement Scales	Items	Mean	SD	Coefficient Alpha
Parent-Child-School Activities	6	17.55	3.14	.711
Parent-School Relations	5	16.11	2.54	.739
Parent-School Community Collaboration	5	13.20	2.52	.643

For the qualitative component of the study, semi-structured interviews were run for both the focus groups and interviews.

Quantitative data analysis. Demographic and survey data was entered in Statistical Package for the Social Sciences program (SPSS); frequencies and descriptive statistics were calculated. Factor analysis was performed to create parental involvement subscales, which helped explain the dimensions of parental involvement in Croatian communities.

Qualitative data analysis. The analytic approach used was a basic hermeneutic inquiry while content analysis was the method used to sort through the documentation. The digital recordings of the focus groups and interviews transcribed on to a word processing document. The transcriptions were then exported on to Atlas.ti which was the qualitative data analysis software used to code the data.

In analyzing the focus group and interview transcripts, three researchers conducted line-by-line coding by identifying relevant text (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003) or meaning units (Engel & Schutt, 2009). We then categorized these relevant text or meaning units into repeating ideas or themes. With each of the three coders, a peer-debriefing session was conducted to discuss the list of themes and their supporting meaning units or relevant text. As a peer-debriefing group, we developed theoretical constructs that demonstrate how the themes relate to one another. We then wrote our theoretical narrative, which discusses the theoretical constructs we came up with concerning parental involvement. The theoretical narrative weaves together our theoretical constructs, the voices of the research participants, and the literature on parental involvement.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Dimensions of Parental Involvement

Several findings emerged regarding parental involvement in the Vukovar region. We begin with a discussion of the dimensions of parental involvement. Although we operationalized parental involvement through Epstein and Dauber's (1989) and Epstein's (1991, 1994, 1995) six constructs (parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with community), our factor analysis results revealed only three main factors that explain the existing dimensions of parental involvement in that region: Parent-Child-School Activities, Parent-School Relations (communication and monitoring), and Parent-School-Community Collaboration. It is not surprising that volunteering and decision-making constructs did not retain in the factor analysis. These are constructs anchored in democratic practices, new to the schools and the parents. Until schools recognize that the responsibility of education must be shared, and that parents need social and political skills to make the school work to their own and children's educational advantage, the struggle to promote volunteerism and parents' participation in schools and decision-making process will continue. Among the skills that might help parents successfully participate in various school-democratic structures are: knowledge about persuasive speeches, strategies of community practice, decision-making practices, budgeting, voting, power, and parliamentary procedures (Schraft & Comer, 1979). However, this does not imply that it is the school's role to teach parents such skills. Since the schools struggle to embrace democratic practice in the new educational reform, the civil society organizations (CSOs) may be a starting point in the engagement of parents to become community leaders, insuring that citizens take a more active role in matters that affect their own lives.

A closer examination of the each of the three dimensions of parental involvement echoes the reminiscence of an authoritative, centralized school system, in which schools are still perceived as solely responsible for children's education. First, when examining the parent-child-school dimension, data reveal a medium to low involvement of parents in their children's school related activities (Mean=1.91, SD=.776). Seventy-four percent (74%) of parents reported a medium to low involvement in their children's education (see Table 3).

Specifically, the itemized parent-school activities' subscale highlights that parents engage in a low level of reading to their children (52% of parents surveyed reported that they do not read to their children) (see Appendix 1). This finding was also supported by our qualitative interviews, in which a teacher clearly stated that "*I encourage parents not to read to their children, as this is our job; they should nurture them, feed them, clean them, and our job is to educate them*".

Table 3: The Parental Involvement Subscales

Subscales	Mean	SD	N	%
1. Parent-Child-School Activities	1.91	.776		
Low			73	35%
Medium			83	39%
High			55	26%
2. Parent-School Relations	2.13	.706		
Low			46	19%
Medium			116	49%
High			76	32%
3. Parent-School-Community Collaboration	1.77	.725		
Low			66	41%
Medium			69	42%
High			28	17%

The subscale is rated on a 3-point scale, ranging from 1=low, 2=medium, 3=high

Second, our data show that parental involvement measured through the parent-school relations is medium to high (Mean=2.13; SD =.706). Eighty-one percent (81%) of parents reported that they felt comfortable visiting the school, talking with the school administration, and getting informed if any problem were to occur with their child while in school (see Appendix 1). Parent-school relations are basic to building strong parental involvement programs. While Croatian scholars (Males, 1995; Pahic, Miljevic-Ridjicki & Vizek Vidovic, 2010) have identified that parents-school relationships remain authoritative, the fact that schools and parents continue to communicate with one another is an asset for a democratic parental participation. The focus should now be on helping both parties recognize that they are equal stakeholders in their children's education with different roles. When parents feel respected and engaged in their children's education, they become more willing to attend school functions and stay connected which consequently influences students' academic success.

Lastly, our data reveal a medium to low parent-school-community collaboration (Mean=1.77; SD =.725). Low involvement in parent-school-community collaboration was reported by 41% of parents; 42% reported medium involvement, and only 17% reported high involvement (see Appendix 1). This is an important finding, especially in the context of educational reform. With the major societal changes during this reconstruction period, schools can no longer remain in traditional roles. This is a time in which both, the school and the parents must unite their efforts to build bridges with community services and resources that would strengthen school programs, family practices, and students' learning and development (Epstein, 1995). Further information on parents-school-community participation will be discussed when presenting the qualitative findings.

Defining and Explaining (The Why) Of Parents Participation

The qualitative component of this study focuses on depicting parents', teachers', and stakeholders' narratives reflecting on parental involvement in the region of Vukovar. The focus groups and the interviews sought to discover how each of these groups defined parental involvement, the rational 'being involved', and the factors that might enhance parental involvement.

The research participants' understanding of parental involvement can be categorized in two ways. The first refers to the *conventional understanding of parents participating in parent-school meetings, parent teachers associations, school councils, and similar venues* to address concerns about their children's academic outcomes. The second understanding of parental involvement provides a broader perspective of parents' participation in schools by viewing it as a way of building communities - *parental involvement as community building*. Parents inevitably become part of a community without consciously thinking of it. They begin to spend time with one another and develop relationships. The following quote illustrates that: "*When your child starts going to school, you will have to meet the other parents regardless of whether you want it or not. You become a member of the community that consists of the parents of all the children that go to the same class. You get to know people... start talking to them and develop relationships*" (Parents focus group). Especially in communities affected by ethnic division, this is an important finding that calls for a closer examination of the role that parental involvement may play in building social capital in the community.

Apart from relationships with other parents, parental involvement also serves as *venues for parents, teachers, and other stakeholders to dialogue on issues beyond school matters*. "*I like it when the parents feel free, and actively participate, when they want to exchange their opinions with me*" (Teachers focus group). For example, "*On the Open Doors Day ...the environment is informal so while talking to the teacher, issues might be mentioned that otherwise would not. It is a chance to improve things. On parental meetings usually particular topics are discussed, you cannot bring up anything besides that, but if the occasion is informal it is easier to talk about other things, such as concerns about the community, neighborhood, or other topics alike*" (Parents focus groups). The fact that parents use parental meetings as an opportunity to address other community concerns seems to indicate that parental involvement, aside for being a central factor for students' academic success, it may also provide a space for building democratic skills (community engagement and public speech). What these findings suggest is that parental involvement might be an important platform to practice democracy and achieve community. It is with no doubt that when parents begin to share their ideas and dialogue with their community members, regardless of their professional community roles, they build a sense of community and begin practicing democracy. In other words, our findings support Mintrom's (2009) work on the relationship between local democracy and education. When communities invest in parental involvement, and create that platform for parents to become involved, parents begin to exercise their voices opening opportunities for stronger democratic engagement.

Our findings also recognize that parental involvement *enhances parents' sense of personal power and their sense of community contribution*. The opportunity to be involved, whether by being a guest speaker, or giving a workshop, affirms parents of their own capacities and contribution to that school and that their voices count. The occasion offered by participating in decision-making on their children's education trains parents on democratic practice. Parents not only learn to articulate their views but also listen to different points of view. These venues for interaction between parents and schools are akin to the Citizenship Schools organized by Septima Clark and other civil rights organizers in the South that taught African-Americans basic literacy as well as democratic literacy (Levine, 2004). Parental involvement in schools can thus serve as citizenship schools for communities rebuilding from conflict.

At the same time, the increased sense of personal power and community contribution that parents experience creates new power struggles between them and the teachers and school administrators. The more parents get involved, some teachers become uncomfortable with parents over-stepping their boundaries, even while they encourage greater involvement of parents in the schools. *"There is always the risk that the parents will try to meddle into the school's business, which is not always desirable. Parents think they do not know less than the teachers, but still they do not have the methodological and pedagogical knowledge as a person who mastered that as faculty does. Parents are not always welcome to interfere into the expert's field, but they play the greatest role when it comes to their child's upbringing."* With more parents becoming involved in decision-making around their children's education, such conflicts will be inevitable. The idea is not to avoid these conflicts but to handle them thoughtfully. Unless managed wisely, such conflicts can actually hinder rather than strengthen social relations of parents with other teachers. Encouragements of dialog related to these topics would also facilitate parental role construction and enhance their motivation for involvement as well as make teachers more prepared for parental involvement into schools and educational reform.

Factors Enhancing Parental Involvement

The following conceptual constructs delve into the factors that enhance parental involvement in schools. First, parents and teachers shared ideas of how to engage parents, to take part in decision-making concerning their children's education as well as in school policies. Although the typical structures of parent councils were suggested, there were also ideas shared about *simplifying ways for parents to be more involved*. *"Having fun is what matters, not educating; education is for teachers to worry."* *"Others also talk about allowing the process of parental involvement take its natural course rather than strictly enforcing it."* This gets back to Comer and Haynes's work (1991) on the pyramid of parental involvement which suggests three levels of parental involvement. The first level is that in which parents get involvement in general activities around school, such as Christmas celebration events, gardening programs, flower festivals excursions, and bread days. By attending these events, parents not only share their resources and capacities with the school community, but activities help them build a sense of pride and satisfaction by seeing their children performs. When parents are encouraged to attend school events and are reminded of the good 'news' of their children's performance (as opposed to the more

'bad' news), they tend to become more interested in coming back or participating in parental involvement initiatives (Comer & Haynes, 1991).

Along the same lines, other constructs shed light on *how often parents might participate* in school activities and *how teachers and school officials may make a conscious effort to include parents in decision-making and in the conduct of activities (Involving parents as often as possible)*. One way of building parents' capacities, apart from providing opportunities for on-going training, is to *create opportunities for their participation*. Hands-on experience is believed to be one other way of enhancing parents' knowledge and skills in school involvement. The other two levels promoted through this pyramid of parental involvement are parents involvement in the day-to-day classroom activity and school activities (level two), and parents elected by the parents group to participate in the school planning and management structures (level one) (Comer & Haynes, 1991). This pyramid of parental participation could be a good starting point for enhancing parental involvement programming in the Vukovar region. With the school division along ethnic lines, starting with parents' encouragements to participate in general school events and then moving to more specific involvement of parents in academic activities and leadership may help build a sense of trust and belongingness among community members.

CONCLUSION

By examining Croatian parental involvement in postwar communities, this mixed-methods study contributes to the empirical literature on parental involvement and community participation. Our data demonstrate that when parents become involved in a school related event, they form new relationships, learn that their voices count, get involved in decision-making processes, and create a space in which to dialogue about mutual concerns. In doing so, parental involvement may become a platform to practice and learn democratic behavior. However, for this to happen, we also learn that parents and schools have to be educated and empowered to embrace new roles and responsibilities in an emerging democracy.

Especially in areas affected by war and an ethnically divided community, our findings remind us that by supporting parental participation in school, we are investing in the community as a whole. While the literature on parental involvement and community building is at a formative stage, primarily consisting of case studies of school reform (Shatkin & Gershberg, 2007; Stone et al., 1999; Wohlstetter & Briggs, 2001), this study goes further through the provision of empirical evidence that supports the relationship between community participation and parental involvement. Furthermore, this study calls for further research that will provide additional empirical evidence on the relationship between parental involvement and the social fabric renewal in post war communities.

Notes:

1. Three different models of education are available to national minorities in Croatia (Doolan, 2010): Model A schooling is implemented entirely in the language and script of the minority. However, students have the obligation to learn Croatian language as well. Model B schooling is bilingual, as science is taught in Croatian language, and humanities are taught in the

language of the national minority. Model C schooling is implemented in the Croatian language, with additional two to five classes dedicated to learning the language and culture of the national minority. An additional two to five classes are allocated for studying the language and literature of the minority, as well as its history, geography, music, and art.

The number of preschool, elementary school, and high school students who were schooled in the Serbian language in the year 2010 was 3 742 (Office for National Minorities of the Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2011).

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APPENDIX I

I. PARENT-CHILD-SCHOOL ACTIVITIES SUBSCALE

Subscale Items	Mean	SD	Strongly Disagree %	Disagree %	Agree %	Strongly Agree %
Q3: I frequently talk with my child about school	3.60	.546	1	1	37	61
Q6: I read to my child every day	2.42	.881	16	36	37	11
Q9: I have visited my child classroom several time in the last four month	3.05	.804	6	12	53	29
Q10: There are many children's books in our home	2.97	.899	10	12	49	29
Q11: I have attended activities at my child school several times, the past four month (School presentations, kids acting, singing, recitals, participated in parents-teachers meetings, parents' workshops, etc.)	2.83	.785	6	23	53	18
Q13: Reading books is a regular activity in our home.	2.69	.921	14	22	47	17

II. PARENT-SCHOOL RELATIONS SUBSCALE

Subscale Items	Mean	SD	Strongly Disagree %	Disagree %	Agree %	Strongly Agree %
Q1: I feel very comfortable visiting my child's school	3.13	.779	8	1	61	30
Q2: If my child misbehaved at school, I would know about it soon afterward	3.24	.664	3	5	58	34
Q14: If my child will have problems (academic or behavioral) in school, I would know how to get extra help for her/him.	3.16	.751	6	5	58	31
Q17: I feel comfortable to come to my child's school.	3.22	.712	7	8	57	28
Q18: The leaders (school directors, teachers) of our children's school facilitate honest conversation among students, and families from different ethnic backgrounds	3.23	.752	5	5	52	38

III. PARENT-SCHOOL-COMMUNITY COLLABORATION SUBSCALE

Subscale Items	Mean	SD	Strongly Disagree %	Disagree %	Agree %	Strongly Agree %
Q5: I always know how well my child is doing in school.	3.18	.773	6	5	54	35
Q7: I talk with other parents (regardless of their ethnicity) frequently about educational issues.	3.05	.747	6	9	61	24
Q8: My child attends community programs regularly (library readings, NGO extra-curricular activities, and other community fun events).	2.82	.840	8	20	52	19
Q15: In the past 4 months, I volunteered (help clean the classroom, assist the school with various activities, etc.) at my child's school.	1.93	.665	23	65	9	3
Q16: I know of many programs for children in my community that are free and accessible to everyone, such as art-fairs events, eco-projects, library programs, NGO programs, etc.	2.40	.879	18	33	41	8